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The Renaissance of Gender Equality Research and Sustainable Development in the Academic  
Context of Marketing: Championing Paths Forward

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**Abstract:** The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls (SDG #5) is cited as interlinked with other SDGs. One often hears that “Global Goals cannot be achieved without ensuring gender equality and women’s empowerment” (UN, 2015) and that “gender equality is critical to all areas of a healthy society, from reducing poverty (SDG #1) to promoting health (SDG #3) and education (SDG #4), and to the protection of the well-being of girls and boys” (UN, 2016). Despite its importance, business academics have been slow to acknowledge issues surrounding gender equality amongst other SDGs. This chapter argues that despite these challenges, gender research in the wider field of marketing is experiencing a renaissance, fueled in part by global, political and social movements, and in part by the persistence of academics studying these connections. Three research areas for championing a path forward—gender violence, intersectionality, and local and global perspectives in marketing are presented. The translation of this research to inquiry based and transformative learning is particularly emphasized. Lastly, the chapter calls for and advocates ongoing and future efforts to keep the momentum of gender and sustainability issues at the forefront of the marketing field. Using marketing as an illustration for wider business disciplines, it is their role to recognize and become key drivers in shaping sustainable development.

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## *Introduction*

The sustainable development goal (SDG) of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls (SDG #5) has been cited as strongly interlinked with other SDGs. It is often the case that “Global Goals cannot be achieved without ensuring gender equality and women’s empowerment” (UN, 2015) and “gender equality is critical to all areas of a healthy society, from reducing poverty to promoting health, education, protection and the well-being of girls and boys” (UN, 2016). Despite its importance, business academics have been slow to acknowledge issues surrounding gender equality. Yet, inequalities form part of the fabric of everyday life. Globally, at this point in time, no country has achieved gender equality (OECD, 2012). Nowhere in the world do women and men equally benefit from rights, resources and recognition, nor do women and men equally occupy decision-making positions to change these conditions. Additionally, gender equality does not just relate to women but encompasses a wider range of intersecting identities: sex, age, ethnicity, social stratum, non-religion, sexuality, rural and urban geographies.

Beyond gender equality, economics, business and management, both in theory and practice, play key roles in the SDGs, ranging from *No Poverty* (SDG #1), to *Responsible Consumption and Production* (SDG #12) and the development of *Partnerships for the Goals* (SDG #17). It may therefore be surprising to learn that gender equality and other SDGs are not always central to business research and practice. Examining a specific subject discipline -- the authors’ discipline of Marketing -- emphasizes a lack of progress towards the study of gender equality. Although a range of research in marketing has contributed critical gender perspectives, (e.g. Maclaran et al., 2009; Ourahmoune et al., 2014), some mainstream research still overlooks differences between gender and sex, disconnects gender from sustainable and responsible marketing, and instead focuses on the use of gender as a variable to document

differences between men and women. However, critical and cultural gender scholarship in marketing is vast and growing (see Arsel, Eräranta, and Moisander 2015; Bettany et al. 2010; Dobscha 2019; Otnes and Zayer, 2012). For example, a range of research has explored gender identities as constructed through consumption (Hein and O'Donohoe, 2014; Kates, 2003; Thompson and Üstüner 2015), and the role of advertising and media in portraying or shaping gender ideals (Gurrieri, Previte, and Brace-Govan, 2013; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004; Zayer and Coleman, 2015), often via feminist perspectives (Borgerson, 2007; Dobscha and Ozanne, 2001; Dobscha and Prothero, 2012; Hearn and Hein 2015). What is lacking, however, is a more consistent focus by the marketing field on gender inequalities (Fischer 2015) and broader social divisions in which markets, marketing and consumption play significant roles (Hein et al., 2016; Steinfield et al., 2019a; Zayer, et al., 2017).

Indeed, some scholars note that gender research is predominantly welcomed in the business academy if it remains apolitical (Hearn and Hein, 2015). Academics who seek to introduce more critical and political perspectives may face obstacles or become discouraged as many journals in the field emphasize managerial or theoretical contributions over research that prioritizes consumer welfare and broader issues of sustainability. This may create an environment where incentive structures are lacking for academics to research social issues, such as gender (in)equality. Indeed, a recent review by McDonagh and Prothero (2018) of gender research published in top journals in Marketing from 1993-2016 reveals that just 2.0 percent of the 17,525 papers focused on gender (and the majority of this research approached gender as a binary category rather than pursuing gender equality or a gender justice perspective). Moreover, a closer look at the composition of leadership positions in the leading journals reveals only 18.5 percent of editors-in-chief, 38.9 percent of co-editors, 28.0 percent of associate editors and 28.3 percent of editorial review board members were female (McDonagh and Prothero, 2018).

Despite these imbalances, gender research in the wider field of marketing is experiencing a renaissance, fueled in part by global, political and social conversations, for example surrounding the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, in addition to persistence of a minority of scholars. Academics are in a unique position to capture these cultural conversations both in terms of building an agenda of advancing knowledge through research and action, but also in classrooms in preparing the next generation of business professionals.

### *Championing Transformative Gender Justice Research*

A growing community of researchers and changing social conditions are facilitating efforts to engage in research with an activist or action stance (Frisby, et al., 2009; Hein et al., 2016). This chapter highlights ways of addressing or overcoming the many obstacles raised above, including: finding and giving a voice, building foundations and embracing conditions conducive to change, and attempting to make impact beyond the academy. As Fischer (2015, p.1721) notes, progress on market-level research with regard to gender inequality is, “...limited in many geographic regions, and often stalls or reverses even in those jurisdictions and institutions where we most expect it to flourish.”

Topics particularly important yet neglected in the field of marketing in relation to gender equality are, therefore, highlighted in the chapter. These are as follows:

1. Gender Violence in the Market

Gender violence is a major injustice and sadly a regular, even normalized, occurrence in contemporary markets, marketing and consumers' lives. Images of violence against women in advertising, and media in general, including social media and gaming are pervasive. In advertising, shockingly violent images are used to gain attention often breaching regulations, and, when challenged, advertisers were identified as denying responsibility or claiming the images were 'art' (Gurrieri, Brace-Govan and Cherrier, 2016). Further research should address

the myriad of representational violence (and misrepresentations) and move towards positive, affirmative gender depictions that can transform women's and men's lives.

So far, very little research has investigated the pervasiveness of physical and sexual violence in markets. Human and sex trafficking, for example, are firmly based on unjust, often global, gender relations, that remain muted or side-lined in marketing literature, despite exceptions, such as Pennington et al., (2009), Varman, Goswami, and Vijay (2018), and a recent special issue on 'Violence, Markets and Marketing' in the *Journal of Marketing Management* (Varman, 2018). Similarly, domestic violence or cultural practices, ranging from the high price of idealized beauty to female genital mutilation, are significant issues affecting many women's lives, often underpinned by unequal power relations in families or households, and affecting fundamental access to consumption decisions. Women's bodies are commoditized and objectified, in a myriad of ways. Practices and systems ranging from forms of prostitution, sex trafficking, pornography, plastic surgery to domestic labor (e.g., Filipino maids in Europe), and surrogacy or contract pregnancy (e.g., surrogates in Gujarat, India that service international clients) have been argued as examples of this commoditization (see for example Sharp, 2000; Yee, 2018). Marketing and consumer research have a responsibility to highlight market(ing) dynamics that contribute to unsustainable, unjust consumption and production (SDG #12), while offering potential resolutions. If gender inequality becomes acknowledged as a root problem, it is these areas, amongst others, that require significant research attention and action in the wider field of marketing.

## 2. Intersectionality, Markets, and Marketing

Markets and marketing are complicit in gender exclusion, discrimination and oppression, as much as they are powerful in giving people voices. Yet power and discrimination are rarely a research focus in marketing. Crenshaw (1991) introduced the concept of intersectionality as a

metaphor for the complexity that lies in the experience of discrimination on the basis of several different oppressions concurrently, such as gender/sex, race, sexuality, religion, class and age (to name a few identity markers). Intersectionality thus seeks to address the rights and voices of those who are currently invisible.

Although originally applied to explore multiple discriminations in legal contexts, the chapter argues that there is a need to translate this feminist critical perspective to our contexts of (unequal) markets, marketing and consumption. Indeed, early research has conceptualized intersectionality as it relates to marketing as, “the interactivity of social identity structures such as race, class, and gender in fostering life experiences, especially experiences of privilege and oppression” (Gopaldas, 2013, p. 90). However, much marketing scholarship overlooks the intersection of multiple sources of oppression, for example racism, classism, and sexism (i.e., women of color), wherein one or the other is given more attention and the comprehensive context is not accounted for. Harnessing the transformative potential of intersectionality, a marketing research focus could shift from studying gender categories towards the study of sexism and gender discrimination at the intersection of other forms of discrimination (Steinfeld et al., 2019b), and as a result study root causes of inequalities (SDG #10) and gender inequalities (SDG #5). Scholars and practitioners are urged to build and expand on existing research in this area (e.g., Corus et al., 2016; Crockett et al., 2011; Gopaldas and Fischer, 2012; Gopaldas and Siebert, 2018; Harrison et al., 2017; Zayer et al., 2017). Indeed, as a recent review by Ger (2018) highlights, intersectionality is often treated implicitly in existing marketing scholarship. In pursuit of sustainability, scholars are encouraged to focus on revealing and countering sources of systemic oppression, which can emerge in business and marketing -- issues that are often linked together with critical gender injustice topics.

### 3. Widening Local and Global Research Perspectives and Replacing an Overemphasis on Traditionally Western Communities

Lastly, and related to the first two issues above, critical scholars highlight gender as studied from a Western and privileged perspective. Although it is important to differentiate meanings of ‘Western’ or ‘whiteness’, relative privilege becomes evident in relation to women and men in developing countries and of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Studying the overlooked, invisible and silenced communities thus also requires critical, transnational perspectives of local, national, regional and global market relations (i.e., how they are experienced, socio-culturally ingrained, structured and institutionalized). A nuanced look at the various levels of gender and global market relations can further highlight links across SDGs with a view towards transformations.

Scholars in marketing have called for more research on consumption phenomena within Non-Western contexts (Jafari et al., 2012) and indeed, there is evidence of research which tackles the intersection between gender and consumption issues outside the Western world (e.g., Ourahmoune and Özçağlar-Toulouse, 2012; Sredl, 2018; Steinfield et al., 2019a; Varman, Goswami, and Vijay, 2018). However, scholars need to question the meanings of center and periphery and move towards transdisciplinary approaches. For example, the growing marketing and consumption of skin lightening products across Africa, Asia and Latin America needs to be contextualized within the global legacy of colonialism that is wielded by transnational companies that profit from linking social and global capital to skin color (Glenn, 2008). Postcolonial and decolonial paradigms in marketing can emphasize the “coloniality” of power and knowledge of the present time (Appadurai, 1996; Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1988). These paradigms offer important conceptual and methodological insights to advance understandings of the mechanisms of marketplace (re)production of gender inequities.



It is important to note that one cannot laud differences and diverse voices (in marketing), while disregarding the historical conditions and processes which reproduce complex social inequalities (Chaudhuri, 2004). A decolonial approach is particularly salient in Latin-American contexts, where it valorizes and builds from the lived realities of indigenous and black populations, inseparable from the colonial legacy. As Escobar notes (2010, p.43), "...decolonial feminism, while questioning Enlightenment-derived modern/colonial feminist discourses, also unveils patriarchal constructions of womanhood harbored within appeals to tradition and cultural difference."

Decolonial perspectives are global, based on a logic of protests made by scholars located in the Global North or South regardless of their background (colonial or otherwise), who are committed to understanding and changing the relations of dominance and oppression through new social movements. These are elements of a process of decolonization of thought, which merit close attention by marketing scholars to enrich current conceptualizations of (gendered) transnational market phenomena. More broadly, it is time for researchers in marketing to engage with plural, alternative non-western-centric approaches to better capture the logics of domination and levers of emancipation at the heart of emerging economies and their specific challenges to meet gender equality and sustainable development.

#### *Championing Inquiry-Based and Transformative Learning and Teaching*

Marketing academics are increasingly poised to translate research on gender equality and justice into pedagogies (Gelles and Miller, 2017). Attempting to make an impact with inquiry-based, transformative learning at higher education institutions relies on the premise that students leave the institution better equipped to deal with a dynamic and challenged global business world (Thomas and Brown, 2011). Inquiry-based learning is an approach to teaching that gives students ownership of their learning, while also attending to diversity in classrooms in terms of attitudes and interests. Oriented around higher-order thinking as per

Bloom's Taxonomy and Kolb's experiential learning, inquiry-based learning encourages students to engage with authentic investigations and to become an "active participant in the learning process" (Blessinger and Carfora, 2015, p.6). In this approach, the instructor provides theoretical frames, which can be multidisciplinary, that are purposefully designed to open up areas to student knowledge creation and exploration. There are clear opportunities to introduce the juxtaposition of surprising and interesting contexts and questions for learners to investigate either individually or in groups. Designing group work and other forms of student interaction and sharing (whether in the classroom or online) opens up avenues for "learning new meaning schemes and learning through meaning transformation" (Kitchenham 2008, p.110).

The inquiry-based approach matches well with Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning, incorporating social and emotional development, as well as critical self-reflection and competence evaluation. Critical reflection and questioning of assumptions was a key development in Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Kitchenham 2008, p.116) along with his recognition of the significance of "affective, emotional and social aspects" of adult transformative learning.

Challenging taken-for-granted ideas through learning has a long history (Freire 1973). However, there is a timely opportunity not only to engage students more deeply in their own learning but also, to be sensitive to their diverse starting points on challenging issues while concurrently introducing them to meaningful frameworks that allow them to critically reflect on complex and important contemporary topics, especially as they relate to gender equality and marketing. The previously mentioned SDG that resonates with adjusting perspectives on violence, intersectionality and globalism is SDG #5 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' with the target to end all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere (UN Women). Rising concerns around various social issues, in tandem with

the increasing involvement of consumers in digital media protests, has gradually generated a shift in organizational engagement with policy and change. For example, in the U.S., *Harvard Business Review* reports on the "New CEO Activists" (Fuqua and Toffel, 2018), identifying business leaders not only as advocates for change around issues that are unrelated to their business, but also, importantly, using the economic significance of their businesses to support their views, such as threatening to move away from states that pass controversial laws. This kind of leadership activity has real consequences in terms of generating change, potentially an exciting and hopeful space for students to investigate. In addition, such public stances also require that marketing activities are flexible and adaptive driving the curriculum into new and dynamic learning spaces.

In Australia, leadership around SDG #5, was given impetus in 2010 when the Sex Discrimination Commissioner established Male Champions for Change. Male Champions for Change (MCC) is "a disruptive strategy to accelerate the advancement of women in leadership and achieve gender equality" that works with, and learns from, many organizations, including UN Women. The signatories are male CEOs who commit their enterprises to deliver change for women and gender equity across a range of issues. The 2018 Impact Report noted that there were 12 groups comprising more than 200 leaders of 600,000 employees globally (MCC, 2018, p.7). These activities and their increasingly impactful presence are sufficiently diverse to appeal to a broad range of marketing students and their interests. The accessible reporting and transparency also allows in-depth discussion from a substantiated position, which is essential around gender as a topic, and, importantly, offers a window into the marketing world that students are likely to enter. Thus, an inquiry-based approach can be particularly useful for marketing academics to apply in teaching a range of core marketing topics, such as segmentation, product development, and advertising messaging.

The chapter concludes by providing recommendations for other academics who seek to champion gender equality research and teaching in their field, particularly as they contribute to the SDGs put forth by the UN. By providing a framework for conducting research focused on gender justice as well as highlighting recent efforts in gender scholarship, this book chapter hopes to celebrate the inroads scholars have made in bringing gender scholarship to the forefront in marketing.

### *Conclusions and Recommendations*

This chapter has sought to document the struggles and successes of a group of marketing scholars in their efforts to center gender equality in research, teaching and action towards sustainability. The many obstacles relate to how gender is currently theorized and how research findings are put into practice.

The chapter points towards a current dominance of studying gender as reduced to variables, essentialized in biology and reproduced in stereotypes. Links to sustainable development are neglected, as is research that seeks to transform pervasive inequalities and injustices. Gender is complex, transnational and deeply entrenched in systems and practices that drive sustainability. In other words, sustainable futures are those that focus on gender equality. Important foundations are being built, for example in frameworks that propose solutions for addressing these complexities, such as the Transformative Gender Justice Framework (TGJF)(see Hein et al., 2016).

The TGJF approaches gender from perspectives of material *distributive justice*, socio-cultural *recognition theory* and the empowerment of individuals via *capabilities approach*. It is imperative that these, and other approaches, are embraced and facilitate conversations in wider sustainability scholarship to ensure gender equality gains further prominence. Importantly, the chapter repeatedly emphasizes that gender equality, as represented in

theories and important topics raised above, deserves more prominence in marketing and business academia. Issues of gender justice, sustainability and responsibility are at times secondary to profitable, efficiency-driven managerial implications.

However, increasingly there are groups of like-minded scholars and journal editors who actively pursue topics and theories proposed above, as well as other areas of importance. Part of the struggle is thus to enhance the momentum of these groups, and convince more scholars, senior academics and change-makers to acknowledge the importance and impact of such work. In such a way, a point where these voices are brought to the fore and scholarship that moves beyond solely improving the bottom line can be widely celebrated.

Looking ahead to the future of marketing and gender research, it appears likely that the impact that marketing academics, business professionals and students can have on championing a path forward that is commensurate with the SDGs is increasing. In particular, in this year alone, several dedicated special issues of marketing journals related to gender (SDG #5 on Gender Equality and SDG #10 on Reduced Inequalities) including issues in the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, *Journal of Macromarketing*, *Journal of Marketing Management*, *Consumption Markets & Culture*, and *Journal of Advertising Research* have been published or are forthcoming. Moreover, gender scholarship in marketing continues to be highlighted in marketing and consumer behavior edited volumes (see for example *Handbook of Research on Gender and Marketing*, Dobscha 2019), and various recent book chapters such as Maclaran, Otnes and Zayer (2017) in the *Routledge Handbook on Consumption*, Zayer et al. (2017) in *The Routledge Companion to Consumer Behavior*, and Visconti, Bettany and Maclaran (2017) in *Consumer Culture Theory*. In addition to an increasing voice in journal publications, edited books and book chapters, the tradition of the Association for Consumer Research Gender, Marketing and Consumer Behavior biennial conferences has continued (since its inception in 1991) where gender

scholars from around the globe gathered in Dallas, Texas in October 2018 with a focus on social change. Events included a roundtable highlighting transformative gender issues as well as the first meeting of the GENMAC advisory board, a group of scholars dedicated to advancing social change and building knowledge on gender, marketing and consumer behavior ([www.genmac.co](http://www.genmac.co)). This momentum is expected to continue in years to come as these efforts translate to the pursuit of gender and social justice within marketing as one of many disciplines from the wider field of business and management.

Beyond the struggles and steps that some scholars have taken to ensure continued efforts to direct marketing research and practice to the areas defined above, this chapter has sought to inspire and encourage other disciplines, particularly relating to business and economics, to recognize their roles and responsibilities in addressing the most pressing issues of our time. Given the complexity and interlinkages between SDGs, academics and industries, it is vital that research, education and practices join forces to champion a shared path into the future, with sustainability at its core.

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