



# Transformative spaces for gender equality: Transnational experience of China and Iceland

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► Abstract

► About the authors

► Um höfunda

► Heimildir

Gender equality is essential for achieving educational equality and enhancing outcomes for all students. Adopting a transnational perspective on gender equality in China and Iceland allows us to reflect on lessons from diverse socio-cultural contexts that encounter similar challenges. By combining Fraser's feminist theory with Vygotskian concepts of transformation, this article proposes a new conceptualisation of transformative spaces in education defined as: (a) dialectical processes of learning and unlearning aimed at expanding prior knowledge, (b) critical awareness and reflexivity, (c) multiple voices and perspectives within the classroom or a specific learning environment. Based on a theory-driven analysis, qualitative data from policy documents and eight interviews, plus participatory observations with teachers from Iceland and China, demonstrate that the theoretical framework of transformative spaces is valuable for analysing and achieving gender equality within and through education.

**Keywords:** gender equality, transformative spaces, China, Iceland, transnational study.

## Introduction

Gender equality is recognised as a critical factor worldwide for enhancing quality of life (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993). As a testament to its significance, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls are now integrated into the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and intersect with other objectives outlined in the agenda (United Nations, 2015). Research indicates that there have been some global advancements in access to education and educational opportunities (defined as gender equity) (see UNESCO, 2016). However, the gender gap in education persists. For example, improved education for women has not fully led to greater gender equality within society (Inglehart & Norris, 2003). In the global North, where gender equity in education is relatively high, the gender equality index shows that gaps remain, particularly in political participation, employment opportunities, and equal pay (e.g., World Economic Forum, 2016).

In today's globalised world, education is seen as a key tool for achieving social inclusion and equality among various communities, especially between men and women. A significant milestone in linking education with gender equality occurred during the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The Beijing Platform for Action (United Nations, 1995) emphasises the importance of education in ensuring equal access to educational opportunities and promoting equality within education. Additionally, the EU Socio-Economic Fifth Framework study on Gender and Qualification, conducted in several European countries, examined teacher practices in vocational education and training for young people. More recently, Horizon 2020 studies on participative

citizenship have identified the mediating practices of teachers in forms of adult education aimed at addressing inequalities in the social participation of young adults. Therefore, education serves not only as a metric to assess gender equality but also as an essential means to raise awareness of gender equality between women and men. In other words, implementing gender equality in educational settings and integrating it into educational activities plays a critical role in the social transformation toward greater equality between men and women.

In existing literature, current research primarily focuses on global, national, and local policies regarding gender equality (e.g., Haltinner & Pilgeram, 2016). However, attention is rarely given to the microlayer of teacher practices for gender equality in schools (e.g., Francis, 2010; Weiner, 2000), and the studies that have addressed this issue have mostly been conducted within a single cultural setting. Comparative research on different cultures and histories concerning gender equality and classroom practices has been quite limited (e.g., Engebreston, 2016; Karlsson, 2010; Skelton, 2007).

This paper aims to adopt a transnational perspective by addressing policy discourses and educational practices related to gender equality in two countries: Iceland and China. The rationale for selecting these countries is explained through three aspects: (a) by utilising data from a Western country and an Eastern country, we can foster intercultural dialogue regarding gender equality and its implementation in different cultural contexts; (b) Iceland is a developed country that has achieved a high level of gender equality over the past few decades, whereas China, due to its long history and strict hierarchical and bureaucratic ethos, continues to grapple with gender inequality; and (c) the two authors of this article hail from Iceland and China, respectively, possessing the expertise and firsthand resources necessary to conduct this study without any linguistic barriers. They have also collaborated in the field of teacher education to implement a more inclusive approach to gender equality. However, our approach is theoretically driven, and our emphasis is not primarily on empirical data. We draw on Fraser's feminist theory (Fraser, 2008) and Vygotskian ideas on transformation (Vygotsky, 1978, 1981) as resources to construct a conceptualisation defined as 'transformative spaces' in gender equality education.

In this paper, we utilise various data sources, including interviews and observations with teachers and students, analyses of curriculum texts, and educational policy documents from China and Iceland. We structure the paper by first contextualising 'gender equality' as a social issue within the Chinese and Icelandic contexts. The introduction of these two countries provides a comprehensive narrative on gender equality. Next, we develop the theoretical framework primarily based on the Vygotskian approach, which represents a theoretical advancement in gender studies. In the remaining sections, we examine empirical examples from China and Iceland to investigate the potential of using the Vygotskian framework to analyse gender equality in education and to create transformative spaces within the classroom regarding gender equality.

Our study was theoretically informed by feminist concepts and the Vygotskian sociocultural approach, which suggest that gender is socially constructed through the power of social orders and transformative individual actions. As stated previously, our aim in this paper is to explore and discuss whether and how the new conceptualisation of transformative spaces can be used to analyse and investigate the possibilities of gender equality in education. Thus, while collecting and analysing our data, we were guided by two questions:

- How is gender equality in schools and educational contexts shaped by the societal and educational policies and ideologies of China and Iceland?
- How do teachers in China and Iceland promote gender equality in education by creating transformative spaces?

## Discourse on Gender equality and education in international agreements

Gender equality has been emphasised in the Beijing Platform for Action of 1995, which views gender equality and education in broad social terms, as can be seen from the following quote: ‘Non-discriminatory education benefits both girls and boys and thus ultimately contributes to more equal relationships between women and men’ (United Nations, 1995). However, its practical scope focuses more on the parity and disparity between women and men in education and gender-based illiteracy and literacy. In this context, gender equality and education are understood in both practical terms—specifically, gender equality in and within education—and in a broader or transformative sense, as gender equality through education. A similar approach to gender equality is evident in the Dakar Framework for Action of 2000, although its emphasis leans more towards practical aspects in both scope and content. In other words, gender equality in education is understood as reducing educational barriers between men and women, boys and girls, rather than concentrating on and addressing the institutional and structural processes, norms, and attitudes that sustain gender inequalities and the patriarchal social order.

This narrow, practical understanding of gender equality has also dominated educational discourse in the global North, primarily centring on discussions about ‘failing boys’, achieving girls (girl power), and the feminisation of education (Ringrose, 2007). Although exploring these discourses is not the primary focus of this paper, it cannot be denied that they have shaped our understanding of gender equality in education, mainly revolving around access and achievements as referred to in international agreements. Consequently, this shifts attention away from the core issues related to achieving full gender equality and implementing structural changes through education. One reason for this is the lack of a unified understanding of what gender equality means in education, particularly in international agreements and frameworks. For example, the UN Human Rights Council does not provide a single definition of gender equality but instead refers to other UN institutions regarding this issue. In a 2023 report, the UN HRC emphasises the importance of gender equality in realising human rights for women and girls while simultaneously warning against the rising backlash concerning gender equality worldwide (UN HRC, 2023).

Subrahmanian (2005) points out that there is no precise definition of gender equality in the Dakar Framework for Action, which leaves it open to interpretation and discussion. According to Subrahmanian (2005, p. 397), this ‘...makes measuring progress towards its achievement hard if not impossible to achieve’. A similar observation can be made about the Beijing Platform for Action, which provides a vague definition of gender equality and fails to adopt a substantive and critical approach to the concept, particularly regarding the unequal power relations between men and women as well as the structural oppression related to gender, including the gender system (patriarchy).

As will be discussed further in this paper, we adopt a critical approach to gender equality, defining the concept in accordance with critical feminist theories (Fraser, 2008). Our primary focus will be on education related to gender equality and achieving gender equality through education. Before that, the following sections provide brief summaries of the history of gender equality and women’s rights in Iceland and China, both in terms of society at large and within the educational context.

## Gender equality in Iceland

Gender equality has developed gradually over the last century in Iceland. In 1915, women over the age of 40 with a certain economic income gained national suffrage and the right to hold office (Jafnréttisstofa, n.d.). These rights were expanded in 1920 to all women who had reached a certain age, regardless of economic income. In 1976, the first Gender Equality Act (Jafnréttisstofa, n.d.) was approved and enforced in the same year. Four years later, Icelanders elected the first female president in the world. Consequently, the gradual changes in gender equality have created a utopian image of Iceland, further supported by the Global Gender Gap index published by the World Economic Forum (2024). The changes over the past century and decades can be attributed to the strong presence

of a feminist movement in Iceland, which began in the late 19th century with the founding of the Icelandic Women's Rights Association and culminated in the 1990s with the Women's Alliances participating in both local and parliamentary elections (Jafnréttisstofa, n.d.). However, the meaning of feminism today, along with differing emphases among members of the third and second waves of feminism, has, in some ways, fractured the Icelandic feminist movement. Today, gender equality and feminism intersect with other human rights issues, revolving around sexuality and ethnicity, among others.

In the context of education, women in Iceland achieved de jure equal access to secondary education in 1886. However, in practice, more men had access to secondary education than women (Jafnréttisstofa, n.d.). Since then, women's participation in education has increased, and even today, most students at Icelandic universities are female. Since the Gender Equality Act took effect in 1976, educational policy has been shaped by gender equality in relation to curriculum, laws, and regulations (Law No. 78/1979).

In 2011, a new national core curriculum was implemented that was groundbreaking, as it emphasised equality (including gender equality) as one of the eight pillars of education (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011). Thus, as reflected in the policy and documents, education is seen to create an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983) regarding (gender) equality. However, this ideal mostly exists on paper or de jure, and when it comes to implementation, a gap remains between policy and reality.

## Gender equality in China

Historically, the subordination of women has been legitimised in Chinese culture. In the *Analects of Confucius*, for example, in Chapter *Yang Huo*, Confucius said: 'Only women and petty men are hard to be with. If you are close to them, they become disrespectful; if you keep a distance, they become resentful' (Confucius, 1993). This comment has often been regarded as clear evidence of Confucius's low opinion of women, which has influenced East Asian societies for a long time. The Chinese tradition of biographies of virtuous women and instructional books by and for women illustrates a Confucian construction of gender. Practices such as widow chastity, foot binding, and having a concubine are discussed within the context of Confucian and Chinese history (Rosenlee, 2006).

China's political modernisation process coincided with efforts to combat Confucian-inspired female oppression, beginning with the May Fourth Movement in 1919 and gaining prominence during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. The socialist revolution and development in China led to the emancipation of Chinese women. For instance, women actively participated in the Maoist social revolution and benefited from it, especially regarding access to education and political involvement. After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), gender equality became the dominant ideology and legal principle. As part of this victory and in alignment with socialist ideals, women's liberation was promoted. Women's equality with men was affirmed in the Chinese Constitution of 1950, which aims to represent and defend women's interests, promote gender equality, and elevate women's status in society (Xue & Cheung, 2011).

Meanwhile, since the economic reforms began in China and the country opened up in 1978, it has become clear that rising inequality in Chinese society is highly gendered. The market reforms have led to more negative consequences for women than for men; China's successful economic development has sparked a strong backlash against gender equality across socioeconomic, political, and cultural domains (Cai 2006; Chen 2008; Gaetano & Jacka 2013). In recent years, there has been a renewed concern over social inequality within China and an increasing intellectual reflection and critique of the growth-focused development path that China has pursued thus far. Consequently, gender inequality research in China is not just an academic endeavour lacking social relevance. Instead, it serves as a form of social critique and activism that is deeply rooted in the intellectuals' sense of social conscience and social justice.

## Theoretical perspective

### Fraser's concepts of counter-publics and gender justice

In conceptualising the transformative aspect of gender theory concerning gender equality, we draw on the notion of *counter-publics*. Nancy Fraser explains counter-publics as 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser, 2008, p. 67). Therefore, counter-publics can be understood as transformative discursive spaces because, within these spaces, counter-knowledge can be cultivated through critical engagement with the dominant norms and contexts of the cultural environment. In this sense, we utilise the concept of counter-publics in this paper within educational settings and connect it to Vygotsky's notion of transformation (see next section).

We are also informed by our reading of Fraser's (2008) three-dimensional approach to justice: redistribution (in terms of a more equitable distribution of economic resources), recognition (the equal recognition of different identities/groups within a society), and representation (participatory parity in political discussion/decision-making). When addressing gender equality in and through education, Fraser's three-dimensional approach to justice is significant as it highlights the institutional and structural processes of injustice and inequality while emphasising what needs to be done to ensure gender justice. Thus, in line with Fraser, justice should be viewed as a transformative process that addresses or alters the structural or institutional basis of injustice and inequality. In other words, we need to change the system, which, in the case of gender justice and equality, is underpinned by patriarchal values and the binary notion of gender.

### Vygotskian approach to transformation

Vygotsky's ideas are widely used in educational research; however, they have not been extensively applied to studies on gender equality in education. This paper argues that, through the lens of Vygotskian sociocultural theories, Vygotsky's understanding of transformation—interconnected with two other concepts: the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) and *volitional actions*—can provide valuable insights when examining gender equality in and through education.

*Transformation* is a key concept in Vygotskian theory that depicts the trajectory of human development, encompassing both children and adults. Human development occurs through transformation, during which individuals become aware of, and respond to, crises. Vygotsky asserted that this transformative process unfolds within the *zone of proximal development*. His ZPD signifies the gap between what an individual can achieve independently, such as solving problems, and what they can accomplish with the help of capable others (Vygotsky, 1978, 101). The ZPD serves as a space where the power of self-determination, or 'active adaptation' (Vygotsky, 1981, pp. 151–152), can be nurtured. Vygotsky (1978, p. 73) argues that transformative progression is a complex dialectical process characterised by periodicity, uneven development across different functions, metamorphosis or qualitative change from one form to another, the intertwining of external and internal factors, and adaptive processes that overcome obstacles.

From an individual's perspective, the possibility of transforming human needs, which Vygotsky referred to as *volitional actions*, is crucial for understanding an individual's developmental potential (Sannino, 2015). According to Vygotsky, the remarkable uniqueness of the individual consists of the fact that individuals possess no power over their behaviour beyond the influence that external factors have on it (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 212).

The significance of Vygotskian theory is crystallised in its potential to transcend formal education and the anticipated capabilities of teachers and students. It is essential to move beyond mere access and reevaluate the conventional values and messages within the curriculum, as well as transform



the practices of teachers, principals, and students at both the school and classroom levels, where they continuously reproduce gendered expectations. The lived experiences of schooling represent an important arena for the (re)production of gender identities and must therefore be incorporated into educational policies (Stromquist, 2006). By examining gender equality in educational settings through a Vygotskian lens, this approach proposes a transformative activist stance for the intentional, goal-oriented, and purposeful transformation of society based on a commitment to social change (Stetsenko, 2008). This method aligns with the critical tradition that connects theorising to politically engaged activism (Freire, 1970). Vygotskian projects that evolved as value-laden, collaborative endeavours deeply engaged in the socio-political practices of their time came to embody these practices, leveraging civic-scholarly activism to develop theory and implement it in practice.

### **Transformative spaces for gender equality in education**

We argue that gender equality is not merely an outcome but a transformative process. In line with Vygotskian thought, it can be achieved gradually by creating specific conditions that facilitate further learning—not in a linear fashion, but dialectically—moving between thesis and antithesis to foster a common understanding or synthesis of how gender equality can be realised. It is under these conditions that transformative spaces are created, which, in some ways, resemble Vygotsky's ZPD, originally a psychological concept viewed through the lens of social constructivism.

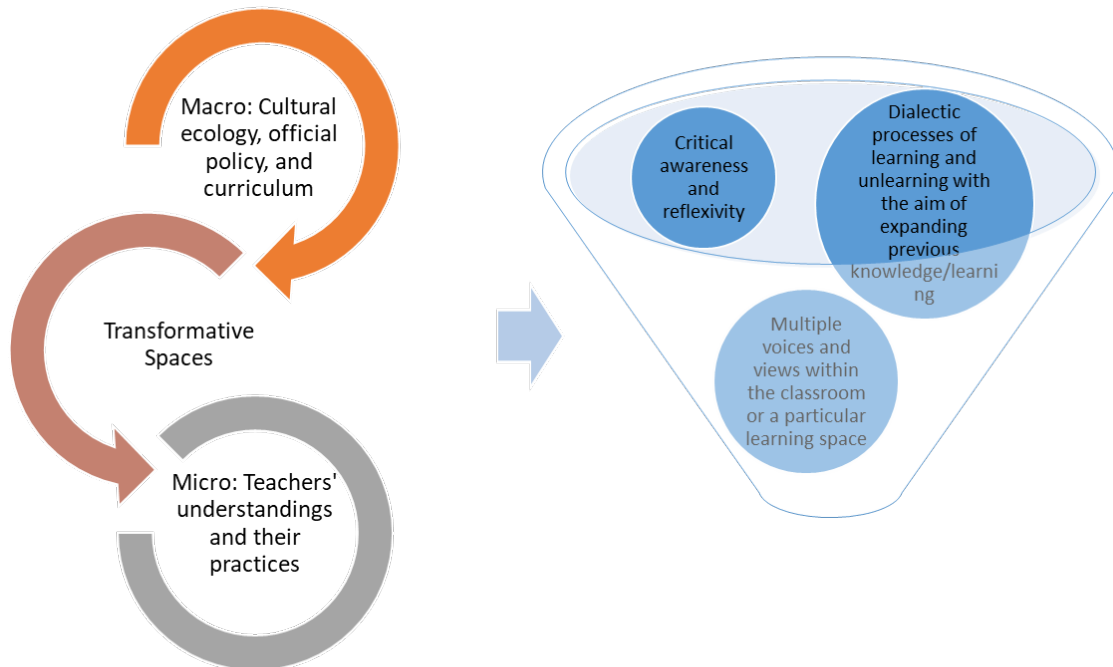
In transformative spaces, counter-publics arise to present diverse viewpoints and ideas that promote gender justice and nurture a counter-discourse. To summarise, we define transformative spaces in education as encompassing:

- Dialectical processes of learning and unlearning to expand existing knowledge.
- Critical awareness and reflexivity.
- Multiple voices and viewpoints present in the classroom or in a specific learning environment.

The concept of transformative spaces can be applied when analysing discourses in policy documents and curricula, or when studying narratives and practices within the classroom. In this context, transformative spaces may be discursive, symbolic, imaginative, or physical. In this paper, we primarily focus on the discursive and physical aspects of transformative spaces, arguing that within schools, this is realised through the interaction between macro-level policy and micro-level classroom practices. The space in between is what we define as a transformative space, where opportunities arise for promoting equality in and through education (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Transformative spaces in between the macro policy and micro practice. Source: authors.*



## Method, Data, and Analysis

The primary aim of this study is to examine how the concept of transformative spaces applies to understanding schoolteachers' enactment of gender equality. Two countries, Iceland and China, were selected for this study because the authors come from these cultural contexts and can serve as both insiders and outsiders to explore new meanings constructed at the boundary between these nations, where historical, social, cultural, political, ethical, and subjective understandings intersect (McNess, Arthur & Crossley, 2015). The first author, who hails from Iceland, identifies as queer and has worked in education for the past twenty years. The second author, who is from China, has substantial experience in education, gaining firsthand insight into teaching and learning practices in the field. In our analysis of the data, we draw on our professional and personal experiences, as well as our interactions within the education sector. Moreover, the first author has long engaged with both queer and feminist/critical theory in their writings. In interpreting the data and designing the research, these knowledges were utilised. In other words, critical feminist and queer perspectives influenced the research process, from study design to data collection, analysis, and writing up the results.

Comparing these diverse environments provides rich examples of how transformative spaces in schools are constructed through discussions of micro-macro interactions and cultural ecologies. Methodologically, micro-level comparative analysis can include a macro-causal dimension (Ragin, 2008) as the macro manifests differently through a micro lens. In this paper, the micro accounts of teachers reflect the manifestations of the gender system in action (Walby, 1990). However, it is important to note that, despite being a comparative study, we did not merely juxtapose or compare

these two cases to examine a particular issue. We were also interested in the local nuances and how they influenced the construction of transformative spaces. Furthermore, we placed the theoretical concepts of transformative spaces at the heart of the comparison process. In this regard, and in line with Schriewer (2006, 2014), our analysis addresses a global audience and has a transnational scope, driven by the theoretical concept of transformative spaces to illuminate the global issue of gender equality. Methodologically speaking, this paper is not an inductive empirical study but rather an interactive dialogue between theoretical construction and empirical exploration.

## **Data collection and analysis**

Two data clusters were collected in each country. The first cluster focuses on public and educational discourses surrounding gender issues. The cluster includes official policy documents, legislation, and national curricula related to gender issues, specifically the National Curriculum Guide for compulsory schools and the National Curriculum Guide for upper secondary schools in Iceland. Documents regarding gender equality and issues in China were primarily collected from policies and briefings of the State Council of China, the country's highest administrative authority, which functions similarly to a cabinet within the Chinese political system. In this context, documents and policies from this body represent the dominant political discourse on specific issues. In analysing these documents, we were guided by Foucauldian discourse analysis (Foucault, 1972, 1978), which emphasises the dynamics of power and knowledge within the documents and how they are constructed through discourse, as well as critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2001). The second data cluster consists of semi-structured interviews with eight schoolteachers from Iceland and China. During the interviews, we discussed topics related to school policies and classroom practices regarding gender equality. The participants were recruited through snowball sampling methods, coming from various compulsory and upper secondary schools in the Beijing metropolitan area and Reykjavík, the capital of Iceland. All participants consented, and chose their pseudonyms upon participation. The interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes each and were conducted in the local languages (Mandarin and Icelandic). They were transcribed verbatim and translated into English by the authors. Themes were identified using thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The authors re-read the interviews and established several general themes related to teaching practices, textbooks, policy, perspectives on gender equality, and reflexivity. Following this initial analysis of the dataset, both authors discussed how the findings could be integrated with the theoretical framework, particularly concerning the core concepts related to gender equality and the construction of transformative spaces.

## **Findings**

### **Policy documents on gender equality**

In this section, we pose the following questions while analysing the documents. How are gender and gender equality contextualized in the policy documents? How is gender equality understood? What do the documents reveal about implementing or achieving gender equality in and through education? Do they create any transformative spaces that align with our theoretical approach?

In the Icelandic context, we analyse two documents: the National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools, and the National Curriculum Guide for Upper Secondary Schools. These policy documents took effect in 2011 and serve as regulations; schools are required to incorporate these policies into their work and curriculum. In the first document, the word 'gender' appears thirteen times, while in the second one, it appears nine times. 'Equality', on the other hand, is mentioned forty-two times in the first document and forty times in the second. Thus, equality is given high priority in both documents. Equality is one of the six fundamental pillars of the National Curriculum Guide. It is essential to note that the concept of equality in Iceland has often been framed primarily in terms of gender equality. However, other factors, such as ethnicity and sexual diversity, are also acknowledged.



In the Icelandic documents, gender and gender equality are contextualised with reference to the Act on Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men, which stipulates that ‘... at all school levels pupils should be educated in equal rights where an effort should be made to prepare both genders for equal participation in society ...’ (Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, 2011a, 20). Thus, gender equality within schools is seen as reflecting gender equality within society at large. Gender is also mentioned in connection to equality education, where the gender factor is listed among many identity categories, such as sexuality, disability, ethnicity, race, age, etc., that can ‘establish discrimination and privileges for people’ (Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, 2011a, 20). This highlights how gender equality is understood in the documents. It can be argued that gender equality is conceived both in terms of gender equity within education and through education, wherein society can be transformed. For example, both National Guides emphasise equal and extensive educational opportunities for girls and boys and stipulate that schools need to incorporate gender equality/equity in their practices: ‘Nowhere in school activities, content, or in working methods should there be any obstacles for either gender’ (p. 20). Moreover, the National Guide for Compulsory Schools emphasises that ‘... teaching methods must not discriminate against students based on gender’, or any other factors such as sexuality and disability. The National Guide for Upper Secondary Schools is more concerned that ‘educational material should appeal equality to both sexes’ (p. 40). Thus, both in teaching practices and teaching materials, there is a strong focus on actualising gender equality within education. However, there is also a transformative aspect regarding gender equality in both guides, in which gender equality is related to society as a whole and the aim of education should be to address gender inequality in society. In other words, gender equality is achieved through education. This can be seen, for example, in the following quotes from the two guides:

In preparing for the future field of employment, it is important to keep in mind a gender-divided labor market and advocate a less gender-based selection of studies than is the case now. It is essential that the choice of tasks set for students is based on equality and equal rights and they thus become less gender-oriented. (Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, 2011b, 34)

... [An] effort should be made to prepare both genders for equal participation in society, both in family life and in the labor market. Emphasis should be on boys and girls having as extensive and equal opportunities as possible. (Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, 2011a, 20)

In terms of implementation, both National Guides lack clear guidance for teachers and schools on how to incorporate education about gender and gender equality into the school curriculum and classroom practices. However, they provide some suggestions on how this can be achieved, as can be seen in the following quotes:

For this purpose it is reasonable for schools to make use of the knowledge that has been acquired in new studies, such as gender studies, queer theory, multicultural studies and disability studies. (Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, 2011b, 20)

Gender studies and their concepts are an important factor to make pupils conscious of the status of the sexes in society. (Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, 2011a, 36)

Furthermore, some key competencies related to gender equality education encompass teaching students to be ‘... aware and critical of the influence that role models and stereotypes have on their own image and lifestyle, and [to] understand the role of sex and gender in society’ (Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, 2011b, 34). Thus, it can be argued that while the National guides are progressive concerning gender equality education by encouraging schools and teachers to incorporate gender/queer studies into their teaching practices, it ultimately falls to each individual teacher or school to translate policy into practice. In other words, these policy documents provide hope and opportunities for creating a transformative space within the classroom, but the actual

implementation relies on individual teachers and schools. In this regard, it can be argued that curricula and policy documents alone do not create a transformative space within the discourse on gender equality and education; rather, this space must be realised through reflexive teaching practices, as will be discussed later in the paper.

In the Chinese context, we analysed educational and curriculum policies to explore the gendered discourses of past decades in China. The Chinese documents also include discussions about gender equality at the national level. Since the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Chinese government has proposed several policies addressing the relationship between gender and education. The State Council implemented the Outlines for Women Development in China in 2001, which identifies the relationship between women and education as follows:

In the reform process of curriculum, subject content, and pedagogical methods, gender consciousness should be integrated into teacher training programs. Additionally, courses on Women's Studies, Marxist Views on Women, and Social Gender and Development should be introduced to enhance gender awareness among educators and learners, (MOE, 2001)

Almost in the same year, the State Council implemented another policy entitled Outlines for Children Development in China, which mentioned that '[p]rimary and secondary schools and education should adopt gender equity into their subject matters' (CCCCP, 2001).

These policy documents emphasise three concepts: gender awareness, gender consciousness, and gender equity. However, the meanings of these concepts and their implementation are not clearly articulated. It is also noteworthy that the focus is on equity rather than gender equality in the 2001 CCCCCP document. This can be seen as avoiding a comprehensive discussion of gender equality within primary schools, leaving teachers with a somewhat narrow focus on the topic. Nevertheless, these policies open possibilities for transformative work, as gender is explicitly documented in policy. However, due to their ambiguous meanings, they do not facilitate or enable teachers to implement gender equality in schools, as we will demonstrate later. Consequently, these national policies from 2001 have rarely been enforced in schools. Furthermore, a review of the curriculum and teacher education programmes in selected teachers' colleges indicated disparities concerning gender equality. This has also been confirmed by Zheng (2005) in his analysis of various textbooks, which concludes that overall, male images (84.7%) are more visible than female ones (15.3%). Additionally, these same textbooks reproduce traditional gender roles. For example, famous scientists and politicians are predominantly male, while women are often depicted as peasants or in caretaking professions.

The discrepancy between national policies on gender equality and actual practices is also evident in policies concerning teachers' salaries, as well as their rights and responsibilities. These differences highlight the gender equality gap between male and female teachers. For instance, in the Beijing municipality, the retirement age is seventy-five for male school principals and seventy for female school principals. Males are also prioritised for in-service teacher training programmes before female candidates, based on the assumption that they have more time to develop their professional skills and competencies compared to female teachers, who must juggle their schoolwork and domestic responsibilities. Thus, these examples illustrate a gap between national policies and practices, as well as local educational policies, which often rely on traditional social values and customs, perpetuating gender inequality and patriarchal norms. This paradox poses a challenge for teachers to establish an equitable space that aligns national policies with the curriculum, local educational policies, and practices. In other words, there is a disconnect between the broad political discourse on gender equality and the more localised practices and understandings of how these principles should be applied and integrated into local educational policies.

The national educational policy in China often lacks clarity or does not address achieving gender equality in classrooms and schools. Consequently, teachers have limited opportunities to incorporate this issue into their work. Additionally, there is a lack of guidance on teaching gender equality

within the national K-12 curriculum in China. For instance, we examined all the primary-level textbooks (ages 6-12) and found that they did not explicitly address gender issues. Teacher Fang, a social science teacher at Youth School, confirmed this in our interview with him when he stated that ‘my students don’t have the awareness of gender before grade four, I suppose. Because we don’t have the subject content about gender in class.’ Accordingly, the lack of gender awareness among students can contribute to the limited educational material available on gender, making it challenging for teachers to introduce transformative changes in their teaching practices. The absence of textbooks or educational materials to work with can serve as an obstacle to learning and unlearning, which are key aspects of creating a transformative space within the classroom.

How the national curriculum and school-based curriculum promote gender equality in textbooks, as well as teaching and learning activities, is a fundamental question for policy analysis. In China, gender issues seem to be an overlooked area for primary school students. This can be read from the interview excerpt with Chung, a Chinese language teacher:

I don’t recall the curriculum and teaching content related to gender equality in detail. In the Chinese language and literature courses, we cover a lot about traditional Chinese virtues, such as not pocketing the money one has picked up, being eager to help others, and having a passion for work, among others. However, there is rarely any focus on gender.

However, reflecting on these official policy documents can engage teachers, as demonstrated by Fang and Chung, in *dialectical processes of learning and unlearning aimed at expanding their previous understanding* of gender equality. We will now examine this, focusing mainly on the interview data. This forms one of the prerequisites aligned with our theoretical perspective to create a transformative space within the classroom.

## Understanding of gender equality and institutional obstacles

To promote gender equality through education and create transformative spaces, teachers need a critical understanding of what this entails. Moreover, they should foster in the classroom what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have termed ‘democratizing gender relations’. This involves transforming gender relations within institutions and society, which entails ‘abolishing power differentials, not just reproducing hierarchy’ (p. 853). Therefore, the goal is to achieve gender equality, which, in line with our theoretical perspective, can be understood as addressing multiple voices and the processes of learning and unlearning. Nearly all our participants expressed the importance of gender equality and what can be interpreted as ‘democratizing gender relations’. Chung and Aron provide some nuanced examples:

Gender equality is essential for **social solidarity**. This concept transcends physical attributes and emphasizes social dimensions. It represents equal social roles without prejudice towards males or females. Gender equality is defined by equitable social roles and **social responsibility**. (Chung)

Gender equality is a **human rights issue**, implying that women and men have **equal power** and participate on an equal basis at all levels of education. This includes teachers’ attitudes towards students, communication among students, interactions between employees or teachers, the curriculum content, assessments, and all other aspects related to school practices. Both genders must enjoy the same *rights and respect*. (Aron)

[Emphasis – bold – is provided by the authors]

These quotes highlight the differing cultural understandings of gender equality between Icelandic and Chinese teachers as they reflect on its transformative potential for society. Chung emphasises the connection between gender equality and social solidarity and responsibility, relating to the ingrained Confucian influences in contemporary Chinese society and underscoring the importance of social

harmony and respect for social order. Furthermore, gender equality involves more than just granting equal rights to women and men, as is dominant in modern (human) rights discourse and emphasised by Aron; it also encompasses social responsibility. This perspective can also be viewed through the lens of the dominance of Marxist-Leninist doctrine, which, particularly in Asia, has historically intersected with social solidarity and respect for stability and party order (Mackerras & Knight, 2015).

Some participants expressed doubts about whether gender equality could ever be fully achieved. Yuen, a female Chinese language teacher, claimed that gender equality in China is just a dream that will probably never come true:

I don't believe there can be absolute equality between genders. Traditional Chinese culture profoundly influences and sustains the differences between males and females. We cannot exist outside of this cultural environment.

In the quote, Yuen's persistent view on achieving gender equality can be understood within the framework of cultural essentialism. Accordingly, cultural factors, often viewed as fixed and unchangeable, may hinder progress toward gender equality. This issue has been emphasised in discussions on Islam and gender equality in Islamic/Muslim-dominated societies. However, in the 'utopic' global North, teachers have also expressed scepticism regarding the realisation of gender equality. Hanna, a female social science teacher in Iceland, highlighted a gap between policy and practice when asked to comment on gender equality at her school and the existing policy on the matter. She identified several obstacles in schools related to achieving gender equality:

Yes, I am familiar with the policy, and most of it is merely on paper. However, there are many promises regarding various issues; equality should be respected, but it's just words on paper. There are numerous examples. One is how management addresses sexual harassment at our school. Another is the latent opposition to making gender equality courses compulsory. Additionally, many people fear expressing their views on gender equality openly; it is often seen as too political.

Hanna and Yuen, both female teachers, seem increasingly aware of the gap between policy, cultural factors, and the reality of gender equality. They recognise the structural obstacles that make it difficult for individual teachers to create transformative spaces in their classrooms. However, by acknowledging these challenges and identifying necessary actions, they have embraced a transformative perspective with a critical stance. Reflexivity, as discussed in our theoretical section, is a vital step for teachers to cultivate transformative spaces for gender equality in the classroom. In this context, Yuen's critical thinking about Chinese traditional culture and its societal structure, along with Hanna's discussion on the gap between policy discourse and practice, contributes to what can be defined as *critical awareness*.

## Teachers' practices

The most challenging aspect is how teachers develop their classroom curriculum on gender equality, which extends beyond the national curriculum. Yuen mentioned that she occasionally tries to address gender issues and gender equality in her language use and teaching instructions:

Once, I taught about the most famous scientists in the world. The textbook only mentioned male scientists, like Edison, Einstein, and Newton. One boy pointed out that we also have a female scientist, Marie Curie. I praised him and decided to expand on his idea for discussion. However, I didn't have enough time to talk about female scientists in class.

Yuen's story highlights the challenges of teaching gender equality in Chinese schools. The curriculum offers neither the time nor the space to address these issues. Furthermore, Yuen and her colleagues lack substantial national or governmental support for this topic (see the section about policy). They incorporate themes of gender and gender equality into the classroom curriculum on an individual basis

and experiment with new methods in their teaching practices to engage students. Yuen demonstrated this when one of her students became aware of the lack of female scientists in the educational material, using what has been termed ‘teachable moments’ to create a transformative space for gender equality within the classroom. This included incorporating diverse voices into the curriculum to engage students with gender diversity in science and the production of scientific knowledge.

Hwang also shares the same experience as Yuen and expressed concern that textbooks lack discussion on gender, as evidenced by the following quote:

The textbook for our social sciences course covers topics such as transportation, hometowns, social virtues, and more. Typically, each lesson spans two to three pages. I need to enhance my teaching by incorporating additional content on gender equality.

Hwang emphasised that textbooks often lack diverse topics, particularly those related to gender and gender equality. Consequently, teachers like Hwang need to ‘add’ those missing topics to the curriculum. In other words, to create transformative spaces within the classroom, educators such as Hwang and Yuen strive to incorporate multiple perspectives on gender equality. They extend the official curriculum on an individual basis, which is unclear about how to teach gender or completely lacks specific guidance. This limitation also applies to textbooks and educational materials. As a result, learning about gender equality in the classroom largely relies on the competencies of individual teachers and their views on the topic. However, many teachers frequently lack a deep understanding of gender and the complexities of gender equality. They tend to hold traditional views on gender and emphasise essentialised differences between boys and girls, as demonstrated in the following interview extracts:

Girls are weaker than boys in terms of physical power. When I take our students out of school, I usually ask the girls to get on the bus first. If boys and girls quarrel together noisily, I always chew boys out first. My concern is for girls. (Chung)

I have different views on boys and girls. For example, I usually assign exhausting tasks to boys, like carrying something heavy, while I ask girls to do things that require carefulness, such as handcrafts. This is my guidance for boys and girls in schooling. (Yuen)

Every now and then, I like to divide my students into groups to collaborate on various projects. However, some boys expressed that they didn’t want to work with girls. As a result, I try to encourage my students, both boys and girls, to work together. (Fang)

Chung, Yuen, and Fang are all shaped by the dominant discourse on gender in Chinese society, rooted in Confucian ideology and perspectives. According to this logic, recognising differences between genders is the first step toward achieving gender equality. Although they all hold traditional views on gender differences, they understand the necessity of promoting equality between boys and girls, as reflected in previous quotes from Yuen, who critically examines the cultural context surrounding the pursuit of gender equality. This stands in stark contrast to teachers from Iceland, influenced by feminist and equality discourse that has shaped Icelandic society over the past few decades. From this perspective, gender differences should not be seen as essential, and the prevailing view is that gender is socially constructed, depending on context and historical factors. This was often expressed in the interview with Hanna. However, some Icelandic teachers seem to hold traditional gender views, like their Chinese counterparts, although this might be more accurately defined as ‘gender blindness’, as expressed by Bergþór, a male math teacher:

Unfortunately, I may not be fully aware of how to incorporate gender equality into my classroom work. However, I allow myself to believe that I do not make judgments or hold preconceived notions about gender. Usually, I focus more on delivering subject content to my students rather than pondering gender issues. Nevertheless, I believe my teaching is not male-oriented and that I can convey the idea that everyone can learn math, regardless of gender—a subject many perceive as a boy’s favourite.



Bergþór emphasised that he makes no distinction in his teaching method between boys and girls. In this regard, he views his teaching as 'gender blind'. Furthermore, he expressed uncertainty about how to incorporate gender equality into his teaching, focusing more on delivering the subject content rather than actively considering the gender perspective. His views differ from those of both his Icelandic and Chinese counterparts, and—unlike the others—he does not reflect on the possibilities of creating a transformative space within the classroom. In this respect, he is somewhat at odds with what the other participants revealed in our study.

In contrast to Bergþór, Anna, an Icelandic female social science teacher, noted that she integrates gender equality into her classroom work by discussing both men and women equally, and when there are gender imbalances, she highlights them to her students. Hanna, also a female social sciences teacher, was more assertive when asked how she incorporates gender issues and gender equality into her classroom work:

I'm always a feminist—whether I'm teaching or not, even outside the classroom, such as during teachers' meetings. I have received compliments, as well as some angry comments. I don't let it stop me.

To sum up, most participants aimed to create a transformative space for gender equality in their classrooms, consistent with our theoretical discussion. They achieved this through reflexive and critical thinking, as well as various teaching practices. Many included diverse voices and perspectives in their classroom curriculum to enhance learning about gender equality. Of course, there were some differences related to culture and context, along with individual variations among the teachers. For example, Bergþór, coming from the presumed feminist utopia of Iceland, highlighted how taking gender equality for granted or viewing it as a won battle might contribute to perspectives that can be defined as 'gender blindness' or 'gender neutrality'. This would require further discussion and research within educational settings and schools, particularly regarding how some teachers might cling to views that restrict rather than facilitate the creation of transformative spaces within classroom environments.

## Discussion

In this section, we explore the possibilities and challenges of creating transformative spaces for gender equality in education, based on the data presented in the previous chapter. Drawing on both Fraser and Vygotsky, transformative spaces involve: (a) dialectical processes of learning and unlearning that aim to expand prior knowledge and understanding, (b) critical awareness and reflexivity, and (c) multiple voices and perspectives within the classroom or a specific learning environment.

Aikman and Unterhalter (2007) point out that achieving gender equality in education requires a focus on teacher practices and the integration of gender equality education into the classroom curriculum. This aligns with our emphasis and findings; we demonstrate that in China and Iceland, schools and teachers were not fully able to create transformative spaces for gender equality within their classrooms. Some participants attempted to be both critical and reflexive in their narratives. However, macro and micro-level structural factors made it challenging for progressive teachers to promote gender equality in and through education.

At the macro level, the grand narratives in educational policies emphasise that gender equality is essential for the well-being of society, democracy, and social justice. This emphasis is evident in the policy discourse of both countries. However, the National Curriculum in China is less explicit about gender equality compared to its Icelandic counterpart. Cultural factors, such as the strong influences of Confucian thought in Chinese society and education, must be considered when comparing educational policies across different cultural contexts. Nevertheless, the policy discourse in both countries lacks practical guidance for educators on implementing gender equality initiatives within schools and through education. Consequently, individual teachers must interpret and utilise existing



policies regarding gender equality. At the micro level, practices vary among teachers. Some educators demonstrate a willingness, whether explicitly stated or not, to promote gender equality and foster a transformative classroom environment, while others maintain more traditional views on these issues. Yuen, for instance, despite recognising that gender equality is an elusive dream in a Confucian society, still initiates discussions about gender imbalance in her class. However, she exhibits traditional views toward gender. Bergþór's adherence to what can be termed 'gender neutrality' or 'gender blindness' was at odds with the views of other participants regarding gender equality, as they held positive views of gender equality and reflected on the concept. In line with our theoretical framework, reflexivity and critical thinking are prerequisites for creating transformative spaces in the classroom. In that respect, classroom practices and teachers' beliefs can be seen as forming a ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) for achieving gender equality in and through education. For example, teachers such as Fang and Hwang felt the need to enhance and develop their own curriculum to foster students' gender consciousness. In this context, they employed their creativity to craft and recreate transformative spaces for their students, thereby transcending the established curriculum and policy.

In this transnational study, we focused on gender equality in and through education and how it can be incorporated into classroom practices by analysing our data on the concept of transformative spaces in schools and education. As shown in Figure 1, transformative spaces exist between the macro sphere of policy and the micro sphere of dominant teaching practices and learning. It entails, in line with Vygotskian thought, a dialectical process of unlearning and learning to transform or expand existing knowledge and methods. These spaces are filled with possibilities and can be understood as both discursive and symbolic, as well as physical. In our study, we used examples from China and Iceland to demonstrate how teachers attempted to enhance gender equality in their practices and within the classroom by navigating between the macro and the micro, aiming to create a transformative space for their students.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we integrate feminist and Vygotskian theories to examine gender equality and gender in educational settings. This innovative approach aims to contribute to academic discussions on these topics. The concept of transformative spaces serves as a theoretical framework in this transnational study to analyse how gender issues and gender equality are addressed in education in Iceland and China. Our analysis focuses on policy discourses and teachers' practices aimed at promoting gender equality in schools. Almost all our participants noted a gap between policy and the practical challenges of incorporating gender issues and gender equality into their classroom curriculum. However, as discussed in this paper, drawing on feminist and Vygotskian theory reveals the potential for creating a transformative space for gender equality within the classroom by navigating between the macro and microsphere (see Figure 1). Thus, the processes of creating transformative spaces operate dialectically, prompting unlearning and learning to expand prior knowledge.

Furthermore, this study offers theoretical implications for cross-cultural and comparative research. It is well known that lessons and experiences from foreign cultures are not easily reconciled. In this paper, a theory-driven approach and a theoretical-plus-empirical paradigm allow gender equality to be understood as a transnational issue. This is why this research has international implications in both social and educational fields. The three facets of transformative spaces encourage educational researchers, schoolteachers, and practitioners to reflect on the issue of gender inequality. Additionally, these three aspects of transformative spaces illustrate the pursuit of achieving gender equality not only in education but also through it.

## **Umbreytingarrými fyrir kynjajafnrétti í skólastarfi : Reynslusögur frá Kína og Íslandi**

Útdráttur: Kynjajafnrétti er mikilvægur þáttur menntun og skólastarfi og stuðlar að betri námsárangri allra nemenda. Með því að taka upp alþjóðlegt sjónarhorn á kynjajafnrétti í Kína og á Íslandi opnast möguleikar til að læra af reynslunni frá ólíkum menningarheimum, sem þó standa frammi fyrir svipuðum áskorunum. Greinin sameinar femínískar kenningar, einkum þá þær sem Fraser hefur sett fram, umbreytingarhugmyndir Vygotsky. Lagt er upp með að þessi nálgun gefi nýja sýn á hvernig hægt er að vinna með kynjajafnrétti í skólastarfi og umbreyta starfsháttum í átt til kynjajafnréttis innan kennslustofunnar. Slík umbreytingarrými fela í sér eftirfarandi: a) Dialektísk ferli sem byggja á því að læra/aflæra í þeim tilgangi að búa til nýja þekkingu og breyta viðhorfum; b) Sjálfsrýni og gagnrýnin hugsun; c) Að stuðla að fjölbreytileika viðhorfa, sjónarmiða og þekkingar innan kennslurrýmis. Í rannsókninni er kynnt til sögunnar kenningarleg nálgun þar sem notast er við ýmiss konar gögn til koma með dæmi um hvernig hægt er að nýta sér áðurnefndan kenningarramma. Í þeim efnum er stuðst við hin ýmsu skjöl á borð við námskrár og reglugerðir, átta viðtöl ásamt þátttökuathugunum í Kína og á Íslandi. Niðurstöðurnar sýna að hugmyndafræðin um umbreytingarrými er lykilverkfæri til að greina og efla kynjajafnrétti í skólum.

**Efnisorð:** kynjajafnrétti, umbreytingarrými, Kína, Ísland, samanburðarrannsókn.

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