

A Paradigm Shift in “Heritage”: What Are the Significances of a Gender Perspective?

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I. Introduction

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which plays a leading role in heritage protection globally, has developed its own operational principles of heritage. A widely recognized turning point in this field is the adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH Convention) in 2003. This convention has significantly altered how heritage is defined and valued, with some scholars describing it as a “paradigm shift” in the field, highlighting the inclusion of community participation, recognition of intangible practices, and attention to cultural diversity.¹

This article critically examines whether this so-called paradigm shift has truly occurred in heritage, particularly from a gender perspective. In this context, a gender perspective does not merely focus on women’s experiences, but critically analyzes the social structures, power relations, and cultural norms that shape participation, roles, and decision-making in heritage contexts. Particularly, in the field of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), this perspective emphasizes who holds authority, who participates and in what roles, and whether existing systems and practices reproduce or challenge gender inequalities.² Applying this lens allows for an assessment of whether heritage safeguarding initiatives truly empower women or inadvertently reinforce traditional hierarchies.

Gender and heritage have long been subjects of scholarly discussion. Laurajane Smith, for instance, introduced the concept of “Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD)” —a dominant framework shaped by “Western elite cultural values” that legitimizes particular narratives while excluding and marginalizing

the perspectives of others, including women, indigenous communities, and immigrants.³ Smith also emphasizes that ICH—as a set of cultural practices enacted by people rather than embedded in material objects like buildings and monuments—is deeply involved in shaping gender identities.⁴ Due to its nature as a cultural practice, ICH is often discussed in relation to gender connected to everyday life and lived experiences. Furthermore, discussions of gender in ICH often intersect with human rights concerns, especially after UNESCO adopted the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity in 2001 and the ICH Convention in 2003; scholars such as Valentine Moghadam and Manilee Bagheritari critically assess how these UNESCO documents impact gender equality, highlighting tensions between women’s rights and traditional cultural practices and drawing on broader international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).⁵

This article, however, examines gender and heritage not through a human rights lens, but by analysing the gendered structures embedded within communities that the ICH Convention identifies as key to safeguarding ICH. As Janet Blake notes, gender is culturally specific and varies across societies,⁶ implying that heritage safeguarding efforts risk reinforcing traditional inequalities if these internal dynamics are overlooked. This point is illustrated through two case studies. In the Japanese float festivals, women participate largely in supportive roles such as food preparation and caretaking, while central, decision-making, and visible performance roles remain male-dominated. Similarly, in Chiang Mai, Thailand, craftswomen engaged in digital documentation and training programs face limited alternatives in decision-making and recognition of their contributions, despite formal inclusion in project activities. These cases show that nominal participation does not necessarily constitute meaningful empowerment. Drawing on Naila Kabeer’s framework in *Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment* (1998), of first- and second-order choices, this article highlights the importance of evaluating both the “conditions of choice”—whether women have genuine alternatives—and the “consequences of choice”—whether their participation can challenge and transform existing gender norms—⁷ and considers how these choices operate in the context of safeguarding heritage from a gender perspective.

The article is structured as follows. Section II traces how the concept of

heritage has evolved across UNESCO conventions, with particular attention to the ICH Convention. Section III introduces the notion of a paradigm shift in the heritage domain and presents critiques of this concept. Section IV analyzes the specific case studies of the Japanese festivals and the project in Chiang Mai, assessing whether safeguarding initiatives reflect transformative change or merely perpetuate existing gender hierarchies. Finally, the conclusion proposes directions for more effectively integrating gender considerations into the safeguarding of heritage.

II. Principle of Heritage

Over decades, UNESCO has played a leading role in establishing key international conventions for the protection of cultural heritage. These include: the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (referred to as Hague Convention, 1954); the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Cultural Property (1970); the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (World Heritage Convention, 1972); the Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage (2001); and the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH Convention, 2003). The development of these conventions followed the widespread destruction of historic buildings and cities, as well as the looting of cultural artefacts and antiques during the First and Second World Wars. In response, UNESCO sought to establish general principles for the protection of heritage, both under normal circumstances and in times of emergency, emphasizing the importance of preservation, transmission, and international cooperation. The following sections summarize the evolution of concept of heritage.

1. The Hague Convention

The Hague Convention was adopted in 1954 and enhanced by its Second Protocol in 1999, represents one of the foundational principles in international heritage protection. It was developed in response to the widespread destruction of cultural sites during armed conflicts, including the Yugoslav Wars (1991–2001), highlighting that attacks on cultural property also constitute attacks on the identities of affected communities. A key contribution of the Convention is

its first technical definition of cultural property, which Francesco Francioni describes as a “dynamic evolution of the notion of cultural property.”⁸ The Convention defines cultural property to include:

- Movable or immovable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people
- Buildings whose main and effective purpose is to preserve or exhibit the movable cultural property of great importance
- Centers containing a large amount of cultural property.⁹

In short, cultural property refers to a collective, public asset, not merely individual possessions or marketable objects. The use of the term “cultural property” rather than “cultural heritage” reflects the public and legal framing of that period.

The Convention establishes several core principles of heritage protection:

- Heritage has collective cultural value and must be safeguarded even in conflict.
- Legal recognition of tangible heritage enables international enforcement.
- Heritage concepts are dynamic, laying the groundwork for including intangible and collective aspects.¹⁰

A remaining challenge is determining who decides what is of great importance and how these decisions are made, reflecting the ongoing tension between universal principles and local perspectives in heritage protection.

2. The World Heritage Convention

The World Heritage Convention, adopted in 1972, aims to identify, protect, and preserve cultural and natural heritage sites around the world that hold outstanding value to humanity.¹¹ It emerged from global efforts to safeguard cultural sites such as the Abu Simbel temples in Egypt, demonstrating the importance of international cooperation and shared responsibility in preserving heritage threatened by human activities or development. The Convention introduced several innovations in heritage principles:

- Integration of cultural and natural heritage: recognizing that both forms of heritage are valuable and vulnerable.
- Use of the term “cultural heritage” instead of “cultural property”: reflecting broader and more complex values beyond mere ownership.
- Categorization of heritage types: monuments, groups of buildings, and sites,

all of which can have Outstanding Universal Value (OUV).

A central principle is that certain heritage sites belong to all peoples of the world, regardless of location, and must be preserved for present and future generations. The concept of OUV provides universal criteria for evaluation, including significance in human creativity, historical or cultural testimony, interaction with the environment, and associations with living traditions or ideas.

Additionally, the Convention emphasizes that heritage sites must possess integrity and authenticity and be supported by adequate protection and management systems. In sum, the World Heritage Convention establishes two fundamental principles:

- Some heritage must be protected by the international community.
- Heritage must be assessed and safeguarded according to universal values and criteria, ensuring consistent recognition and preservation globally.

These frameworks clarified how and why heritage is recognized and protected on a global scale.

3. The ICH Convention

The ICH Convention, adopted in 2003, marks a significant conceptual shift in evolution of heritage principles, expanding the notion of heritage from the tangible and monumental to the intangible and living. This Convention emerged in response to two major shifts. The first one was the global trend of revisiting regional culture and rising awareness of the culture of indigenous people. This shift grew the recognition of the value of ICH, and reflected an intellectual move toward indigenous development, in which local and ethnic cultures including languages were given greater value.¹² Although this was not initially a trend within the heritage field, the adoption of the Convention on Biological Diversity by the United Nations in 1992 helped to grow the move. Article 8 of that Convention emphasizes the importance of respecting and preserving the traditional knowledge and practices of Indigenous and local communities, as they play a vital role in conserving and sustainably using biodiversity. This recognition helped raise global awareness of the need to protect indigenous cultures, which connected to UNESCO's effort to safeguard ICH such as folklore, traditional knowledge and oral traditions.

The second shift was the criticism for the World Heritage Convention,

especially concerning the issue of regional disparity, which was pointed out by many researchers including Noriko Aikawa-Faure.¹³ Although the World Heritage List aimed to protect outstanding heritage sites through international cooperation, most inscribed sites were from Western countries. This imbalance is often attributed to the authenticity, which evaluates heritage composed of original materials. For instance, stone structures in Europe are more likely to meet authenticity than wooden structures in Asia regions as woods deteriorate more rapidly.¹⁴ This disparity raised serious questions about the fairness of heritage evaluation systems. Encouraged by these growing needs to address the issues of both cultural diversity and unfairness of the World Heritage List, UNESCO began implementing ICH safeguarding initiatives, including the Living Human Treasures System (1993) and the Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity (1997). These initiatives connected to the development of the ICH Convention, which was formally adopted in 2003.

Article 2 of the ICH Convention defines the intangible heritage as:

“...practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This ICH, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.”¹⁵

This definition marks a clear departure from earlier conventions. As William Logan notes, it emphasizes that heritage is “embodied in people rather than in inanimate objects,” thus challenging the conventional object-centered paradigm of heritage.¹⁶ The Convention identifies five main domains of ICH: (1) oral traditions and expressions, (2) performing arts, (3) social practices, rituals, and festive events, (4) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and (5) traditional craftsmanship.¹⁷

Another distinctive feature of ICH Convention lies in its principle of community participation. Article 15 states:

“Within the framework of its safeguarding activities of the ICH, each State Party shall endeavor to ensure the widest possible participation of communities, groups and, where appropriate, individuals that create, maintain and transmit such heritage, and to involve them actively in its management.”¹⁸

This provision situates heritage not merely as an expert-defined category but as a community-driven process, where meaning and value are established through local recognition and transmission. In practical terms, communities are expected to participate in the nomination process, the design of safeguarding measures, and the management of heritage elements.

Furthermore, the inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity requires fulfilment of five criteria, including the need for community participation, safeguarding plans, and reflection of “cultural diversity worldwide.”¹⁹ This contrasts sharply with the OUV model of the World Heritage Convention, which ranks sites based on universal aesthetic and historical significance. As Aikawa observes, while the World Heritage system functions as a “rating mechanism”, the ICH framework represents “a peace operation” that seeks inclusion and dialogue rather than competition.²⁰

In essence, the ICH Convention established a new principle of heritage—one that recognizes heritage as living, participatory, and dynamic. It redefines value not as intrinsic to material form but as embedded in social practice, transmission, and community identity. Under this framework, heritage enables communities to sustain and reinterpret their traditions in the face of modernization and globalization. As such, the ICH Convention represents not only a complement to earlier heritage regimes but also a paradigmatic shift in how humanity understands, values, and governs its shared cultural legacy.

III. Paradigm Shift in Heritage

1. New Paradigm

Gustavo Araoz, then President of ICOMOS International, described the conceptual transformation as “a new paradigm.”²¹ At the International Conference of the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee in May 2010,

Araoz delivered a presentation “Protecting Heritage Places under the New Heritage Paradigm & Defining its Tolerance for Change,” which had previously been submitted for global discussion to both the Executive and Advisory Committees at their meeting in October 2009.²² His introduction emphasized that heritage preservation has come under increasing pressure from development projects and new management strategies that often compromised authenticity and integrity. At the same time, heritage began to be perceived as an economic asset, fundamentally altering how governments and communities valued and utilized it. Observing these circumstances, Araoz concluded that the “nature and consequences of these changes have been enough to characterize the *cumulative results as a paradigm shift* for heritage places.”²³

Araoz identifies two primary factors behind this paradigm shift. The first is the evolution of the official understanding of heritage value, which was previously believed to reside exclusively in the material aspects of heritage. Araoz argues that this assumption has changed due to the years of advocacy by the international organizations. He traces this evolution referring to three key international documents:

- The Florence Charter for the Conservation of Historic Gardens (ICOMOS, 1982), which for the first time instructed conservation specialists to “manage a process in a place where character was defined by living organisms with defined life and death cycles.”
- The Charter for the Conservation of Vernacular Heritage (ICOMOS, revised in the mid-1990s), which “advanced the notion that effective protection of the vernacular heritage was dependent on protecting the intergenerational transmission of the traditional knowledge that enables its endurance.”
- The Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), which recognized that “authenticity is a relative concept that depends on its socio-historic context.”²⁴

Through these documents, intangible aspects such as living organisms and traditional knowledge were formally acknowledged as a part of heritage value, in particular, the Nara Document responded to tensions between Eurocentric and non-Western perspectives. Since authenticity was a key criterion for defining OUV, this reconceptualization significantly influenced how heritage value is evaluated. Araoz concludes that heritage values “no longer reside exclusively on its physical fabric and form, but on intangible concepts.”²⁵ This

marks a transition from the old heritage paradigm which valued the form, materials, craftsmanship and setting of the place to a new paradigm that focuses on evolving intangible values.

The second factor behind the paradigm shift is the changing social role of heritage, which is increasingly integrated into community development. Expanding on the new understanding of heritage value, Araoz describes heritage as a both "major anchor for cultural identity" and an "important element at the heart of community development."²⁶ To explain this changing role, Araoz refers to the Burra Charter (Australia ICOMOS, 1999), which was the first international document to acknowledge "the advent and access of these previously unrecognized stakeholder communities to the cultural and political arenas."²⁷ Araoz sees this shift as a moment when non-experts were allowed to participate in the decision-making process regarding heritage values, describing it as a "phenomenon of universal social inclusion" and emphasizes that places of great significance to smaller groups and minorities had been excluded from official policies and dominant cultural narratives.²⁸ As heritage increasingly becomes integrated into community development in its new social role, it responds "directly and constantly to the evolving needs of society at any given time."²⁹ This indicates a growing recognition of intangible and socially embedded values in heritage.

In summary, Araoz identifies two dimensions of the paradigm shift. One is the widespread recognition of that heritage values are rooted in intangible and evolving concepts, and another is the integration of heritage into community development as a new social role. These dimensions mark a significant departure from the material-centered, expert-driven heritage frameworks of the past. However, the question remains: does this evolution truly constitute a paradigm shift?

2. Critique of Paradigm Shift

Willem Derde offers one of the most comprehensive critiques of Araoz's idea by arguing that the outcomes of the so-called paradigm shift over the past decades remain unclear. Derde challenges Araoz's view that the cumulative changes in heritage practice are sufficient to be characterized as a paradigm shift. Referring to Thomas Kuhn's classic example of the paradigm shift in science field, Derde emphasizes that a genuine paradigm shift requires a

“fundamental change in the understanding of the *nature* of heritage places,” which he argues has not truly occurred within heritage field.³⁰ For example, Araoz argues that heritage is increasingly viewed as an economic asset concerns the use of heritage rather than a change in its nature. Other examples cited by Araoz such as the management of social processes, the use of heritage for poverty reduction, façadism, excessive restoration, and tourism-driven urbanization do not indicate a fundamental conceptual transformation. Rather, these examples reflect ongoing challenges and practices within the existing heritage framework and reveal that the field of heritage is “extremely complex and diverse” according to Derde.³¹

Although current threats facing heritage are identified by Araoz, they also do not cause a fundamental transformation. Derde further critiques Araoz’s argument that the professional toolkit and doctrinal foundation are inadequate to respond to new challenging because he failed to explain why and in what ways they are inadequate.³² In fact, the presented examples seem to reflect vulnerability of heritage under current threats, rather than any failures of the existing framework of heritage preservation. While a new paradigm might be necessary reframe these threats, Derde critiques that Araoz does not clearly articulate what the paradigm should do. In Derde’s assessment, Araoz succeeds in identifying the challenges heritage currently faces, but this does not imply that a fundamental redefinition of heritage has taken place.

In the latter half of his critique, Derde offers a detailed critique of Araoz’s concept of heritage value. Araoz argues that heritage value no longer lies in its material but in the immaterial “vessels” due to the increasing integration of heritage into community development, and that the constant evolution of values renders heritage inherently dynamic. In other words, heritage values adapt to evolving needs of society. However, according to Derde, there is a risk in this shift: when heritage becomes part of community development, its aesthetic and historic values are expected to give way to the economic values, effectively turning heritage site into “commodity in the real estate market.”³³ Derde criticizes this point for “treating the economic value of a monument as if it were a heritage value in its own right,”³⁴ which means that economic value may be allowed to override traditional cultural and historical significance.

While Araoz acknowledges that heritage values are fluid, Derde argues that he fails to clarify how intangible values are defined, safeguarded, and

transmitted. Additionally, the idea that values are always in flux contradicts the widely accepted view in heritage field that values must have a certain degree of stability in order to be recognized and protected.³⁵ According to Derde, this idea undermines the foundational principle of heritage values. He also critiques Araoz's concept of "vessels of value" meaning intangible carries of heritage, is too vague and Araoz fails to define what these vessels actually are and how they are safeguarded, rendering his proposed framework difficult for implementation.

In conclusion, Derde contends that Araoz's argument fails to establish a fully developed new paradigm. What is needed is more comprehensive and theoretically grounded theory of heritage that can answer fundamental questions such as what heritage is, what it does, and how it relates to society. Until such a theory emerges, the new paradigm remains an aspirational concept rather than a fully realized transformation.

IV. Gender Critique of the Paradigm Shift

The debate between Araoz and Derde highlights both conceptual evolution and the ongoing uncertainties surrounding the so-called new heritage paradigm, which emphasizes intangible values and community participation. Yet, from a gender perspective, a critical question arises: whose interests are truly represented, and whose are excluded? When a paradigm is "the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community"³⁶ as Khun describes, these questions are particularly crucial. The following sections address them, as they are key to determining whether the paradigm shift is genuine or merely reinforces existing inequalities.

1. From Principles to Practices: The Limits of the ICH Convention

Following the adoption of the ICH Convention in 2003, the issue of gender representation became controversial. The ICH Convention does not specifically mention women, which was decided to reflect divided opinions during its drafting. Some delegates emphasized the importance of recognizing women's special roles in transmitting ICH, while others opposed any special reference as it might constitute "(positive) discrimination."³⁷ In the end, the Convention remained gender-neutral representation but emphasized the need for alignment

with existing international human rights instruments such as CEDAW that explicitly addresses traditional cultural patterns as sources of gender inequality.

However, tensions emerged soon in the practical application of the Convention. When reviewing nomination files, reviewers encountered contradictions between local cultural practices and international equality standards. Gender-specific roles in ICH are often deeply rooted, with men and women performing visible or invisible tasks that are acceptable locally but conflicts with international standards in terms of human rights. Recognizing the needs to address gender issues within ICH framework, UNESCO held an expert meeting in December 2003, two months after the adoption of the ICH Convention. The discussions at this meeting were not limited to gender and women's issues, as these themes were closely connected to other fundamental aspects of ICH. The major discussion themes included: "insider and outsider," "tradition and modernization," "transmission and safeguarding," and "gender (in) equality in ICH."³⁸

Several key recommendations emerged from this meeting. One was the recognition of the need to balance universal safeguarding standards with sensitivity to regional and historical contexts, ensuring that global rules do not erase local particularities. The meeting also highlighted that gender should not be treated in isolation but understood as embedded within broader cultural frameworks. The key question raised was whether these frameworks truly reflect gender balance, rather than merely adding women's participation as a token measure. Another central concern was the persistence of male-dominated decision-making structures at local, national, and regional levels. Correcting these imbalances was considered essential not only for fairness but also for the legitimacy of safeguarding processes, since women are often key custodians of ICH. Accordingly, women must be actively involved at every stage, from identification and documentation to policymaking. Finally, the meeting reaffirmed that safeguarding heritage should remain custodian-centered, which means that researchers and policymakers should act as equal partners rather than directors in line with the principles of the 2003 Convention.³⁹

This raises a further question: would the full implementation of these recommendations constitute a genuine paradigm shift? The answer is arguably "no" because these measures risk reinforcing exclusion in practice by preserving rather than transforming existing gender hierarchies. The following

section critically examines this tension through a gender lens, exploring how the logic of safeguarding can both reproduce and obscure structural inequalities.

2. Gender Structure in Community and Heritage Practices

The recommendations submitted by the 2003 expert meeting are progressive but ultimately insufficient in addressing gender in safeguarding cultural heritage. This is because they can be interpreted as placing greater emphasis on respecting community-based gender norms than on promoting universal gender standards. While this culturally sensitive approach may appear inclusive, it risks overlooking the deeply embedded gender structures and hierarchies that shape how heritage is created, managed, and transmitted. Without a critical examination of gender dynamics—that is, the intersection of social constructs of gender with the creation, interpretation, and management of heritage—these recommendations may unintentionally serve to reinforce existing inequalities and encourage understanding gender inequality within the broader cultural canon. Although intended to contextualize local gender norms, this approach raises concerns that harmful inequalities may be legitimized in the name of cultural preservation.

These tensions can be better understood through Smith’s concept of the AHD. Smith argues that AHD privileges particular ways of understanding and managing heritage —ways that are historically rooted in Western, expert-driven, and often male-dominated frameworks.⁴⁰ Within this discourse, heritage is constructed as a tangible, monumental, and expert-defined domain, thereby marginalizing the lived experiences, emotional connections, and everyday practices through which diverse groups, particularly women, engage with the past. When viewed through this lens, the contradictions between local practices and international standards in the implementation of the 2003 Convention reflect the persistence of AHD logic. Although AHD was originally theorized in the context of tangible heritage, its logic can be extended to ICH governance, where expert authority continues to shape what is recognized as authentic. The Convention sought to move away from this expert-centered tradition by emphasizing community participation and the safeguarding of living practices. However, the mechanisms of evaluation, nomination, and recognition still often operate within institutional and epistemological frameworks that privilege certain voices—usually male, elite, or “authorized” cultural actors.

Building on this analysis, this dynamic can lead to the justification of traditional gender roles. When a canon is constituted predominantly by men, women are frequently positioned in secondary, supportive or invisible roles. Safeguarding heritage under such a framework can risk preserving gendered hierarchies, rendering traditional roles not only authentic but also socially sanctioned. In such context, women who seek alternative roles or more equal participation may face social pressure to conform, resulting in further marginalization. This contributes to the reproduction of gender roles under the guise of cultural continuity. Furthermore, when canonized cultural forms are treated as inherently valuable or untouchable, tradition becomes essentialized—that is, perceived as static and timeless rather than dynamic and evolving. This essentialist logic obscures the fact that many gender norms—such as restrictions on women’s participation—are historically constructed and seldom open to reinterpretation. By treating these norms as inherited values rather than social constructs, critical engagement with gender inequality is discouraged. This essentialist logic not only reinforces existing hierarchies but also highlights the need for reflexive mechanisms in heritage governance to question who defines authenticity and whose voices remain unheard.

A particularly illustrative example is the case of the Japanese float festivals, formally recognized as “Yama, Hoko, Yatai, float festivals in Japan.” These festivals are believed to present a harmonious and inclusive community participation. However, as Helga Janse points out, the nomination file submitted to UNESCO largely omits the mention of gender-based restrictions that continue to shape participation in many of these festivals.⁴¹ In many cases, women are either partially or completely excluded from central, visible roles, despite playing significant supporting roles behind the scenes. Instead of addressing these exclusions, the nomination document emphasizes the festivals as involving men, women, and the young and the elders are included with responsibilities divided by age group. In reality, decision-making bodies such as preservation associations are often exclusively male, and leadership roles are dominated by men. Women are commonly confined to backstage support tasks, including food preparation and caretaking, which are rendered invisible in the formal documentations. Thus, while the nomination fulfilled the formal requirements for community participation and heritage safeguarding, it failed to acknowledge the structural gender inequalities embedded in the traditional

logic of the festival—particularly the gendered division of labor and male-dominated governance.⁴² Through the canonization of an essentialized tradition, these inequalities were not only overlooked but implicitly legitimized. The exclusion of women's voice from decision-making reinforced by a narrow interpretation of tradition contradicts the ideals of equal and inclusive participation in safeguarding of heritage. As Janse argues, this outcome reflects the risk of the system where male-led organizations are authorized to speak on behalf of the community without examining who is excluded from that representation.⁴³ It also exposes the danger of prioritizing regional specificity or cultural canons over critical engagement with internal power structures.

3. Internal Diversity in Community and Heritage Practices

A focus on the cultural canon tends to promote a singular, unified vision of community identity. However, as Blake notes, viewing the cultural community as if it is a monolithic structure and ignoring the internal diversity carries significant risk as such an approach may result in "putting in place 'participatory' structures that favor certain community member's interests over others."⁴⁴ This singular vision can obscure the diverse, dynamic, and sometimes conflicting experiences that coexist within a community—particularly those of women.

Gendered experiences are not only socially differentiated but also historically contingent, shaped by the multiple roles that women play as cultural bearers, caregivers, workers, and more. However, when the canon is constructed around hegemonic narratives, women's evolving roles, critical reinterpretations, and acts of resistance against traditional hierarchies are excluded from formal recognition. Their practices may be dismissed as marginal or inauthentic, and therefore excluded from what is considered to constitute heritage. Even when women actively attempt to reshape their participation in ICH or challenge gender-exclusionary customs, a canon-based approach—concerned primarily with preserving what is already legitimized—disturbs women's actions. Such selective recognition effectively erases alternative gendered roles and silences internal diversity, reinforcing traditional gender norms as the only legitimate form of cultural participation. As a result, the safeguarding process becomes complicit in sustaining gender inequalities, under the guise of cultural preservation. To make heritage frameworks become truly inclusive, they must

shift from static and essentialist understandings of culture. Instead, they must embrace internal diversity and recognize the right of all community members—including women—to participate in the definition, reinterpretation, and transmission of tradition.

The Women E-nspire Culture project, implemented by UNESCO Bangkok and Chiang Mai University, provides a relevant case to demonstrate these risks. The project aimed to support the safeguarding of ICH by assisting ethnic craftswomen in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The project targets were from ethnic minority groups such as the Hmong, Akha, and Karen in Chiang Mai whose crafts include lacquerware, pottery, silverware and silk textiles.⁴⁵ In 2019, UNESCO Bangkok conducted a field survey among several ethnic groups in the region to identify the challenges facing craftswomen and to explore the potential of using digital media to document and promote their craftworks. The survey revealed that these women produced crafts for both their daily use including ritual purposes and for sale in local markets to supplement their income.⁴⁶ Then, two major issues were revealed: one is that intergenerational transmission relied entirely on oral person-to-person transfer and lacked documentation; the other is that women faced increasing difficulty in marketing their works due to competition in the local crafts market. In response, the project offered digital training and tools such as a website and Facebook page so that the women could document their traditional knowledge for transmission to younger generations and for marketing to wider audiences.⁴⁷ While digital media offered a promising method for transmission and marketing, significant challenges soon became apparent. One key issue was a language barrier: older women who were not fluent in Thai were unable to use digital platforms, resulting in reliance on the younger generation. This raised questions about whether such platforms could support the collective interests. In the end, three young women agreed to manage the administration of the website, but with no clear consensus on its purpose. Then, the website limited activity with a few posts after launch. The project revealed two key structural challenges: the language barrier and the issue of ownership over knowledge transmission within community. One of major lessons was the importance of establishing mutual understanding and trust with the community about the objectives of such projects, and of allocating sufficient resources to address challenges.⁴⁸

This case demonstrates the importance of system to support for safeguarding

ICH as the craftswomen's skill and knowledge had not been protected. However, it also highlights the gender dynamics within the community were neglected. First, the diversity among the women was overlooked, as the differences in digital and linguistic literacy were identified at the end of the project. It is unclear whether all the participants fully understood the project objectives and genuinely wished for participation. This raises concerns that so-called community-based approaches just stirs women, and they never become agents who define or reinterpret the meaning and manner of cultural transmission by themselves. Second, the multifaceted aspect of these women's lives was also neglected in this case. These women produced crafts for both their daily use and supplementary income and experienced losing livelihoods during the Covid-19 pandemic. If this project had considered more seriously their economic situation, this project might have fostered real empowerment. However, it was not fostered, meaning that the multifaceted interpretation of women's role—such as being responsible for household finances— remained invisible within the community. Moreover, the fact that women were passive in deciding the purpose and administration of the established webpage may reflect that the women lack the habits or opportunity to make decisions within community. Although the gender composition of the project leadership was not clearly mentioned, this case is expert-oriented approach rather than community-based approach. This also demonstrates how a canon-based approach without considering diversity within community does not lead a meaningful paradigm shift.

V. Empowerment through Heritage Practices

In response to these cases, it is essential to consider how significant the choices made by the women involved in safeguarding heritage truly are, utilizing Naila Kabeer's empowerment theory. Kabeer distinguishes between "first-order choices," which are the strategic life choices that are critical for people to live the lives they want, and "second-order choices," which are less consequential and important only for the quality of people's lives.⁴⁹ Therefore, it is critical to understand the qualifications of choices. One such qualification is the "conditions of choice" which means that true choice exists only when there are alternatives, not when they are absent or too costly, and another is the

“consequences of choice,” which refers that choices can be evaluated in terms of their “transformatory significance” as some have transformative potential to challenge social inequalities, while others just reflect or reinforce existing structures.⁵⁰ Thus, when women agreed to participate in heritage safeguarding activities, it is crucial to assess both the quality and impact of their choice. In the case of Japanese float festivals, the two key dimensions of Kabeer’s framework—conditions of choice and consequences of choice—are largely absent. In terms of the conditions of choice, it is unclear whether women who participate through food preparation and caretaking actually have meaningful alternatives, such as performing on the center stage or opting not to participate at all. Without possible alternatives, their current participation cannot be considered a first-order, transformative choice and thus remains a second-order choice, constrained within existing social structures.

The consequences of these choices are equally complex. When women’s supportive roles are formalized and essentialized through UNESCO nominations, their positions become embedded in the cultural canon, making it difficult to challenge or renegotiate them. Then, if a heritage designation effectively legitimizes these traditional roles, would withholding the designation be a better solution? Kabeer’s framework suggests that the core issue is not recognition but the agency women have within the process. Even when the designation appears to reinforce gendered hierarchies, it can serve as a platform for empowerment if women’s participation is meaningfully expanded—through increased decision-making power, multiple role options, and recognition of the cultural significance of their contributions. In this way, rather than insisting that women perform roles coded as male to achieve equality, it needs to focus shifts to enhancing women’s agency within existing structures, allowing them to negotiate, reinterpret, and influence heritage practices. Without such measures, participation risks reinforcing unequal gender structures, rather than transforming them, and fails to meet the conditions of meaningful empowerment.

In the case of craftswomen in Chiang Mai, both conditions of choice and consequences of choice appeared to be considered in the project, but they were neither fundamentally nor adequately met in practice. Although the project was developed in response to the outcomes of an initial survey and the craftswomen were asked about their interests in digital documentation and participation in

training programs, it is unclear whether they were offered alternatives in the actual implementation phase. For example, there may have been little room for the women to participate in the decision making of how the digital tools would be used, who would manage them, or how their knowledge would be represented online. Moreover, the consequences of their choices were primarily framed within heritage preservation, without sufficient consideration of the transformative potential of participation, such as income generation or increased agency. By focusing on the women's agreement to participate rather than engaging with the diversity of their needs, concerns, and desired outcomes, the project fell short of enabling first-order, strategic life choices in Kabeer's sense.

There are several possible approaches to improve the conditions of choice in the heritage context. In the case of Japanese festivals, a first and essential step is to reorganize the decision-making bodies, which are often male-dominated, to listen to women's voices. What matters is not simply whether women participate, but how they wish to participate. It is crucial to ask women directly about their aspirations for festival involvement and provide alternatives, such as exploring new roles, to create conditions for meaningful choice. Such discussions should ideally be facilitated by a third party, such as researchers or NGOs; however, their role should not replace local agency. Instead, they should act as facilitators who create safe spaces for dialogue, ensuring women define the process and outcomes. Otherwise, external hierarchies may simply replace internal ones, reproducing existing power imbalances under a new guise. Similarly, in heritage preservation initiatives targeting ethnic minority women, such as the case in Chiang Mai, it is important to involve the actual cultural practitioners from the project development phase and to offer multiple options for preservation approaches. In both cases, it is essential that women could revisit, question, and reinterpret the meaning of heritage before making choices. This process connects to the consequences of choice, as Kabeer emphasizes that empowerment needs a "process of change."⁵¹ Kabeer also explains that the ability to exercise choice is shaped by access to resource, agency and achievements. In this context, heritage should be recognized not merely as a resource but as a form of agency—the "ability to define one's goals."⁵² By enabling women to reinterpret the meaning of heritage, they can define their own objectives regarding its safeguarding. If heritage is recognized not only as an object to be preserved but also as a process through which women can

exercise agency, it becomes a tool for empowerment rather than a mechanism for reproducing traditional gender roles. Introducing some examples to challenge the gendered heritage in the world, Rössler also notes that “heritage can no longer be regarded as a specific “objects”, but as an integral part of the environment and daily life, providing a sense of meaning and cultural identity to the people concerned.”⁵³ In this way, safeguarding heritage and the empowerment of women can mutually reinforce, constituting a genuine paradigm shift in both the heritage and gender domains.

VI. Conclusion

This article has examined whether a genuine paradigm shift has occurred in the heritage from a gender perspective with a specific focus on two elements that are often overlooked: gender structures and internal diversity within communities and heritage practices. By analysing the concept of heritage through the lens of UNESCO conventions, experts’ recommendations, and critical case studies, this article reveals that so-called paradigm shift remains limited unless gendered dynamics and internal diversity are explicitly addressed.

The 2003 ICH Convention introduced a participatory and community-centered approach for heritage safeguarding, which was widely recognized as a turning point. However, both the cases of the Japanese float festivals and the Women E-nspire Culture project in Chiang Mai demonstrate that the forms of participation in safeguarding in heritage available to women were constrained by organizational structure, limited alternatives, and limited recognition of tradition. In these contexts, women’s roles were either marginalised or formalized within supportive and subordinate positions as decision-making structures remained male-dominated or externally driven. Such frameworks risk reinforcing existing gender hierarchies under the name of cultural preservation rather than transforming. However, heritage itself is not static but continually evolving, as reflected in the shifts within UNESCO conventions. Therefore, safeguarding mechanisms should likewise be dynamic, creating opportunities to reconsider gendered participation rather than reproducing constrained structures that constrain it.

Drawing on Naila Kabeer’s empowerment theory, this article emphasized the

need to evaluate not only whether women participate in heritage safeguarding, but how and under what conditions they do. Genuine empowerment, and thus a genuine paradigm shift, requires expanding both the conditions of choice—ensuring women can access and evaluate meaningful alternatives—and the consequences of choice by recognizing their agency to challenge and transform the gender norms embedded in heritage.

Crucially, this study has argued that heritage should be recognized not merely as a resource to be protected but as a site of agency so that women can reinterpret, negotiate, and define cultural meanings of their own terms. When women are empowered to reinterpret heritage, not just preserve it, safeguarding heritage becomes not a means of reproducing tradition but a platform for reconstructing gender structures and fostering meaningful social transformation.

Endnotes

- 1 F. Gustavo Araoz first introduced the concept of a new paradigm in a position paper submitted to the ICOMOS council, which remained unpublished for several years. It was later formally published as "Preserving Heritage Places under a New Paradigm" in *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development* 1, no. 1 (2011): 55–60.
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- 3 Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 11.
- 4 Laurajane Smith, "Heritage, Gender and Identity," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, ed. Brian Graham and Peter Howard (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 159–79.
- 5 Moghadam and Bagheritari, "Cultures, Conventions, and the Human Rights of Women: Examining the Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage, and the Declaration on Cultural Diversity."
- 6 Janet Blake, "Gender and Intangible Heritage: Illustrating the Inter-Disciplinary Character of International Law" in *Gender and Heritage: Performance, Place and Politics*, ed. Wera Grahn and Ross J. Wilson (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 207–20.
- 7 Naila Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment," Discussion Paper 1998, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, 437.
- 8 Francesco Francioni, A Dynamic Evolution of Concept and Scope: From Cultural Property to Cultural Heritage," in *Standard-Setting in UNESCO*, vol. 1 (Paris: UNESCO, 2007): 225.
- 9 UNESCO, *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (The Hague Convention)*, 1954, Article 1, <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-protection-cultural-property-armed-conflict>.

- 10 Francioni, "A Dynamic Evolution of Concept and Scope," 226.
- 11 UNESCO, *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (World Heritage Convention)*, 1972, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>.
- 12 Lourdes Arizpe, "The Cultural Politics of ICH," chapter 1 in *Safeguarding ICH—Challenges and Approaches*, ed. Janet Blake (Leicester: Institute of Art and Law, 2007).
- 13 Noriko Aikawa-Faure, "From 'Broad Interpretation' of Cultural Heritage to 'Holistic Approach': 'Meaning' and 'Role' of Culture in UNESCO Cultural Strategy," *Seijo CGS Working Paper Series* no. 4 (2010), Center for Glocal Studies, Seijo University.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 UNESCO, *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, Article 2.
- 16 William Logan, "Closing Pandora's Box: Human Rights Conundrums in Cultural Heritage Protection," in *Cultural Heritage and Human Rights*, ed. H. Silverman and D. F. Ruggles (New York: Springer, 2007), 33.
- 17 UNESCO, *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, Article 16.
- 18 UNESCO, *operational Directives for the Implementation of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, paragraph 2, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/directives>.
- 19 UNESCO, *Operational Directives for the Implementation of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (Paris: UNESCO, 2008).
- 20 Aikawa-Faure, "From 'Broad Interpretation' of Cultural Heritage to 'Holistic Approach': 'Meaning' and 'Role' of Culture in UNESCO Cultural Strategy"
- 21 F. Gustavo Araoz, "Preserving Heritage Places under a New Paradigm," *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development* 1, no. 1 (2011). 55–60.
- 22 The Symposium on Preserving Heritage Places under a New Paradigm was held by ICOMOS in Bethesda, Maryland, USA, October 2009. The objective of the symposium was to critically examine evolving approaches to heritage conservation and to explore new approaches to heritage conservation that include not just physical aspects, but also cultural and social values.
- 23 F. Gustavo Araoz, "Preserving Heritage Places under a New Paradigm," *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development* 1, no. 1 (2011). 55.
- 24 Ibid, 55-56.
- 25 Ibid, 58.
- 26 Ibid, 57.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid.
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- 30 Willem Derde, "On Paradigms, Theories, and Heritage." In *Kultur _ Erbe _ Ethik. Festschrift für Wilfried Lipp*, edited by Reinhard Kren and Monika Leisch-Kiesl, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 39.
- 31 Ibid, 42
- 32 Ibid, 39.
- 33 Ibid, 43.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid, 45.
- 36 Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970, 175.
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- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, 100.
- 41 Helga Janse, "UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and the 'Goodness Criteria,'" *International Journal of Intangible Heritage* 18 (May 2023), 21-22.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Blake, "Gender and Intangible Heritage: Illustrating the Inter-Disciplinary Character of International Law."
- 45 Alexandra Denes and Woralun Boonyasura, "Supporting ethnic craftswomen in Chiang Mai through digital media: acknowledging the possibilities and challenges," *International Journal of Intangible Heritage* 18 (May 2023), 119-121.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid, 124.
- 49 Naila Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment," 437.
- 50 Ibid, 455-461.
- 51 Ibid, 437.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Mechtild Rössler, "Gendered World Heritage? A review of the implementation of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention (1972)," *Gender Equality Heritage and Creativity* (2014), 68

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Abstract

A Paradigm Shift in “Heritage”: What Are the Significances of a Gender Perspective?

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This article critically examines whether a paradigm shift has occurred in the heritage domain, particularly from a gender perspective. While heritage has traditionally been defined and valued as static, material objects often framed by Western elite cultural values, the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH Convention) in 2003 marked a significant development by redefining heritage as dynamic, rooted in everyday practices and lived experiences of communities. This shift ostensibly opened heritage safeguarding to previously marginalized groups, including women, Indigenous peoples, and immigrant communities.

Despite this broader conceptualization, the article questions whether the convention has fostered meaningful transformation regarding gender. Drawing on Laurajane Smith’s concept of Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD), which critiques dominant narratives that exclude non-mainstream perspectives, it highlights the need to examine how safeguarding practices may unintentionally reproduce gender hierarchies and roles. Rather than framing gender solely through a human rights lens, this article emphasizes gendered structures embedded within communities. As Janet Blake notes, gender is culturally specific and shaped by local norms, meaning that uncritical community-based approaches may reinforce traditional inequalities, leaving women’s contributions and authority marginal.

The article illustrates these dynamics through case studies. In Japanese float festivals, women’s participation is largely confined to supportive tasks such as food preparation and caretaking, while decision-making and prominent performance roles remain male-dominated. In Chiang Mai, craftswomen engaged in digital documentation and training programs encounter limited recognition and influence, despite formal inclusion in projects. These examples

demonstrate that nominal participation does not necessarily translate into meaningful empowerment. Drawing on Naila Kabeer's framework of first-and second-order choices, the article underscores the importance of evaluating both the conditions enabling women's choices and the consequences of these choices in challenging established gender norms.

Through a review of key UNESCO conventions, critical literature, and empirical case studies, the article interrogates whether the heritage framework has achieved transformative change or merely rearticulated existing gender relations. It argues that without critically addressing how gender operates within community practices and local power structures, heritage safeguarding cannot fully contribute to gender equality.

The article is structured as follows: Chapter II traces the evolving definition of heritage within UNESCO conventions, focusing on the ICH Convention. Chapter III explores the notion of a paradigm shift in heritage and presents critiques from feminist perspectives. Chapter IV analyzes case studies of ICH safeguarding practices to assess whether they challenge or reinforce traditional gender structures. Finally, the conclusion suggests new directions for integrating gender-sensitive approaches into heritage safeguarding practices.

