

GENDER EQUALITY INDICES: NUMBERS DON'T LIE, AND THEY ALSO DON'T TELL THE WHOLE STORY

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FRIDAY FILE: Each year various statistical indicators assess whether gender equality is indeed progressing. These numbers remind us of some powerful circumstances women face, but they also raise questions at the heart of why rights differ on paper and in reality.

by Masum Momaya

A world of statistics

If rights' advocates – or even the general public – were polled as to which countries came closest to achieving gender equality, the usual suspects would emerge: Nordic countries (Iceland, Norway and Sweden), some of their neighbors (the Netherlands and Switzerland) and other Northern nations (Australia and Canada). But what about countries such as Lesotho, the Philippines, Rwanda and South Africa – all nations that featured highly on several gender equality measures this year? What bolstered these countries' rankings?

Progress towards gender equality is measured annually through various statistical indices, including the [gender-related development index](#) (GDI), produced by the United Nations, the [Global Gender Gap Index](#) (GGI) put forth by the World Economic Forum and the [Gender Equity Index](#) (GEI), compiled by [Social Watch](#), an international network of citizens' organizations. These indices are composite calculations of consistently collected and widely available statistics, including those related to life expectancy, school enrollment, labor force participation and political representation. Gathered since the founding of the United Nations in 1945, these statistics serve as both indicators and proxies for a wide range of markers of equality. They are calculated for both women and men at the country level, and countries are ranked as to how well they are doing in comparison to each other and over time.

Latest gender equality measures grim but prescriptive

Unsurprisingly, all indices in 2009, including the GDI, GGI and GEI show that gender inequality is pervasive and that the gap is closing slowly or not at all in many places. In fact, it is even widening in some countries in South Asia, Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, according to Social Watch's GEI. Moreover, several of the indices point out that the economic gains made by women in 2008 – mainly through paying jobs in formal economic sectors – were reversed in 2009 in the wake of the systemic crisis – and likely well before it climbed to its current heights.

Alongside these grim conclusions, though, comes another finding bolstered by the appearance of countries such as South Africa in the GGI's "top ten" and Rwanda's #3 ranking on the GEI: namely, that public policies have a significant impact on gender equality, regardless of the level of overall economic development. For example, Rwanda ranks highly despite still recovering from brutal genocide and having meager economic resources compared to most countries in the Global North. Its ranking was elevated due to its high level of women's representation in parliament and marked efforts to create income generating opportunities for women. Policymakers use the example of Rwanda to argue that poor countries have no excuse for leaving girls out of schools and women out of jobs and opportunities for political participation.

Conversely, this conclusion also means that gender equality is not guaranteed in rich countries. Even though many have strong foundations – dedicated allocation of resources and gender-sensitive public policies – upon which to build, they need to continue to take active steps in bringing about equality and need to ensure that *all* women are included in their efforts. The overall message: financial resources are necessary but not sufficient to bring about gender equality; political will and proactive public policies can make a significant difference.

Statistics make irrevocable points

Findings like this ring loud and clear in mainstream media and among global audiences. On March 8th, International Women's Day, newspaper columnists and broadcast reporters annually revisit the subject, highlighting for the general public what women's rights advocates already know: that there is not enough progress.

The GGI is now discussed every year at the World Economic Forum in Davos. This year, the report's co-author, Saadia Zahidi, used the findings to [rally support](#) for the Investing in Women campaigns put forth by Nike Foundation's [The Girl Effect](#) and other gender-focused private sector initiatives.

Also, because the statistics used in gender equality indices are widely accepted and internationally recognized, advocates can also use them to hold governments accountable for promises they have not kept or praise them for policies that are working.

For example, Natalia Cardona, Advocacy Director at Social Watch, took the GEI findings to the UN Commission of the Status of Women meetings in New York in March 2010, where government representatives and members of civil society organizations had gathered to discuss progress made since the creation of the [Beijing Platform for Action](#) 15 years ago. Cardona explained that because statistics used in the GEI are collected and accepted by governments, there is no way they can turn their back on such evidence or deny that gender inequality still exists. She argues that, based on the GEI, governments are not doing enough to promote gender equality. Overall, the GEI serves as a powerful tool to demand accountability in a historical moment where governments are renegeing on their commitments to gender equality more than ever over the last few decades.

Also, because the GEI is the only index produced by a civil society organization (CSO), clearly delineates inequities and uses statistics consistent with the demands and concerns of CSOs, women's rights NGOs often take it to their governments, arguing for evaluation and reform of ineffective programs and projects and making the case for new ones.

More of the story to tell

In deeper, day-to-day advocacy circles, though, the limitations of such indicators start to emerge on a number of levels.



Photo Credit: D Sharon Pruitt

First, because these statistics measure differences between men and women, they speak to relative disparities rather than overall well-being. This can be deceptive. For example, countries that have equal but abysmally low rates of school enrollment for boys and girls can still do relatively well on an index because they have closed a gap using a relatively low bar. Also, certain non-democratic countries, such as those in the Gulf region, can have nearly equal but very low rates of overall political participation, masking the need for widespread political reform. Conversely, countries such as India where people have markedly high rates of political participation for women and men through voting and political organizing may not do so well because the indicators only measure the success of candidates for the highest political office.

Also, because these statistics aggregate numbers for all women, they obscure the reality that some women in each country may be doing well while others are much worse off. For instance, in most contexts, able-bodied, heterosexual, urban, middle-class women and girls who are part of ethnic and language majority communities are likely to have more opportunities to go to school, get decent, adequately-paying jobs and participate politically than their counterparts from rural, disabled, queer, indigenous, migrant and poor communities.

Additionally, even statistics that look 'good' cannot capture the full picture and may even disguise trends that run counter to women's rights. For example, social Watch argues that even though the education gap is closing in many countries, it is important to understand how. So although more girls may go to school in a particularly country, are more of them stuffed into small classrooms? What is the condition of the schools? Is it dangerous for them to travel there? Are the conditions safe and sanitary? Do they have adequate nutrition and health to learn? Are their textbooks gender-biased? Are their teachers untrained? And do these girls face resistance to asserting their knowledge in the private sphere as they learn more outside the home?

Similar inquiries relate to labor force and political participation statistics. For example, in the GEI, Spain and the Philippines have comparable rankings. Both are doing well at closing gaps in education, with nearly 99 girls attending school for every 100 boys. The Philippines, though has much higher rates of economic participation and Spain boasts many more women as political representatives. In both countries, though, it's the qualitative nature of participation that counts. Specifically, many Filipina women work in the informal sector at home and abroad under exploitative working conditions. Most have few protections and benefits and bear tremendous personal costs and sacrifices to do these jobs. Thus, high percentages of labor force participation don't necessarily translate into women's well being.

Meanwhile, efforts made within Spain's political system have enabled more progressive women to seek political positions and this has translated into progressive public policy gains for women; thus its not clear that Spain's and the Philippines' numeric equivalencies on the GEI mean that gender gaps are closing in similar or beneficial ways.

In many other countries, conservative women fill political ranks, threatening and even reversing gains in terms of women's rights. Moreover, in some countries such as India, which features amongst the bottom in the GEI, women have made deep inroads into local politics, where they have exerted significant influence in community policy setting related to health, education, sanitation, infrastructure and the environment. Yet none of this is reflected in political participation statistics that capture participation solely at the national level.

Finally, to the extent that educational, economic and political indicators tell one set of stories, they are silent on major issues that impact women's well being, including unpaid care work, violence against women and sexual and reproductive rights. For example, Ireland features among the top ten in the 2009 GGI, but abortion is banned there. Similarly, South Africa ranks sixth due in large part to the high number of women brought in by the new government but struggles with widespread poverty, an ongoing AIDS pandemic and the world's highest rate of reported rape. The Bahamas ranks at #5 of the GEI but does not recognize same-sex unions and has no anti-discrimination laws related to sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

Lack of sexual and reproductive rights and endemic violence against women can often mitigate or even nullify the real gains reflected by 'good' statistical indicators in education, employment and political participation.

Moreover, the fact that none of the indexes account for unpaid care work may inadvertently contribute to its ongoing invisibility and increasing use as a way to compensate for cuts in social spending and the increasing burdens families face due to the worldwide systemic crisis. It does little good that women can have access to more paid jobs and seats in representative bodies if their burdens also increase in the home as a result and they are not safe and healthy overall.

Ultimately, rights are inter-related and statistics that seek to measure them – as a means for further analysis and advocacy – have a ways to go in being able to accurately reflect this. In the meantime, they continue to send powerful messages to a variety of stakeholders that there is much work to be done. As BRIDGE, a knowledge service from the Institute of Development Studies puts it, because what is measured is likely to be prioritized and tracked, indicators make the case that gender equality needs to be taken seriously.

Note: This article is part of the AWID's weekly Friday File series, exploring important issues and events from a women's rights perspective. To subscribe to the weekly Friday File newsletter, click [here](#).

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