

The Global Gender Gap
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Every year, the World Economic Forum presents a report detailing and ranking global progress toward equality under the law for women. They rank countries from the best to the worst, showing progress (or lack of it) over the prior five years. Needless to say, there is still an enormous gender gap around the world, but there is some movement.

The 2012 report had three authors: Ricardo Hausman, Harvard Center for International Development; Laura Tyson, an economist with Berkeley's Haas School of Business; and Saadia Zahidi, senior director of the World Economic Forum. Their criteria for ranking countries are essentially economic: measuring the progress toward sharing whatever the country's resources equally between women and men. They look at equality in sharing political power, education, and health benefits. This particular forum does not seem to look at safety or the lack of it in the public sphere (or battery in the domestic sphere); if they did, I don't think that South Africa would have made it to the top 20.

According to the report, the index continues to track the strong correlation between a country's gender gap and its national competitiveness. Because women account for one-half of a country's potential talent base, a nation's competitiveness in the long term depends significantly on whether and how it educates and utilizes its women.

The countries that make the top 20 countries, places where women thrive according to these criteria, are (in order): Iceland, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Ireland, New Zealand, Denmark, Philippines (surprise), Nicaragua, Switzerland, Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Lesotho (surprise), Latvia, South Africa, Luxembourg, United Kingdom, Cuba, and Austria. Canada and the United States do not make the top 20, but are ranked 21st and 22nd. Not too many surprises here. Looking at a global map, it is apparent that the winners are mostly northern and mostly European or with European cultures.

The countries that make the bottom 20 countries are no surprise either. In ascending order from bottom up are: Yemen, Pakistan, Chad, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Cote D'Ivoire, Morocco, Mali, Iran, Egypt, Turkey, Nepal, Lebanon, Jordan, Algeria, Mauritania, Ethiopia, Benin, Guatemala, and Qatar. The vast majority of these are Muslim and a few African. The surprise here is Turkey, which has lost points since the election of an Islamist president, never a good thing for women.

There is no ranking for Afghanistan, which if there were, would probably be sharing honors with Yemen and Pakistan. And Israel's ranking, at 56th from the top, which has declined from 35th five years ago, must reflect the increasing numbers of both Palestinians and their own Ultra-Orthodox, both of which fall short on the quality of life for women.

As for the United States and Canada, undoubtedly the majority of women have lives as good as those in northern Europe. But both have historic problems with the conditions among their Native American populations, all of whom (men and women) lag in development programs, and with immigration from countries on the lower half of countries listed. But in both Canada and the US, there is continued effort and progress for women's equality.

Economic development is no guarantee of personal happiness, of course, but it certainly does help. However, lack of economic development and ignorant customs (and religious constraints) are major guarantees of misery for women. Two recent incidents in Afghanistan make the point. In one, a peasant went into debt and was forced to repay the loan to his landlord by turning over his six year old daughter in marriage to the landowner. Her fate would be clearly awful.

The other case was a teen-age girl who fled from her 60-year-old husband who had abused her since her marriage at 8. Her brother hunted her down and took an axe to her face and head. She survived, but wishes she hadn't. Her family has no concern over her being abused by her husband; he owned her.

With standards like this, there is indeed a gender gap. There is also a civilizational gap that cannot be dismissed as it's their culture.

673 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of *Ten Inventions that Changed Everything*. You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.