

Gender Equality is a Necessary Partner of Economic Progress

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The UN *Gender Inequality Index* (GII) is a measure of gender inequality which takes into account Reproductive Health, Empowerment and Labour Market Participation.

The top ten countries on the scale are Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, Norway, Finland, Germany, Slovenia, France and Iceland (UN, 2012)

The countries currently with the worst record for gender equality are Yemen, Afghanistan, Niger, Saudi Arabia, Congo, Liberia, Central African Republic, Mali, Sierra Leone and Mauritania (UN 2012).

It is salient that the average per capita GDP of the top ten countries is \$52,672 and the average per capita GDP of the bottom ten is \$3,114 (UN 2012).

Accepting the figures, one of three explanations must apply. Either higher per capita GDP causes increased relative gender equality, or relative gender equality causes higher GDP, or both are caused by other, broader, cultural and historical factors. Either way, it is difficult to argue that you can have one without the other.

Two countries of those mentioned are anomalous and deserve special mention; Slovenia and Saudi Arabia.

The top ten country on the GII with the lowest per capita GDP is Slovenia. Slovenia's GDP measure is well below the average of the other nine. The question is fairly raised as to how women in Slovenia have been more relatively empowered in less favourable economic circumstances than those in many wealthier countries, such as the USA. Learning the answer might assist many other countries to improve their performances. It may be a combination of historical factors, such as the former communist regime's attitude, the proximity to the economies to the west and the recent economic boom in that country, among other things. Another factor may be education, with Slovenia ranking highly on international measures.

The bottom ten country with the highest per capita GDP is Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia's per capita GDP is \$25,136 (UN, 2012). It is the wealthiest gender-imbalanced country by a large margin. Taking Saudi Arabia out of the mix leaves the other nine with an average per capita GDP of just \$ 668.

Saudi Arabia imposes a more conservative code of conduct upon women than most Islamic countries. It scored a zero in the field of political empowerment. There is a useful contrast to be made with neighbouring Qatar. Qatar still performs poorly on the GII, too, but in that state many women enjoy many more freedoms, including political engagement, and this has been partly a result of deliberate government policy over the last twenty years, coinciding with the enormous economic development of Qatar over the same period. Qatar's per capita GDP is \$93,831 (UN, 2012).

Poverty might be expected to be a brake upon the development of gender equity. Economic constraints might also be used to justify or excuse lack of action on the part of governments in this area, in both developing and more developed countries.

It is noteworthy that there are no English speaking countries in the top ten, notwithstanding relatively high GDP. The USA, UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, for example, together have an average per capita GDP of \$49,816 (UN, 2012). This figure is comparable to the average enjoyed by the top ten. The English speaking world has a certain international cultural leadership and many English speaking governments, organisations and individuals make strong pronouncements on gender issues on a regular basis. These countries nevertheless have some catching up to do. The country among them with the highest per capita GDP is Australia, which is therefore embarrassed in the equity stakes, placed at 17th on the GII. The USA finds itself lagging even more, placed very poorly at 42nd. Liberty lifts her lamp equally for both men and women, but the index suggests the reality of life in America falls far short of the ideal.

This is more than just food for thought. Attitudes matter. In some countries the prevailing attitude is that development will occur regardless, and that the empowerment of women is an 'optional extra'. In reality, the empowerment of women is integral to advances in other areas of life, including economics, and no doubt also including education, science and spiritual advancement.

At its base, the Gender Inequality Index describes a power imbalance. At the national level, and in almost every home in every nation, there is an imbalance of power between genders. Addressing this imbalance is not just a matter for the UN. It is also a collective national political duty and personal domestic duty.

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