

Commentary

JANUARY 2009

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ECONOMIC INVESTMENT AND ACTUARIAL RESEARCH

Global Gender Gap

The World Economic Forum (WEF) publishes an annual report on the Global Gender Gap in 130 countries that provides statistical measures of gender differences within each country with respect to economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, political empowerment, and health and survival. The research project leading to the production of the Gender Gap Index is the result of faculty members' collaboration at Harvard University and the University of California at Berkeley. For the past three years the WEF has been providing this statistical framework for quantifying the magnitude of gender-based disparities, tracking their progress over time and designing effective measures for reducing them. The Gender Gap Index also provides a means for measuring differences between countries and regions of the world.

Policy-makers and business leaders around the world are responding to the effects of the current economic downturn and preparing their economies to perform well in a medium-term and long-term economic landscape characterized by growing volatility and uncertainty. In this context, the WEF emphasizes the importance for countries to focus on one of the cornerstones of economic growth, namely, the skills and talent of both men and women that comprise their human resource pool. Over recent decades, both developed and developing countries have made substantial progress in educating women and improving their health. In many developed countries, women now account for more than half of the number of university graduates, and many developing countries have dramatically reduced gender gaps in literacy and in primary and secondary education.

The basic data for the components of the Gender Gap Index come from a variety of sources including the International Labour Organization, the United Nations

Development Programme, UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Inter-Parliamentary Union and the US Central Intelligence Agency. In the area of economic participation and opportunity, the Gender Gap Index comprises five variables: the ratio of female to male labor force participation; wage equality between women and men for similar work; estimated female to male earned income ratio; the ratio of the number of female to male legislators, senior officials and managers; and the ratio of the number of female to male professional and technical workers. In the area of educational attainment, the Index comprises four variables: the ratio of the female literacy rate to the male rate; the three ratios of female to male net primary, secondary and tertiary level enrolment. In the area of political empowerment, the Index comprises three variables: the ratio of the number of women to men with seats in parliament; the ratio of women to men at the ministerial level; and the ratio of the number of years of having a female head of state during the last fifty years to the corresponding number of years for males. In the area of health and survival, the Index comprises two variables: the ratio of female healthy life expectancy over the male value; and the ratio of females to males at birth.

Based on the 2008 Gender Gap Index, the top ten countries ranked overall by gender parity are: Norway, Finland, Sweden, Iceland, New Zealand, Philippines, Denmark, Ireland, Netherlands, and Latvia. Germany ranked 11, United Kingdom ranked 13, France ranked 15, Australia ranked 21, and United States ranked 27. The top three rankings for economic participation and opportunity were achieved by Mozambique, Moldova and Tanzania. The top three rankings for political empowerment were achieved by Finland, Norway and Iceland. Thirty-six countries achieved the highest ranking for

health and survival ahead of the United States ranked 37. Twenty-four countries achieved equal ranking for the highest gender parity in educational attainment, including Australia, Denmark, Finland, France, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, United Kingdom and United States.

Finland sets a shining example for the rest of the world with respect to the achievement of gender parity. Finland's accomplishments won the unique distinction of holding the number one ranking on three of the Gender Gap Sub-Indexes: health and survival, educational attainment and political empowerment. The Nordic countries have consistently achieved the highest rankings overall and in the four constituent sub-indexes since the WEF began publishing the results of its statistical research into the gender gap phenomenon. New Zealand is another country with a consistently high ranking on all components of the Gender Gap Index and has a long tradition of the political empowerment of women, incidentally being the first country in the world to give women the right to vote in 1893.

At the lower end of the Index rankings table, it is evident that there remains considerable opportunity for future improvement in closing the gender gap in the Middle East and North Africa with respect to economic participation and opportunity, as well as political empowerment of women. The same holds true for Sub-Saharan Africa for educational attainment and for certain parts of Asia with respect to health and survival.

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