

The long road to gender equity

In every human society, there are given practices, relations, institutions and identities that make up a gender system, along with a sexual division of labour that transforms gender differences into inequalities. The first step towards gender equity is for societies and governments to first accept and understand that this system generates inequalities between men and women, and then to promote policies to address them. Social Watch's Gender Equity Index (GEI) provides conclusive evidence that women's opportunities in the economic and political spheres are still limited.

Social Watch Research Team¹

Since the General Assembly of the UN adopted the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1979, gender equity has been a central theme of the world development agenda. After the World Summit for Social Development in 1995 and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, the international community dedicated two of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), whose deadline is the year 2015, to improving the situation of women. MDG 3 calls for the promotion of equality of opportunity between the sexes and for women's empowerment – equitable representation of both sexes in decision-making processes; MDG 5 requires the reduction of maternal mortality rates by three quarters.

Despite these gestures, the ratification of the consensus continues to be troublesome, since there are still 47 UN member countries that have not signed or ratified the Convention and another 43 that have done so with reservations; meanwhile, the gender equity statistics look grim. Of the 1.3 billion poor people in the world, 70% are female. Women also form two thirds of the 860 million people who cannot read or write, and in the entire world, women's income is between 30% and 60% of men's. Each day, complications during pregnancy and childbirth kill 1,600 women and cause another 50 million to suffer damages to their health.

There can be no social justice without a reversal of this situation. The UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, has emphasized that, "By effectively increasing the impact of women on public life at all levels, the potential for change towards gender equality and empowerment of women and a more democratic and just society is increased."² As illiteracy and female poverty virulently affect the countries of the South and, in smaller measure, the industrialized

ones as well, women's marginalization from decision-making processes is a global phenomenon. According to international studies, for women to have a real influence on political processes their participation should be at least 30%.

To comprehend the theoretical and methodological scope of the dimension of gender, it is first necessary to establish as an underlying theoretical framework the sexual division of labour and the social organization that regulates it, in other words, the gender system that shapes relations between men and women. Briefly, as it is not the premise of this article to delve deeply into this issue, by "gender system" we mean the practices associated with daily social life: symbols, customs, identities, dress, beliefs and persuasions, common values and meanings, and other loosely bound elements that make reference, directly or indirectly, to a culturally specific form of considering and understanding the difference between recognized genders; that is to say, in the majority of cultures, between men and women.³

In line with this view, we can imagine the gender system as a collection of highly disparate elements, ranging from superficial markers of style and personal preferences to the deep-rooted norms regulating social institutions and relations. Within this collection of practices, relations, institutions and human identities, those which are "marked" for gender have been historically variable. Therefore, the "salience" of gender in different spheres of life is viewed as a factor that is conditioned by time, place and circumstances. This illustrates two of the main characteristics of the gender system, namely, that it is both dynamic and culturally and historically determined. These characteristics imply the possibility of change and modification in gender systems.

The other concept that is central to the understanding of the reach of this perspective is the sexual division of labour. In every society women and men carry out some different tasks, considered as feminine and masculine activities. Although this sexual division of labour has never been the same and has varied in each actual society, it is a phenomenon that has been maintained throughout history. There are norms that set the codes of acceptable behav-

our for men and women and mechanisms of punishment that prevent individuals from deviating from these norms in their personal conduct. The social organization of labour that stems from the existence of this sexual division of labour is the gender system – the processes and factors that regulate and organize society in such a way that both sexes act differently and consider themselves different and determines which social tasks lie within in the scope of each gender.

Although gender roles are different in each culture, the common theme which defines them in all countries is segregation; that is, that men and women are not found in the same sectors of society.

One important element, perhaps the first step toward gender equity, is for societies and governments to accept and understand that a gender system exists and that it generates inequalities between men and women. Society must acknowledge these inequalities, for to acknowledge them means to understand that gender is one of many already recognized factors that generate social inequality. This "obligates" governments to promote policies that will redress these inequalities. A second central element is to establish that the main concern is not differences in themselves, but the transformation of differences into inequalities. Addressing inequalities should be the objective of policy. The State then has the responsibility of forming clear and explicit gender policies to oppose the negative effects of social, cultural and market forces that cause inequality among genders and greater social exclusion of women.

Gender equity: equality of opportunity, recognition, and socioeconomic valuation

As debates around the notion of equity are very extensive at the moment, it is important to approach this concept methodologically and conceptually with the recognition of three dimensions that must be taken into account when speaking of gender equity: *equiphony*, *equipotency*, and *equivalence*.⁴

"*Equiphony*" refers to access to discourse, to the possibility of having a voice. But it is not enough to have a voice; rather, this voice must have the

1 The members of the Social Watch Social Sciences Research Team are listed in the credits at the start of this book.

2 United Nations, Commission on the Status of Women (2005). "Equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels. Report of the Secretary-General". E/CN.6/2006/13, 19 December, p. 14. Available from: <<http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N05/651/17/PDF/N0565117.pdf?OpenElement>>.

3 Anderson, J. (2006). "Sistemas de género y procesos de cambio". In: Batthyány, K. (Coord.) *Género y desarrollo: una propuesta de formación*. Montevideo: UDELAR-FCS.

4 Batthyány, K. (2004). "Cuidado infantil y trabajo: ¿un desafío exclusivamente femenino?". Montevideo: CINTERFOR-OIT.

TABLE 1. Gender Equity Index (GEI) - 2006

Sweden	89	Switzerland	74	Jamaica	65	Malta	58	Mali	46
Finland	86	Hong Kong (China)	73	Kazakhstan	65	Mozambique	57	Niger	46
Norway	86	Hungary	73	Sri Lanka	65	Tajikistan	57	Turkey	46
Denmark	81	Israel	73	Suriname	65	Uzbekistan	57	Bahrain	45
New Zealand	81	Portugal	73	Viet Nam	65	Albania	56	Bangladesh	45
Bahamas	80	Slovenia	73	El Salvador	64	Ghana	56	Egypt	45
Iceland	80	Ukraine	73	France	64	Korea, Rep.	56	Eritrea	45
Australia	79	Austria	72	Azerbaijan	63	Cape Verde	55	Guinea-Bissau	45
Barbados	79	Czech Republic	72	Chile	63	Lesotho	55	Kuwait	45
Latvia	79	Panama	72	Dominican Republic	63	Mauritius	55	Algeria	44
Lithuania	79	Argentina	71	Italy	63	Nicaragua	55	Equatorial Guinea	44
Canada	78	Romania	71	Belize	62	Lao PDR	54	Morocco	44
Moldova	78	Thailand	71	Kenya	62	Madagascar	54	Oman	44
United States of America	78	Ireland	70	Armenia	61	Senegal	53	Syrian Arab Republic	44
Colombia	77	Macedonia, FYR	70	Cambodia	61	Solomon Islands	53	Congo, Rep.	43
Estonia	77	Trinidad and Tobago	70	Ecuador	61	Zambia	53	Nigeria	43
United Kingdom	77	Uruguay	70	Japan	61	Guatemala	52	Saudi Arabia	43
Netherlands	76	Belarus	69	Malaysia	61	Indonesia	52	United Arab Emirates	43
Philippines	76	Georgia	69	Maldives	61	Tunisia	51	Sudan	42
Spain	76	Brazil	68	Mexico	61	West Bank and Gaza	51	Nepal	41
Croatia	75	South Africa	68	Swaziland	61	Angola	50	Burkina Faso	40
Namibia	75	St. Lucia	68	Uganda	61	Zimbabwe	50	Togo	40
Russian Federation	75	Venezuela	68	Fiji	60	Iran, Islamic Rep.	48	India	39
Rwanda	75	Costa Rica	67	Kyrgyzstan	60	Gambia	47	Central African Republic	38
Slovakia	75	Honduras	67	Peru	60	Guinea	47	Pakistan	38
Belgium	74	Tanzania	67	Bolivia	59	Jordan	47	Sierra Leone	37
Botswana	74	Cuba	66	Burundi	58	Benin	46	Chad	36
Bulgaria	74	Cyprus	66	China	58	Ethiopia	46	Côte d'Ivoire	36
Mongolia	74	Paraguay	66	Guyana	58	Lebanon	46	Yemen	26
Poland	74	Greece	65	Luxembourg	58	Malawi	46		

same value and impact as the voice of other social actors. It is not merely a matter of being able to contribute to discourse, but also the recognition and value granted to this contribution.

“*Equipotency*” refers to equity in the access to and exercise of power. This is an element that commonly gives rise to conflicts, because it involves aspects of power and access to power.

Finally, “*equivalence*” refers to assigning equal value and equal recognition to the activities carried out by men and women, in both economic and social terms. In this regard there is a sphere which must not be ignored, which is the reproductive sphere, and its relation to the productive sphere. “*Equivalence*” relates to the economic value attached to the activities undertaken by women in both the productive and reproductive spheres. It involves the world of work in both of its forms: paid work and unpaid work.

The Social Watch Gender Equity Index

For the specific theme of gender equity – a concept that is complex, multifaceted and difficult to measure – and in order to contribute to the debate and consistent monitoring of women’s situation, Social Watch developed a Gender Equity Index (GEI). This allows for the positioning and classification of countries through the selection of indicators relevant to gender inequity, chosen according to information

that is available and comparable at the international level. The GEI classifies 149 countries and verifies, by conclusive evidence, that in no country do women enjoy the same opportunities as men, that the elimination of gender inequality does not require increased revenues, and that, even though women’s situation has improved in certain respects over the years, it is clear that women’s opportunities in the economic and political spheres are still limited.

The three dimensions included in the GEI are economic activity, empowerment and education. The possible values of the GEI range from 0 to 100, with 0 the least degree of equity and 100 the greatest.

TABLE 2. Income gap (women/men) by geographic region

REGION	AVERAGE
Middle East and North Africa	0.32
Latin America and the Caribbean	0.43
South Asia	0.46
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.56
Europe	0.58
East Asia and the Pacific	0.59
Central Asia	0.62
North America	0.63
Total	0.53

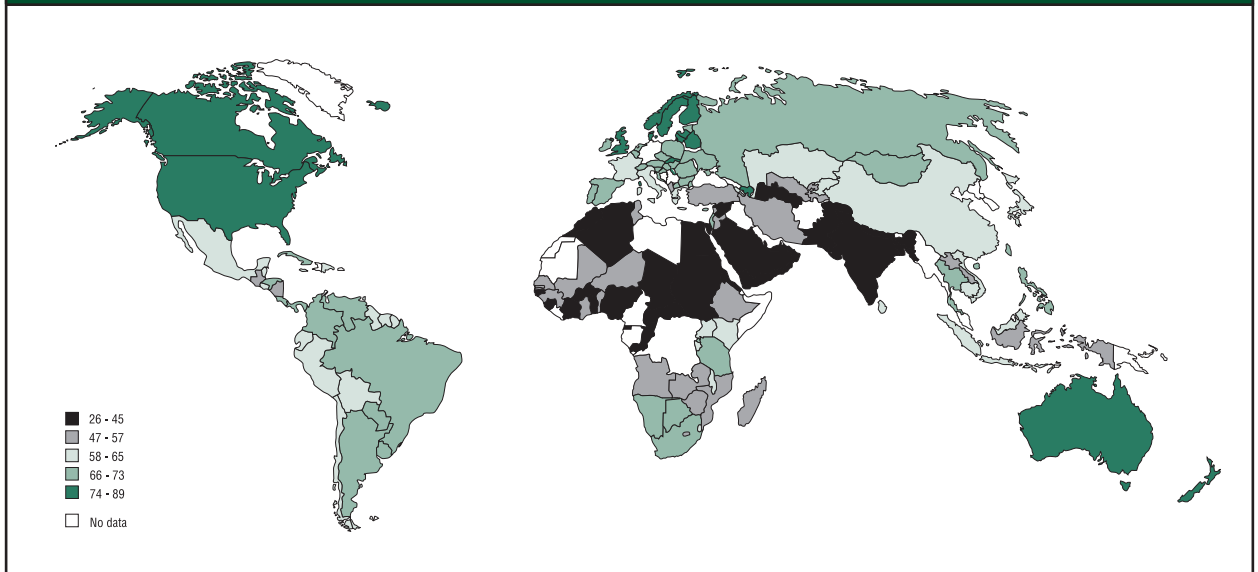
The results obtained by the 2006 GEI indicate that Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark are the countries with the highest scores. The Nordic countries have, in general, a good showing in terms of gender equity due to the advanced application of progressive policies (above all, quotas and policies of gender equity in the labour market.)

Income gap

The degree of gender equity in the economic participation dimension is measured through two indicators: the percentage of the total paid work force (excluding the agricultural sector) made up by women, and the income gap between women and men.

Throughout the world, women have less access to the labour market than men, and face the additional discrimination of lower wages. The average income gap between women and men is 0.53, which means that on average women earn 53% of what men earn for the same work. This situation varies across regions; the smallest gap is found in North America (0.63) and Central Asia (0.62), while the largest is seen in the Middle East and North Africa (0.32), followed by Latin America and the Caribbean (0.43).

MAP 1. GEI value for each country



Equality: less and more

The educational sphere is the one with the fewest disparities found in the 2006 GEI. The greatest inequalities in educational access are seen in Chad, the Central African Republic, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Benin and Yemen, where the gap is greater than 0.5.

By contrast, it is in the empowerment dimension that inequity is most sharply marked. This dimension is measured by assessing the percentage of women in professional and technical jobs, high administration and management positions, parliamentary seats and decision-making posts at the ministerial level. Despite constituting more than a half of the world's population, women occupy a mere 6% of cabinet posts in national governments. Only in Norway, Sweden and Finland (and only in the past few years) have these rates surpassed 40%. In 1995, Sweden appeared before the world as the first nation in history whose cabinet had 50% women. Other countries, such as Spain in 2004 and Chile in 2006, have followed this same path and appointed 50/50 cabinets.

The global average for legislatures is 16% women. Their overall absence in government institutions implies that national, regional and local priorities are defined without their contributions and opinions, despite the fact that their life experience and subjectivity can reveal important

differences in the perception of a community's needs, concerns and priorities.

Since 2004, there has been an improvement in the number of women participants in decision-making processes; the 2006 edition of the GEI reveals that many countries have an index above 30%, with as many from the South as the North: Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Costa Rica, Cuba, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Mozambique, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Rwanda, South Africa, Spain and Sweden.

Gender inequity by regions and national income

This global map of the GEI permits the identification of regional gender equity patterns.

Excepting Australia, all the highest-scoring countries are European. Most countries in the following level are European and North American, with a minor presence of countries from East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean.

In general terms, the Latin American countries can be found in high and intermediate positions. Meanwhile, the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa are found mostly among the intermediate and low positions, revealing the worst degrees of gender inequity. ■

TABLE 3. Countries with worse GEI performance and corresponding region

COUNTRY	REGION
Yemen	Middle East and North Africa
Côte d'Ivoire	Sub-Saharan Africa
Pakistan	South Asia
Burkina Faso	Sub-Saharan Africa
Chad	Sub-Saharan Africa
Central African Republic	Sub-Saharan Africa
Togo	Sub-Saharan Africa
India	South Asia
Nepal	South Asia
Congo, Rep.	Sub-Saharan Africa