

# GENDER EQUALITY AND CULTURES – ARE WE THERE YET?

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## Summary

The article tackles the issue of gender inequality as a permanent and important problem of all cultural communities. Results of two major surveys show the discrepancies between the positions of genders in society all over the world. There are still deep gaps between them even in the top ranking countries as the results demonstrate, especially in the accessibility of positions in the highest power structures. Further the article illustrates the relationship between culture and gender roles with special attention to cultural dimensions and language. The final part deals with the negative impact of gender inequality on the society and the close correlation between economic prosperity and gender equality.

## Keywords

gender, inequality, gender gap, genderlect, feminisation of poverty

## Összefoglalás

A tanulmány a nemi egyenlőtlenséggel, minden kulturális csoport állandó és fontos problémájával foglalkozik. Először két jelentős felmérés eredményeit ismerteti, melyek rámutatnak a két nem által betöltött pozíciók ellentmondó voltára az egész világon. Még mindig nagy a szakadék a nemi egyenlőség terén magas pontszámokat elérő országokban is, különösen a legmagasabb hatalmi szinteken levő pozíciók elérhetőségével kapcsolatban. A tanulmány a továbbiakban a kultúra és nemi szerepek kapcsolatát mutatja be, különös tekintettel a kulturális dimenziókra és a nyelvre. A befejező rész a nemi egyenlőtlenség társadalomra gyakorolt negatív hatásával, valamint a gazdasági prosperitás és nemi egyenlőség közötti szoros kapcsolattal foglalkozik.

## Kulcsszavak

társadalmi nemek, egyenlőtlenség, gender-nyelv, a szegénység “nőiesítése”

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## **Gender and gender inequality**

The paper attempts to approach the issue of youth from a specific angle of gender differences, inequality, its measurement and consequences by taking into consideration the fact that youth as well as the whole population of any country is divided into two major groups of genders. Though there exist some cultures which distinguish more than two genders we will consider the most frequently appearing division into two groups – males and females.

When studying the topic of *gender* it is advisable to clarify the term properly as it is often used as a synonym for sex though there is a big difference in their meaning. Sex is the dual division of men and women based on biological differences in their bodies. It covers the fact that they have different chromosomes, genes and reproductive organs. On the other hand, gender refers to culturally influenced characteristics, to those meanings that cultures and within them individuals ascribe to female and/or male categories. So while sex is a biological term gender belongs to social and cultural domains. The distinctions suggested by genders are patterned and their evolution depended on the diverse conditions of cultural development. Members of a particular culture remain active agents who carry out their gender roles in everyday activities throughout their lives. The society and cultural community is organised into patterned relationships based on the perceived differences between sexes and their interpretation within genders. The perception and acceptance of specific gender roles then further influences all interactions within the society. The conventional gender distinctions are naturally incorporated into the institutions and hierarchical structures of the particular culture. Thus we can acknowledge the importance of culture and its impact on generating the specific meaning of the term gender.

Another key term is *gender inequality* defined by the UN as "any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex (...) in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field" (UN 1979). Due to historical and social development of cultural communities a system of gender stratification has been established placing genders into a hierarchical order where women are generally considered less valuable and inferior by virtue of their sex. Such a hierarchy is then translated into, and demonstrated by their relationships, patterns of behaviour, inheritance laws, customs, and frequently in practical invisibility of women's work. We can specify the most discernible areas where gender stratification is the most noticeable:

- Status, power and influence in society
- Access to valued resources
- Eligibility for social positions
- Ability to make decisions about one's own life
- Freedom to act

Though, we cannot separate these areas from other relevant impact factors. The stratification of a society or cultural community is obviously not exclusively based on gender differences. The power relations can change in various aspects of life, such as public and family sphere, education, welfare etc. Another important factor could be age which may influence the status of a person. Young people usually do not have the same access to decision making as the middle-aged group and old age can be in some contexts an advantage or just the opposite, depending on the particular culture. We can mention few more factors that combined with gender stratification create the hierarchical network of a community. Class, religion or ethnicity can both strengthen and weaken one's position within the society. If people belong to the dominant class and religion their access to power and resources is easier in case of both genders and any age group.

## Gender inequality measurement

We have chosen two major sources of gender inequality measurement to exemplify the scale of the problem, one global and one European. We chose Gender Gap Report (GGR) and Gender Equality Index (GEI). An interesting outcome of those surveys is the finding that there is a strong correlation between gender equality and economic prosperity and success. The higher the equality is, the better the economic results are. Though, the discussion about the cause and consequence is still quite intense. It is hard to decide whether higher gender equality leads to better economic results or economic prosperity naturally creates conditions for more equality between genders.

The World Economic Forum regularly organises an extensive research and measurement of gender gaps (Gender Gap Report) in 145 countries all over the world. They publish their annual report which shows the degree of closing the gender gap in the measured countries during the previous year (WEF 2016). The gap between genders is demonstrated on the disparities in their positions. The degree of achieved equality is measured through four major indicators: *economy*, *education*, *health* and *politics*. Based on a set of sub-indicators a final coefficient is calculated reflecting the relative position of genders comparing women to men. The economic indicator evaluates the degree of female labour force participation, their relative wages compared to men for the same work, female earned income, female senior officials and managers and female professional and technical workers compared to males.

The educational indicator states the ratio of female primary, secondary and tertiary enrolment as well as the overall female literacy over the male value. The health indicator shows the relative health and survival over male results including sex ratio by birth and female healthy life expectancy. Finally, the indicator of politics compares the number of seats in parliament, number of female ministers and number of years women spent in the office of the head of state. The advantage of such comparative approach is that the results are independent of the overall prosperity of various countries and the final ranking reflects only the relative in-/equality of genders. Table 1 shows the top 10 countries in 2015.

Table 1: Global Top 10 countries in gender equality

Global Gender Gap Index	Rank	Score*
Iceland	1	0.881
Norway	2	0.850
Finland	3	0.850
Sweden	4	0.823
Ireland	5	0.807
Rwanda	6	0.794
Philippines	7	0.790
Switzerland	8	0.785
Slovenia	9	0.784
New Zealand	10	0.782

\*Position of males is expressed by score 1.0

Source: WEF 2016

According to the results in 2015 not even the best placed countries were able to achieve the full closure of the gender gap. Out of the four indicators, education and health seem to be the most advanced as the global average achieved were 0.95 and 0.98 respectively. On the other hand, the area of economy and politics are still far from the desired equality as the global averages were stated at 0.60 for economy and only 0.10 for politics. Such results

clearly support the finding that gender inequality is a serious problem even in the most advanced and prosperous countries and that a large pool of female talent has been neglected and left untapped. The bottom end of the ranking list shows a quite large gap between the positions of genders. In the worst-placed country, Yemen, the gap score is only 0.484 and all the 10 bottom countries evolve around 0.5 score which means that women in those countries are strongly disadvantaged compared to men (WEF 2016).

The second resource, Gender Equality Index, covers the member countries of the European Union and its aim is to evaluate the impact of the common equality policies which are implemented since 2005 (EIGE 2015). In that survey 6 major domains are considered with two additional subdomains. The main domains include the areas of *work*, including women’s participation, possible segregation and quality of work, *money*, with attention to financial resources and overall economic situation, *knowledge*, covering chances of attainment, degree of segregation and possibilities for lifelong learning, then *time*, measuring the quantity of time spent by economic activities, care for others and quantity of personal free time for social activities. The fifth domain of *power* measures the access of genders to political, social and economic power and the last one considers *health* issues including accessibility and status. The two additional subdomains observe the *degree of violence against women* and possible *intersecting inequalities*, e.g. minority or non-national status, single parenthood and older age. These subdomains may considerably increase the degree of inequality.

Table 2 presents the top 10 EU countries compared in the previously described domains.

Table 2: Top 10 ranking for GEI

Gender Equality Index	Rank	Score*
Sweden	1	74.2
Finland	2	72.7
Denmark	3	70.9
Netherlands	4	68.5
Belgium	5	58.2
UK	6	58.0
Slovenia	7	57.3
Ireland	8	56.5
France	9	55.7
Germany	10	55.3

\*Position of males is expressed by score 100  
 Source: EIGE 2015

The results of 2015 show the Scandinavian countries are in top position again which proves the consistency of the research methods in both cases though the scores seem to be slightly less encouraging. All surveys carried out on both global and continental level prove the unfavourable relative position of female gender compared to male one.

**Culture and gender inequality**

As stated previously, there is a strong relation between gender roles and the cultural context of a particular community. The views and beliefs about proper gender behaviour and communication style are attributed to the overall cultural environment. Genders can be perceived as two major micro cultures within a specific culture with their own values influencing their patterns of behaviour. If we consider the variety of cultural dimensions that

can distinguish one culture from another, the dimensions of masculinity and power distance show the closest relation and impact on the degree of gender equality.

### ***Masculinity vs. Femininity***

The top ranked Scandinavian countries are a typical example of feminine cultures. Such countries are according Hofstede characterised by overlapping gender roles (Hofstede 2003). Children are not specifically raised as two different groups and among the main priorities in life the Scandinavians prefer cooperation, sharing and quality of life. Feminine cultures emphasize people over tasks or results. As a consequence of the cooperative approach to problem solving soft skills are strongly promoted in both business and political leadership and therefore it is relatively easier for women to gain access to power and equal status.

### ***Power distance***

Power distance as a cultural dimension illustrates the degree of acceptability of differences in status and power (Hofstede 2003). A high power-distance culture tends to class people into hierarchical layers/casts with very limited possibility of change and advancement. If we consider the position of genders from the perspective of a high power-distance culture it is obvious that such culture would naturally retard any advancement towards gender equality; it would rather support the preservation of male dominance as a time-proven status quo. On the other hand, cultures with low power distance support equality as a human value which contributes to easier empowerment of women.

Results of both gender equality surveys show that countries with feminine and low power-distant cultures tend towards top ranks with best results in gender equality achievement as opposed to countries with masculine and high power-distant cultures that usually form the bottom of the ranking list.

### ***Language and Gender***

Another important indicator of gender relationships within culture is language which closely reflects the structure of the society, relationships and its priorities. Therefore, if we consider genders as separate micro cultures we should find differences in their use of language as well. According to Tanner the term *genderlect* denotes the culturally and by gender determined differences in language use between men and women. They are different forms of the same language and alternative communicative styles. Each of them reflects a gender role and the expectations of the society how men and women should talk and communicate.

There are some differences in genderlects which seem to apply across cultures and may be connected with the overall history of humankind (Tanner 2007).

- Rapport as opposed to report

Women usually communicate to create relationships. They talk to connect with others. They are internally focused, trying to express their feelings. Their speech is rather cooperative; they seek support with others, hesitate more and need some kind of verification from others. Men, on the other hand are externally focused, consider the communication as problem-solving issue and are ready to act immediately. Therefore they mostly talk to inform others or to receive information.

- Ventilation as opposed to curing

The approach of the two genders to communication and their motivation is usually different, too. While women tend to express their inner feelings connected with the topic of communication, men try to find solutions. A typical example is a situation when a woman wants to lighten her heart expecting compassion and solace while a man becomes frustrated as he is unable to find a quick remedy.

- Hinting as opposed to telling

This is a typical contrast of high-context and low-context communication. While women prefer hinting about their needs and desires, men usually like to talk openly and clearly. They do not understand hints and suggestions.

- Understanding a situation and relating it

The communication of genders differs also in quantity; while men prefer to talk only about issues of personal importance and in cases where they can actively contribute to solving problems; women have a tendency to talk more and often about issues of others as an act of sharing. Gossiping in all possible meanings of the word is much more probable in female communication minimally due to its higher frequency.

The different patterns of communication are observable at all levels of language. Genders use slightly different vocabulary (diminutives, endearing words, swear words), length of structures and complexity of dialogue patterns. Even the topics of communication are often gender-based and infringement of these rules usually draws surprised or even hostile reactions.

### **Consequences of inequality**

It is not enough to assert the fact that inequality between genders exists; we need to understand its consequences. We have already mentioned the large pool of talents which is not utilised for the benefit of the whole society. But there are even more serious ramifications of the disparity. There is a definite global trend of feminisation of poverty with a very negative impact on both women and their dependents (children, seniors). The negative impact in the most developed countries may have less extreme forms but it still exists. The invisible “glass ceiling” preventing women to develop their careers in a similar way as their male peers as opposed to “glass elevator” which gives preference and advantage to males in a predominantly female environment still exists. More difficult accessibility of power for women means that the leading posts in a society are filled by men and therefore many social issues of importance (e.g. quality of life, child care, welfare) are underrepresented in the political and legal agenda.

In the less developed countries the consequences can be even more severe leading to slower economic development, imbalanced population growth with serious demographic consequences and slow process of democratisation. The feminisation of poverty is even more visible in those countries. It is caused by lack of education and consequently less job opportunities for women who remain dependent on their husbands and other male relatives. If they find any employment at all it is usually poorly paid (sweatshops), only part-time jobs and provides very limited opportunity for advancement and promotion. They often become victims of shadow economy and human trafficking.

Nevertheless there are even more extreme manifestations of gender inequality such as gender-selective abortions and infanticides in some Asian countries resulting from strict population control. Certain areas can sustain only a limited number of people. Boys are in those countries and cultural communities considered an asset because they can ensure the survival of the family, take care of parents and bring a dowry with their brides. On the other hand, girls are a liability; they do not earn money for the family, work only in households and need a dowry for marriage. Many families cannot afford to pay them; therefore they prefer sons to daughters. This is especially true in China where the one-child policy caused that millions of women are missing in certain generations. Some sources state that just between 1998 and 2002 more than 90 million women were not born or were left to die in Asia becoming victims of gender-selected abortion or infanticide (Das Gupta 2005).

## Conclusion

The mounting evidence of gender inequality around the world proves that the issue still poses serious questions about the justice, democracy and rationality of human society and its various cultural communities. The historical experience supported by the results of scientific research and extensive surveys prove that a large portion of each community is undervalued, discriminated against and wasted. As the results of the two presented research show even the most advanced countries still do not meet the standards of full gender equality.

The reasons for such status quo can be identified in the historical, economic, social and cultural development of particular societies where the specific patterns of gender division, behaviour and communication style were formed. But modern research points at a close connection between gender equality and economic success. Prosperity can be achieved only if the full potential of the population, i.e. both genders, is utilized. Otherwise, the negative impact of gender inequality harms the whole population and may lead to distortions in their structure. Nowadays, the generations of young people especially in the developed countries perceive gender equality as their basic human right and therefore demand its complete implementation. In other, less developed regions the progress towards more equality is still slow but globalization, availability of mass media and education can facilitate the process of gender-gap closure.

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