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## *Measuring the Global Gender Gap: An International Comparison*

Ildikó Nagy

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

The need to empower women to achieve equality of opportunity in the social, economic and political spheres of life, as well as in their access to fundamental human rights, nutrients, basic health care and education, has been discussed with increasing emphasis since the 1980s both in an international and in a Hungarian context. Recognition of the subordinate status of women has led to the emergence of the notion of gender, which has by now become a basic socio-cultural variable on a par with factors such as class, age, race and ethnic identity. It is essential to note that the concept of gender does not reflect on women in isolation, but on both men and women, as well as on their status relative to each other. Gender equality refers to that level of human social development where “*the rights, responsibilities and opportunities of individuals will not be determined by the fact of being born male or female*”;<sup>2</sup> in other words, it is a world where men and women can both achieve self-fulfilment.

Ever since the 1980s, a number of major projects have been initiated in the world in an effort to achieve equality of opportunities for men and women. The year 1984 was an important stage in this process, when the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) established a separate fund, the UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women), dedicated to improvement in the status of women. The issue was taken up in 1995 by the 4th World Conference on Women (the Beijing World Conference), where, most importantly, an action programme of ‘gender mainstreaming’ was announced. The central thesis of gender mainstreaming is application of the social gender concept to all areas of society by, for instance, considering the potential effects on equality of the sexes when developing legal and social norms, policies and research strategies. The success of the world conference

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<sup>1</sup> The paper is based on a report of the World Economic Forum published in 2005 as *Women’s Empowerment: Measuring the global gender gap* (by A. Lopez-Claros and S. Zahidi). Downloadable at: [www.weforum.org](http://www.weforum.org).

<sup>2</sup> The authors of the WEF report cite the United Nations Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues, ‘Gender Mainstreaming’. Downloadable at: [www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/gendermainstreaming.htm](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/gendermainstreaming.htm).

is evidenced by the emergence of a series of new initiatives across more than a hundred countries with the common goal of improving the position of women. At the Beijing +5 World Conference held in 2000, the idea of gender mainstreaming gained further support.

As the report of the World Economic Forum (WEF) notes, however, progress toward the target of gender equality has been painfully slow. Despite all the strenuous efforts of the past decades, the gender situation is today still dispiriting. The reason is that achieving equality of the sexes goes beyond the adjustment of legal regulations, social policies and decision-making environments, since the position and evaluation of men and women in society is greatly determined by the cultural norms and traditions of their home country.

There is great variation between the countries of the world with respect to the level of equality between men and women and the status of women. In some countries rape is not considered a crime at all, and various forms of violence against women are everyday occurrences—even in relatively well-developed countries. Female sexual trade and the practice of forcing women into prostitution are still real-life threats to young, often underage, women of poor social classes. Forced marriages and the burning of widows (*suttee*) are still considered acceptable in some Asian countries. Women are still more likely to remain illiterate than are men: the female population living in rural areas represents two-thirds of the world's illiterate adults. In developed countries, where the basics of equality between the sexes have been realized, the problem surfaces at a different level: as discrimination against women in the workplace or as a smaller opportunity for women to participate in political decision-making. The current situation, therefore, leaves no doubt that a lot of time and effort is yet to be invested in the problem before gender equality becomes reality on Earth.

Ten years on from the Beijing World Conference, the World Economic Forum undertook the task of publishing an international comparison of how the countries of the world currently stand with respect to gender equality. The Forum had a dual purpose in preparing the report: drawing renewed attention to the urgency of improving women's equality of opportunity and, at the same time, furthering the work of the governments and agencies of the countries participating in the survey by providing data to help identify weak areas and to show which countries could act as models in this respect.

### **Methodological issues and measurements**

As with any type of study involving ranking, it is worth discussing the method of measurement in some detail.

The WEF measured the extent of women's inequality along five major dimensions. The areas of investigation were selected on the basis of their

significance at a global level, as indicated by the data and the results of UNIFEM. The dimensions under investigation were the following:

- economic participation
- economic opportunity
- political empowerment
- educational attainment
- health and welfare.

International comparisons always need to face the problem of comparability of data. The Forum chose to circumvent the problem by using data published at a national level or by international organizations (e.g. UNDP, UN and WHO) on the one hand, and the results of the international Executive Opinion Survey (henceforth WEF Opinion Survey) carried out by the Forum on the other. The former type of data were ‘hard’ statistics, some of which had been standardized to make them suitable for international comparison, while the latter resource provided opinion data, which, we believe, may give rise to problems of reliability. The fact that the WEF Opinion Survey was not originally intended to measure equality of opportunity between the sexes also suggests that the results need to be interpreted with some caution.<sup>3</sup>

A brief explanation of each of the dimensions is given below, with a description of the data sources that were used for measurement.

#### *Economic participation—women’s presence in the workforce*

Encouraging the participation of women in the workforce not only serves the purpose of reducing the disproportionate extent of poverty among them, but also constitutes an important step toward increasing household income and stimulating economic development.

Citing the well-known economist, Amartya Sen, the authors of the report note, that women should be regarded not as passive members of society in need of help, but rather as the dynamic organizers of their society. Having access to education, employment and ownership rights heavily influences

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<sup>3</sup> The *Executive Opinion Survey* was carried out by WEF in 2004. The survey recorded the opinion of 9,000 business leaders from 104 countries. The participants in the survey were asked what they thought was needed to create a good business environment in the broad sense, including business practices, infrastructure, educational establishments, etc. The authors of the report selected those questions of the survey that were related to the issues investigated by the report and that described the positions of men and women relative to each other. One such question, for instance, concerned “*the impact of maternity laws on the hiring of women*”. That is, the survey itself was not developed directly for the purpose of measuring inequalities between women and men.

women's ability to control their environment and to contribute to economic progress.

Women's employment is an important issue not only with respect to the likelihood of their participation in the labour market, but also from the perspective of wage distribution. The principle of 'equal pay for equal work' has not so far become practice. Citing the findings of UNIFEM, the authors observe that, in a worldwide context, on average women receive 78% of the wages given to men for the same work.

Women are also more unfavourably affected by globalization than men, especially in developing countries, where women only have access to long-term employment at times of economic expansion. Their employment is otherwise temporary, insecure, and is tied to harsh conditions.

One of the important tools of gender mainstreaming in its endeavour to eradicate women's poverty is 'gender budgeting', which targets the budgeting decisions of a given country and helps ensure that financial measures take into consideration the impact they may have on the equality of women and men. The authors see the crucial role of gender budgeting in providing a direct means for governments and decision makers to evaluate the effects of their policies with respect to the circumstances of the sexes. This should help, for instance, in taking account of the interests of women working in the informal sector when various financial measures are drawn up.

To measure inequality between the sexes in labour market participation, the authors examined unemployment rates in 2002 among the whole population and among people aged 15–24, and looked at women's wage levels and the likelihood of their economic activity relative to men's. The data were taken from publications by the World Bank and UNDP. In addition, the Forum analysed an opinion question from its own survey that concerned managers' opinions of whether there were differences in the wage returns to men and women doing equal work.

### *Economic opportunity*

Economic opportunity concerns the quality of women's economic participation. A problem typical mostly of developed countries is that it may be relatively easy for women to gain employment, but this is likely to be poorly paid or a job not requiring qualifications and thus lacking in opportunities for upward mobility. This is often the consequence of legal and social regulations that bring economic disadvantages with the childcare and child support systems, penalizing women for childbirth and, at the same time, excluding men from their share of family duties.

It is a general characteristic of the countries of the world that female labour is concentrated in 'feminized' occupations, such as nursing and administrative work—a phenomenon termed 'horizontal segregation'. Feminized

professions are typically underpaid, precisely because they tend to be practised by women. Promotion opportunities are often limited or totally lacking. For this reason, occupational segregation is closely related to female poverty.

At the other extreme of economic opportunity for women, the proportion of women has increased considerably over the past decades in the legal, medical and engineering professions. It must be noted, however, that women are greatly disadvantaged relative to men in terms of their position in the workplace (vertical segregation, or the 'glass ceiling' phenomenon). Achieving managerial positions is not only a difficult task, but also means that women need to make a choice between family and career. This can also be seen from the results of a US survey, say the authors of the report, according to which 49% of women in managerial positions are childless, while the figure for men is only 19%.

An adequate child benefit and family support system is an important prerequisite to women's participation in the workforce. The majority of the world's countries offer paid maternity leave, during which women are entitled to 50–100% of their salary. The maximum length of maternity leave varies from country to country. The United States is a surprising exception: there women are entitled to only 12 weeks' unpaid leave, which places the country in this respect on a par with Papua New Guinea, among the countries of the developing world.

The authors of the report use the duration of maternity leave, the relative size of the wages payable for the duration of the leave, and the number of women in managerial positions as measures of the current level of economic opportunity for women. In addition, the answers to three questions from the WEF Opinion Survey were included in the analysis: whether state-supported childcare is available; whether maternity leave has the effect of curtailing women's employment; and what the extent is of inequality between men and women working in the private sector.

### *Political empowerment*

Political empowerment means achieving equal participation by women both in formal and in informal decision-making, and gaining a say in policy making at the level of society. The WEF researchers cite a report by the Inter-Parliamentary Union: it observes that women's participation in politics averages 15.6% around the world, a figure that includes Members of Parliament. Substantial differences are found across the major regions of the world: the proportion of women in political decision-making ranges from 6.8% in the Arab states and 18.6% in the Americas to 39.7% in the Nordic states of Europe.

The higher we go in the hierarchy of political decision-making, the fewer women we find. Among other reasons, women's political empowerment is essential because, in its absence, women are excluded from shaping political or social laws that affect them. At the same time, the involvement of women in politics can give rise to new perspectives and could change the priorities in formulating government spending strategies. The authors of the report back up this claim by citing a study carried out in Bolivia, Cameroon and Malaysia showing that women's priorities differ greatly from men's: women would be far more likely to spend money on family, health, education and the eradication of poverty, while men would prefer to spend it on the military, alcohol and gambling. Women's organizations and NGOs can and do play an important role in increasing the proportion of women participating in politics.

To determine the extent of gender equality in political empowerment, countries were ranked by the WEF report on the basis of the number of female ministers, the number of women Members of Parliament, the proportion of women holding managerial positions, and the number of years, if any, that the post of prime minister or state president has been occupied by women in the past 50 years.

### *Educational attainment*

Educational attainment and learning are one of the most fundamental prerequisites to the achievement of equality of opportunity for women. Adequate qualifications are essential to obtaining labour market positions of high status. As has been shown by a number of empirical studies, rising levels of education have the effect of reducing infant mortality rates, as well as fertility rates in a society.<sup>4</sup>

Although the past few decades have seen significant progress in the educational attainment of women, the authors observe, women still constituted around two-thirds of the world's illiterate population at the turn of the millennium. In the former socialist countries and in the Middle East, among the youngest generations there is now equal participation of women and men in education—with women even in the majority in certain areas of tertiary education. In the rest of the world, however, there tends to be a clear gap between boys and girls even in the early stages, and this grows wider with each year of schooling. A lot could be done toward reducing the disparities between the sexes by modifying the content of educational curricula and

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<sup>4</sup> The authors cite a report by the World Bank from 1993: *The Benefits of Education for Women*. Human Resources Development and Operations Policy Dissemination Notes. No. 2, March.

changing the attitudes of teachers to put an end to the practice of reinforcing old, misleading gender stereotypes in children's awareness.

The dimension of qualifications includes access to and use of information technologies. This field of knowledge has become a critical driving force of development around the world over the past one and a half decades, and women, unfortunately, appear to lag behind men in this field as well: we have a gender-based digital divide. Women living in developing countries are especially disadvantaged in this respect, due partly to their low-level qualifications and partly to their environment, which not only fails to provide encouragement, but even condemns new challenges outright. If no progress is made on the acquisition of information skills, the authors warn, the position of women living in developing countries will continue to slide.

The report measured disparities between the sexes in educational attainment in terms of female literacy rates relative to male literacy rates; the likelihood of girls and women enrolling in primary, secondary and higher education relative to the enrolment rates for boys and men; and the number of years of schooling among the female population of a given country relative to the number of school years among the male population.

In our opinion, the method of measurement used to determine this dimension is more reliable than the others, as it relies on statistical data only.

### *Health and welfare*

The dimension of health and welfare relates to the substantial differences between men and women in their access to sufficient nutrition, basic health care and reproductive facilities, and to issues of personal safety and integrity. According to a report by WHO and UNICEF from 1990, 585 thousand women die during childbirth or in pregnancy every year, or 1,600 women a day on average. According to estimates by the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, a total of 46 million abortions are carried out around the world every year, 20 million of which are in unsafe conditions. This results in the death of some 80 thousand women and is likely to cause long-term health problems for those who survive.

Violence against women is essentially connected with the personal safety and integrity of an individual. We lack accurate statistics on this issue even in Sweden, the country in the best position from the point of view of gender equality. In all probability, this is because the subject was long regarded as taboo and victims could not expect either legal protection or assistance from society. In place of understanding, the social environment reacted with deep condemnation and exclusion, blaming the victim for provocative behaviour and thus holding her responsible for the events. Also, in the absence of appropriate laws, it is difficult to hold perpetrators accountable or to obtain



accurate statistics if there is no legal category of domestic violence, child abuse or wife battering. As a consequence, incidents of violence are reported far less frequently than they actually occur.

In Africa and the Middle East, 2 million girls aged 4 to 8 years are subjected to female genital mutilation every year, which frequently leads to the death of the child and could result in various long-term illnesses.<sup>5</sup> Regrettably, cases of mutilation have also been reported among immigrant communities on other continents of the world, including Europe.

As no reliable worldwide statistics are available on violence against women, the WEF report analysed a number of factors to measure inequalities between the sexes in the dimension of health and welfare. The fertility rates of women aged 15 to 19 were included as an indicator of health risks for teenage women. To this were added the proportion of births assisted by health professionals, maternal mortality rates and infant mortality rates. The data were adjusted for the number of doctors available per 1,000 people, in order to control for the incidence of unfavourable reproductive health care services ensuing from the general poverty of a given country. Finally, the report includes a question from the WEF Opinion Survey concerning the effectiveness of government measures to alleviate poverty. We must note here that it would have been best to rely on 'hard' statistics to measure poverty, such as indicators of relative poverty or other indicators similar to those of the Laeken indicator set used in the European Union to measure poverty.<sup>6</sup> The results of these would probably have been different from the findings based on managers' opinions.

## The rankings

The authors attempted to consolidate the results on the five dimensions characterizing the gap between the sexes into a single index.<sup>7</sup> *Table 1* shows the ranking of the 58 countries included in the study with respect to gender equality.

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<sup>5</sup> The authors cite an article by Amnesty International, 2004: *Female Genital Mutilation*. Downloadable at [www.amnesty.org/ailib/intcam/femgen/fgml.htm#a1](http://www.amnesty.org/ailib/intcam/femgen/fgml.htm#a1).

<sup>6</sup> For more information see, for example, the study by A. Gábos in the present volume.

<sup>7</sup> The gender inequality index was computed using the following procedure: the qualitative data obtained from the WEF Opinion Survey were the values on a scale of 1 to 7. The 'hard' data taken from published sources were accordingly normalized to a scale of 1 to 7, where a 1 was assigned to the worst value and a 7 to the best. For instance, the country with the shortest maternity leave, Egypt, was allotted a 1, while Sweden was given a 7 for having the longest maternity leave (52 weeks). The remaining countries were assigned an appropriate value between 1 and 7. All data were normalized using this procedure and the scores for each category were calculated by taking the unweighted mean of the values of all variables within that category. The overall scores for each country were computed by taking the unweighted mean of the scores for all categories. That is, the five dimensions receive equal weights in the index.

The top places in the table are occupied by the Nordic countries of Europe, with Sweden in first position. These countries perform especially well in the categories of health and welfare, education, political empowerment (with the exception of Denmark) and economic opportunity, but are not necessarily among the first in economic participation (Norway, Iceland and Finland). This cannot primarily be explained by restrictions on women's employment, but is largely the consequence of high standards of living, which enables women to elect not to work.

The next five places are occupied by 'woman-friendly' countries: New Zealand, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany and Australia. These nations show outstanding results in political empowerment (with New Zealand in first place) and educational attainment, but with respect to economic opportunity for women they only figure in the top third of the list.

The great majority of the former socialist countries appear in places 11 to 25. The socialist ideology once prevalent in these countries had the effect of creating a sound basis for gender equality in the dimensions of economic participation and opportunity, and in particular in educational attainment. As regards political empowerment and especially health care services and welfare, however, these nations have lots of room for improvement. Of the former socialist countries, it is those in the Baltic region that do well in the first four categories, including political empowerment (with the exception of Estonia). However, this performance is marred by the current low standards of health and welfare.

Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia are found further down the list, in places 19, 21 and 22, respectively. Hungary and the Czech Republic come just within the first 25 countries, outranking the Russian Federation (29), Bulgaria (31) and Romania (41) from among the former socialist countries.

Let us look at the position of Hungary in a little more detail. Hungary occupies a surprisingly good position (3) with respect to women's economic opportunities, possibly owing to generous childcare support systems. It is also possible, however, that the picture painted by the WEF Opinion Survey concerning equality between men and women in workplace promotion opportunities is more favourable than the situation really is. The latter hypothesis is supported by a study appearing in the present volume,<sup>8</sup> which observes that top managers—whether male or female—do not consider women to be hampered in workplace advancement in Hungary. They attribute the lower incidence of women in higher managerial positions to the dual burden of work and family that women have to bear.

In all other dimensions, Hungary lags far behind. It occupies 28th place in political empowerment, 30th in economic participation, and ranks even lower in educational attainment (39) and health and welfare (40). The magnitude of the disparities between the countries unfortunately cannot be

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<sup>8</sup> See the paper by B. Nagy in this volume.

nitude of the disparities between the countries unfortunately cannot be estimated, as the report does not give the mean scores for individual categories.

According to the latest data by EUROSTAT on economic participation, Hungary ranks in the mid-range of the EU-25 with respect to gender differences.<sup>9</sup> Unemployment rates among people aged 15 to 24 and among the active population, however, indicate an advantage for women, who are less likely to be unemployed than men. It must be added that unemployment data are not necessarily the best indicators of labour market participation, since people temporarily not intending to work, or those who have given up work for an extended period of time and become inactive, are not included.

Looking at women's participation in politics in an EU context, it can be seen that Hungary ranks somewhere near the bottom. According to data from 2004,<sup>10</sup> the proportion of seats held by women in the Hungarian Parliament is only 9.8%, which puts Hungary below all other member states of the EU bar Malta. Although the situation is somewhat better than it was over the previous period, further improvement in women's political empowerment, too, is expected following accession to the EU.

In educational attainment Hungary ranks 39th, in spite of the fact that, among young generations, enrolment rates tend to favour girls today.<sup>11</sup> On average, men and women enrol in universities and higher educational establishments in equal proportions. Although adult education outside the school system is rare in Hungary, women here are in a better position than men, in terms both of participation rates and the amount of time allocated to studying. The population rate of illiteracy, however, is higher among women, especially in the case of older generations.

According to the assessment of the WEF report, Hungary performs most poorly in health and welfare. There are research results, however, that contest this evaluation. Considering the chances of women and men becoming poor, as measured by the Laeken indicators used in the EU, Hungary does not fare quite so badly in a European context:<sup>12</sup> the poverty risks for women are barely higher than those for men. The disparity between the sexes is considerably greater in this respect in Finland, Austria, Belgium, Denmark and the United Kingdom.

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<sup>9</sup> The labour market position of men and women in Hungary is discussed by E. Bukodi in this volume.

<sup>10</sup> Women's participation in politics is discussed by G. Ilonszki of the present volume.

<sup>11</sup> See the study by E. Bukodi in this volume.

<sup>12</sup> For details, see the paper by A. Gábos in the present volume.

Changing Roles

Table 1

Gender gap rankings for 58 countries of the world at the turn of the millennium

Country	Rank	Overall score*	Position in each of the five dimensions				
			Economic participation	Economic opportunity	Political empowerment	Educational attainment	Health and welfare
Sweden	1	5.53	5	12	8	1	1
Norway	2	5.39	13	2	3	6	9
Iceland	3	5.32	17	7	2	7	6
Denmark	4	5.27	6	1	20	5	2
Finland	5	5.19	12	17	4	10	4
New Zealand	6	4.89	16	47	1	11	26
Canada	7	4.87	7	27	11	12	14
United Kingdom	8	4.75	21	41	5	4	28
Germany	9	4.61	20	28	6	34	10
Australia	10	4.61	15	25	22	17	18
<i>Latvia</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>4.60</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>48</i>
<i>Lithuania</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>4.58</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>44</i>
France	13	4.49	31	9	14	31	17
The Netherlands	14	4.48	32	16	7	42	8
<i>Estonia</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>4.47</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>46</i>
Ireland	16	4.40	37	51	12	9	12
United States	17	4.40	19	46	19	8	42
Costa Rica	18	4.36	49	30	9	14	30
<i>Poland</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>4.36</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>38</i>
Belgium	20	4.30	35	37	25	15	16
<i>Slovakia</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>4.28</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>33</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>Slovenia</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>4.25</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>19</i>
Portugal	23	4.21	27	18	31	36	20
<b><i>Hungary</i></b>	<b><i>24</i></b>	<b><i>4.19</i></b>	<b><i>30</i></b>	<b><i>3</i></b>	<b><i>28</i></b>	<b><i>39</i></b>	<b><i>40</i></b>
<i>Czech Republic</i>	25	4.19	24	4	43	25	23
Luxembourg	26	4.15	48	8	33	21	25
Spain	27	4.13	45	34	27	35	5
Austria	28	4.13	42	22	21	38	13
<i>Bulgaria</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>4.06</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>55</i>
Colombia	30	4.06	41	38	15	13	52
<i>Russian Federation</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>4.03</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>57</i>

Country	Rank	Overall score*	Position in each of the five dimensions				
			Economic participation	Economic opportunity	Political empowerment	Educational attainment	Health and welfare
Uruguay	32	4.01	36	26	36	2	56
China	33	4.01	9	23	40	46	36
Switzerland	34	3.97	43	42	17	49	7
Argentina	35	3.97	55	29	26	3	54
South Africa	36	3.95	39	56	16	30	21
Israel	37	3.94	28	40	32	28	39
Japan	38	3.75	33	52	54	26	3
Bangladesh	39	3.74	18	53	42	37	37
Malaysia	40	3.70	40	36	51	32	15
<i>Romania</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>3.70</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>51</i>	<i>47</i>
Zimbabwe	42	3.66	2	57	34	52	41
Malta	43	3.65	56	43	45	16	24
Thailand	44	3.61	1	39	49	54	32
Italy	45	3.50	51	49	48	41	11
Indonesia	46	3.50	29	24	46	53	29
Peru	47	3.47	50	44	38	47	31
Chile	48	3.46	52	20	44	40	45
Venezuela	49	3.42	38	13	52	33	58
Greece	50	3.41	44	48	50	45	22
Brazil	51	3.29	46	21	57	27	53
Mexico	52	3.28	47	45	41	44	51
India	53	3.27	54	35	24	57	34
Korea	54	3.18	34	55	56	48	27
Jordan	55	2.96	58	32	58	43	43
Pakistan	56	2.90	53	54	37	58	33
Turkey	57	2.67	22	58	53	55	50
Egypt	58	2.38	57	50	55	56	49

Source: WEF (2005: 8–9).

\* Overall score based on a 7-point scale with a minimum value of 1 and a maximum value of 7.

Some of the EU member states figure in the top twenty, largely owing to the fact that they have made significant efforts toward improving women's equal opportunity.

The United States is also in the top twenty (17); it performs outstandingly in gender equality in the area of educational attainment, but shows a poor performance in economic opportunity for women, with a rank of just 46. Its

position in health and welfare is similarly low, at 42. Working women are entitled to only 12 weeks of unpaid maternity leave and women's advancement in the workplace is also restricted—they regularly encounter the 'glass ceiling'. Costa Rica performs surprisingly well, with a rank of 18. Political empowerment and educational attainment are particularly high there, compared to the other dimensions of gender equality under analysis.

Switzerland (34) and the Southern European states of Malta (43), Italy (45) and Greece (50)—which are commonly held to subscribe to traditional gender roles—get lower overall ranks than some of the Latin American countries (e.g. Costa Rica) and some Asian nations (e.g. Bangladesh). The slight advantage of Switzerland in the ranking is credited to the fairly good chances of women in health and welfare and to the relatively high score received for political empowerment. The relatively privileged position of Spain (27) has a similar explanation: a very low fertility rate is paired with fairly good health care services. Italy, Greece and Malta are way below average on economic participation and opportunity, and on political empowerment.

China is the highest-ranking country in Asia, with an overall position of 33. It is followed by Japan at 38. China is among the top ten countries in the dimension of women's economic participation, but lags behind in all other dimensions of gender equality. In Japan, by contrast, it is the dimension of health and welfare where inequalities between the sexes are smallest. Thailand (44) stands out with respect to economic opportunity for women—where it ranks first (!) among the countries under investigation—but is close to the bottom of the ranking on the dimensions of political empowerment and educational attainment. The extent of gender inequality is substantial across almost all the dimensions in India (53) and Korea (54).

There are considerable differences between the achievements of individual Latin American countries. As was mentioned earlier, Costa Rica (18) performs best among them, and is followed—some considerable way behind—by a bloc consisting of Colombia (30), Uruguay (32) and Argentina (35) and, somewhat further down, by Peru (47), Chile (48), Venezuela (49), Brazil (51) and Mexico (52). The countries in the latter group perform badly on all dimensions of equality between the sexes, with the exception of economic opportunity in Venezuela, Chile and Brazil. The report notes that the problem is not necessarily in the lack of economic opportunity for women, but in women not having access to adequate qualifications or basic human rights, such as political empowerment and health care and welfare services.

The final group is the group of Islamic countries. These include countries of the Far East region—Bangladesh (39), Malaysia (40) and Indonesia (46)—and the last four countries on the list of 58, from the Middle East and North Africa region: Jordan (55), Pakistan (56), Turkey (57) and Egypt (58). The latter four countries fare badly across all dimensions characterizing the position of women relative to men. A notable exception is Turkey, where the

female employment rate is fairly high (22), but this achievement is marred by its last place in economic opportunity, a very low participation rate in politics and education, and poor health care and welfare services. The deeply ingrained traditions and religion that circumscribe the role of women in these regions severely curtail women's political empowerment and, consequently, the role they can play in other socio-economic areas. The position of women is somewhat more promising in the Islamic countries of the Far East, primarily due to their increasing economic freedom.

## **Summary**

The main conclusion of the WEF report is that gender equality has not been attained in any of the countries of the world. The results reveal that the Nordic states of Europe have so far come closest to this goal. Women and men in these countries gain comparable benefits from all of political empowerment, education, economic opportunity and labour market participation, even though not all of the five Nordic countries get a place at the top of the rank in every dimension.

Hungary falls in the mid-range of the list, which seems more or less reasonable, although the questionable reliability of some of the variables that form the basis of comparison gives rise to incompatible results concerning some of the dimensions of the study.

Nevertheless, we believe that it is a major achievement of the WEF report that it presents comparative data in an attempt to measure the current extent of gender equality in 58 countries of the world and thus draws attention to the issue of improving the position of women.