

How Elevating Women Improves Communities

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March is Women's History Month. We observed International Women's Day on March 8th. All of us should know that women are critical members of any society. However, few countries have actually achieved equality. Let's examine some of the ways that elevating women improves life for all.



According to the latest edition of World Bank's *Women, Business and the Law*, only 10 countries worldwide have gender-equal economies. The United States is not among them, nor is any South Asian country. However, the report measures progress as well as current status. The greatest improvements have been seen in Latin America, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East. South Asia and the United States, however, have more work to do.

World Bank uses key metrics to score a country's *Women, Business and the Law* index rating. The overall categories are mobility, workplace, pay, marriage, parenthood, entrepreneurship, assets, and pension. There are sub-categories to each. A perfect score is 100, which has only been achieved by Canada, Belgium, Latvia, Ireland, Denmark, France, Iceland, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Sweden.

The United States scored 91.3, sitting squarely between Bulgaria and Taiwan. The highest-rated country in South Asia was Nepal at 80.6. India scored 74.4 and Sri Lanka came in at 65.6. Bangladesh was 49.4, just behind Pakistan at 55.6. Of this group, Pakistan was the only country to pass any kind of gender equality reforms from 2019 to 2020.

So why list these scores? What do we accomplish by comparing different countries and cultures? For one, we can already see what we're doing well. More importantly, however, we can see what needs improvement.

So How Does Gender Equality Benefit The Whole Community?

Well, glad you asked!

Let's start with the most obvious (and the most impersonal). If laws and societal norms only benefit men, then an allegedly great nation is only great for half of its citizens. Equality elevates the community because it means everyone can maximize their lives, free of persecution or hinderance. Economically-speaking, an unequal society can only achieve half its potential.

Our communities and cultures may cling to archaic gender norms for whatever excuse — tradition, honor, fear of change. But all we accomplish is holding everyone in our community back. This means we, as a society, have both a moral and practical obligation to change the culture until it's great for everyone. Any traditions or norms that force women into boxes are best left in the past.

Now, let's move away from the macro perspective and look more closely at some of the ways elevating women improves communities.

When Women Have Greater Control Over Household Resources, Spending Practices Improve

According to a 2009 United Nations study, women's access to and control of economic resources improves several key development metrics. There are marked improvements in poverty levels and welfare of children. Studies have shown, in countries including India, that women are more likely to invest household resources into food and education. Furthermore, women are more likely to send *all* of their children to school instead of just the boys.

On that note...

When Women Have Greater Access to Education, Poverty Decreases

We have a problem across South Asia, which is the disparity between education of men and women. Gender biases and norms continue to perpetuate the gap in education. That can't go on. When women have equal access to education, communities flourish.

Education, especially for women, is also critical in breaking the cycle of poverty. Education is the key to increased earnings. Women are more likely to remain and invest in their communities. Therefore, when more women in a given community have access to education, more will be invested back into that community.

When Women Fill Leadership Roles, Education, Health Standards, and Infrastructure Improves

Generally speaking, women's leadership is linked to improvements in education, health, and infrastructure. These improvements can be seen at both local and global levels. **An Indian study on women in leadership found societal improvements across the board in communities where women were part of the leadership.**

There were greater investments in sanitation and clean drinking water. Men in those communities had more favorable views of women in leadership roles, having witnessed exactly that. Girls in those communities had higher aspirations for both education and careers. In fact, girls in those communities had higher aspirations for jobs requiring education than boys did. Furthermore, seeing women in leadership roles also encouraged girls to push back more against patriarchal norms.

In plain terms, more women in leadership roles benefit communities both directly and indirectly. They tend to invest more into public goods which benefits the entire community. Women leaders also serve as vital role models for girls, especially in South Asia. Furthermore, communities with women in visible leadership roles saw gender gaps in education and income narrow and sometimes close entirely.

Change Is Needed

Support. Believe. Advocate. Educate. It is the duty of all of us to change our culture for the better. We all have the power to make small changes that will ripple through the community. We need to recognize how destructive and outdated our gender norms are.

Our communities and countries only operate at half capacity when we allow cultural practices that hold women back to persist. But when we recognize where we have missed the mark and collectively decide enough is enough, we can all thrive. And it is time — enough is enough.

Take a look at the full World Bank report for some interesting reading! The full list of indicators is on page 80. The full list of countries and their indicator ratings starts on page 95.

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