International Assessment and Framework for Gender Equality

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Abstract

This study investigates the gender-related issues that impede women and girls' abilities to survive and thrive. These issues – poverty, education, employment, violence, stereotypes, and political participation – prevent women and girls from becoming a healthy and productive member of society. Despite the world's progress in all avenues, not all women and girls enjoy basic human rights and opportunities that are afforded to men and boys. In this capacity, there have been a number of international assessments, frameworks, indicators, and indices invented for the assessment of gender equality. These methods share the same purposes of assessing the status of gender equality, predicting the trajectories of future gender equality, and hopefully serving as a foundation for policy formulation to create a more inclusive society. This study therefore examines the methods and approaches used from past to present to assess the global landscape of gender equality. The examination and analysis find that while the frameworks and indices may serve as a useful lens reflecting to a certain extent the gender equality status in different countries, often times they fail to grasp contextual differences and the complexity and variability of the real gender-related issues among regions and countries. Therefore, while these assessments are well-intended, the efforts should continue to be the improvement, refinement, and expansion of areas to be included and measured. In addition, a qualitative investigation should always be considered since gender issues are rigorously context-specific and not always quantifiable.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Inequality, Gender Gap, Assessment, Framework

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กรอบความคิดและการประเมินความเท่าเทียมทางเพศ

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บทคัดย่อ

ถึงแม้ว่าโลกจะได้รับการพัฒนาไปอย่างมากในปัจจุบัน แต่ปัญหาความไม่เท่าเทียมทางเพศ ยังคงปิดกั้นสิทธิมนุษยชนและโอกาสแก่ผู้หญิง ปัจจัยและประเด็นเหล่านี้กีดกันและขัดขวางไม่ให้ ผู้หญิงดำรงชีวิตได้อย่างปลอดภัยและเป็นธรรม และทำให้ประชากรเพศหญิงไม่สามารถประสบ ความสำเร็จในชีวิต และเป็นพลเมืองที่สร้างสรรค์ประโยชน์ให้แก่สังคมได้ ประเด็นเหล่านี้ประกอบด้วย ความยากจน การศึกษา ความรุนแรงทางเพศ ภาพพจน์และความเชื่อทางสังคม และการมีส่วนร่วม ทางการเมือง ดังนั้น ประเทศและองค์กรระหว่างประเทศจึงได้มีการออกแบบและสร้างระบบ การประเมิน กรอบความคิด ตัวชี้วัด และดรรชนีต่าง ๆ เพื่อใช้ในการประเมินสถานะความเท่าเทียมทางเพศ วิธีการวัดเหล่านี้ต่างมีวัตถุประสงค์ใกล้เคียงกันประกอบด้วย การประเมินสถานภาพความเท่าเทียม ทางเพศ การพยากรณ์อนาคตของสถานะความเท่าเทียมทางเพศ หรือใช้เป็นระบบพื้นฐานในการดำเนิน การนโยบายสร้างสังคมที่เท่าเทียมกัน งานวิจัยฉบับนี้จึงเป็นการศึกษากระบวนการ กรอบความคิด และ ระบบการประเมินต่าง ๆ ที่ได้รับยอมรับและใช้การอย่างกว้างขวางทั่วโลก ผลการศึกษา พบว่า ระบบ การประเมินอาจไม่ครอบคลุมเพียงพอและไม่ได้มีการประยุกต์ใช้ให้เหมาะสมกับสภาพแวดล้อม และปัจจัยท้องถิ่นในแต่ละพื้นที่ซึ่งมีความซับซ้อนและแตกต่างกันไป ถึงแม้ว่าระบบการประเมินและ ดรรชนีต่าง ๆ จะมีประโยชน์และเป็นจุดเริ่มต้นของการสร้างความเท่าเทียมกันทางเพศ อย่างไรก็ดี ระบบเหล่านี้ควรได้รับการศึกษา ปรับปรุง และปรับใช้ให้เหมาะสมกับแต่ละสถานการณ์ นอกจากนี้ การประเมินความเท่าเทียมกันในเชิงคุณภาพควรได้รับความสำคัญไม่ด้อยไปกว่ากัน เพื่อให้การสร้าง ความเท่าเทียมกันทางเพศเป็นไปอย่างครอบคลุม

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Global Gender Inequality

Global female population in 2021 accounts for about half of total global population or approximately 3.9 billion (World Bank, 2021). This means that women and girls account for half the world's productivity and potential. Women and girls are not any less significance than men in contributing to the economy and society. If truth be told, female contribution to society might have been even more than conventionally documented due to unpaid and unrecognized work and care. Yet, in many parts of the world, women and girls are still subjected to unfair and unjust treatment.

From the first day women and girls enter into the world, being female is a predisposition afflicted by conscious and unconscious biases and prejudices. In many cultures, having a girl is a great disappointment for parents since girls are believed to be of no economic value and cannot pass on their family name. In ancient times, girls are, as tradition would dictate, a piece of property destined to be given away to care for men and children. Women and girls were almost always under the jurisdiction of a man, most often her father and then husband. Nevertheless, even though the world's progress after World War II with regard to women's rights has improved dramatically, the global statistics today still reveal disappointing and inexcusable developments. Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, the global gender gap has taken many steps backward. At the present rate of progress, it will take 132 years to close the gender gap around the world, which is a number that has increased from 100 in 2020 due to the pandemic (WEF, 2022). It is clear that when a crisis strikes, women and girls are more severely affected. Moreover, for the past 20 years, only 4% of gender parity has been closed. Other global statistics from countries and international organizations around the world demonstrate the same awful truths.

Women and Poverty

According to Oxfam research (2018), three-fifth of the world's one billion poorest population are women and girls. The new projections by UN Women and UNDP present that the estimated number of women and girls who will be experiencing extreme poverty is 388 million in 2022. As girls grow older, they encounter a greater chance of poverty than boys in the lower and middle-income countries (UN Women, 2021) due to higher

adolescent fertility rates and single motherhood. When women reach the age of 25-34, they are once again more likely to be vulnerable to poverty since they are at the age of childbearing and childcare. This statistics is evident in all regions across the world. These numbers are even more pronounced in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which women have been forced to leave their employment due to disproportionate unpaid care and employers' biases and perceptions on the skills of female workforce. All these contribute to the financial struggles faced by women and girls across the world (UN Women, 2022).

Women in the Work Force

There are seemingly endless challenges women must overcome every single day. While women and girls account for half of the world population, only 39.2% of women participate in the workforce and the rate of male workforce participation is 72% (ILO, 2022). Although women and girls have the higher rates of educational attainment, a large number of highly educated women are still unemployed. Even when women are able to secure an employment, the majority are confined with vulnerable jobs within low-productivity sectors with little access to social benefits and protections (UN Women, 2018). Most women still lack decent work and have lower wages than men despite possessing the similar level of degrees and abilities. According to the global gender gap report 2020, women receive 24.4% lower wages on average than their male counterparts.

Women and Leadership

Currently, only 13 countries have seen a woman lead as Head of State and only 26% of all national parliamentarians are female (UN Women, 2022). In addition to the lack of supportive environment, career opportunities, and the glass ceiling women must try to shatter, women's career decisions are also influenced and pressured by gender norms and practices that require them to be the domestic carer in the family. In other words, women are more likely to choose careers that do not inhibit their primary role of household caring, while men are more likely to choose high-earning, high-status professions due to social perception of suitability. As a result, women are faced with the problem of double burdens because the family economics dictates women to work outside of home to earn a living and simultaneously bear domestic responsibilities such as child rearing, household

chores, and other unpaid care work, according to the research conducted by the Center for Philanthropy and Civil Society (CPCS) under NIDA in 2021. According to McKinsey Global Institute (2018), 75% of global unpaid work, including necessary tasks such as childcare, cooking, and cleaning, is carried out by women. Even when they are young, girls bear disproportionately larger burdens in household chores than boys due to gender norms that declare females responsible for domestic responsibilities (UNICEF, 2020). Family, education, authority, healthcare, sports, media, literature, and religion are socializing agents that reinforce the cultural norms that dictate how women should behave (Thein, 2015).

Violence against Women and Girls

Another issue that needs immediate actions if gender equality is to be achieved is violence against women and girls. Gender stereotypes and expectations foster the environment where men are viewed as superior and thus have the power over women. Deeply rooted in this notion, violence against girls and women is accepted and normalized. In many countries where social structures allow for imbalanced power dynamics between men and women, men are viewed as superior and dominant, whereas women are expected to be submissive and obedient. According to UNICEF (2020), 13 million girls aged 15-19 have experienced forced sex, but most chose to keep quiet about the abuse due to social norms of male supremacy. More disturbingly, due to the same social norms, 38% of adolescent girls globally believe wife-beating is justified (UNICEF, 2020). Sexual abuse and harassment still take place every day in society and in schools, according to CPCS at NIDA (2021), including for example peer-to-peer physical and verbal harassment, teachers making rape and sexist jokes, teachers touching female students to check if they truly have periods, and incidents of domestic sexual abuse by family members.

Gender-based Stereotypes

While the roles and expectations of women have changed over the years, there are still the socially and arbitrarily constructed norms that feed into gender stereotypes that are nearly impossible to change or erase. It is the most powerful force in reinforcing the patriarchal structure that dominates every inch of the society. The images of male being stronger and more aggressive while female being weak and vulnerable are imprinted

in our minds as we navigate through our lives as a member of the society. Children then receive, process, learn and absorb knowledge and information from experiences around them. They learn who they are, what they can do and cannot do from a very early age. They learn of their place and where they belong in the society by aligning themselves to those close to them. This is precisely why gender-stereotyped messages play such a deep-rooted role in their conscience and self-esteem.

These stereotypes are what conditions girls and women to believe, behave, and make choices in life. They grow up being conditioned to believe what they can and cannot do, not what they are capable to do. The primary school children have a diverse list of professions they aspire to be. But as the children grow older, in secondary schools, the list of jobs narrows down to a handful, especially for female students, according to CPCS at NIDA (2021). Not yet aware by gender stereotypes, primary school students, both male and female aspire to be doctors, lawyers, pilots, engineers, and many more. However, the choices become severely limited for female secondary students, many of whom now believe they would not do well in professions that require mathematical skills. These stereotypes, while some may seem harmless, create lifelong mentality that can be hard to shake off. Defying those stereotypes can also mean defying your family values and socially accepted behaviors. The pressure for young girls and women to conform to social conventions and to exhibit behaviors expected of them becomes their rationality in making life choices, rather than their capabilities.

After a few decades of progress and development, women remain the vulnerable group of population in societies. It is plain to see that there is much to be done if meaningful and inclusive development is to take place. Many countries have made a fair amount of progress in closing the gender gaps in many areas as evidenced by a number of changes in terms of laws and regulations, and educational and development policies aiming to create a more equal and equitable society for women. Most countries have built various structures to bring about change and oversee the well-being and development of women, such as offices and units embedded in relevant ministries or agencies. Some countries have officially adopted or established a commission for women or an organization specifically designed to implement women-related policies. These changes have made significant improvements in increasing women's quality of life and safety; and securing more future opportunities for girls and women across the world.

International Gender Equality Assessment and Framework

Women's rights are basic human rights. There is much to be done in order to close the gender gaps and ensure equitable and equal treatments for women and girls worldwide. It is also of utmost importance to end all forms of sexual harassment and violence against girls and women, as well as to provide access to quality education, healthcare, career opportunities, and other resources to support women and girls. In order to achieve these outcomes, there have been various gender assessments and indices that are designed to report and monitor the progress of global gender equality and all that entails.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) originated from more than 30 years of efforts by the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, which was created in 1946 in order to assess, monitor, and promote women's rights. After a long period of arduous work, in December 1979, CEDAW was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly and fully went into effect in September 1981 with the endorsement from 20 countries. Until today, CEDAW has been ratified by 189 States Parties, out of 193 UN Member States, making it one of the most internationally comprehensive gender equality frameworks worldwide. It has played a key role in advancing women's rights and uplifting women's status around the world.

CEDAW, in its document, unequivocally states that "extensive discrimination against women continues to exist. Such discrimination violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity." The framework acknowledges issues and challenges concerning women's rights, what equality means, and how it can be achieved. To lay a path for implementation, CEDAW has founded an international bill of rights for women and an agenda for actions for all the countries. The bill of rights for women demands that all nation states take proper measures to ensure the right path of development and advancement of women's rights and to guarantee the fundamental freedoms for women on a basis of equality with men. In addition, the agenda for actions included in 14 articles covered in three dimensions: civil rights and legal status of women;

human reproduction; and impact of cultural factors on gender discrimination.

For the first dimension, women must be guaranteed the basic rights of political participation, which means the rights to vote, to hold public office, and to perform public functions. This dimension also encompasses non-discrimination in education, employment, and economic and social activities. Equal rights for women must be upheld regardless of choice of spouse, parenthood, marital status, and other personal rights. The second dimension emphasizes women's reproductive rights mandating that women's role should not be viewed and treated differently from that of men. This means shared responsibility for child-rearing and other family or household responsibilities. More importantly, there should be laws incorporated into areas including employment, family plan, healthcare, and education. Equally important is the women's rights to reproductive choice. Finally, the third dimension concerns the cultural influences and social norms that deprive women of their fundamental rights. These influences include for instance gender stereotypes, customs, and norms that restrict women from receiving equitable and equal treatments and opportunities.

All in all, CEDAW provides the underpinnings for the structural changes needed in order to achieve gender equality. It is rather a comprehensive framework that entails the issues to be tackled and action plans to be implemented. To ensure the progress has been made and will continue to be so, the implementation is monitored by the Committee composed of 23 experts who have been nominated by their governments and impartially elected. Every four years, a report is to be submitted to the Committee to demonstrate the measures taken to advance women's equal rights.

How Implementable is CEDAW?

While CEDAW is praised for providing a clear path of implementation, some features of the action plans, or the lack thereof, present a few challenges. Despite its comprehensive nature, the major issues with CEDAW are its lack of alignment and localization. As such, the impacts of CEDAW at a national level, as noted by several social scientists and policy implementors, might be fairly limited (Runyan & Sanders, 2021; Och, 2018; Mullins, 2018). In addition, a study by Englehart and Miller (2014) found that while CEDAW does have a moderately positive impact on women's rights in the countries that ratify it, the impact tends to be mainly the political rights, but not convincingly so for

economic and social rights. Particularly for countries with a federal system or a centralized governing body, translating an international agreement into a national policy proves to be a daunting task. For one, CEDAW sometimes does not align with the grassroot policy making, even though the agreement acknowledges the cultural and social dimension of gender discrimination. This results in the ineffective compliance and weak implementation mechanisms (Englehart & Miller, 2014; Risse, Ropp & Sikkink, 2013).

The most problematic path is thus how to build a sufficient capacity in order to promote women's rights principles at the local level. Capacity building becomes a main issue for local governments as CEDAW requires more permanent laws and regulations, infrastructure, and sustainable source of funding. Moreover, effective collaboration from all levels of governing bodies is vital in the creation of common goals and the mobilization of resources. In the US for instance, due to the fact that the US still has not officially ratified CEDAW, the CEDAW principles are not publicly promoted, even though they are sometimes used as guidelines for local policy. As such, very little awareness of CEDAW is present (Runyan & Sanders, 2021). This renders state and local lawmakers unresponsive to women's issues and gender-related policies. Even when the local government is invested in the implementation, lack of infrastructure and funding resulting from both political and economic resources often lead to failure. Therefore, there has not been a consistent effort or approach to enacting CEDAW guidelines.

Despite the obstacles, CEDAW has helped many countries achieve a more equal society. Various studies have demonstrated that CEDAW has been a critical instigator for change in women's rights and well-being. Since CEDAW's inception, there has been ample evidence showing that CEDAW has generated public awareness and facilitated capacity building in the promotion of women's rights at national, regional, and international levels (Hellum & Aesen, 2015; Facio & Morgan, 2009). Nevertheless, as mentioned before, in order to effectively create change, CEDAW guidelines must be embedded within the country's infrastructure. As seen with a powerful country such as the US, when the CEDAW principles are not fully incorporated with the legal system, the implementation cannot take place. In the US case, the full ratification of CEDAW is not allowed by the US constitution (Mullins, 2018), making it an impossible task for the state and local governments to fully embody CEDAW guidelines and turn them into meaningful action plans. However, in countries where major parts of CEDAW have been incorporated into the constitution

(Ulrich, 1999), CEDAW has helped pave the ways to the establishment of national laws such as the Domestic Violence Act in South Africa or a constitutional ban on sex-based discrimination in Mauritius. Unsurprisingly, these countries that embrace CEDAW have seen great success in the advancement of women's rights. Therefore, the commitment to policy alignment, the localization process, and proper resources are the momentous components in the effectiveness of CEDAW.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPfA)

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPfA) is a global initiative launched by the United Nations – a result of the Fourth World Conference on Women that was held in Beijing China in September 1995. After the two-week conference, the representatives from 189 governments agreed into the contract making the BDPfA one of the most expansive efforts in women's rights. What is also unique about the BDPfA was that during the conference, there were more than 30,000 participants attending the Forum of non-governmental organizations contributing to the highly constructive and dynamic stage for networking, advocacy, knowledge-sharing, and training. The conference itself was praised for providing a space for coalition and alliances which were urgently needed to tackle women's issues. Building upon the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979 and several other women-oriented conferences including Mexico (1975), Nairobi (1985), Vienna (1993), Cairo (1994), and Copenhagen (1995), the BDPfA expressed strong commitment to women's rights as human rights, gender equality and eliminating discriminations against women (Cornwall & Edwards, 2015).

The Platform for Action comprises 12 critical areas of concern: poverty, education and training, health, violence, armed conflict, economy, power and decision-making, institutional mechanisms, human rights, media, environment, and the girl child. Each criteria contains strategic objectives as well as a detail account of actions needed to be taken by national governments and other related stakeholders at all levels. The BDPfA is also applauded for being the first of its kind in directly addressing violence against women and girls. In June 2000, the special session of the UN's General Assembly, called "Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the Twenty-first Century" also known as Beijing+5, was convened in New York to review the implementation and

to recommit to the Platform. The session also intended to showcase good practices and success stories, lessons learned, and the remaining key challenges. Further actions and initiatives were also formulated in order to ensure the continuity of the efforts in the advancement of gender equality in the new millennium (UN Women, 2000).

Is Civil Society a Recipe for Success?

Over the years, the BDPfA has been praised for its many dynamic aspects. One of the most striking is the engagement and collaboration it has been able to elicit from a variety of sectors. From its very beginning, BDPfA was able to magnetize attention and participation not only from governmental entities, but business sector and more importantly civil society. The Beijing discourse was seen as an open public space for the formation of alliances and networks of solidarity for women advocates and activists worldwide. It required the contribution from women's groups and networks, non-governmental organizations, as well as community-based organizations that focus on women's issues. A number of studies attest to this success observing that the relationship formed between governmental institutions and civil society has become a significant apparatus for meaningful conversations and negotiations that allow for possibilities of gender-related reforms (Chaney, 2016; Rai, 2003).

Even though the BDPfA appears to be a catalyst for many of the international and national commitments and reforms in gender equality as seen from significant improvements in female educational enrolment, female participation in labor force, and female representations in parliaments, it is notable that the progress intended in the Platform has been rather slow and uneven across the world. For instance, while girls today are able to attend and remain in school more than before as educational enrolment has increased in most regions of the world, gender parity remains rather uneven in STEM education. Moreover, occupational segregation remains a major issue especially in high-skilled, high-paying industries (UN Women, 2020). Some of the main questions remain unanswered. For instance, although the BDPfA has actively adopted and promoted gender mainstreaming as a key strategy in overcoming gender discrimination, the translation into real-world practices and reforms are still scarce.

A study by Chaney (2016) found that the BDPfA specifically in African context from 2003 to 2015 has not achieved its goal in bringing together the state governments

and civil society organizations. The participative model of gender mainstreaming failed to capture the common policy framing, conceptual clarity, and prioritization of gender issues. The "disconnect" between government and civil society resulted in ineffective capacity building as the two sides were pursuing different agendas. As Chaney pointed out, the majority of African governmental entities relied on political elites and gender experts for gender mainstreaming, but not necessarily on civil society engagement, especially on such issues as poverty, economic inequality, and conflict resolution.

The Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI)

Introduced by the World Economic Forum in 2006, the Global Gender Gap Index is designed to capture gender inequalities and track the evolution of gender parity and its progress over time. Employing altogether 14 key indicators, the index measures four key development areas, which include economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. The 14 indicators are composed of labor force participation rate, wage equality for similar work, estimated earned income, professional and technical workers, literacy rate, enrolment in primary education, enrolment in secondary education, enrolment in tertiary education, sex ratio at birth, healthy life expectancy, women in parliament, women in ministerial positions, and years with female/male head of state (last 50). The goal of the index is to provide a metric for the assessment of gender inequality over time by comparing the gender gap between men and women across regions and individual countries. The assessment is conducted through the executive opinion survey targeting differential outcomes experienced by men and women in various aspects including gender, sexual orientation, ethnic and/or racial background, religion, income level and disability.

World Economic Forum makes clear in its methodology that the index focuses on three aspects. First is that the index measures gender-based gaps in terms of access to resources and opportunities afforded to men and women within countries, rather than the actual levels of resources available. It claims that this method is used so that each country's level of development would not overshadow the real gender inequality issues since neither higher level of development nor more resources necessarily translate into narrower gender gaps. Second, the index aims at measuring outcomes instead of inputs because the main objective is to demonstrate where women stand in comparison with

men in terms of basic rights such as education or political participation. As such, the indicators that are understood as inputs such as culture and customs are not taken into consideration. Third, the index is designed to rank the countries based on their proximity to gender equality. The concentration is on the gap between men and women, which means women's empowerment is not factored into the evaluation.

The Global Gender Gap Index is considered the longest-standing measurement to date. The detailed descriptions of each score in each area are often used by state governments, businesses, and non-governmental organizations to benchmark the policy designs and measures needed for reducing the gender gaps. The index is also famous for providing a cross-country times-series analysis with a focus on results in the above four areas and the number of years to closing gender parity.

What's in the Numbers?

The GGGI's methodology itself acknowledges the limitations in data collection and availability in certain regions of the world. This may contribute to inaccurate interpretations of data which can hinder the true reflection of gender gaps and contextual issues in the country or region. In this sense, even when the data collection and availability are poorly executed, the numbers and rankings derived from it continue to be used and conclusions continue to be drawn from them as if they are the panacea to the inequality problem. Furthermore, the index (along with several others that attempt to quantify gender inequality) is criticized for placing too much emphasis on "countability" and "ranking" which perpetuate a misleading comprehension of gender inequality, resulting in misguided policy directions and misallocation of resources (Einarsdóttir, 2020).

While the index is widely referenced, the main critique is the attempt to measure the unmeasurable. The indicators used to calculate the index are designed in a way that creates a "self-fulfilling imperative" which is to generate a set of measurable indicators and then require that work be done to achieve the levels determined by the preset indicators (Liebowitz & Zwingel, 2014). The quantification does not always reflect the real magnitude of the problem or even begin the discussion. Often times, the indicators cannot be entirely objective, mostly designed to cater to the creators. Unconscious biases as well as judgments are rampant and quantifiable measurements are likely to produce realities, rather than representing them. (Schedler, 2012). The designed indicators help produce

facts, rather than reflect them. As such, the index and its indicators may make unfounded assumptions because they almost entirely disregard the political, economic, and social implications that are deeply inherited through centuries of practices. Simplifying and quantifying the context-sensitive gender issues into the comparison of scores and rankings therefore cannot be the solution to ending gender discrimination.

The index and indicators used to calculate it are also criticized for overlooking differences among women including class, race, and other factors that contribute to gender inequality (Parisi, 2009). The measurement approach does not take into account these social and economic dimensions. For instance, the numbers for female labor force participation tell us very little about the quality of work (Chalmers, Campbell & Charlesworth, 2005). Hence, increasing female numerical statistics as a means to decrease inequality ignores the realities in which women and girls must endure every single day. Another example is the gender gap in health outcomes across the world. The GGGI has demonstrated in the last decade that the world is on its path in closing this gap at almost 96% (Hausmann et al., 2012). However, as Liebowitz and Zwingel (2014) pointed out, the category for health outcomes is made up of only two indicators being female/male sex ratio at birth and female life expectancy, while gender discriminations in the quality of care and treatment or the illnesses that do not reduce life expectancy remain universally prevalent. Moreover, these two indicators have very little to no relevance to such issue as sexual violence against women and girls.

Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG5): Gender Equality

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable development adopted in 2015 by United Nations (UN) member states consists of 17 goals, also known as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and 169 targets that the world leaders have agreed to strive to achieve by the year 2030. The SDGs were developed to serve as a blueprint for addressing global challenges such as inequality, poverty, and climate change among others and create a sustainable future for all. The UN member states are expected to integrate the SDGs and associated targets into their national development plans, develop their own priorities based on the country context, align policies and institutions accordingly, and create a system to track the progress. One of the key tenants of the 2030 agenda is creating a prosperous future for all, which requires constructive and inclusive cooperation among all groups of

society including the government, civil society organization, businesses, academia, and others (UNESCAP & UNU-IAS, 2018).

Among the 17 sustainable development goals, SDG5 puts forward the vision of "Achieve Gender Equality and Empower all Women and Girls." The goal consists of nine targets, representing an independent goal for women's empowerment and gender inequality. Compared to the earlier Millenium Development Goals (MDGs), which heavily focused on gender equality in education, SDG5 has a much broader scope. As women's empowerment is a multidimensional process, their economic empowerment that was included in MDGs might be necessary, but not a sufficient condition for realizing gender equality (Bayissa et al., 2018). The MDGs had one target and three indicators devoted to gender equality, whereas the Agenda for Sustainable Development includes a sustainable development goal specifically dedicated to gender equality and 53 indicators across the 17 SDGs that specifically address gender (MacFeely et al., 2019). The targets of SDG5 address a wide range of gender concerns, including discriminatory and harmful practices, violence against women, unpaid care and domestic work, reproductive rights, access to resources, representation in leadership positions, among others. Feminist analysts of the SDGs attribute the broad scope of the targets to the inclusive and multistakeholder process by which the SDGs were developed (Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights, 2017). In the light of widespread presence of gender inequality in both developed and developing worlds, SDG5 provides a much needed holistic and comprehensive framework for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment.

Is SDG5 the Answer?

SDG5, as well as gender concerns related to other SDGs, have been critiqued on multiple fronts since the inception of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Feminist scholars have criticized SDGs for their lack of attention to structural power relations that disadvantage women and maintain discrimination. Esquivel (2016) argues that realizing genuine women's empowerment requires changing unequal power relations, but the term 'power' is only used once in the entire 2030 Agenda. The author asserts that the agenda was shaped by power relations itself, with powerful actors including influential countries, intergovernmental institutions, and transnational corporations involved in last-minute negotiations and wording modifications with the goal of maintaining

the status quo. In addition to disregarding unequal power relations, the author also observes that the agenda has weak human rights language around gender. The ideas and discourse will continue to be important during the implementation phase of the agenda, resulting in new conflicts over interpretation and a deeply political implementation process.

UN Women and UN DESA (2021)'s review of progress on the nine targets and 18 indicators and sub-indicators of SDG5 for 2021 shows that despite some progress, data gaps continue to be a major obstacle in tracking progress. Only 47% of data required to monitor progress on SDG5 were available. Consequently, only 13 out of 18 indicators were available for a global level assessment and only three indicators for a global assessment of trends. According to the report, three areas need to be prioritized in order to get SDG5 back on track: tackling long-term structural barriers such as discriminatory norms and laws; addressing global challenges such as the COIVD-19 pandemic and climate change; increasing national funding and global cooperation for the gender equality agenda.

Specific targets and indicators of SDG5 have also been critiqued by some scholars. According to Razavi (2016), despite failure to include reference to women's rights or human rights, SDG5 targets cover most of the focus areas espoused by women's rights groups. Still, SDG5 excludes two arenas of decision-making that are critical for women's rights. First is the intra-household sphere where inter-personal negotiations among family members are carried out over a variety of issues such as division of work, allocation of resources, and freedom from violence. Second involves women's participation in civil society and collective organizing, which is an important indicator of women's voice and influence in bringing about constructive policy change and is a crucial dimension of women's leadership.

Global Inequality Index (GII)

Introduced in 2010 by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Global Inequality Index (GII) was created to measure the gender disadvantages and disparities between women and men. The index is meant to reflect the loss in potential human development because of inequality. The score ranges from zero indicating perfect equality to one indicating perfect inequality. The index is measured across three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment, and the labor market. The indicators of reproductive health include maternal mortality ratio and adolescent birth rate; the indicators for

empowerment include female and male population with at least secondary education and female and male shares of parliamentary seats; and indicators for labor market include female and male labor force participation (UNDP, 2022).

The GII additionally seeks to measure the human development cost of gender inequality (MacFeely et al., 2019; Eden and Gupta, 2017) using Human Development Index (HDI), which is an overall measure of development also published by UNDP. Furthermore, the GII was in some ways redesigned to overcome the shortcomings of GDI (Gender-related Development Index) and GEM (Gender Empowerment Measure) previously created by UNDP to measure global gender inequality. But unlike GDI and GEM, GII does not take into account income levels, which had resulted in wider gender gaps mostly in developing countries, where a significant proportion of women work in the informal sector (Gutiérrez-Martínez, 2021). GII also does not let higher scores in one dimension offset a lower score in another. In addition, it includes reproductive health related variables which were not previously incorporated in the UNDP's composite indices (Permanyer, 2013).

An Index of Inequality for Human Development?

According to UNDP (2014), the GII has several limitations. First, it does not adequately portray the extent and depth of gender equality. For instance, the use of national parliamentary representation as an indicator excludes representations in the local government and other aspects of civic and community life. Second, the labor market component does not include information on incomes, occupation, and unpaid work, which is primarily and disproportionately performed by women. Third, the index does not include other crucial dimensions, such as time-use as women carry a disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic and home care responsibilities, which limits their free time and negatively impacts their mental and physical health. In addition, the index does not capture aspects such as asset ownership, gender-based violence, and participation in decision-making at the community level, mainly due to the unavailability of data.

While scholars have lauded the GII for overcoming shortcomings of the previous gender indices, they have critiqued its methodology and failure to incorporate some important gender concerns. The GII index combines female-specific indicators, such as in the area of reproductive health, with indicators that compare performance of females and males. Permanyer (2013) and Klasen (2017) argue that combining these two sets of

indicators complicates the interpretation of the index and penalizes the performance of low-income countries. For example, inequality in maternal mortality is defined as more than ten deaths per 100,000 live births, but in parliamentary representation, inequality is defined as deviations from 50%, which may wrongly imply that the majority of poor countries are not performing well in terms of gender when in fact high maternal mortality could be due to poor health services which impact both women and men (Klasen, 2017). Another criticism of the GII is that its labor market dimension misses some critical elements of gender inequality, namely gender pay gap, occupational segregation by gender, and gender stereotypes which impact women's participation in the labor market (Bartůsková & Kubelková, 2014). As a result, the GII is perceived as being narrowly formulated which should not be used to draw conclusions or interpretations. Finally, the GII also suffers from its quantitative nature as many scholars argue that quantifying socially and contextually sensitive issues such as gender inequality can neither be reliable, objective, nor truly reflective of the real problems.

Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)

The Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) was developed by the OECD Development Centre in 2009 with the special aim at measuring the discrimination against women in social institutions across the world. This index is specifically created to capture the institutional discrimination faced by women and girls in the areas of formal and informal laws, attitudes and practices that limit women's and girls' access to rights, and justice and empowerment opportunities. The SIGI uses a multi-faceted approach that takes into account both qualitative and quantitative data. The main purpose of the index is to demonstrate how social institutions discriminate against women and girls throughout their lives, contributing to a never-ending cycle of poverty and restrictions of rights leading to lack of opportunities and choices in life. These social institutions sadly perpetuate gender inequalities in vital growth areas such as education, healthcare, and employment.

The SIGI is a composite index containing 12 individual variables aggregated into five subindices: discrimination in the family code, physical integrity, civil liberties, son preference, and ownership rights. With the latest edition in 2019, the SIGI's variables are quantifiably designed to capture discriminatory practices found in social institutions such as child marriage, violence against women, lack or unequal property rights, and unequal

inheritance rights. There are currently 180 countries participating and having scored on the index. Previous studies found that SIGI produces somewhat different country rankings than more commonly used indices such as World Economic Forum's GGGI or UNDP's GII (Branisa, Klasen & Ziegler, 2013).

As such, the index is praised for addressing institutional discriminations that might be neglected in other cross-country indices on gender inequality. The scores can thus be used to detect and acknowledge institutional biases against women and girls which can be difficult to identify and combat. Gender-related measures and policies can then be formulated more effectively.

Can Institutional Discriminations Be Eliminated with the Use of Index?

The OECD plainly puts forth its index's limitations stating that integrating a large amount of data into a format that can be easily comprehensible for general public is not an easy task. Most often the methodology lends itself in manipulating the data into the desired outcomes. In addition, a composite index such as SIGI presents a set of challenges in data input and the method of data aggregation, as observed by a study by Branisa, Klasen, Ziegler, Drechsler & Jütting (2014). Social institutions are a creature of culture and norms that have been cultivated over the years and thus cannot be summed up and easily translated into a quantifiable set of indicators. For example, women's political representation and empowerment cannot and should not be deduced into just the ratio of women in parliament or executive functions (Liebowitz & Zwingel, 2014). The aggregating data may also not be able to capture all the small details surrounding gender issues. As such, in certain regions of the world, the scores and henceforth rankings may be misleading since certain traits may be excluded or omitted.

In addition to the index having been perceived as narrow and insensitive to local contexts, as many other indices appear to be, one crucial critique for the SIGI is the omission of the OECD countries in the index and ranking calculation. The obvious absence is viewed as a result of what is called "neocolonialist stance" (Liebowitz & Zwingel, 2014; Narayan, 1997) which implies that discriminatory practices in social institutions in these industrially advanced countries no longer exist (OECD, 2012). For the SIGI, especially pertaining to social institutions, women are seemingly perceived as passive constituents, instead of active

participants whose collective actions are fundamental in achieving equality and creating social and political changes (Liebowitz & Zwingel, 2014).

Gender Parity Score (GPS)

Another index that captures a broader outlook of gender inequality is the Gender Parity Score (GPS) developed by McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) as it encompasses the legal, financial, and digital aspects of equality in society and work. GPS measures the distance each country has journeyed toward achieving perfect gender parity, set at the score of 1.00. The score creates a connection between gender equality in society, including attitudes and beliefs about the role of women, and gender equality in work. The scores are calculated based on 15 outcome-based indicators, grouped into four categories: equality in work, essential services and enablers of economic opportunity, legal protection ad political voice, and physical security and autonomy. In addition to the gender parity score at the country level, GPS report also provides gender equality lens at the regional and local levels.

The 15 indicators used in the calculation of GPS include a variety of issues concerning women's rights which have been identified and analyzed by the review of global charters and statements of principle including for instance, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. The indicators include the following: the ratio of labor force participation rates by gender; the ratio of men and women with professional and technical jobs; the perceived wage gap for similar work between men and women; the ratio of women and men in leadership positions; the distribution of unpaid care work among men and women; the percentage of women whose need for family planning is not met; maternal mortality rates; education levels by gender; the extent to which women have access to financial services relative to men; the extent to which women have access to cell phones and internet services relative to men; the presence of legal protections for women; the number of women in ministerial and parliamentary roles; sex ratio at birth; the percentage of girls and young women aged fifteen to nineteen who are married; and the percentage of women who have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner at some time in their lives.

GPS is mainly praised for its utilization of a wide spectrum of indicators, combining the operationalization of social and political dimensions that have interconnected impacts on gender equality. Its methodology emphasizes that the dimensions that originate and perpetuate gender inequality cannot be isolated.

Combining All the Indicators?

While GPS is applauded for its innovative methodology and inclusion of legal and digital inequalities between men and women, some argue that the scoring system lacks clarity in its conceptual definition (Sander & Keller, 2021). While the 15 indicators appear to be based on CEDAW and Sustain Development Goals, there is no clear explanation or justification. Moreover, all the four categories used to produce the scores are equally weighted, while some indicators are simplified into a mere number of hours to represent the ratio of labor participation or unpaid care work. Also, for some indicators, composite indices from international organizations are used without clear connections among the variables such as education or legal protection. The conclusions or interpretations drawn from GPS can therefore be seen as not quite comprehensive or meaningful.

Conclusion

While the world has seen improvements in gender equality and women's empowerment over the years, there remain numerous challenges that need to be addressed and prioritized. Gender inequalities in many areas are still prevalent, although the majority of countries have adopted several international frameworks and assessments in their fight. In countries where major provisions of CEDAW and BDPfA have been adopted and incorporated into their constitution and thus turning into laws, cultural and social norms have also begun to positively respond to the policy efforts and changes.

As a number of regional and international indices are invented and applied, the world has been given a wake-up call in realizing the magnitude of gender inequality problem. Although those indices may overlook some key pieces of information or the true manifestation of gender biases and discriminatory practices, they are not at all useless. Achieving gender equality remains a momentous task for all to continue the endeavor to close gender gaps and eliminate gender-based discriminations and practices in all shapes and forms. The indices, while may be lacking in contextualization and localization, remain

significant tools in shedding light on many forgotten or ignored gender issues. As mistreatments pronounced and misrepresentations identified, the indices and all their indicators should be improved, refined, and expanded. They should provide an evaluative lens into the complexity and variability of gender norms that are context specific. More importantly, figures and rankings should never replace careful considerations and investigations of all the factors that may contribute to gender inequality. Equally important is that the commitment from state governments, corporations, civil society organizations, as well as general public must be aligned and promoted. Only then that the frameworks, indices, and indicators can lead to real changes.

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