

Global Gender Gap Report 2021: Hegemony, Level-Blind Assessments and Poor Rankings of the Global South

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This post analyses some basic principles of ranking of countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2021, and examines the presumptions that determine the outcomes. Udaya Shankar Mishra and William Joe highlight the faultlines in these presumptions, and argue that given the importance of these rankings which invariably complicates the hard-earned developments of developing countries, developmental organisations and think tanks from the global South (such as BRICS) should broaden their roles and scope of engagement on global rankings and principles.

Global Rankings and India

Global rankings receive wide attention toward various developmental concerns. Better ranking is cherished as a marker of governance standards and capabilities. Most of these global rankings place developed countries much ahead of developing countries, and it is seldom contested by the global South. The most recent *Global Gender Gap Report 2021* rankings by the World Economic Forum is a case in point that warrants greater attention.

India ranks 140 out of 156 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index (GGI) 2021; it was ranked 98th in GGI 2006. Despite rapid economic growth in the last two decades, India continues to fare miserably in GGI rankings, marred with ranking inconsistencies across the index sub-components viz. economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. For instance, on the one hand India ranks 155 out of 156 countries in the domain of Health and Survival; on the other, it ranks 51st in Political Empowerment. Can a country faring better in Political Empowerment be last but worst in Health and Survival among women?

In fact, it is startling to note that the worst performer (rank 156) in 'Hand and Survival' is China. Can two large economies with the highest economic growth register such poor performance on Health and Survival? Of course, it is plausible and one can argue that better levels of development may not necessarily reflect gender gaps. The GGI methodology specifically claims that the rankings focus on gender gaps irrespective of the attainment levels. If levels are irrelevant then assessments should be based on gap but — as we elaborate below — GGI ends up capturing levels in its rankings.

Ranking inconsistencies

Two specific examples to highlight ranking inconsistencies that arise on account of levels, and not gaps, are as follows. First, in Afghanistan, the literacy rate of males and females is 55.5% and 29.8% respectively, whereas in Chad it is 14.0% and 31.3% respectively. The gender gap in Afghanistan is 25.7% and 17.3% in Chad. If the GGI valued only gaps then Afghanistan should have a poorer ranking than Chad; however, the GGI ranks Afghanistan (151st) ahead of Chad (154th).

Second, the estimated earned income (in International Dollars) of men and women in Bangladesh is \$6,200 and \$2,500, in China \$12,100 and \$19,800, and in France \$38,700 and \$54,500 respectively. The gender gap is \$3,700, \$7,700 and \$15,800 respectively. If levels are irrelevant, countries with low gender gap should have better rank. However, the Global Gender Gap report ranks France (39th) much ahead of China (76th) and Bangladesh (131st). Clearly, the rankings are influenced by levels, and therefore makes the GGI's claim of level-free assessment questionable.

Assessing Gender Gap

Closing the gender gap is one of the ideals to be emphasised in the developmental process, and has its own implications in terms of human rights and welfare. The *Global Gender Gap Report 2021* admittedly focuses on the gaps and not the levels, meaning the numeric gaps between males and females are independent of the levels achieved. The GGI goes further to say that it disassociates the gender gap from the level of development to reward countries with smaller gender gaps irrespective of their levels of development. Such an admission raises two concerns — first, that the gender gap presumably is not responsive to the changing levels of the phenomenon; and second, the valuation of similar gender gap is not to be differentiated across the levels of the phenomenon. The former concern suggests that gender gap is level-blind and the latter indicates that gender gap is transition neutral. Contesting such level-blind assessments should be a priority of the global South.

Why levels matter?

The GGI emphasises that if gender gaps are smaller despite limitation in resources and opportunities, this gap is no different from the one where similar gender gap persists with better resources and opportunities. Typically, countries with better levels of development are more resourceful than those at lower levels. Such resourceful countries should lead

the global efforts by demonstrating rapid reductions in gender gaps. But if such countries progress without bridging absolute gaps, then they are contributing little or nothing toward the cause of gender equity in relation to those showing equitable progress.

The rankings that are insensitive to absolute gap are indirectly rewarding the countries for their resources, and not necessarily valuing the efforts toward equitable progress. The above-mentioned comparison of Bangladesh, China and France makes it obvious: clearly, a progress in level should be rewarded if it is accompanied with efforts to bridge the gender gap; on the other hand, any such progress that widens the gender gap should be penalised in rankings.

Principles for ranking

Gaps can be of two types — absolute or relative, and a choice has to be made between the two. The question is pertinent as the entire ranking structure is shaped by this choice. For example, in Bangladesh, men earn 2.5 times higher income than women but the absolute gender gap is \$3,700, whereas in France, the income of men is 1.4 times that of women but the absolute gap is \$15,800. Both the types of gaps are important and, therefore, the question is, who should be ranked higher than the other? Such intricacies call for level-sensitive rankings that can overcome concerns associated with both absolute and relative gender gaps.

To elaborate, if two countries with varying levels of achievement have same absolute gender gap then a country with a lower level should be ranked ahead of the country with a higher level. At the same time, if two countries have same relative gender gap, then again a country with lower levels should be ranked ahead of the country with a higher level. These are well-defined axiomatic principles known as ‘difference-based level-sensitivity’ and ‘ratio-based level-sensitivity’ respectively. Any ranking procedure or global developmental indices should satisfy these axioms. There are some reasonable leads on this matter that deserves consideration for development of such indices.

Knowledge hegemony

Developmental norms have been invariably shaped by Western societies, and it is presumed that the global South readily subscribes to these norms. But these norms are also inextricably linked to the social fabric as well as resource constraints that cannot be transformed overnight. Gender gap assessments should value progress that is not only sensitive to the hiatus between genders but also to the levels of the phenomenon.

Ignoring levels defeats the purpose of valuing gender gaps and the ideal of having gender equity. For example, an intersectional perspective highlights how a black woman (or man) is much likely to be worse placed than white woman. Similarly, women (or men) belonging to Scheduled Castes or Tribes are at greater disadvantage than those from upper castes in India. The gender gap rankings should consider characteristic heterogeneities from various perspectives that are important but are currently neglected. More importantly, it is high time that the global South engages as a knowledge partner and makes its presence felt. Developmental organisations and think tanks from the global South (such as BRICS) should broaden their roles and scope of engagement on global rankings and principles.

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