

Gender discrimination and inequalities across regions

Attitudes, beliefs and practices that serve to exclude women are often deeply entrenched, and in many instances closely associated with cultural, social and religious norms. Surveys, opinion polls and case studies provide a good indication of the prevalence of gender discrimination in many countries.

A Gallup Poll conducted in five Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador and Mexico) found that half of the respondents believed society favours men over women. In Brazil, only 20 per cent of respondents, both men and women, believe that society treats both sexes equally, while more than half of respondents in that country, and in neighbouring Argentina, consider that women and men do not enjoy equal job opportunities. Although these results are drawn from a small sample, they may well be indicative of a broader recognition of gender discrimination in society.

Examining social attitudes on specific issues, such as access to education and income-generating opportunities for women, reveals even more clearly the extent of gender discrimination and how it compares across countries. The World Values Survey reveals that an alarmingly large number of men – who, as this report will show, often hold power in the household allocation of resources for vital services such as education and health care – believe that university education is more important for a boy than for a girl (*see Figure 1.2, page 6*).

Around two thirds of male respondents in Bangladesh indicate that university education for boys should be

prioritized over that of girls – an opinion echoed by around one third or more of male respondents from the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mexico and Uganda, among others. In some countries, men's opinions on this particular issue were less discriminatory, with only 1 out of every 10 male respondents in China and less than 1 out of every 13 male respondents in the United States holding the same view.

These views on education are largely mirrored in attitudes to women's work and participation in politics. More than 80 per cent of men in seven countries surveyed in the Middle East and North Africa believe that when jobs are scarce, men have more right to work than women, and that they make better political leaders than women. In other regions, the proportion of men holding these views is lower, but still significant.

The survey revealed that women's views can also be equally discriminatory towards their own sex, if not quite as extreme. A surprisingly large number of women respondents from the survey agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that men make better political leaders than women – including over half of women respondents from Bangladesh, China, Islamic Republic of Iran and Uganda, over one third from Albania and Mexico, and one out of every five from the United States. This underlines the fact that discriminatory attitudes towards women and girls are not simply held by men, but also reflect norms and perceptions that may be shared by the entire society. Research has shown that when women set aside these norms and the pressure to conform is relaxed, their choices and values are very different.

While such opinion polls and surveys offer a window into the views of societies, they cannot show the true extent of gender discrimination. Quantifiable indicators are needed in order to gain a clearer picture of the inequalities and inequities produced by gender discrimination against women and girls. But as many national and international surveys and censuses are often not disaggregated by sex, such indicators are relatively scarce. Nonetheless, the data available point to a clear conclusion: gender inequalities remain stubbornly entrenched in all regions of the world.

An attempt to capture gender discrimination in a single indicator is the United Nations Development Programme Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), which assesses gender equality in key areas of economic and political participation in decision-making. The measure includes estimated earned income (a crucial determinant of a family member's influence on household decisions), the percentage of women working in senior positions and the percentage of women in parliament. Gender empowerment as measured by GEM is lowest in countries in the Middle East and North Africa and South Asia, and highest in industrialized countries, although there is wide variation across regions.

While poorer countries tend to have lower levels of gender empowerment, there is no clear evidence that gender inequalities automatically diminish at higher levels of income. Accordingly, low income need not be a barrier to higher levels of gender empowerment.

See References, page 88.