

From the United Nations: PROGRESS OF WOMEN?

Nearly 70 percent of the 1.2 billion people living in poverty are women.

Dr. Sylvain Ehrenfeld, IHEU and the National Ethical Service, and representative to the UN Dr. Reba Goodman, Ethical Culture Society of Bergen County

For women as a whole, inequalities still persist e.g., in access to education, health care, and political and economic opportunities. Nearly 70 percent of the 1.2 billion people living in poverty are women. Nearly 70 percent of the world's illiterates are women. Women contribute about two-thirds of the hours worked, but earn only one-tenth of the world's income—and yet own only one percent of the world's property. Women are paid an average of 30 percent less than men for comparable work.

The most devastating fact is that worldwide one in five women will be a victim of rape or attempted rape.

Recently, a major report from the UN Population Fund reported in detail the changes in the condition of women over the last 20 years. Some of the news is encouraging. Worldwide women have made great strides in literacy. Women now have fewer children due to the greater availability of contraception. Furthermore, they are less likely to die in childbirth and have an increasing life expectancy. In fact, in general both for women and men, the number of people living in extreme poverty has fallen dramatically from a stark 47 percent in 1990 to 22 percent in 2010.

The bad news is that this progress is not equally distributed. A closer look reveals large differences between so-called rich and poor countries with poor women in some richer countries not experiencing improvement in many aspects of their lives. Many of the one billion people living in the 50 plus poorest countries will stagnate, even as the rest of the world gets richer. The UN report highlights the fact that the gains of the last 20 years cannot be sustained unless governments tackle the inequalities that have hurt the poorest and most marginalized people. The growing inequalities worldwide are staggering. It is estimated that less than 1 percent of adults worldwide control 40 percent of the wealth while more than two-thirds control only 3 percent of the wealth.

According to a Chinese proverb, “women hold up half the sky.” Unfortunately, this fact is not reflected in the experience of many women.

While the wealth of a country is important there is significant variation in the condition of women, even among rich countries. The World's Economic Forum publishes an annual Global Gender Gap report. It ranks countries by a gender gap index. This index incorporates four key areas: Health, Access to education, Economic participation and Political participation. The top 5 in the 2013 ranking are Iceland (1), Finland (2), Norway (3), Sweden (4), and the Philippines (5). The Philippines among the poorest country in Asia, is a surprise. It ranks high because of education, health, and political empowerment.

Other facts about the gender gap also demonstrate that a country can be poor and still get a high ranking in some important areas, while a country can be rich and get a low ranking. For example

Cuba is ranked 15th. Cuba has a dismal economy but Cuban women rank high in education and health as well as economic and political equality, filling professional and technical positions in ministries and government-run enterprises. In contrast, in the Arab world the gender gap is extremely wide. In spite of their wealth, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia rank very low. The United Arab Emirates ranks 109th and Saudi Arabia is way down at 127th.

The conclusion we draw is that the culture of a country and willingness to use resources for public policy really matter for their women.

Klaus Schwab, executive director of the World Economic Forum states, “A world where women make up less than 20 percent of the global decision makers is a world that is missing a huge opportunity for growth and ignores untapped reservoirs of potential.” Thus, despite progress in recent years, much improvement is still needed.