



Rwanda is one of the world's bright spots for gender equality. Photograph by Majority World UIG via Getty Images

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This Is the Big Problem Stalling Global Gender Equality

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Oct 26, 2016

It appears that the world's march toward gender equality hit a roadblock this year.

A new study of 144 countries published Tuesday by the World Economic Forum found that measures of the overall gender gap—women's health, education, economic participation and opportunity, and political advancement compared to men's—improved in 68 nations, but worsened in 74, making 2016 "an ambiguous year for global gender parity, with uneven progress at best," according to the report. (The remaining two countries are new to this year's report.)

One big reason for that stagnation is the anemic growth in women's labor force participation rate, which has ebbed worldwide. "Consistently, in the last three years, the rate of change is slowing down, and that's starting to show up in economic gender parity numbers," says Saadia Zahidi, head of employment and gender initiatives at the WEF.

Women aren't entering the workforce as quickly as they once did, due in part to automation that's eliminating jobs that tend to belong to women, like sales and administrative positions, says Zahidi. At the same time, women are not necessarily educated or prepared to shift into the areas where automation is creating opportunities, like in the STEM fields—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

A second factor that keeps women out of the workforce, Zahidi says, is the inadequate infrastructure to support the care of young children and the elderly. "In most developed economies—with the exception of the Nordics—care infrastructure is not where it needs to be for today's workforce," she says. "It's still seen as just supporting women and not all parents."

Women's labor force participation rate factors into the WEF's measure of "economic participation and opportunity"—one of the four dimensions it uses to compile its Global Gender Gap Index. The metric also considers a ratio of estimated female-to-male earned income, wage equality for similar work, and the ratio of women to men in specific roles like legislators and technical and professional workers. Across all 144 nations, the average gap between the economic participation and opportunities of women compared to those of men is 41%.

Another metric that WEF takes into account—political participation, which reflects the number of parliamentary and ministerial seats belonging to women and the tenures of female heads of state—shows an even greater divide between genders: 77%.

The two remaining metrics are brighter spots: the health and education of women have pulled to near parity with men's across the nations included in the report. The education gap between women and men is just 5% overall, and the health divide is 4%. That's the result of a "very deliberate approach" to make access to education and health "as equal as possible," Zahidi says.

All told, and weighted by population, nations have closed 68% of the global gender gap across the WEF's four dimensions, leaving a gulf of 32%. Those figures are a slight improvement over 2015's top-line numbers and they mark another year of steady but incredibly slow progress in striving toward universal parity.

In addition to giving a global view on the gender gap, the WEF examines individual countries and ranks them accordingly. Iceland secured the No. 1 spot for the eighth straight year by closing all but 12.6% of its overall gender gap. The nation benefits from full parity in terms of educational attainment. It's also the top performer in political empowerment, with a gap of 28.1%,

and lands ninth in terms of economic participation and opportunity with a gap of about 19.4%. Finland, Norway, and Sweden follow Iceland on the list. Rwanda is at No. 5 due to having the highest share of female parliamentarians in the world—64%—and the progress it's made on its economic metrics.

The United States, meanwhile, lands at No. 45—a 17-spot drop since last year that's partly attributable to an adjustment in the methodology used to estimate earned income. But the U.S. is also hampered by declining labor force participation among women and stagnation in the share of women among legislators, senior, officials, and managers. Its overall gender gap of 27.8% puts it behind Bulgaria, Jamaica, Laos, and Trinidad and Tobago.

<http://fortune.com/2016/10/25/wef-gender-parity-report/>