U.S. lags in gender equality

Gap in 5 key areas undermines potential, study finds

By Andrea Coombes

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SAN FRANCISCO (MarketWatch) -- Many U.S. women assume they're better off than their peers in other parts of the world. But when it comes to gender equality, U.S.women are not even in the top tier.

In a world ranking on gender equality, the U.S. came in 17th -- behind Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Ireland, among others, according to a report from the World Economic Forum, a Geneva-based not-for-profit think tank.

Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark and Finland topped the list of 58 countries because they score high across all five categories measured: Women's educational attainment, health and well-being, economic participation, economic opportunity and political empowerment.

Also, women in those countries enjoy career advancement, and they represent a high portion of politicians as compared to other countries, she said. "This is what sets the Nordic countries apart," she said.

The World Economic Forum usually compares countries' ability to compete, but the degree to which a country treats its men and women equally may play a part in its long-term competitiveness, Zahidi said.

"If you are not using fully one-half of the human resources in your country, you're undermining your competitive potential," Zahidi said. "With some exceptions, we see a very high correlation between the gender gap rankings and the competitiveness rankings."

"The Nordic countries which occupy the top five positions also occupy very high positions in the competitiveness rankings," she said.

U.S. misses on two measures

Countries closer to the middle of the list are likely to excel on two or three points, but fail on the others.
In the U.S., a higher-than-average percentage of women are in the work force, hold political positions and obtain college degrees.

But where U.S. women fare less well is in health care and economic opportunity, Zahidi said.

U.S. maternal and infant death rates are high compared to the number of physicians per capita, and while U.S. women are well-represented in the work force, they have less opportunity for advancement than in other countries, she said.

That's due in large part to the study's inclusion of maternity-leave benefits in its economic opportunity measure.

Countries which offer longer maternity leave, and pay salaries during that time, scored higher.

U.S. federal law provides just 12 weeks of unpaid maternity leave, compared to Sweden's government-mandated 52 weeks. Another factor impinging the U.S. score was the lack of government-provided child care.

"Putting these factors together, women, if they want to have children, are cut out from ... having the advancement that they should be able to have given the skills they have," Zahidi said.

As for health care, 17 of 100,000 U.S. women die in childbirth each year, as do seven out of every 1,000 infants (within the first year of life). "That shouldn't be happening in a country with 2.7 physicians per 1,000 people," Zahidi said.

Sweden, with three physicians per 1,000 people, has a maternal mortality ratio of two out of 100,000, and an infant mortality of three per 1,000, she said.

Swiss surprise

Switzerland, the land that gave women the vote in 1971, scored high on political empowerment -- evidence that women have successfully become government ministers -- but low on economic opportunity and education.

"It's one of the few developed countries where female [school] enrollment rates are lower than those of males. That's very rare for a developed country," Zahidi said.

Also, fewer Swiss women are entering the work force, she said, and "once they do they have few opportunities for advancement."

The country does "extremely poorly on the weeks of maternity leave allowed," she said. In July, Switzerland's mandated maternity leave will rise to 14 weeks at 80%, up from eight weeks.
Those measures pushed the country to No. 34 on the list.

Scoring far higher were Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, Nos. 11, 12 and 15.

"A lot of the Eastern European and Baltic countries having been under the Communist regime, a lot of the Soviet ideals preached that women ought to be able to do everything, that women are fully part of the work force," Zahidi said. "That really helped boost their rates."

Latvia, for instance, scores high on economic participation and opportunity, and political empowerment. The country has had a female president or prime minister for five of the last 50 years, and 37% of the country's legislators are women.

Like the U.S., one of Latvia's biggest gender gaps is in the health-care realm.

They're "not providing the type of reproductive health care they could provide," Zahidi said.

Widest gender gaps

Meanwhile, Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, Jordan and Korea are clustered at the bottom of the list.

Still, to be fair, any country on this list may be treating women better than those not represented because not enough data exists.

"For many countries, this is not important enough that they collect data," she said. "We couldn't cover much of Africa, Asia or the Arab world because there simply isn't enough data."

The World Economic Forum would like to see the countries that scored lowest start educating girls.

"The biggest problem with these countries at the bottom of the rankings is they're doing very badly on all five categories," Zahidi said.

Improving gender inequality "is a monumental task," she said. "The one thing we have to recommend as a very basic first step is the education of girl children" because doing so "makes a huge difference" on other measures of gender equality.

Some low-ranked countries are showing signs of change. "For example, Jordan [does] very poorly overall but they're doing quite well in economic opportunity," she said.

"Another ray of hope is India. They do quite well in terms of political empowerment."

The complete list
The following is the full ranking of 58 countries by the World Economic Forum. For the full report, complete with chart detailing each country's score on each measure, visit the Web site. World Economic Forum's Gender Study page.

1. Sweden
2. Norway
3. Iceland
4. Denmark
5. Finland
6. New Zealand
7. Canada
8. United Kingdom
9. Germany
10. Australia
11. Latvia
12. Lithuania
13. France
14. Netherlands
15. Estonia
16. Ireland
17. United States
18. Costa Rica
19. Poland
20. Belgium
21. Slovak Republic
22. Slovenia
23. Portugal
24. Hungary
25. Czech Republic
26. Luxembourg
27. Spain
28. Austria
29. Bulgaria
30. Colombia
31. Russian Federation
32. Uruguay
33. China
34. Switzerland
35. Argentina
36. South Africa
37. Israel
38. Japan
39. Bangladesh
40. Malaysia
41. Romania
42. Zimbabwe
43. Malta
44. Thailand
45. Italy
46. Indonesia
47. Peru
48. Chile
49. Venezuela
50. Greece
51. Brazil
52. Mexico
53. India
54. Korea
55. Jordan
56. Pakistan
57. Turkey
58. Egypt.

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