

Editorial

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Women's Rights, Women's Power

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One observation, both fascinating and disappointing for the researcher, is that many of the most important aspects of cultural diversity at the present time are predictable, forming a near-unidimensional scale of “development” with rising material wealth, education and intelligence as likely causal factors and more specific features such as political liberties, atheism, low corruption and “individualist” attitudes as more specific expressions.

Gender equality is one of those more specific cultural traits that are at least somewhat predictable from broader societal conditions such as prosperity and the effectiveness of the educational system. There is a strong positive relationship of gender equality with a plethora of other “development indicators”. For example, according to the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) of 2025 (WEF, 2025), the most gender-equal countries are Iceland, Finland and Norway, and those with the greatest gender gaps are Chad, Sudan, and Pakistan. Broadly, what we observe is that as nations become richer, more educated and more individualistic, the kinds of gender gap that the GGGI measures become smaller.

And what is it that the GGGI and other composite indices of gender (in)equality, such as the United Nations’ Gender Inequality Index (GII), measure? First, we notice that gender differences in important outcomes such as life expectancy, school dropout, enrolment in tertiary education and crime rates are neglected. The creators of these indices are interested only in indicators on which women perform worse than men, not in those where they perform better than men. To a very large extent, these composite indices are measures of wealth, power, and status. The components of the GGGI that show the most meaningful variation in outcomes are those related to economic participation and opportunity and to political empowerment, for example female labour force participation, percent of women in senior management positions, and percent women in parliament. This preoccupation with power and status is understandable when we realize that the creators of these indices are individuals ranking highly on wealth, power and status, a position they have presumably attained because these are the things they consider important in life. What is important to them must be important for everyone, including all women.

These gender equality indicators measure primarily outcomes, not opportunity. Most countries in the world—with a few exceptions such as Afghanistan—have gender equality guaranteed in their legal systems, and yet, outcomes are unequal for men and women. The creators of the GGGI, for example, complain: “Across economies included in the index, there is a near-universal implementation gap. Even economies with advanced legal frameworks show wide differences in practical support. Adopting high legal standards alone is insufficient to close gender gaps; robust implementation mechanisms are key to translating policy into real gender parity outcomes.” (WEF, 2025, p. 8) Translation: The task of politics and the legal system is not only to prescribe equal *opportunity* for men and women, but to enforce equal *outcomes*. When equal opportunity fails to translate into equal outcomes, equal outcomes need to be imposed top-down.

One article in this issue of *Mankind Quarterly*, by Zulfia Kulanbaeva and her coworkers in the Kyrgyz Republic, examines gender equality in Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian republics. On the various gender equality indices, the Central Asian republics get middling scores: less gender-equal than Europe and its offshore clones, but more gender-equal than Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. Our Kyrgyz authors emphasize that the present state of affairs is the result of historical developments. Patriarchy with its

inherent gender inequality is attributed in part to two historical legal traditions: *adat* (customary law), and *sharia* (Islamic law). The Soviet system suppressed these earlier traditions, imposing gender equality in education and employment top-down. The authors emphasize the utilitarian function of this. In essence, both men and women had to work hard to achieve the goals of the 5-year plans. This early forced imposition of gender equality is a characteristic that sets the countries of the former Soviet Union apart from Western democracies, where the same happened more slowly and without state coercion.

Today, legally guaranteed gender equality persists in the post-Soviet republics, but unequal outcomes still exist despite legal equality. Our authors go into much detail explaining why this is so, examining politics, economic transitions and “re-traditionalization” after independence, but the simple fact is that not only in Central Asia but everywhere in the world, gender inequalities in wealth, power and related outcomes persist despite legally guaranteed equal opportunity. If these gender inequalities occur world-wide and have been in existence since time immemorial, then we need more than local explanations such as *adat* and *sharia*, or economic causes such as the transition from traditional nomadism to digital nomadism in Central Asia. We need explanations for the world-wide patterns past and present. Historical accidents, economic constraints and cultural fashions are not good enough.

Anthropologists describe behavioural patterns and social outcomes that occur in similar form world-wide as “human universals” (Brown, 2004). Marriage, for example, is a human universal. Even a practice as peculiar as bride kidnapping is widespread in human societies. Our Kyrgyz authors mention the local tradition of bride kidnapping (*ala-kachuu*), a presently illegal practice with very low approval ratings among feminists. In another article in this issue of *Mankind Quarterly*, a group of Indian researchers examines bride kidnapping as well, as one of several marriage practices in one of the tribal groups of India. And in ancient Germany, *Raubehe* (bride capture) was one form of marriage in addition to *Muntehe* (bride price) and *Friedelehe* (elopement). Human universals, in general, can only be explained with universal features of human psychology (aka “human nature”), but not with the ad-hoc explanations preferred by sociologists.

Patriarchy, as a description of gender differences in power, is a human universal (Cummins, 2021). To explain it, we must take recourse to the two fundamental dimensions of human social psychology: dominance, and affiliation. These are expressed in two concentric social domains: the family, and the wider society outside the family. Kin-selected bonding (aka “love”), with attachment, caring and unconditional altruism (Hamilton, 1964), often more developed in females than males, prevails (or ought to prevail) within the family. Here, decision making tends to be domain-specific, with the mother often having the final word in internal affairs and the father representing the family in its relations with the wider society. “Dominance” in the family is most prominent in the parent-child relationship, not the husband-wife relationship, and unlike dominance in the wider society is not linked to competition, a trait that is stronger in males than in females (Eriksson & Strimling, 2023).

Outside the family, dominance hierarchies are the primal social structure, in humans as in other primates. This can be seen in contexts ranging from group-wide decision making in hunter-gatherer bands to modern corporate hierarchies and society-wide stratification by social class. Dominance hierarchies involve competition, alliance formation, prestige, and sometimes physical fights in the struggle for the many advantages that come with high dominance status. In every hierarchy, it is better to be the hammer than the nail. In humans more than in other animals, dominance is allied with reciprocity (Trivers, 1971), which is the foundation of cooperation outside the family, whereas cooperation within the family is unconditional. In this context, a reputation for honesty and dependability is a mark of high status, a kind of “moral dominance hierarchy”. It is here, in the wider society outside the family, where male dominance is universal: in politics, commerce, and in corporate and government bureaucracies. Thus patriarchy (literally, “rule of the father”) is misleading as the description of a male-dominated system.

Why is it that males tend to occupy the higher rungs of dominance hierarchies in all human societies? A straightforward application of Darwin's theory predicts that striving for high dominance status evolves whenever higher dominance status leads to greater reproductive success, as it usually does in social primates (Cowlshaw & Dunbar, 1991). If, averaged over thousands of generations of human evolution, the correlation between high rank in the dominance hierarchy and reproductive output was stronger for males than for females, then males must have evolved greater striving for power, control, and prestige

than females. This is the most parsimonious explanation for patriarchy and male dominance because it explains a vast array of phenomena, observed world-wide and throughout historical epochs, with a simple mechanism—Darwinian evolution by mutation and selection—that is already well-accepted and beyond reasonable doubt. For women, in contrast to men, child survival was more important for reproductive success than competition over additional mates, selecting them for loving care and for the maintenance of the social bonds and networks needed to protect their children.

Thus we can conclude that sex differences in competitiveness and status striving (stronger in males, applied outside the family) and in affiliation, nurturing and caring (stronger in females, applied within the family) are universal in human societies. These are the psychological sex differences that determine traditional gender roles world-wide. Or, in simpler terms: A woman who cannot love is like a man who cannot fight.

In modern and modernizing nations today, economic conditions that favour individualism by making the family less essential for economic survival than it used to be are setting the stage for the pursuit of gender equality. High-status individuals of either sex value status competition in today's manifold dominance hierarchies because if they wouldn't, they wouldn't be high-status. Their main thrust is to educate women into male-typical preferences, behaviours and social roles which they consider more valuable and commendable than traditional female activities such as raising children. Women have to compete like the men (Villeval, 2012) to achieve prestigious and highly paid positions at the same rate as men. That men are not equally encouraged to raise children and hold the family together instead of climbing up the career ladder shows that gender equality is not merely about equality, but about imposing male-typical interests, preferences and behaviours on the women. The effect on the family can be seen when we compare marriage rates, divorce rates and birth rates today with those in the early 20th century and before.

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