

“What Gender Gap?”  
A Sermon by Rev. Frieda Gillespie

Today I'd like to consider what progress women have made toward equality in the world as we start this New Year. I suspect that many Americans believe that the Women's Movement is long over, feminism is a dead concept, and that women and girls have equal access to health, education, wealth and political power should they choose to take advantage of the opportunity. Well we can perhaps get an idea of whether that is true from The Gender Gap Report of 2007<sup>1</sup> created by an International non-profit group called the World Economic Forum. This group has gathered data from 128 countries for several years about how equally men and women have access to certain resources in that country. It doesn't matter whether there are many or few resources, they measure whether males and females have equal access to whatever is available. The resources they measure are: Healthcare, Education, Wealth, and Political Power—those four aspects of life. So, probably, like me, you have a picture in your mind right away of what kind of countries would be at the top of the list and which would be at the bottom. I'm not going to give you lots of statistics here, but I do want to share some surprising results. For the overall ratings combining all of the areas I mentioned: Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland top the list. That's not terribly surprising if you read the news. Any guesses as to where the US falls on the list? The US is 31<sup>st</sup> in the ranking. So, 30 other countries share resources more equally between the sexes than the US. The US is closer in ranking to Argentina and Jamaica than it is to any of the North European countries at the top of the list. It is well below Sri Lanka, Cuba, and the Philippines.

Let's just look a little more at the individual resources as well. The top score a country can get is a 1 which means actual equality between the sexes.

For wealth, the report measures access to jobs, and influence in economic decisions in the country. The U.S. ranks 14<sup>th</sup> on this index. The top few countries here are Mozambique, the Philippines, Ghana, Tanzania and Moldavia. The top scores are in the .77 - .79 range. The US scored .73.

For educational attainment, the US ranks 76<sup>th</sup>. However, this is the only index where some countries actually achieved a score of 1. 15 countries scored a 1 and 101 countries scored .9 or better. So, girls and women have gained a lot of ground in the world in equal education. That is a tremendous win.

For access to healthcare and survival rates, the US (we have the best health care in the world don't we?) ranks 36<sup>th</sup>, just a hair below the top 35 countries, which include most of the South and

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap/index2007.pdf>

Central American countries and again, the Philippines. Thankfully, all of the countries scored in the high .9's. Another area where females are treated fairly equally with males worldwide.

The really sad index is the one called political empowerment. This looks at the numbers of women vs. men in the highest political positions in the country and their length of time in those positions. The Scandinavian countries ranked highest, many of them have had female Presidents, some more than once. Even their scores are not above .5. The US is 69<sup>th</sup> on this list with a score of .1, and it gets lower than that as you go down the list ending finally in the Arabic countries. The US is closer to these male-dominated countries in score than the ones at the top of this list.

So to summarize, the report says, “ that the 128 countries covered, representing over 90% of the world's population, are close to eliminating the gap between women and men's health and education outcomes: almost 92% of the educational outcomes gap and 96% of the health outcomes gap has been closed. However the gap between women and men on economic participation and political empowerment remains wide: only 58% of the economic outcomes gap and only 14% of the political outcomes gap has been closed.”

So women's access to economic and political power remains limited not just throughout the world but in the US as well. How do you feel about that? I find it sad and puzzling.

I came upon this report after hearing about the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan. She was someone I admired as a woman who did not let the limitations of her culture keep her from political power and her death affected me deeply. As a young woman who attended Harvard University, she is remembered as being determined that she would have a role in bringing democracy to her country. She sought the chance to do that throughout her life. To be fair, Benazir Bhutto had the opportunity to become Prime Minister in the late 1980's because her father had been Prime Minister. He was a leader of a reform party and was assassinated a year or so after Benazir returned to Pakistan with her degree. She was imprisoned after this for several years. When she was released, her family's party became strong again and at the age of 35 she was elected. Bhutto failed to bring about many of the reforms she promised. She bequeathed the leadership of the party to her husband in trust for her son, a far cry from the democracy she claimed to stand for. She is criticized for this now and perhaps rightfully so. Was she influenced by her corrupt husband who was responsible for her being ousted from the country? Or did she care more for fame and wealth than the people as some critics claim? Or was she limited in what changes she could achieve given the cultural and religious climate? I don't know the answer.

In reading about Bhutto and what young Pakistani women have to say about her now, it is clear that she stood on the shoulders of very courageous women who came before her. One of the stories I read was about Fatima, the sister of Jinnah who founded Pakistan. “In the 1960s, she stood as the opposition candidate for the presidency against the dictator Ayub Khan.” Again, her family name made this possible, and her courage gave her the impetus to do it. There is another great story told by Irshad Manji, a young Pakistani born woman who lives in the US and writes liberal manifestos about Islam. She writes, “my father told me the apocryphal story that soon after independence, when the Pakistani constituent assembly was debating the abridgment of

women's rights, the wife of the first PM, Liaquat Ali Khan, led a delegation of women symbolically carrying brooms, to warn their husbands against such shenanigans.”

There was a time I would have voted for a woman on principle because the cause of increasing the voice of women where economic and political decisions are made was that important. Somehow this goal has been lost in our consciousness. For myself, I've seen too many women support oppressive laws against the autonomy of women or against human rights when it comes to discrimination against GLBT persons. Outcomes and integrity have become more important to me than making sure women are elected just because they are women.

So now I am left with some important questions from the Gender Gap report. First, why are women not in political power, especially in the US? Is it because they are prevented by the “old boys’ network” that runs political parties? Or the cultural bias that is so strong in women and men that says men are better leaders? Is it because women think and act differently than the existing political structures allow? Is it because women are affecting change in other ways and prefer to work at the personal level than the political one? I suspect all of these come into play in one way or another.

One area in the States where women have increased in numbers is as the head of government agencies, specifically those that have to do with health and education and the environment. Does this give us clues to where women's interests lie? We of course also have a female Secretary of State, Dr. Condoleezza Rice, the first in our history. She is also African American. Has her appointment or any other female appointment improved conditions for women in this country? When we are battling such issues as global warming, the war in Iraq, the potential for a wider spread war with Iran, mounting healthcare costs, and the loss of civil rights, what difference has it made to have women in agency positions? Perhaps like with Benazir Bhutto, we can applaud their achievement of the office but not so much their accomplishments once there.

So this leads then to the question why should we care about this gender gap? Well we should and especially in the realm of economic opportunity. In a report by Legal Momentum an advocacy group for women, it was found that “In 2003 poverty rates grew for the third straight year and women were once again much more likely to be poor than men. Indeed, there has been a large gender poverty gap in every year since the official poverty standard was created in the 1960's.” Children are even more likely than adults to live in poverty. The US Census Bureau says in 2004, children were 25% of the population and 35% of those living in poverty. When women live in poverty it is magnified in their children.

So we must care very much about this gap.

Women's unpaid work has traditionally provided important support to children and men without which they would not thrive. However this work has never been counted in the income of nations. Women are economically disadvantaged for bearing children, when staying home to raise their children, and even when they attend to their children's needs while working outside the home. Is it really better for our economy and society to force women to work in minimum wage jobs rather than to ensure that their children are safely raised by a caring parent? The dollars we spend on juvenile crime and pregnancy must far outweigh what these women produce

for the economy. Women are blamed for being poor and for being the victims of domestic violence. Poor women are the universal scapegoats. And yet they are a powerful economic force waiting to happen. And many of them are not waiting.

The United Nations Development Fund for Women or UNIFEM reports that “Women are the missing piece of the poverty puzzle.” They go one to say, “Seven out of 10 of the world’s hungry are women and girls... When women are afforded the equality of opportunity that is their basic human right, the results in terms of economic advancement are striking. [The magazine] *The Economist* estimates that over the past decade, *women’s work has contributed more to global growth than China*. Gender gaps in education were closed, access to family planning was expanded and women were able to delay childbearing and marriage while more work opportunities increased their participation in the labour force. The economic contribution of women helped reduce poverty and spur growth. Being deeply affected by poverty, women also hold great potential to end it. But until their potential is recognized and realized, women will remain the missing piece of the poverty elimination puzzle, and will not fully enjoy the benefits of the economic growth to which they contributed.”

The fact is that investing in women brings about economic growth for entire countries. Investing in women brings about greater health and well-being for children who are the futures of nations. Investing in women brings about economic benefit for men as well.

Where intelligent, energetic women who are movers and shakers in support of women are putting their efforts are mostly all at the grassroots level. They are creating funds by the hundreds through grassroots donations that support initiatives to empower women and girls. They also work toward changing laws and policies to give women more economic power and self-reliance. They are doing great work and even though they are working at a face-to-face one-by-one kind of effort, they are making a huge difference by leveraging these individual efforts into legislation. They say they are not just looking to teach women and girls to fish based on the old saying, ‘give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him forever.’ They are interested in helping women to buy the pond.

Here’s an example close to home from the Women’s Funding Network website: “the Atlanta Women's Foundation funded a citywide initiative in 2001 to stop child prostitution. They created a task force, convened a summit, and successfully lobbied the legislature to pass a bill making the prostitution of children a felony. The attention they received for this effort resulted in a major donor approaching the fund and offering to support a shelter for exploited children. The Atlanta Women's Foundation subsequently launched successful class action proceedings for racketeering against the 15 most active pimps in Atlanta.” This is just one women’s fund sponsoring one group’s initiative in one city. No political office required.

I suppose we should care about women in higher office. Every budget decision that is made has a different impact on women and children than it does on men. Who are more likely to know

this than women? Perhaps in the final analysis power corrupts too much or seduces the soul away from compassion into ambitions that don't create positive change. Perhaps the institutions of governments are too cumbersome and rigid for women to make a difference from the inside. I hate to think so, but perhaps it is so.

Fortunately women have proven over the past decades that they do not have to be dependent on government to change their lives. Nor do they need to hold public office to be agents of change. Women as they have always done are creating a new paradigm: truth telling, networking, working with real people, trusting their desire and ability to be effective. Add education, encouragement, birth control, financial investment and a little child care to a poor woman's life and stand back and see what happens.

Just as we mark the coming of the New Year before any signs of new life are visible to us, so I think we can celebrate the developing empowerment of women all over the world. The work is going on under our noses without the grandstanding of politics. It will reach a tipping point in the not too distant future. I would love to see what this world will be like when all 51% of the world's population becomes fully empowered. Women will be our greatest hope for change not only for women, but for all of the children we raise and the men we love.

Benediction:

When we find ourselves believing that we can't change the ills of our society because they are too big. Let us remind ourselves that we are asleep and all we need do to make a difference is to wake up and begin.