



“Missing Women”

& Economic Freedom

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The disadvantaged social and economic positions held by women in many underdeveloped nations are some of the main issues that present a serious challenge to long-term economic development. Women are not only openly and directly discriminated against, but they are also indirectly affected by discrimination, in so far as they are presented with fewer opportunities than men in their social and economic interactions. This stark inequality presents a considerable barrier to economic development; however, it is an obstacle that can be eased considerably through the implementation of public policy promoting economic freedom.

Amartya Sen, Nobel Laureate in Economics, observed that a decade ago, the ratio of women to men was approximately 0.94 in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Sen, 1990; Sen, 2003). This represents quite a low figure, particularly in comparison with

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100 million women are “missing”

the ratio of around 1.05 for Europe and North America. From these ratios, Sen developed a rough estimate of the “missing women” in the developing world. By comparing the number of women that should have been born (if these under-developed regions had the same ratio as Europe and North America) with those who were actually born, Sen finds that there are more than 100 million “missing women” around the world. In other words, if “men and women [had] received similar care in health, medicine, and nutrition” these 100 million women would not be missing (Sen, 1990). Surprisingly, according to Sen’s calculations, it appears that Sub-Saharan Africa does not exhibit a skewed sex ratio at birth. However, he records 44 million women missing in China and 37 million missing in India overall. Sen points out that decade later, due to two opposing trends, the sex ratio has not changed.

Although the disadvantage that women experience in terms of mortality (particularly death at young ages) has declined, a new movement has taken hold, namely that of sex-specific abortions against girls. This practice has become quite widespread across many societies, due to the accessibility of new technologies that enable doctors to determine the sex of the fetus. Sen’s analysis is meaningful, as it quantifies the extreme inequality that has been

plaguing women in the developing world with long-lasting effects, particularly in India and China.

Economists Siwan Anderson and Debraj Ray built on Amartya Sen’s research to provide an analysis of the composition of the “missing women” by age and cause of death, thereby qualifying some of the earlier discoveries and shedding some more light on the sources of these “excess deaths” (2010). Similarly to Sen, Anderson and Ray compare the average death rates of women in developed countries to those in developing countries and categorize the “missing women” by age and disease. Their results are quite remarkable. Although previous research (including Sen’s) had emphasized excess female deaths at birth or at very young ages, Anderson and Ray’s analysis shows that the story is significantly more complex.

About 37–45% of the missing women in China occur at birth and in infancy—these are termed



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“prenatal factors” (Anderson and Ray, 2010). However, the situation is markedly more complex for India. The authors calculate that only 11% of missing women in India are due to prenatal factors, including sex-specific abortions against girls. In fact, the most prominent source of excess female deaths in India at *young ages* (between zero and four years) are infectious, respiratory and perinatal diseases, amounting to about 15% of the total, or 260,000 missing girls. Infectious diseases account for about half of these deaths. To put this number into perspective, maternal deaths in India, generally regarded as a significant issue, account for



about 130,000 of the yearly excess female deaths. The largest number of excess female deaths in India, however, occurs at *older ages* mainly due to cardiovascular disease, a cause that far outweighs prenatal or maternal excess deaths. Essentially, this means that compared to developed countries, Indian women are affected by cardiovascular disease at a *closer rate* to men. In other words, the discrepancy between men and women in the rate of deaths resulting from cardiovascular disease is smaller in India than what is natural biologically. Another disquieting issue for India is death from “injuries”: for all ages, injuries (both unintentional accidents and intentional acts of violence) account for over 255,000 excess female deaths, far exceeding maternal mortality. In addition, about 30,000 women are missing from the 15–29 years category as a result of death from “intentional injuries” (Anderson and Ray, 2010).

Another surprising finding made by the authors is that the annual flow of missing women (as a proportion of the female population) in sub-Saharan Africa is quite large, adding up to roughly 1.53 million missing women in

The causes of excess female deaths are diverse and complex

2000 (Anderson and Ray, 2010). This may seem confusing, since the sex ratio at birth for sub-Saharan Africa is quite equal, at 1.03 (Anderson and Ray, 2010). However, we can reconcile Anderson and Ray’s findings with the parity sex ratio by emphasizing that none of the missing women are situated at birth. In other words, girls and boys are not treated differently at birth—the missing women are spread out over the age spectrum. In fact, as a fraction of the female population, the number of sub-Saharan missing women is *higher* than the Chinese and Indian populations. The biggest reason for missing women in Sub-Saharan Africa seems to be HIV/AIDS, by far (Anderson and Ray, 2010). The authors’ calculation yields over 600,000 annual excess female deaths from this disease; this is over a third of all missing women for the region. This finding is so striking because the death rate from the HIV/AIDS virus is 1.2 times higher for women than for men in Sub-Saharan Africa. Even more shocking is that in the rest of the world, HIV/AIDS death rates are *higher* for men than for women, even going up to a ratio of 4:1 in developed countries (Anderson and Ray, 2010). Although other causes, most notably maternal deaths, are also a significant cause of the missing women in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is imperative to emphasize that for whatever reason, there is an obvious bias against women in terms of HIV/AIDS deaths in this region.

In conclusion, Anderson and Ray’s findings show that the biggest fraction of missing

women come from disease-by-disease effects: “in India, the number is 1.64 million out of the aggregate estimate of 1.71 million, in sub-Saharan Africa 1.39 million out of a total of 1.53 million, and in China 1.59 million out of 1.73 million” (2010). The authors show that comparing aggregate sex ratios does not deliver the full story regarding missing women. By looking at distributions by age and disease, we can be closer to understanding whether direct gender discrimination or various other factors are responsible for the large number of missing women around the world.

These studies have established that there is indeed a significant problem of “missing women” and that the causes are quite diversified and complex. What can be done about it? Although there is an array of public policy tools that can be undertaken, economic freedom remains an essential mechanism that can help substantially redress the inequality between men and women. While it is by no means a complete solution, economic freedom can directly and indirectly empower women through a variety of mechanisms. First, nations that are more economically free perform substantially better than non-free countries in crucial indicators of well-being. Economically free countries exhibit a higher Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per-capita and higher average incomes, better life expectancy and life satisfaction, less corrup-



Greater access to credit can empower women

tion, more secure political rights and civil freedoms, etc.¹ With a higher degree of economic freedom, developing countries are better poised to experience and maintain economic development.

How exactly can this process benefit women? Certainly, with economic development comes greater access to basic health provisions that decrease maternal mortality and the risk of disease in general, for both men and women.

In addition, greater economic freedom allows women to have greater access to education, a provision which increases their human capital and thus increases their employment opportunities and bargaining power in the household.

Finally, there is another formidable avenue through which women can be empowered: greater access to credit markets. Women in developing countries are denied an important source of income, because they cannot

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Economic freedom brings health care, education, and employment opportunities to women

gain entrance to credit markets. This occurs because it is men who are generally the owners of property or wealth (due to cultural and traditional design). Such assets can be used as collateral, a necessary condition when borrowing. Economic freedom can profoundly empower women by giving them more access to credit markets, thus allowing them to borrow in order to pursue entrepreneurial activities. Such occupations give women opportunities to work outside the household and become more independent, both socially and financially. Economic freedom can simply help by developing proper functioning credit markets, which are non-existent or barely operational in many developing countries. In addition, governments can pursue microcredit finance schemes (such as the Grameen Bank) focused on lending to

women.² There seems to be evidence that even when the money borrowed by a wife is simply transferred to her husband, women still benefit in many ways, such as being subjected to less violence and gaining more self-respect (Kabeer, 2001). Therefore, greater access to credit can go a long way in changing attitudes towards women and giving them more alternatives to become meaningful economic and social participants of their societies.

The evidence suggests that the complexities surrounding the issue of “missing women” are extensive. There is no calculation that can fully account for the extent of discrimination against women and it is very difficult to separate direct discrimination from other contextual factors that may lead to excess female deaths. However, it is undeniable that the “excess deaths” of 100 million women have had and will continue to have a detrimental effect on the social, cultural, and economic fabric of the developing world if they are not addressed.

Notes

- 1 For more information, see the *Economic Freedom of the World: 2010 Annual Report*.
- 2 For more information on the Grameen Bank, see www.grameen-info.org.

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