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November 2018

Gender Gaps in Transition – What do we learn (and what do we not learn) from gender inequality indexes?

We look at the development of gender inequality in transition countries through the lens of the Gender Inequality Index (GII), which aims to capture overall gender inequality. By extending the measure back to 1990, we show that even though gender inequality in transition countries for the most part has decreased since the fall of the iron curtain, once overall development is taken in to account, transition countries did better in relation to other countries in terms of rank differences before transition. We, however, caution against relying exclusively on composite indexes to understand patterns of gender inequality. While the desire of policy makers to get one number that captures gender inequality development is understandable, weak correlations across different overall indexes, as well as across different sub-indexes that make up each index, suggest that such an approach has limitations.



Indexes of gender inequality

In the public debate of socio-economic issues there is an understandable interest in single measures that summarize complex issues, describe historical developments and allow international comparisons. The use of GDP to measure economic development is the most immediate example of this way of proceeding. The same applies to gender inequality. Over the past decades a number of “gender equality indexes” have been developed by international organizations such as the UNDP, the EIGE (European Institute for Gender Equality) and the WEF (World Economic Forum), to name a few.

These measures receive a lot of attention and in particular the reporting of country rankings tends to have an influence on political and policy discussions.

In this brief, we study the development of the Gender Inequality Index (GII) in *transition countries*, contrasting these to Western European countries. By *transition countries*, we refer to all countries that were part of the Soviet Union plus the Central and Eastern European countries that were heavily influenced by the Soviet Union before 1990 (not including Albania and former Yugoslavia). Whenever we have been able to find the underlying data, we extend the GII measure back to the early 1990s. This extension allows us to measure the development of gender inequality through the lens of a single index since the beginning of the transition. We then discuss what the GII tells us about gender inequality in transition, but also – perhaps more importantly – what it does not tell us. Our analysis is discussed as well as shown in some more detail in our forthcoming companion FREE Policy Paper.

The Gender Inequality Index

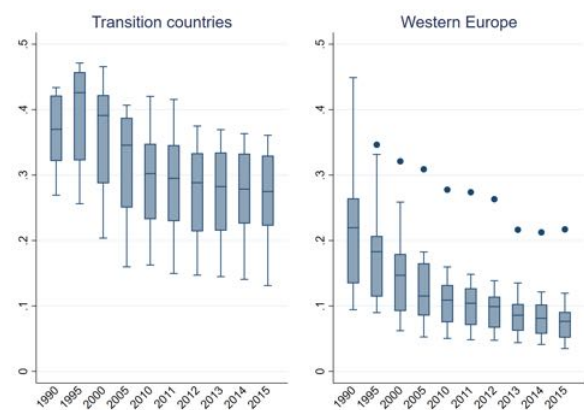
The GII was reported for the first time in the 2010 Human Development Report. It measures gender inequalities in three dimensions of human development: 1) reproductive health, measured by maternal mortality and adolescent birth rates; 2)

empowerment, measured by representation in parliament and secondary education among adults; and 3) economic status, measured by labor force participation.

GII country-values from 1995 are available on the UNDP website. Conveniently for our purpose, most of the underlying data that the index is based on are also made available from the UNDP for the years 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005, and every year between 2010 and 2015, with the only exception of the female seat share in Parliament in 1990. Using the UNDP data, and data on the female seat share in Parliament in 1990 from additional sources (see the FREE Policy Paper for a list of sources), we obtain values for the GII from the beginning of the transition in 1990 until 2015.

What does the GII index tell us about gender equality in transition economies?

Figure 1. The Gender Inequality Index in transition countries and Western Europe, 1990-2015



Source: Own calculations based mainly on UNDP data. The transition countries are: Armenia, Bulgaria, Georgia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and the Russian Federation. For Western Europe the countries are: Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland.

Figure 1 reports values for the GII index in box plots, which show the index 25th and 75th percentile (respectively bottom and top of the box), its median (horizontal line in the box), its maximum



and minimum (whiskers), and outliers (dots) for two groups of countries: transition countries and Western-European countries. We have reconstructed the values of the GII index for a limited set of countries within these groups (see the note to Figure 1 for the list of countries). When interpreting Figure 1, recall that higher GII values imply more inequality.

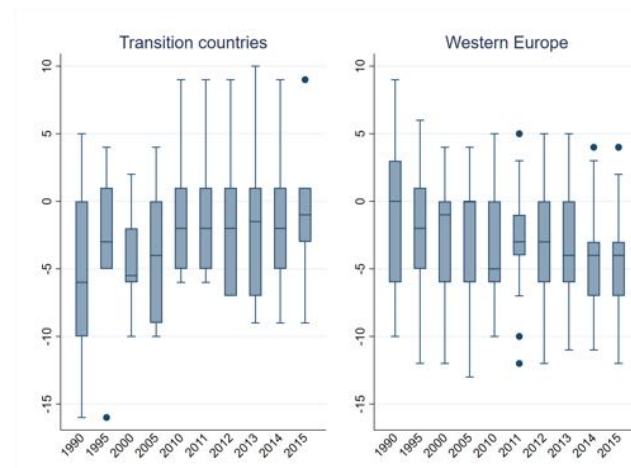
Figure 1 shows that based on the GII, median gender inequality is larger in transition countries than in Western Europe and has been so throughout the entire period since 1990. In both regions the index shows a decreasing trend, after an initial increase in 1995 in the transition countries. As we show in the Policy Paper, this decrease is mainly due to a drop in female representation in national parliaments. The variance of the index scores has declined over time in Western Europe, while it remained mostly unchanged in the transition countries.

The evidence from the GII is somewhat at odds with the common notion that transition countries enjoy relatively low level of gender inequality. However, it is important to notice that transition and Western European countries are generally at different levels of development. Figure 2 displays the country groups' performance in relation to their level of human development. This is done by measuring the difference between their GII ranking and their Human Development Index ranking (HDI) among all the countries with non-missing GII values in the years considered. The HDI is an UNDP-developed measure of overall human development. See the Policy Paper for details about its measurement. The larger the difference between GII- and HDI-ranking, the worse the group performance in terms of gender inequality in relation to its level of development.

The trends between transition countries and Western Europe are now opposite. In 1990, the median standing in terms of gender inequality was better than that in human development for transition countries, and the *relative* level of gender inequality was lower than in Western Europe. The (negative) difference between GII and HDI

ranking however appears to have narrowed over time, and it is close to zero in 2015. Western European countries have instead improved their gender equality ranking in relation to their ranking in terms of human development over the period studied. Put differently, the ranking improvement in terms of human development in former socialist countries since the transition have not translated into comparable gains in gender equality ranking as measured by the GII index.

Figure 2. Difference between Gender Inequality Index ranking and Human Development Index ranking in transition countries and Western Europe, 1990-2015



Source: Own calculations based mainly on UNDP data.

It is also important to emphasize that, according to several scholars, a dichotomy in terms of gender relations existed in transition countries during the socialist period. This is because on one hand the socialists put substantial into effort to empower women economically (see e.g. Brainerd, 2000; Pollert, 2003; Campa and Serafinelli, 2018), but on the other hand they failed to eliminate patriarchy (LaFont, 2001). This suggests that a composite index can mask important contrasting patterns among its components. In the Policy Paper we uncover such contrasting patterns. By looking separately at the different components of the GII index, we show that while Western European countries have invariantly improved their levels of gender equality since 1990, the trend in transition countries depends on the measure one looks at:



Women maintained, but did not improve, their relative status in the labor force. They gained more equality in education and especially in terms of reproductive health, and lost descriptive political representation.

Conclusion

In this policy brief we have studied the development of gender inequality in transition countries through the lens of the Gender Inequality Index, whose span we have extended to the beginning of the transition period. We have shown that, based on this index, gender inequality has decreased since 1990 in transition countries, a trend which is common to that in Western Europe. However, once the changes in overall development during this period are taken into account, it appears that transition countries fared better in 1990 than today. Our analysis thus shows that analyzing gender inequality indexes in absolute terms and in relation to levels of development can deliver different conclusions. The factors that account for these differences should be kept in mind in policy discussions and policy-making. Some issues related to gender inequality, such as maternal mortality, are potentially addressed with a comprehensive strategy aimed at overall development. Conversely, other drivers of gender inequality, such as women's political empowerment, do not necessarily go hand in hand with overall

development, and might therefore require more targeted policy interventions.

We have also cautioned the reader about the limitation of using comprehensive indexes to describe developments in gender inequality. A comprehensive index can overshadow important sources of gender inequality if it is composed of sub-indexes that move in opposite directions. This point can be especially relevant in the context of transition countries, which historically experienced a top-down approach to gender equality, the results of which in the long-term appear to be major advancements in some dimensions of women's empowerment and contemporary potential backlash in other dimensions. It has been argued, for instance, that low levels of female representation in political institutions in transition countries can be the result of women's large participation in the labor market while the division of roles in households remained traditional. In the words of anthropologist Suzanne LaFont (2001), "Women have been and continue to be overworked, and their lives have been over-politicized, the combination of which has led to apathy and/or the unwillingness to enter the male dominated sphere of politics. Many post-communist women view participation in politics as just one more burden". In such a context, average values of an index of gender equality might mask high achievements in economic empowerment coexisting with lack of political representation.

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