

MARKETING

What Are the Best Countries for Women?

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What's the best country to live in if you're a woman?

Well, which one do you — and your friends and colleagues — think is the best? The U.S.? Canada? Germany? Sweden? A country you once vacationed in and long to revisit?

How people worldwide perceive different countries varies widely, according to Wharton marketing professor David Reibstein. “We all have some chauvinism about our own particular country.... Our perception of our country may be very different from other people's.”

These perceptions can have a profound real-world effect on national economies, says Reibstein. He studies nation branding: How a country's image, he says, is similar to a product brand and can be measured and improved. Tourism, foreign trade, foreign direct investment and overseas job recruitment may all hang in the balance.

Opinions about which countries treat women fairly make up one aspect of the brand, and these opinions are reflected in Reibstein's new Best Countries report and interactive website, compiled in collaboration with *U.S. News & World Report*, BAV Consulting, and Wharton. Unveiled at the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos, Switzerland, on January 20, the project — which Reibstein says is the largest and most diverse of its kind — surveyed approximately 16,200 global citizens to capture their impressions of 60 countries. Reibstein describes the survey population as “one third general population, one third business decision makers, and one third what would be called ‘educated elite.’”

Sixty-five attributes were assessed and grouped into nine sub-rankings: Adventure, Citizenship, Cultural Influence, Entrepreneurship, Heritage, Movers, Open for Business, Power, and Quality of Life. (Gender equality was classified under the Citizenship sub-ranking.) According to Reibstein, statistical weighting was then applied based on the correlation between the sub-rankings and the countries' per capita GDP (at purchasing power parity) to arrive at the final country rankings.

Which Countries Topped the Gender-Equal List?

Among the 14 “Best Of” lists created as part of the report (Best Countries to Start a Career, Best Countries for Green Living, Most Transparent Countries, to name a few) is Best Countries for Women. For this ranking, Reibstein drew only from females' responses to the survey, which numbered about 7,000. The Best Countries for Women rating is a composite of five attributes: human rights, gender equality, income equality, safety, and progressiveness.

Reibstein comments that perhaps the biggest topic at this year's World Economic Forum meeting related to women and their role in society. “I think there's a tremendous interest in which countries are doing a good job on gender equality and how they might serve as a model for other countries.”

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Denmark topped the 60-nation list as the perceived best country for women. According to the report, Denmark has a parental leave policy that is among the most flexible in the European Union, an earnings-related day care system, and virtually free education and health care. Denmark also ranks high (fourth) on Save the Children's 16th Annual Mothers' Index, which measures the well-being of mothers and children in 179 countries.

Interestingly, though, Denmark did not win Best Country overall—Germany did.

Sweden was regarded as the second best country for women, followed by Canada, the Netherlands and Australia. Sweden has an extremely progressive attitude toward gender equality, the report says, and ranks near the top—fourth—on the latest World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap report. (The WEF report presents statistics on 145 economies, measuring “how well they are leveraging their female talent pool” based on economic, educational, health, and political factors.)

Global perceptions about Canada (#3) may continue to be positive because of its current prime minister's outspoken stance on gender equality. Justin Trudeau is proud to call himself a feminist, the Independent reported recently. Trudeau said there is a “tremendous amount of work” to be done to establish pay equality, equal representation in the parliament, and access to quality childcare, as well as to eradicate violence against women.

The Netherlands (#4) provides benefits to new mothers including subsidized access to a maternity nurse, according to the report. It ranks high — 13th out of 145 countries — on the latest WEF Global Gender Gap report. And in Australia, according to the Best Countries report, women have increasingly assumed leadership roles in universities, workplaces, boardrooms, and government.

Notably, all of the top five best countries for women score well — around 5 or higher — on the WEF report's 7-point scale assessing the ability of women to rise to positions of leadership in particular countries.

Pakistan and Algeria, two countries criticized by human rights groups for their treatment of women, came in last at #59 and #60. In Pakistan, the struggle of girls and women to get an education, and the threat of terrorism in that country, was highlighted worldwide in 2012 when the Taliban tried to execute 14-year old Malala Yousafzai for speaking out about girls' right to attend school. On the WEF Global Gender Gap Report, the country ranks nearly last, 144th out of 145 nations.

How Did the U. S. Rank?

The U. S. ranked only #13 as a good nation for women, despite coming in at #4 in Best Countries overall. The report mentions income inequality as one factor lowering the U.S. ranking for women. According to a recent article in the New York Times, American women earn only 79 cents for every dollar earned by men. (Unfortunately, the U. S. is not unique in having a gender pay gap.)

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Another factor negatively impacting perceptions of the U.S. as a good place for women could be the lack of paid maternity leave. According to a recent NPR report, the U.S. is the sole country among the 34 nations in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that does not mandate paid maternity leave. It is also one of only nine that has no leave policies for fathers.

The U.S.'s specific gender equality score is relatively high: 7.6 out of 10. Philadelphia-based consultant Tom Lincoln, who is the director of the Wharton Nation Brand Conference to be held in October in Philadelphia, comments, "The U.S.'s brand perception for gender equality is surprisingly strong, especially when you consider that we have no paid maternity leave laws. One explanation might be that the women's rights movement in the U.S. is perceived to have had a long and successful history compared to that of other countries."

Reibstein points out that another factor weighing down the U.S.'s ranking may be safety. Safety was one of the five attributes rolled into Best Countries for Women, and many people "view the U.S. as not necessarily a very safe place." In Reibstein's view, our movies and news media unintentionally contribute to this image. "A lot of our movies show violence happening in various American cities... Some countries that have violence keep it very low-profile and don't want it very well known. Whereas it seems to be the headline coming out of the United States."

How Nation Branding Affects Economic Growth

How women perceive a country affects the country's economic success, asserts Reibstein. For example, if a country is rated highly, "it certainly leads to a little bit more than 50% of the world feeling more positive about a country. Which, in turn, has an impact through [many] economic dimensions."

Global perceptions can affect where women (and men, and families) choose to spend their travel and leisure dollars: some may want to vacation in a place viewed as relatively female-friendly.

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And these opinions can affect investing as well, especially today when many are giving more thought to social factors when they dedicate their financial resources. For example, says Reibstein, “If I want to be investing in companies in a country... I might want to invest in a country that is more progressive and gender-equal.”

Moreover, multinational companies’ recruiting efforts can either be helped or harmed by global opinion. “If I want to attract women as employees, the fact that I’m in Denmark makes it easier.... The fact that I’m in Algeria makes it harder.” Or a female executive may be looking at similar career opportunities in Canada and the U.S., says Reibstein, and realize, “Canada seems to be viewed as treating women better.”

“I think there are ways to start thinking about these results, and how companies might even be able to take advantage of this information.”

Emerging markets in particular may want to take heed of the rankings as their companies increasingly compete with developed-world companies for management talent. Women now make up 40% of students at top U.S. MBA programs, according to *Fortune* magazine. And it’s well-documented that women now outnumber men globally in university attendance and graduation rates.

India, for example, ranks relatively high as a Best Country (#22) but plummets to #44 in Best Countries for Women. Drilling down to its perceived gender equality score, it earned only 0.2 on a scale of 10. And according to the WEF Global Gender Gap report, the ability of women to rise to positions of leadership in India is only 3.3 on a 7-point scale.

South Korea, another strong developing market, had a similarly poor showing in gender equality of 0.1. It’s notable that South Korea has the second-longest working hours of all OECD countries. This generally poses a greater obstacle for female employees than male employees because they typically provide more of the care for children and aging parents.

Lincoln notes, “You start to wonder, could some countries increase their GDP by encouraging a culture that would benefit women?” A 2015 McKinsey report called gender inequality “not only a pressing moral and social issue but also a critical economic challenge.” It estimated that \$12 trillion could be added to the global GDP by 2025 by advancing women’s equality.

Reibstein emphasizes that before nations start brainstorming new promotional campaigns to change their image, they need to do their best to effect real change within their borders. He notes that when it comes to nation branding, the perception and the reality are “not independent phenomena... The actuality absolutely has a major role in how people perceive the brand — of a product or of a nation.”

Findings from the Best Countries report — especially the economic benefits of nation branding — will be explored further at the Wharton Nation Brand Conference.

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