



SEXUALITY

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Some thoughts for Sexuality Policy Watch on
The Global Gender Gap Report 2009

By Kate Bedford

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Sexuality Policy Watch (SPW) is a global forum composed of researchers and activists from a wide range of countries and regions of the world. Inspired by local and international initiatives, the SPW's mandate is twofold: to contribute to sexuality related global policy debates through strategic policy-oriented research and analysis projects, and to promote more effective linkages between local, regional and global initiatives.

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Foreword

In late 2009, the World Economic Forum launched its new report on the Global Gender Gap Index, which gained immediate visibility in both global and national media. Its impact was particularly palpable in Latin America because Ricardo Hausmann, the lead author, is a well known and prestigious Venezuelan economist, who until very recently had not engaged with gender and economic matters. Given the public and policy relevance of the report, I consulted Kate Bedford, who has been a SPW partner since 2006, about her desire to critically examine the report. She said yes, but as it often happens in our extremely busy lives, she was not able to complete the task until very recently.

This delay, however, is irrelevant. Kate's critique's of the WEF Global Gender Gap Index does not refer to the specific data published last year, but rather to the conceptualization that underlies the report as whole. In other words, from a critical feminist perspective, she identifies positive aspects but also flaws in the approaches adopted by WEF to measure gender gaps, which also apply to previous and fore coming reports, as well as to similar exercises that may be developed by other organizations.

Moreover, Kate's critique comes into light, a bit after the establishment of UN Women, the new United Nations agency globally responsible for gender equality and exactly when Michelle Bachelet was appointed its first general director. By and large, all indications suggest that gender equality (and inequalities) will remain high in global economic debates or more broadly in the development agenda. In our view, Kate's critical reflections presented in this short Working Paper are a wonderful contribution to this ongoing conversation, which calls attention to gaps and potential pitfalls of mainstream gender and development indicators.

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Some thoughts for Sexuality Policy Watch on the *Global Gender Gap Report 2009*¹

By Kate Bedford

“When (the Gender And Development Unit) started many people laughed; one or two called us lesbians, dykes; that is no longer acceptable. Now the most difficult problem is one of people pretending they agree”

(Member of OXFAM's Gender And Development Unit quoted in Moser 1993, 117)

“To ‘speak truth to power’ has long been the goal of policy analysts, but just how similar must the speech be to the master’s language?”

(Staudt 1998, 52)

I. Introduction

The World Economic Forum (WEF) is best known for its annual Davos meeting, where leaders from business and politics gather to “shap(e) the global agenda” around economic growth, aiming to inspire “entrepreneurship in the global public interest.”² It is not well-known as a site for gender analysis; feminists and sexuality activists have taken far greater interest in the counter-mobilization it inspired, the World Social Forum. However since 2006 the WEF has been publishing a Global Gender Gap Index, aiming to measure gender-based disparities, track their progress, and rank countries based on how quickly

¹ The report was authored by Ricardo Hausmann, Laura Tyson and Saadia Zahidi. World Economic Forum: Geneva.

² (<http://www.weforum.org/en/about/index.htm>)

they are closing gender gaps (2009, 3). The rankings have been highly publicized and some countries have trumpeted their rise up the ranks.³ In this discussion I briefly explain the index and summarize a few of its major findings, before exploring in greater depth some key reasons why it might be relevant for feminists and sexuality activists working on gender issues. I focus firstly on the mischievous uses to which it can be put, before moving on to flesh out two reasons why it might prove harmful to global work on gender (in its preference for what it understands to be gender equality over women's empowerment; and in its choice of key indicators). It would be interesting to compare what other readers think of the index and its relevance (or lack thereof) to their work.

II. Overview of measurements and findings

Briefly, the WEF approaches gender issues from an "equality as smart economics" perspective that should be familiar to World Bank observers. This argues that women are potentially a key source of growth. Their talents should thus be harnessed by businesses and politicians, not just for social justice reasons but because it makes good economic sense. Women's participation in the *economy* and in *politics* should be the same as men's and they should have equal outcomes in *education* and *health*. The Index seeks to measure those 4 areas, "benchmarking" national gender gaps and "provid(ing) country rankings that allow for effective comparisons across regions and income groups, and over time. The rankings are designed to create greater awareness among a global audience of the challenges posed by gender gaps and the opportunities created by reducing them." (3).

A key perceived strength of the index is that it provides transparent, straightforward measurements of gender inequalities that can then be used "as a base for designing effective measures for reducing gender gaps." (3). As the executive chairman of WEF puts

³ See for example the Times of India article: *India slips to 114th place in global gender gap ranking: WEF* (27 October 2009) available online at: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/India-slips-to-114th-place-in-global-gender-gap-ranking-WEF/articleshow/5169621.cms#ixzz0yGYLz3qj>. (accessed 31 August 2010) and the article in the Brunei Times by Shareen Han and Rachel Thien (29 Oct 2009) *Brunei improves rank in global gender gap index* (<http://news.brunei.fm/2009/10/29/brunei-improves-rank-in-global-gender-gap-index/>) accessed 31 August 2010.

it: “measuring the size of the problem is a prerequisite for identifying the best solutions” (v).

The 4 problem areas for which solutions are sought are:

1. Economic participation and opportunity, captured via data on the participation gap (in the labour force participation rate), the remuneration gap (the ratio of estimated female to male earned income, plus the opinions held by global business executives about wage equality for similar work), and the advancement gap (the ratio of women to men among legislators, senior officials and managers, and the ratio of women to men among technical and professional workers).
2. Educational attainment (ratios of women to men in primary, secondary and tertiary education, and the ratio of the female literacy rate to the male literacy rate).
3. Political empowerment, focused on the highest levels (e.g. the ratio of women to men in ministerial-level positions and parliamentary positions; the ratio of women and men in years in executive office in the last 50 years).
4. Health and survival, measured via the gap between life expectancy, and the sex ratio at birth (4).

In the report, 134 countries were ranked on these areas in 2009, covering over 90% of the world’s population. Iceland came first; Yemen came last. 25 countries achieved a perfect score on educational equality, and 39 did so for equality of health and survival. On a global scale the index provides grounds for optimism, showing that the included countries have closed over 96% of the gender gap in health outcomes and almost 93% of the gap in educational attainments (6). They were less successful in closing gaps in economic participation and outcome, and political participation (only 60% of the gap on economic participation and 17% of the gap in political empowerment has been closed) (26). Data is also broken down regionally. Oceania, Western Europe and North America have closed over 70% of their gender gap, Latin America and the Caribbean follow with 67%, Sub Saharan Africa and Asia have closed 65% of their gap; and the Middle East and Africa follow with 58%. Some countries have made “great strides” (e.g. South Africa, 6th in the ranking due to improvements in the female labor force participation rate and women’s participation in parliamentary and ministerial positions); Ecuador (which rose from 35 to 23 in the 2009 report, due again to an increase in women’s economic participation and

growing numbers of women in parliament), and Nicaragua (which jumped from 71 to 49, due to better data on economic participation). Others have slipped back or been overtaken - Honduras fell from to 47 to 62 (because its female labor force participation rate was over-estimated in 2008) (21); Venezuela fell 10 places, to 69, due to a decreasing female labor force participation rate; and Brazil fell 9 places, to 81, due to widening gaps between men's and women's income). Country reports flesh out this information.

The discussion section of the report closes by noting that “*we are hopeful that this report, by providing a transparent and comprehensible framework for assessing and tracking global gender gaps, will serve as a catalyst for greater awareness, future research and targeted action by policymakers, employers and civil society.*” (30).

III. Mischief Potential

One of the key features of the index is that it measures gaps in access to resources and opportunities between men and women rather than levels of those resources and opportunities. This can have perverse consequences as I note below, but it can also provide some interesting and useful rankings. It rewards countries for smaller gaps in access to resources, and is intended to make the index independent of levels of development (3). This means that, for example, countries with higher education spending per capita do not outrank poorer countries if inequality of access to those greater resources is high. The rankings themselves confirm that to some extent the oft-assumed link between a country's wealth and its level of gender equality needs questioning. Put more bluntly, they challenge neo-colonial and racist assumptions about the need for wealthy Western states (and development workers) to intervene to protect (generic) Third World Women from their dreadful gender oppression. This is unremarkable to those who reject that assumption in the first place (Chandra Mohanty did not need the index to prove that point 24 years ago, after all), but since the assumption remains dominant in a lot of the Global North (including among some gender and development professionals), the rankings can be used as supplementary material (alongside Mohanty 1991 [1986], etc. etc.) to challenge preconceived notions of national wealth (and power) aligning with gender

equality. And we need all the supplements we can get at a time when colonial powers are again justifying wars on the grounds of liberating women.

There is, therefore, something potentially subversive, in these times, about a WEF-designed, quantified global gender equality index that aims to provide objective data to global policymakers in non-political terms wherein South Africa, the Philippines and Lesotho rank higher than the UK; wherein they, plus Trinidad/Tobago and Sri Lanka, rank higher than Australia; and wherein they, plus Ecuador, Mongolia, Angola, Mozambique, Costa Rica, the Bahamas, and Cuba, rank higher than the USA. The colonizing power of economics (Bergeron 2006) and the dangers inherent in the relentless push to quantify data on gender equality notwithstanding, that scorecard is a goldmine for mischief, a point not lost on the US feminist blogger Ariel Boone. She posted a comment on the *feministing* site noting that the US ranked “40th in health and survival, behind Cambodia, Mexico, the Philippines, Venezuela, and Yemen.”⁴

In other respects, however, the index is unhelpful to feminists and sexuality activists working on gender issues around the world. I highlight two features that seemed particularly troubling to me here. I would really enjoy hearing what others think when they read the index.

IV. Indicator Trouble

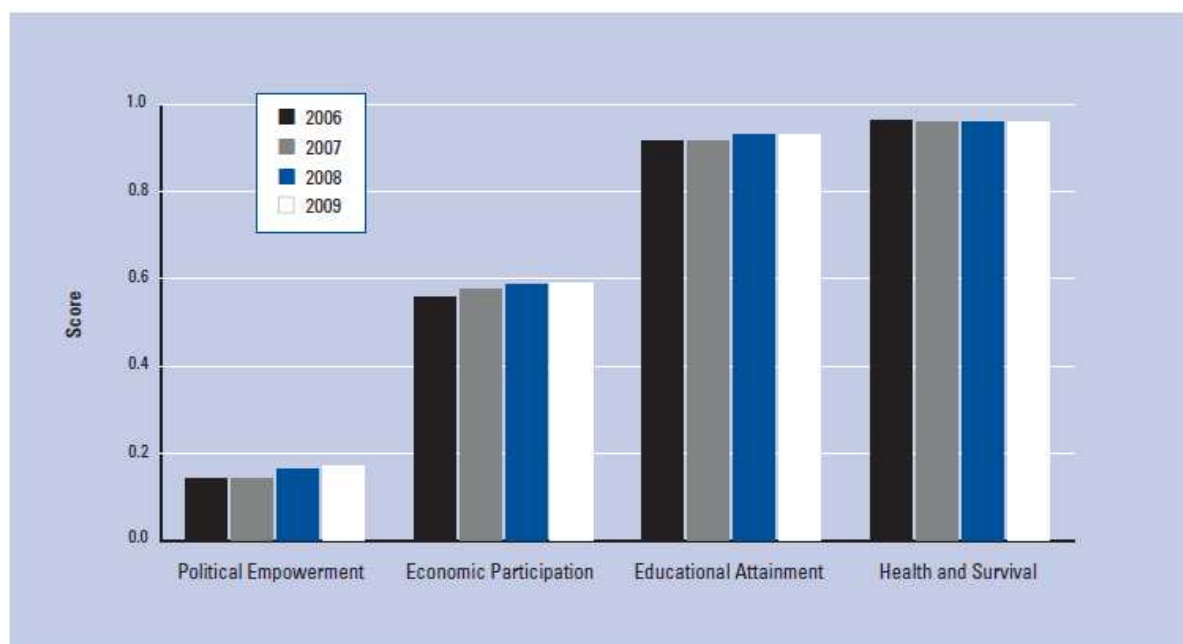
A first set of concerns about the index centre around the measurements used. Some of the data appears to be unreliable or of marginal relevance. For example using employers’ opinions about wage differentials is a very curious way to get reliable data on whether they discriminate against women doing similar work to men. The data used in the country profiles is also questionable: it is unclear why the presence of polygamy and FGM, specifically, get included in *every country* as key indicators of women’s status, when other potentially oppressive familial arrangements and harmful interventions on women’s bodies are not considered. It is worth seriously questioning the sort of political work being done by a country profile model that has FGM and polygamy as the key indicators to represent women’s vulnerability to bodily harm and lack of control over their intimate lives – one

⁴ <http://classic.feministing.com/archives/018807.html>. posted 11 November 2009 by Ariel Boone , accessed 31 August 2010.

wonders how helpful this is to the activists working on the CAWN campaign to highlight state complicity in femicide in Central America, for example (Carcedo 2010), or the Brazilian scholars and activists documenting the human rights violations affecting sex workers (detailed in Pimenta et al 2009, 27). The WEF's index may indeed harm their work, by encouraging smugness among political actors (because violence is being measured badly), and in drawing attention away from the key variables of interest at a national level, towards spectacularized violence elsewhere in the world.

In other ways the index seems to be operating at cross purposes, measuring things that take many years to change (such as changes in life expectancy) but then charting progress in 12 month periods. Not surprisingly little variance is available over these short time periods, even more so when all countries are grouped together to provide a global snapshot of the gender gap. Data is at risk of being over-aggregated such that important variations – of potential use to scholars, activists and policymakers – are occluded. Consider, for example, fig A1 below on the global gender gap index by sub index 2006-2009. This shows basically no change in health and survival across the world in the last 4 years, and also that most of the world's countries rank at almost equal in terms of their gender gap. It is hard to imagine how this data could be used to address health inequalities. It is, however, quite easy to imagine a danger that money and resources will be shifted from health and survival and education concerns to economic participation and political participation given these seem to be lagging behind (and they are also more sensitive to 12 monthly measuring cycles). This leads me to another key concern about the prioritization of the 4 areas chosen in the index.

Figure A1: Global Gender Gap Index by subindex, 2006–2009



Source: Global Gender Gap Indexes, 2006–2009; scores are weighted by population. Population data from World Bank's *World Development Indicators* online database, 2005, 2006 and 2007, accessed June 2009.

There is little explanation given as to why the 4 indicators were chosen to signify empowerment for men and women in the countries being measured, and no discussion of the way that access to those 4 sets of resources are used within academic and activist circles as key indicators of well-being. This is particularly important for the measures of economic participation and empowerment, and political participation. Feminist scholars and activists continue to debate whether, when, and how paid employment can signify empowerment for women. Some studies have shown that waged work can allow women to leave abusive relationships with men, establish more independent relationships with family members, gain self-respect etc. But at the same time ratios of women's to men's labor force participation can go up because men are being hit hard by unemployment, because export processing zones (often operating 'outside' a country's labor regulations) are employing young women in poorly paid and sometimes dangerous work, hoping that they will be less likely to unionize; or because women are forced through poverty into paid work while carrying out unpaid care responsibilities. None of these scenarios is typically described as empowering. Yet in the WEF's index labor force participation rates get to stand in straightforwardly as measures of global gender empowerment, carrying as much

weight as data on whether women are alive or dead, or whether they get access to primary education.

In particular, gender experts all over the world have pointed out that paid work can not be discussed as empowering for women without considering unpaid care responsibilities – yet hardly any mention is made in the 2009 report of childcare, parental and care givers' leave, and so on. The 2009 report contains an extended discussion of “the marriage and motherhood gaps” (the different labor force participation rates of single and married women, and of women with no children versus women with 3 children), in a text box on “*The dynamics of the gender gap: how do countries rank in terms of making marriage and motherhood compatible with work?*” (27). This recognizes that

“whether women participate in the labor market depends on how compatible marriage and motherhood are with employment.” However the fact that women are working is understood to mean that they are empowered.

Hence the fact that “*in almost half the countries we studied, women with three children work at least as much as women with no children*” is taken to show that “*motherhood has not been a universal obstacle for female labor force participation.*” (27). It is not understood as evidence that women with 3 or more children may have to surmount enormous obstacles to take paid work on along side exhausting unpaid care in order to survive. Brazil, Spain, Greece, Israel, and Argentina are identified as model countries that have made the fastest progress in closing the employment gap for married women, while Austria and Bolivia have registered big reductions in the motherhood gap. But we get no information about the key causal explanations for this progress. We can thus wonder whether it matters that Spanish feminists have allied with national and sub-national socialist and nationalist parties to use EU gender regulations to improve Spain's equality framework (Bustelo and Orbals 2007). Or maybe Spanish feminists can learn from Argentine women's experiences of the intensified “double day” they had to undertake when they took paid work to cope with economic crisis (Lipszyc et. al. 2004). But the report gives us no information on these issues. The text box concludes that the motherhood employment gap “*is related to the compatibility of marriage and motherhood with a lifestyle where women can work. Some countries have made enormous progress in this area. We*

should learn more from them.” However it does not provide enough breakdown of the key cases to allow such learning to occur – over-aggregation and lack of attention to causal connections (which may make employment have a different relationship to empowerment in one case than another) render it unhelpful.

Similar points can be made about the political participation indicator. The report’s authors recognize the lack of data on local government as a limitation given that women’s political participation tends to be concentrated at lower levels of government than the ones measured by the index. They promise to include this if global data becomes available (4). However there is no discussion of the links between getting women into politics and women’s greater equality. The links between formal and substantive equality are assumed here, but existing research on women’s political participation (and there is a *lot* of it – see Krook 2010) does not provide firm grounds for that assumption, especially when looking at women serving in very high levels such as the executive.

V. Gender equality versus women’s empowerment?

The WEF index ranks countries according to gender equality rather than women’s empowerment. It understands this to mean that it measures how close women are to parity with men, but it does not reward or penalize countries with gender gaps in the other direction. The authors explain “we find the 1-sided scale more appropriate for our purposes” (2009, 6), in large part because it does not reward countries for trying to exceed the 50/50% benchmark. They go on:

“Our aim is to focus on whether the gap between women and men in the chosen variables has declined, rather than whether women are “winning” the “battle of the sexes.” A footnote elaborates:

“A first attempt to calculate the gender gap was made by the World Economic Forum in 2005; see Lopez-Claros and Zahidi, Women’s Empowerment: Measuring the Global Gender Gap. The 2005 Index, which was attempting to capture women’s empowerment, used a “feminist” scale that rewarded women’s supremacy over men (the highest score is assigned to the country with the biggest gap in favor of women)” (30).

This is an interesting move, for a number of reasons. While it may help feminists who have had to struggle with claims that men's disempowerment (usually in the realm of education) is the crucial gender concern, it confines the parameters of gender work very narrowly, to the creation of a 50/50% split of pre-identified resources. Inadequate overall supply of those resources is outside the scope of discussion - what matters is that they are shared equally. Thus, Angola scores very highly for equality on health and survival, on the grounds that its healthy life expectancy is 35 for women, and 32 for men (60). DAWN activists identified the absurdity of this sort of reasoning decades ago when noting that "equality with men, who themselves suffered unemployment, low wages, poor work conditions and racism within the existing socioeconomic structures did not seem an adequate or worthy goal" (Sen and Grown 1987, 25). More recently, Argentine economist Valeria Esquivel has criticized models of global care provision that rest on men sharing domestic labour more equally with women on similar grounds:

"...Gender inequality in the distribution of unpaid care work is not the only problem with care... Developing countries may face absolute care deficits, as some crucial care requirements are simply not met and neither families nor the community can compensate for state absence or retrenchment. In these circumstances, even "equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men" would not suffice to provide the care required." (Esquivel 2008, 4, original emphasis).

Or as a joint UNIFEM and UNAIDS paper on care explained:

"The redistribution of care work between men and women within the household or community is unlikely to sufficiently address the profound issues of poverty, strain and hardship of caregiving on families and households. Nor is it likely to meet the ever growing gaps in services and safety nets on the part of governments associated with health sector reforms, decentralization, privatization and cuts to social spending." (UNAIDS/UNIFEM 2008, 9).⁵

At issue here is the restriction of gender equality to mean the equal sharing of pathetically inadequate resources and services. An index constructed on these grounds

⁵ For more on the limits of a 50/50 sharing model in care debates see Bedford 2010.

offers activists who are interested in broader notions of gender justice (involving redistribution of wealth, addressing overall deficits in service provision, challenging low wages, poor working conditions, racism, and existing socioeconomic structures) no support.

Secondly, innumerable studies have been done confirming the need to take an intersectional approach to gender inequality, recognizing that women are not a homogenous group and that women's and men's access to resources and power are affected by class, race and other social relations, and that these must be tackled comprehensively for equality to be secured. The WEF index, in contrast, fails to disaggregate its data on men and women, meaning that inequalities within each group appear to fall outside of the mandate of global gender activism. Again activists working on the principle that global gender inequalities can not be tackled except through interconnected struggles against racism, ableism, and so on, will find nothing useful here. In fact their work may be harmed because the aggregated data may conceal important inequalities around which they are mobilizing (e.g. on indigenous women's health, or discrimination against women of color in the labor market, etc.). The index may allow national and regional leaders to trumpet their successes in achieving gender equality while making it harder for those demanding action on intersectional inequalities to get heard.

Finally, the uneasiness of the report's authors about gender empowerment, their eschewing of feminism, and their preference for what they understand to be equality over a "war of the sexes" strike at the heart of what some critical commentators have been saying about gender and development for a while now: that it can endorse a remarkably conservative, and frighteningly banal, approach to gender. The WEF approach to gender is one stripped of power relations, wherein consensus can move us gradually towards gender equality (on the grounds of economic efficiency). It is unable to countenance any notion of conflict – talk of war must be overcome with talk of the 50/50 benchmark. This emphasis on consensus must overlook the daily realities of male violence and exploitation that frame so many women's lives; the costs of gender inequality, in terms of lost productivity and harm to economic growth, are useful to chart (e.g. 24) but the benefits are nowhere to be seen. Hence the concluding finding - that "the index continues to track the strong correlation between the gender gap and national competitiveness and sends a clear

message to policy-makers to incorporate gender equality into their national priorities” (29) - leaves the competitiveness agenda and existing national priorities untouched.

Moreover it is worth wondering, seriously, whether sharing harmony between men and women - the 50/50% split – is the aim we should be striving for if we are interested in development and equality. This entrenches the experiences of the powerful as the standard to be achieved. Hence equality means women becoming ministers (not imagining politics differently, to give people greater autonomy over their lives, bodies, imaginaries), or becoming 50% of technical and professional workers (not querying who gets to be classified in that way, or paying nurses and teachers and informal care workers like engineers).

The preference for equality over empowerment also requires relentless attachment to the other half of the benchmark. Hence, to return to the report’s extended discussion of the marriage and motherhood gap (the difference between single women’s labor force participation rate and married women’s, and between the labor force participation of women with no children and 3 children), the report is happy to query “how compatible marriage and motherhood are with employment”, but not how compatible marriage, motherhood and employment are with what women want – with their empowerment. Assumptions are made about women’s lifecycles moving inexorably through marriage and motherhood, and ending there, a curious move for Latin American researchers given that female headed households compose a quarter of all households in some areas (some of these women are married, of course, but it is telling that divorced women are not in the data at all, and there is no way to tell whether people are separated).

That waged work might enable women to leave husbands (as some studies suggest) also raises interesting questions about economic empowerment and intimate autonomy, but they are not addressed; neither is the important work showing that biological parenthood is not necessarily the only indicator of who cares for children (and thus who may be suffering barriers to employment because of care-related responsibilities). And of course people whose lives are not organized on a 50/50 attachment model are implied to be less equal. Single parents, divorced people, female headed households, people in non-monogamous relationships, widows, people who do not experience or live their gender identity in binary terms, single-sex groups living together – are we to be overcome as our societies progress towards 50/50 equality? Perhaps we are

unfortunate echoes of a war, of empowerment rather than equality, since some of us who are divorced, single, or queer opted for a version of intimate autonomy outside the 50/50 split? Perhaps we are victims, abandoned and deserted?

As I read through the index, however, I wondered if some of us might constitute a limit to the WEF's approach to gender equality. If, as OXFAM's gender specialist noted in the quote that opens this discussion, the most difficult problem for Gender and Development nowadays is people pretending to agree, there is something important in pointing out where the disagreements lie, where the pretending fails, where the visions of gender justice clash. In particular, it seems that here is a crucial conversation to be had about that footnote explaining why the WEF moved away from feminism, and empowerment, to 50/50 benchmarking – the loss of the first conversation is a serious one for scholars and activists.

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