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Dark underbelly of the world's most 'peaceful' countries

Some nations that rank well in the Global Peace Index are notorious for violence against women and children.

By Riane Eisler

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PACIFIC GROVE, CALIF. - The first-ever study ranking countries according to their level of peacefulness, the Global Peace Index, was recently published by the Economist Intelligence Unit.

Sensibly, its basic premise is that "peace isn't just the absence of war; it's the absence of violence."

The index uses 24 indicators such as how many soldiers are killed, the level of violent crimes, and relations with neighboring countries.

Yet it fails to include the most prevalent form of global violence: violence against women and children, often in their own families. To put it mildly, this blind spot makes the index very inaccurate.

Glancing at the list shows why. Out of 121 countries studied, the United States ranked 96; Israel was 119. But Libya, Cuba, and China – not exactly paragons of human rights – rank 58, 59, and 60.

A closer examination reveals some of the sources of distortion:

•For example, Egypt was ranked 73. But more than 90 percent of Egyptian girls and women are subjected to genital mutilation. This gruesome practice causes many lifelong physical problems and claims the lives of countless women. It's a terrible form of violence, but it wasn't included in the index, otherwise Egypt would have ranked much lower.

•United Arab Emirates is 38, but this does not count the jockey slave trade of little boys for the camel races that are a favorite sport in this area. It is well known that these children are often treated worse than the camels, subject to whippings and other violence, as well as given little to eat so they won't weigh much. (To its credit, the UAE banned the use of underage camel jockeys in 2005. According to the US State Department: "...all identified victims were repatriated at the government's expense to their home countries. Questions persist as to the effectiveness of the ban, and the number of victims is still unidentified.")

But if this violence, as well as the violence of "honor killings" of girls and women in the Middle East were included, such nations would rank much lower.

•China ranked 60, but female infanticide is still a major problem, as shown by the imbalanced ratio of males to females there.

•Chile ranked 16, but as in many Latin American nations (and nations worldwide), the incidence of wife battering is extremely high. For example, although this violence is still rarely prosecuted or officially reported, 26 percent of Chilean women suffered at least one episode of violence by a partner, according to a 2000 UNICEF study.

The authors of the Global Peace Index expressed hope that it will lead to a new approach to the study of peace. They also said they plan to expand their criteria for future indexes. This expansion must start with major changes in the 10 "measures of societal safety and security."

The current index rightly seeks to measure the "level of disrespect for human rights." But according to the report's methodology, this level was based on the "Political Terror Scale" – a scale that ignores the fact that the most ubiquitous human rights violations worldwide are, as a UNICEF report noted 10 years ago, violations of the rights of women and children.

That the index fails to include this violence is particularly shocking in light of the longstanding availability of international statistics such as:

- Twenty percent of women and 5 to 10 percent of men have suffered sexual abuse as children.
- Between 100 million and 132 million girls and women have been subjected to genital mutilation worldwide. Each year, an estimated 2 million join their ranks.
- Female infanticide, selective female malnutrition, and medical neglect of girls are far too common. In India's Punjab State, girls between the ages of 2 and 4 die at nearly twice the rate of boys.

Similarly, while the index rightly includes "level of violent crime," it fails to take into account that much of the violence in families is still not considered a crime in many nations – and hence not reported, much less prosecuted, as such.

It's unrealistic to expect "cultures of peace" so long as children grow up in families in which the use of violence to impose one's will on others is considered normal, even moral.

The good news is that not every one growing up in such families perpetuates violence. The bad news is that many people do – be it in intimate or international relations.

Intimate and international violence are inextricably interconnected. But we can only see this once we include in studies of violence the majority: women and children. If we are serious about peace – not just about measuring it but about creating more of it – we have to look at the whole picture.

We must pay particular attention to those formative experiences when young people first learn either to respect human rights or to accept human rights violations as just the way things are.

Only as we leave behind traditions of domination and violence in the human family will we have solid foundations on which to build global peace.

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