

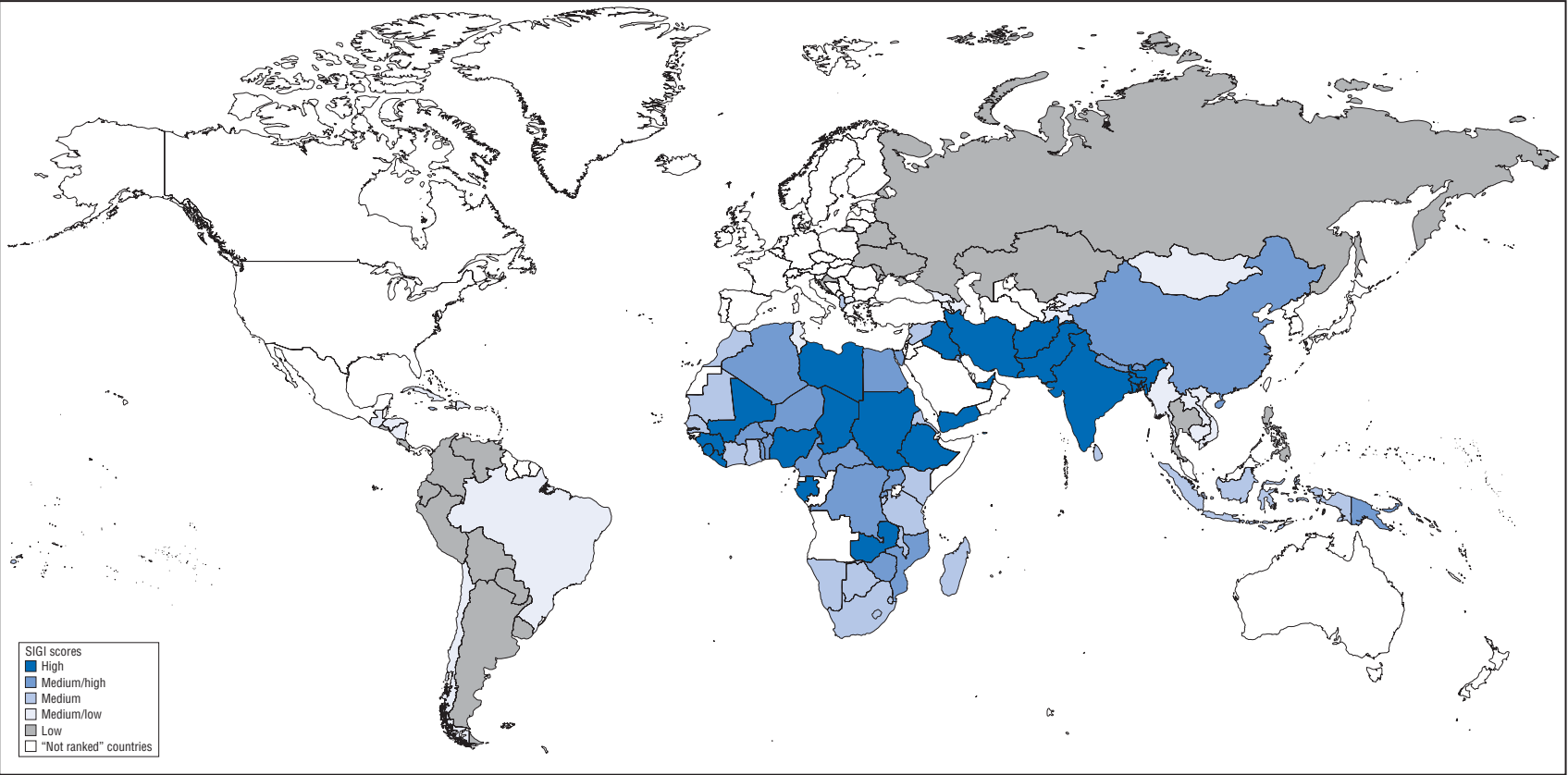
# WORLD OVERVIEW

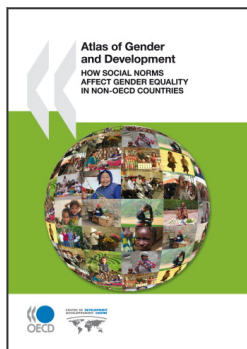
**G**ender discrimination in social institutions spans the world – from highly developed countries such as the Gulf States to low income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Overall, the regions of the world fall into two main groups: On the one hand is South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa, where on average gender discrimination as measured on the SIGI is high to very high; on the other is East Asia and Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean and Europe and Central Asia, a grouping characterised by lower levels of gender inequality.

This overall pattern is a useful starting point for understanding the main differences across regions, but it is also necessary to look at each country individually. Within each region and within countries there are huge differences in gender equality, reflecting factors such as culture and religion, the rural-urban divide, the level of development and the political system. Nonetheless, some striking discriminatory features in different regions can be highlighted: the high incidence of son preference in Asia; the prevalence of early marriage in some Asian and African countries; land ownership, rarely accessible by women, especially in Asia and Africa; restrictions on freedom of movement and of dress, mostly in the Middle East and North Africa; and domestic violence, for example in Latin America and Europe and Central Asia.

While the overall picture of gender inequality portrayed in this Atlas is rather worrying, not everything is bleak. Progress has been made in many areas: women's job opportunities have expanded in East Asia and Pacific in the last decades, mainly in the services and manufacturing industries; a plethora of micro-credit programmes and initiatives have flourished across all continents, and women are increasingly becoming active in starting up and running their own businesses, notably in the Middle East and North Africa; and governments in Asia are involving more women in local decision-making, which is an essential element for progress.

Overall, this Atlas shows that socio-cultural practices can evolve regardless of income level, religious affiliations and political systems. In order to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of gender equality by 2015, we must understand the conditions that enable changes in discriminatory social institutions, and enforce existing laws that help drive this process. The stakes are high, the challenge enormous; but as research has shown, the rewards will not only give what Amartya Sen calls the “freedom of choice” to women and men all over the world but will also unlock the potential for fairer and stronger growth.





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