

**BIG  
ISSUES**

# INEQUALITY

*the uneven and/or unjust distribution of resources  
and opportunities*

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# BIG ISSUES: INEQUALITY

**Inequality** refers to the uneven and/or unjust distribution of resources and opportunities within a society. Inequality can be seen at a local level within communities or a household, but also at a national, regional or global scale.

Inequality has been a feature of human societies for most of our history - there have always been the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. In recent decades some forms of inequality have reduced. For example, access to education and to safe supplies of water have improved at a global level (though these are still not equal for everyone). Other forms of inequality have increased over recent decades and especially those related to wealth.

Inequality is a major challenge with impacts on people's health, education, housing, income-earning potential, and on their mental health and well-being. Inequality can also be linked to crime, substance abuse, violence (especially against women) and to a failure to meet people's human rights.



The United Nations has made reducing inequalities one of its 17 Sustainable Development Goals - Goal 10 - but because inequality is such a complex issue, it also has clear connections with the other 16 SDGs (see other goals below).



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## Inequality - a complex reality

The experience of inequality can be felt in many different ways. In an Indian household it might be that one child is given access to education whilst another is not. In rural Uganda it may be about who has land in order to grow sufficient food to feed their family. In suburban England it could be about whether you can afford transportation to get to where you need. For teens in rural Greece it might be about whether they can access the latest digital technology and the opportunities this enables. In the USA it could be about the cost of healthcare when you become ill and whether you can afford treatment.

Inequality can be about both practical (e.g. access to water) and emotional (e.g. attitudes towards gender) relationships and so have both physiological and psychological impacts on those affected. One of the reasons that inequality is such a big issue is because of the 'knock-on' or 'multiplier' impact that it can have on people and societies. Not having sufficient money to meet your basic needs (food, water, housing, clothing etc.) could mean you go hungry or cold. This may, in turn, make you at higher risk of illnesses or diseases and this might impact on your ability to work and earn income.

The above is an example of a negative spiral, of things becoming worse, but it is also possible to map a positive spiral by removing inequalities. A 'living wage' for workers that ensures they have enough to meet their essential needs can have a positive effect for example. Access to education or healthcare for all can have similarly positive impacts for both individuals and wider society.

Girls who have access to education are likely to be able to read information about their health and so have greater control over their own bodies and reproductive choices. If they have children, those children will have a better chance of surviving and put less pressure on the healthcare system.

Making sure everyone can access safe water and sanitation facilities can dramatically improve the health of a population as water-related diseases are one of the world's biggest causes of ill health and death.

*A child born in Sierra Leone in 2021 can expect to live to 60, but for a child born in Japan they'd expect to live to 84.<sup>1</sup>*



Photo by Annie Spratt on Unsplash

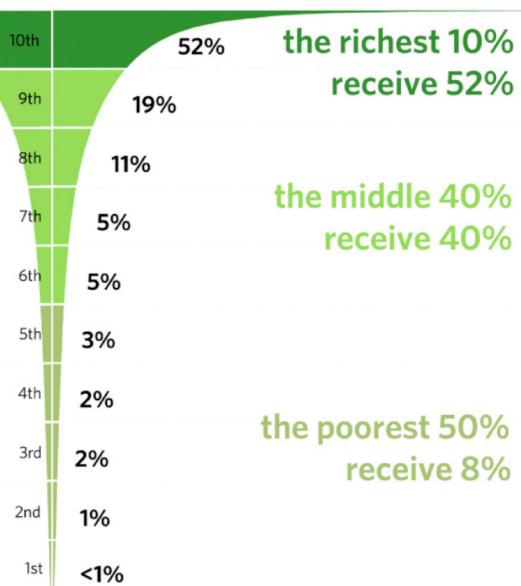
The life chances of this young child in Sierra Leone will be shaped in part by the inequalities they encounter.

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## Measuring inequality

Because it is complex, inequality can be challenging to measure. Most measures look at a specific type of inequality such as gender or wealth, or at inequality in relation to particular resources such as healthcare, water or housing. Inequality can also be measured at different scales, ranging from global differences to variations within a country.

At a global level the most common ways to measure inequality are to look at wealth distribution. The 'champagne glass' model below is one way to show this. It shows that the wealthiest 10 per cent of the world's population receive over half of global income (wealth), whilst half of the world's people share just 8 per cent of global wealth.



And recent trends suggest that the impact of the global Covid pandemic (2019-2021) has caused global income inequality to increase again for the first time in decades.

*In the ten years up to 2022 for every US\$100 of wealth created, US\$54.40 went to the wealthiest 1 per cent of people, compared to just US\$0.70 to the poorest 50 per cent of people.<sup>2</sup>*

Wealth or income is only one measure of inequality. Other common measures of inequality at a global scale include key indicators such as access to water, literacy rates (those over 15 able to read and write) or those going hungry. For most countries, and at a global scale these measures have been improving over the past 30-40 years, but there is still significant progress needed to reduce inequality as these figures relating to some of the SDGs demonstrate:



About 1 in 10 people worldwide are suffering from hunger.<sup>3</sup>



Half of the world's primary classrooms lack access to computers or the Internet.<sup>4</sup>



At current rates 1.6 billion people will lack safely managed drinking water in 2030.<sup>5</sup>

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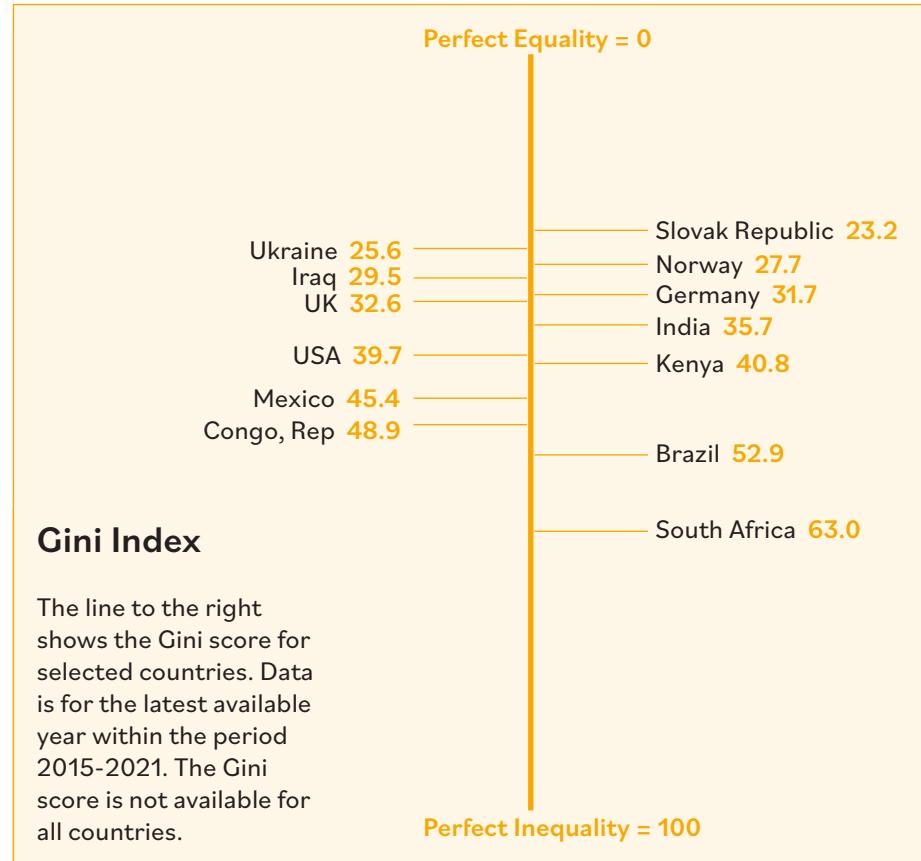
## Scales of inequality

Measuring inequality at a global scale can hide other forms of inequality. At a global scale for example, people living in the global north are significantly wealthier than those living in the global south. However there are people living in the global south who are very wealthy and people living in the global north who are very poor.

In the UK, one of the wealthiest countries in the world, 4.7 million people (7 per cent of the population) were living in food poverty in 2021/22.<sup>6</sup> In India where more than 211 million people live in poverty<sup>7</sup>, there are estimated to be around 70 new millionaires created every day.<sup>8</sup> These examples of inequality are at a national level. The Gini Index is a measure of how equal or unequal a country is. It does this by looking at how income is distributed among the population.



Photo by Steve Knutson on Unsplash



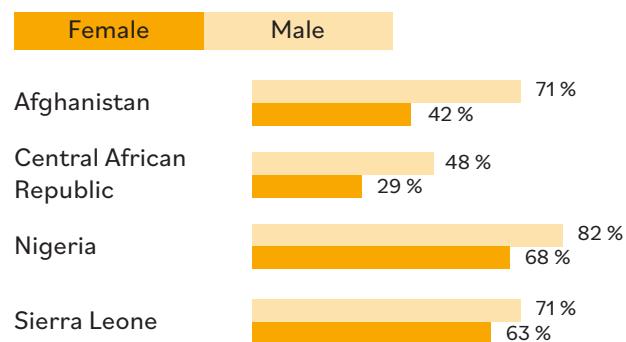
The Gini Index gives a score between 0 (perfect equality) and 100 (perfect inequality). The infographic above shows a selection of countries and their Gini score ranging from the most equal country (Slovak Republic) to the most unequal country (South Africa).

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Inequality can also be experienced at a regional scale within countries. Healthcare, education or public transport may be better in one part of a country to another for example. At the local scale, within a particular city, town, or community there may also be inequalities. In London (UK) for example, the life expectancy for a male born in the Westminster area in 2020 was 84.7 years, compared to 78.6 years in the neighbouring area of Lambeth - a difference of 6 years.<sup>9</sup>

Inequality can even be seen at the household scale with differences in access to education for boys and girls in many countries (see infographic below). Similar inequalities may also exist for access to healthcare or even food.

## Youth (15-24 years) literacy rate, 2013-22<sup>10</sup>



## Attitudes, identity and inequality

Although inequalities can be connected to overall wealth and levels of development this is not true for all forms of inequality. Some forms of inequality are associated with identity or with

dominant social attitudes. People may be treated unequally due to a range of factors in this way including their gender, religion, skin colour, or sexual orientation.

***1 in 5 people have experienced discrimination on at least one of the grounds prohibited under International Human Rights Law.<sup>11</sup>***

In 2023 for example, there remain laws against being homosexual in 64 nations (mostly in Africa and Asia) with the death penalty still enforced in five of these.<sup>12</sup> Even within those countries where homosexuality is not criminalised less than half (67 of 174) recognise same sex marriage or partnership.<sup>13</sup>

Gender is another area where there are significant inequalities at global and national scales. In 2022, women accounted for only 26.2 % of elected positions globally,<sup>14</sup> despite making up half of the population. Within the European Union, women's earnings were on average 12.7 % below those of men in 2021.<sup>15</sup>

Women, on average, earn less than men, sometimes even for doing the same job.



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Inequality based on race and ethnicity shows up in income, health, education, housing, crime and other forms of data in many countries. In the USA, which will be a majority Black and Latino population by mid century, the median wealth for a Black family was US\$ 24,100 in 2019 and US\$ 36,050 for a Latino family. This compares with US\$ 189,100 for White families.<sup>16</sup>

## Inequality, movements and new inequalities

The high profile killing of George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020, led to the #Black Lives Matter movement gaining global headlines. The strength of feeling about the inequality that many Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people had to live with has led to efforts across the world to redress decades of discrimination and racist attitudes that date back to the colonial conquests of European powers.

#MeToo is another movement that has been tackling inequality and focussing on the treatment and abuse of women in the workplace. Both #Black Lives Matter and #MeToo have been able to use modern social media to raise awareness of inequalities at local, national and global scales.

Social media has also been a force in bringing new inequalities into the spotlight such as the inequalities associated with the impact of the climate emergency. This shows that those countries who produce the fewest emissions responsible for the climate emergency are often the most affected by its consequences. Extreme weather events, droughts, floods, and disease outbreaks associated with the climate emergency are all felt the most by those who are already among the poorest in the world.

Photo by Saikiran Kesari on Unsplash





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