



# Life satisfaction across nations: The effects of women's political status and public priorities



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## ABSTRACT

Feminist scholars suggest that improving the quality of life of individuals living in nations around the world may be more readily achieved by increasing women's political power and by reorienting public-policy priorities, than by focusing primarily on economic growth. These considerations raise the question of which characteristics of societies are associated with the quality of life of the people in those societies. Here, we address this issue empirically by statistically analyzing cross-national data. We assess the effects of gender equality in the political sphere, as well as a variety of other factors, on the subjective well-being of nations, as indicated by average self-reported levels of life satisfaction. We find that people report the highest levels of life satisfaction in nations where women have greater political representation, where military spending is low, and where health care spending is high, controlling for a variety of other factors. GDP per capita, urbanization, and natural resource exploitation are not clearly associated with life satisfaction. These findings suggest that nations may be able to improve the subjective quality of life of people without increasing material wealth or natural resource consumption by increasing gender equality in politics and changing public spending priorities.

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## 1. Introduction

What are the societal goals behind economic growth? Ostensibly, expansion of the economy is aimed at improving people's lives. Measures of economic affluence, such as the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, are commonly used as indicators of quality of life of people in nations. However, the connection between GDP per capita and quality of life is not straightforward (Diener, Helliwell, and Kahneman, 2010).<sup>1</sup> In fact, some activists and scholars have argued that GDP is "utterly unrelated to the well-being of a community" (Waring quoted in Nash, 1995) because the levels of inequality, poverty, health, educational attainment, and environmental conditions in a nation are not reflected in the GDP (Waring, 1999). The recognition of the limitations of economic measures for gauging a nation's living conditions and overall well-being has spread widely. Increasingly, scholars and activists are calling for a shift toward measuring societal well-being using indicators that assess not only people's physical conditions, including their health, but also how people themselves evaluate their own

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<sup>1</sup> The cited work is an edited volume, with chapters by various authors. Our reference is specifically to the general summary remarks made by the editors in the introduction based on their overall assessment of the various works in the volume, as well as the extensive literature on cross-national differences in well-being, but also more generally to the content of the volume, which has several chapters addressing various aspects of cross-national differences in subjective well-being.

well-being (Diener et al., 2010; New Economics Foundation, 2009). Focusing on more direct measures of well-being has the advantage of allowing us to ask the question of *whether* economic growth and other indicators of economic development actually improve people's lives, rather than assuming that they do *a priori*. This type of approach also opens up the possibility of assessing how a variety of other factors, such as social inequalities, affect the ways in which people experience their lives. To help further our understanding of the factors that influence the well-being of people, our aim here is to assess the effects of women's representation in the political sphere, affluence as measured by GDP per capita, and other factors on the average self-reported life satisfaction of people across nations.

How societies work to improve people's lives has important implications for the environment. A considerable body of research has established that some of the hallmarks of modernity and development – economic growth, urbanization, and the globalization of markets, among other factors – are associated with a rising tide of environmental problems, historically unprecedented in scale and diversity (Jorgenson and Clark, 2012; Rosa et al., 2004; York et al., 2003). Scholars have found that those nations considered to be the most “developed” by these types of criteria typically have high levels of environmental impact relative to the standard of living of their people (Dietz et al., 2009, 2012; Knight and Rosa, 2011; New Economics Foundation, 2009). Furthermore, there is growing evidence that while increasing the quantity of material possessions, economic growth has not necessarily improved people's lives (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2011; Diener et al., 2010; Leiserowitz et al., 2005). In fact, empirical work has established that high levels of consumption of energy and other natural resources are not closely connected with the quality of life of people in societies (Mazur and Rosa, 1974; Rosa, 1997; Seaford, 2011). There are quite a number of so-called “less-developed countries” (LDCs) where people live long lives and report high levels of life satisfaction, while having relatively small ecological footprints (New Economics Foundation, 2009; Seaford, 2011).

In light of the many environmental problems the world faces, finding ways to improve people's lives without increasing their material affluence is critical for the future of our planet. Thus, there is a need to assess which societal factors show promise for improving people's well-being without relying on increasing resource consumption. We maintain that important insights into this effort can be found in the work of feminist scholars who argue that greater gender equality and a reorientation of social priorities can improve people's quality of life without the environmental consequences associated with common modes of economic growth (Waring, 1999). Here we aim to assess the effects of various factors on the average subjective well-being of people in nations, focusing especially on gender equality in national parliaments.

To put our research in context, we first present a brief overview of research on cross-national differences in well-being. We then briefly review research on the connections between gender relationships and quality of life, presenting some of the reasons why we may expect there to be a connection between women's political representation and the well-being of the populous. We then explain our analysis and present our findings.

## 2. Cross-national differences in well-being

There is a large body of cumulative scholarly work on the factors that influence people's well-being, examining both individual level factors and societal level factors (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2011; Diener and Lucas, 2000; Diener et al., 2010; Veenhoven, 2005). Here we focus on the literature examining average differences across nations, since that is the level of our own analysis.

Many analyses have focused on the extent to which material affluence, typically measured as per capita GDP or GNP, is connected with subjective well-being. While there is a diversity of findings, an assessment of the research overall suggests that people in more affluent nations tend to report higher levels of life satisfaction than people in poor nations, but the association is fairly weak (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2011; Diener and Lucas, 2000). In particular, the cross-sectional pattern, broadly speaking, suggests a relationship of diminishing returns, where the association of life satisfaction with higher income is clearest when comparing nations with very low income to those with moderate levels of income, but there is not a clear difference in life satisfaction between nations with moderate levels of income and those which are highly affluent (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2011; Diener et al., 2010; Seaford, 2011). Additionally, while the cross-sectional pattern suggests that affluence matters to some degree, analyses of time-series data have not found compelling evidence to suggest that economic growth increases life satisfaction within nations (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2011).

Political and social factors have been shown to affect average subjective well-being in nations. In particular, the average well-being of people is generally higher in nations where democracy and democratic participation, personal freedom, and individualism are strong (Frey and Stutzer, 2000; Helliwell and Huang, 2008; Veenhoven, 1999; Welsch, 2003). Well-being is also higher in nations with low economic inequality (Veenhoven, 2005; Winkelmann and Winkelmann, 2010). Additionally, well-being appears to be greater in nations with higher levels of public spending, particularly on health care, and more developed welfare states (Kotakorpi and Laamen, 2010; Pacek and Radcliff, 2008).

Related to the research on subjective well-being, there is an important body of literature in sociology examining the connection between military development and physical well-being (commonly indicated by life expectancy). Dixon and Moon (1986) and Moon and Dixon (1985) found that military spending was associated with lower physical well-being in nations, whereas democracy was connected with higher well-being. Similarly, Jenkins and Scanlan (2001) and Scanlan and Jenkins (2001) found that military spending and arms imports reduced food security and increased child hunger in nations. Since there is an established connection between physical well-being, particularly as indicated by life expectancy,

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