

Women need more economic freedom, not more government

By [Antony Davies](#) 6:49 PM 03/09/2012

Thursday was International Women's Day, so it's fitting that we take a moment to recognize factors that contribute to greater gender equality around the world. Here's a hint: Gender equality is not, as some op-ed writers have suggested recently, the result of government action. ADVERTISEMENT

Data from two different sources — the Fraser Institute's Economic Freedom of the World Index and the United Nations' Gender Inequality Index — show that women who live in societies with more economic freedom enjoy greater gender equality. In other words, women don't need help to achieve equality; they just need governments and coercive institutions to get out of their way.

These data sets show that societies with high levels of economic freedom offer women more opportunity, protection and equality than societies with less. Gender inequality among the 60 countries with the least economic freedom is 2.5 times greater on average than is gender inequality among the 60 countries with the most economic freedom. In countries that are more economically free, all people — women as well as men — have better protected property rights, find it easier to start their own businesses and are better able to pursue education. The good news doesn't end there. Countries with more economic freedom also enjoy higher standards of living and more equitable income distributions.

But what comes first — freedom or equality?

Gender equality follows economic freedom because the more economically free a country is, the better able its people are to make decisions for themselves and the less able gender-biased institutions are to impose their misogynistic wills on others who will hold them accountable.

In free economies, businesses that discriminate against women pay for it. Within hours of Rush Limbaugh suggesting — on air — that Georgetown student Sandra Fluke was a woman of questionable moral character, nine advertisers dropped Limbaugh's radio show. Did they do this out of moral outrage? I'd like to think so.

In an economically free world, all that is necessary is that the advertisers fear that irate customers might stop buying their products. In a free economy, you can't force people to buy your product and you can't force people to invest in your company, so you are subject to the wrath of consumers who don't appreciate your gender bias and will take their business and investment dollars elsewhere. But in a crony-capitalist economy, a good old boy network can remain in power because it can co-opt the government to force people to buy its products, to invest in its stock and to bail it out.

Economic freedom isn't a cure for gender discrimination. Discrimination is a moral ill that resides in people's hearts — it's merely expressed in their institutions. The cure for discrimination is to raise our children to be people of good will. A free economy is the stage on which people of good will are best able to take action to make the world a better place. The data on economic freedom and gender inequality suggest that we have a lot of people of good will in the world. What they need is more freedom.

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