Women's Participation and Influence as Pillar of Democracy

KEY FINDINGS:

- *Institutions such as gender quotas and proportional electoral systems, are among the most efficient ways to improve women's political representation.*

- *Democracies are better than autocracies at safe-guarding women's rights.*

- *Political empowerment of women is associated with a number of long-term development goals such as economic growth and improved population health.*

Even though adult women represent the majority in most countries, they exercise considerably less political power than men. The most prominent explanations for this phenomenon include cultural and social barriers (traditional understandings about the role of women in society), but institutional factors such as gender quotas and proportional electoral systems are also very important and often much easier to change. While democracies do not necessarily have more women in powerful positions than autocracies, the former are significantly better at protecting women's civil liberties. Yet in autocracies, better protection of women's rights is associated with subsequent push for democratic transition. Finally, there is strong evidence that women's political empowerment promotes long-term human development, further motivating the need to ensure better representation of women.

Although adult women represent the mathematical majority in most countries, they participate less in political activities and hold considerably less political power. While the trends are starting to change, women still occupy far fewer and less influential political offices than men do.

In 2019, women only constituted 24.3% of members in parliament worldwide on average; occupied a mere 20.7% of cabinet positions; and across the 195 countries in the world there were exactly 10 women Heads of State and 10 Head of Government worldwide (IPU and UN Women 2019).

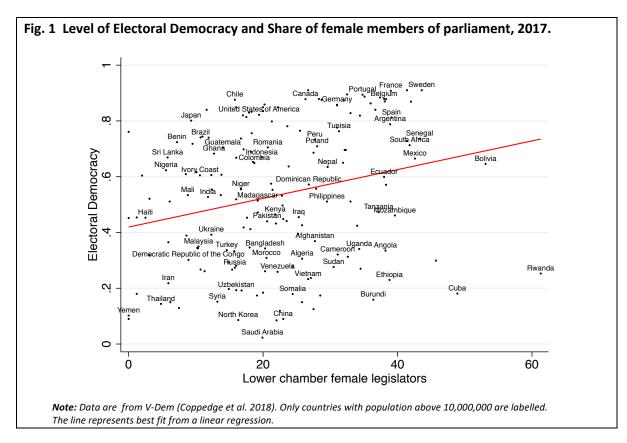**What is the reason for women's under-representation?**

The recent literature puts forward institutional, social and cultural barriers as the main reasons for women's political under-representation rather than biological differences between the sexes, or lower ambition on behalf of women to pursue political careers (Tremblay 2007).

The institutional explanations for the under-representation of women posit that different rules of the game favor men and women.

For example, proportional electoral systems with large, multimember constit-uencies are more favourable for electing

women than majoritarian single-member district systems (for a discussion see Ballington 2005). The reason is simply that it is easier for women to be accepted as number two, three, or four on a party list in a proportional system, than as the number one and only candidate in a single-member system.

Nontheless, gender quotas is the most effective institutional reform to enhancing women's representation. The decision to adopt gender quotas can be the result of pressure from activists of women's rights arguing in favour of the importance of equality and representation.

Due to cultural, institutional and social barriers, gender parity in terms of political representation is far from achieved, also in democracies.

Fig. 1 Level of Electoral Democracy and Share of female members of parliament, 2017.

Note: Data are from V-Dem (Coppedge et al. 2018). Only countries with population above 10,000,000 are labelled. The line represents best fit from a linear regression.

However, as gender quotas increasingly become the norm and the international pressure to empower women increases (Krook 2010), autocratic regimes have also started to adopt quotas for strategic purposes. These could be either for "window-dressing" in order to appeal as women-friendly to both domestic and international audiences, or as means of maintaining a dominant's party grip of power by co-opting women (Donno and Kreft 2018).

Therefore, the level of democracy turns out to be only weakly associated with greater political representation for women (Reynolds 1999). **Figure 1** is an illustration of this finding using more recent data (2017) on the relationship between level of democracy and the number of women in parliament. It demonstrates that a number of prominent cases that do not fit the theory about a positive association between democracy and women's greater level of representation.

For example, in terms of numbers of women in parliament some of the most highly ranked democratic countries in the world like Japan, Chile, and United States of America, fall significantly behind some of the most autocratic countries such as Rwanda, Cuba and Burundi.

Another prominent explanation for the under-representation of women that spans across democracies and autocracies, is values embedded in culture and social norms. In particular, the extent to which a society values equality between men and women, is one of the leading explanations in this literature (Norris and Inglehart 2001).

More traditional societies and cultures also tend to have an understanding about a division of society where the public sphere is reserved for men, while women should take care of the private sphere (Krook 2017).

As result, women have historically faced a set of cultural barriers and prejudices that have prevented them from entering politics across all societies. These types of norms and values persist in many places acting as barriers to the election of more women, also in advanced democracies.

For example, a study of the 2008 elections in the U.S. shows that voters still

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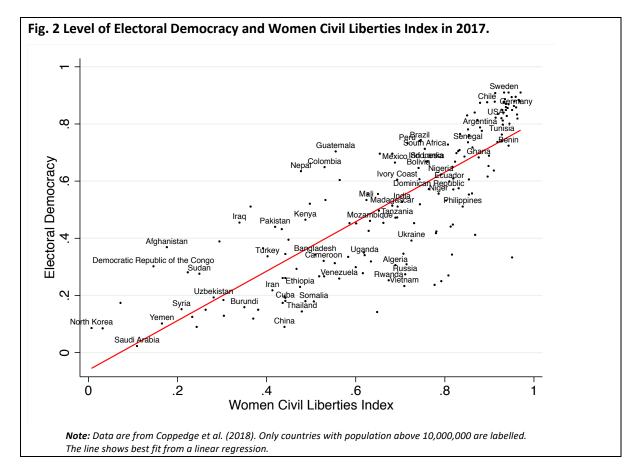
harbor stereotypes where women are seen as warm, compassionate, and family-oriented while men are strong, assertive, and goal-oriented – characteristics valued in leaders (Banwart 2010). When women exhibit such leader-characteristics, they are perceived as being 'cold' and not sufficiently 'nice' (Rudman and Glick 2001).

Women's civil liberties and democracy

A consistent finding in the literature is that women's rights are better protected in democracies (Lindberg 2004). **Figure 2** presents evidence for this finding. The data suggest that the more democratic a country is, the better it

protects women's civil liberties such as freedom of domestic movement, right to private property, freedom from forced labor, and access to justice.[1]

Further, the literature suggests that improving women's rights is essential for successful democratization (Wang et al 2017). Allowing the other half of the population – that is women – to also move freely, organize and discuss politics, considerably changes the capacity and opportunity for the opposition to organize, thus making it ever more difficult for the regime to oppress the population (ibid). Case study evidence from various contexts, Latin America in the 1970s, Middle East and North Africa in the 1990s, and sub-Saharan Africa (for example, South Africa during the apartheid movement) shows that women played an important role in the push toward electoral democracy.

Fig. 2 Level of Electoral Democracy and Women Civil Liberties Index in 2017.

Note: Data are from Coppedge et al. (2018). Only countries with population above 10,000,000 are labelled. The line shows best fit from a linear regression.

Why is equal political representation important?
There are strong normative reasons why women should have an equal say in the political sphere. However, there are also a number of economic and practical arguments suggesting that empowering women has positive consequences for the whole society.

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[1] The women civil liberties measure is a composite index of these four dimensions.

First, ensuring descriptive representation of women in politics is expected to improve the quality of deliberative democracy due to the new and increased variety of ideas (Mansbridge 1999). Women enrich representative bodies with more diverse expertise, knowledge, and preferences. This increases the chances of the best ideas being expressed and adopted, as well as those that are good for as many people as possible.

A simple economic model shows that if we assume that talent is randomly distributed in the population, then ignoring half of the population leads to massive losses of talent (Cuberes and Teignier 2014).

Women as voters and policy-makers tend to favor policies that are conducive to development such as health-care and education.

Importantly, the literature has also shown that there are systematic differences between men and women in terms of their policy preferences and behavior due to their specific experience as groups (Khan 2017, Phillips 1995).

Empirical research has also shown that women tend to favour gender equality (Barnes and Cassese 2017), redistribution (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006), as well as social welfare programs including those that support poverty alleviation, health-care and education programs (Duflo 2012).

Women invest more money than men in goods and services such as health-care and education that support the whole family and which are conducive for development. This is why development banks design loan programs, specifically targeting women, hoping to address development issues (ibid).

Turning to more macro level analysis, there is ample evidence that empowering women politically has a number of positive consequences for the society as a whole. For example, the introduction of female suffrage in the United States led to increased spending for health-care and thereby, improved health outcomes such as infant mortality (Miller 2008).

On the elite level, higher percentage of women in parliament is also associated with increased rates of immunizations, infant and child survival, and overall higher budgets for health (Swiss, Fallon and Burgos 2012, Mechkova and Carlitz 2019). This is a consistent finding in the literature, particularly important when considering long-term development outcomes.

Finally, women political empowerment is associated with economic growth, as result of improved variety and quality of ideas but also because of the investment in development, which women bring as they enter politics (Mechkova and Dahlum 2019).

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