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The State of Women’s Participation and Empowerment: New Challenges to Gender Equality

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

I. Executive summary

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995). It is therefore timely to take stock of the overarching picture of the state of women's participation and empowerment in public life.

Part I summarizes and captures relevant normative and legal policy frameworks and compares the conceptual and empirical interconnections among the three focus areas of the priority theme: women's participation in civic society, their empowerment in political decision-making, and the elimination of violence against women in public life.

Long-term advances for gender equality in public life have commonly occurred in many countries during the late-twentieth century. Women have entered elected office in greater numbers than before and their roles expanded in political decision-making. Progress accelerated after Beijing, with many states worldwide codifying women's rights and implementing gender quotas for elected office. As a result, the number of women members of national parliaments has gradually risen worldwide, as many previous studies have highlighted.

Nevertheless, there are several reasons why the meaning of these advances, while important, should still be interpreted with due caution.

Firstly, since 1995, progress for women in elected office have been slow and uneven around the world, with less than a handful of countries achieving gender balance in national parliaments today. A dearth of women members has advanced to become senior ministers and heads of government at the apex of world leadership.

Moreover, descriptive representation -- measured by *de jure* gains in the proportion of women holding elected and appointed political offices -- does not automatically translate into substantive representation, or the *de facto* empowerment for women. The world's government has agreed that progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 5 should be monitored by gains in the proportion of women in national parliaments and local assemblies, as measurable benchmarks. To gauge empowerment, however, it is important to build upon this foundation and go well beyond this.

'*Women's participation and empowerment*' is therefore conceptualized more broadly in this paper and operationalized by distinguishing four separate but interrelated dimensions or pillars:

(i) CULTURAL EMPOWERMENT: This includes progress *cultural values* and *social norms* in each society endorsing principles of gender equality in the domestic and public spheres and embracing women's rights;

(ii) CIVIC EMPOWERMENT: This refers to advances in women's participation in *civil society* agencies connecting citizens and the state. The informal channels of expression and mobilization allow citizens to influence decision-makers indirect. This includes collective actions through interest group and new social movements (especially women's and feminist movements), and through voting in elections and referenda, party membership and activism, and via traditional and digital media communications;

(iii) DECISION-MAKING EMPOWERMENT: This is conceptualized as progress towards achieving gender balance among *elite officeholders* exercising government authority in the policymaking process. This includes women and men serving as elected and appointed members and leaders in local/regional and national parliamentary assemblies, the judiciary, and senior civil service; and finally,

(iv) POLICY EMPOWERMENT: This is defined as gains in *gender equality policy outputs and outcomes*, where laws and regulations expand opportunities for women and girls to realize their full potential capacities in each society, such as through safeguarding marital, sexual and reproductive rights, implementing welfare policies addressing female poverty and protecting maternal healthcare, eldercare, and childcare services, safeguarding women in the private and public spheres against the risks of violence, and reducing hierarchical and vertical occupational segregation and pay differentials in the workforce.

Part II describes the evidence analyzed in the paper for each of these dimensions. Global trends at national level are monitored using data from the Varieties of Democracy project comparing 202 nations and independent territories worldwide. Longitudinal change is examined for the century since the end of World War I, when the franchise started to be expanded to women in many countries. For a deeper dive, however, national trends need to be disaggregated, so the paper also analyzes cross-national survey data to examine changes in attitudes, values, and behaviors for women and men at individual level. The study draws upon successive waves of the pooled European Values Survey/World Values Surveys, around 330,000 respondents living in more than 100 societies, focusing upon changes in the decades since Beijing.

Part III presents the empirical findings.

The results of the analysis suggest that when women's participation and empowerment are understood as multidimensional, evidence suggests that progress across all pillars has not advanced at the same pace worldwide. Progress in women's participation and empowerment is limited by the continued prevalence of socially conservative cultural attitudes and by persistent gender gaps in women's civic engagement, their representation in legislative and executive office, and their impact in transforming the public policy agenda. In many places, advancement towards gender equality in public life has commonly faltered and stagnated in recent years – or else even deteriorated – thereby falling well short of the world's commitments to advancing fundamental principles of women's empowerment and participation. In short, warning signs suggest that the world has been entering a chillier climate for advancing gender equality women's rights during the 21st century.

Emerging Challenges

To explain these developments, Part V identifies several emerging challenges to women's political participation and empowerment observed during the last decade. These include:

- (i) Public support for the principles and values of gender equality has gradually risen in many societies since Beijing, but *the worldwide pace of value change has usually proved glacially slow and uneven*, with socially conservative attitudes opposed to equality for women and men in education, politics and the paid workforce continue to prevail in many places;
- (ii) *A rising tide of socially liberal values has catalyzed a cultural backlash among social conservatives feeling threatened by these profound shifts*, heightening polarization over cultural issues, and mobilizing moderate and extreme anti-gender and anti-feminist social movements actively seeking to undermine women's rights;
- (iii) *The backlash among social conservatives has also transformed party politics through rising support for Authoritarian-Populist parties and leaders* elected on platforms advocating the roll-back of feminist policy gains and women's rights;
- (iv) *The growing climate of cultural polarization around gender equality values and policies seems likely to have exacerbated the risks of threats and acts of violence*, especially those targeting women leaders in the public sphere; and finally,

(v) Most recently, the social and economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic seems likely to weaken hard-won gains for women and girls in education and the paid employment, to intensify social tensions and weaken public trust in politics, as well as to undermine democratic processes and institutions through sidelining parliaments and postponing elections, with potentially negative consequences for the advancement of women's participation and empowerment.

Policy Recommendations

Part VI identifies the key lessons and policy recommendations designed to counteract these emerging risks. These include three main initiatives:

Recommendation 1: *that the UN General Assembly convenes a Fifth World Conference on Women in 2025, to build upon Beijing, revitalizing the commitment of the world's governments and mobilizing transnational feminist organizations and women's networks to tackle the emerging challenges facing women's political participation and empowerment, and the threats of violence in public life.*

Recommendation 2: *that UN agencies, coordinated by UN Women, multilateral regional organizations, NGOs, and national statistical offices in all member states, monitor a wider range of more comprehensive indicators for all the dimensions of women's participation and empowerment, and the risks of violence for women in public life, compiling more comprehensive metrics from existing global datasets at national and individual levels which go beyond the proportion of women and men in local and national parliaments.*

Recommendation 3: *that UN Women commissions new research documenting the systematic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's participation, empowerment, and the threat of violence against women in public office, coordinating this initiative with the work of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, officials in national parliaments and local governments, NGOs such as International IDEA and iKNOWPolitics, and related gender research institutes.*

II. The legal and normative framework

Since the founding of the United Nations, gender balance between men and women has been among the most fundamental principles of human rights. Adopted in 1945, the Charter of the United Nations pledged “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, [and] in the equal rights of men and women.” The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights endorsed and strengthened these commitments, as did the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. ¹ Building upon this foundation, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the General Assembly in 1979 and subsequently endorsed by 189 countries worldwide. ²

In 1995, following the Fourth World Conference on Women, the landmark Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action reinforced the legal commitment of U.N. member states to achieving gender equality, the empowerment of all women and girls, and the realization of their human rights. ³ The Beijing Declaration identified a dozen critical priorities for achieving women’s rights and gender equality across all major spheres of life, including actions addressing women’s participation and representation in decision-making, women’s poverty and development, education and training, and healthcare and access to justice. In terms of women’s empowerment. The Declaration highlighted key commitments designed to achieve women’s empowerment:

“Women’s empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace.”

In 2000, the world’s governments endorsed the Millennium Development Goals, providing specific targets, including to promote gender equality and empower women (Goal 3). ⁴ The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (“Rio+20”) renewed member states’ commitment to achieving gender equality for women and girls, where the effective participation of women is seen as critical for achieving all other aspects of sustainable development. In Goal 5, the Sustainable Development Goals recognized gender equality as a fundamental right in itself, and instrumentally valuable as a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. Actions include dismantling legal social and economic barriers to women’s empowerment, rectifying women’s underrepresentation at all levels of political leadership, and preventing violence against women and girls (VAWG). ⁵ The SDGs pledged governments to repeal discriminatory laws and ensure women’s equal access to justice. Decisionmakers in global agencies and national governments have agreed on Agenda 2030, which puts gender equality at the core of sustainable and inclusive development:

“20. Realizing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make a crucial contribution to progress across all the Goals and targets. The achievement of full human potential and of sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights and opportunities. Women and girls must enjoy equal access to quality education, economic resources and political participation as well as equal opportunities with men and boys for employment, leadership and decision-making at all levels..”⁶

Since the mid-twentieth century, therefore, a succession of human rights instruments, recognized in international law and endorsed by the UN General Assembly and the world’s governments, have highlighted the importance of women’s empowerment and endorsed the principles of gender equality.

But how far have human rights commitments been realized and women’s participation and empowerment advanced in practice? In several countries, emerging warning red flags indicate that gender

equality between men and women in public life has either failed to move forward during the last decade – or else has regressed – thereby falling well short of the world’s commitments to achieving fundamental principles of human rights in Agenda 2030.

In 2020, on the 75th anniversary of the UN Charter and the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration, the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women conducted a comprehensive review to assess developments.⁷ The Commission highlighted several reasons for caution, concluding that growth in women’s political leadership had not been fast or deep enough, so that most parliaments still did not reflect the population in societies from which representatives were drawn, achievements have been uneven worldwide, and major gender gaps remained. The 2020 review noted that no country has fully achieved gender equality at all levels of political leadership in elected or appointed office, and significant disparities of power continue globally, especially among leader at the apex of power as Heads of State and Heads of Government.

The Commission identified persistent obstacles to the closure of gender gaps arising from structural barriers, discriminatory practices, and the feminization of poverty. Many women and girls experience multiple forms of discrimination, vulnerability and marginalization throughout their life. The issue of violence against women and girls has also been recognized as a major issue of growing concern, both in society in general, and as a barrier to women’s leadership when directed against female activists and leaders, including threats of online harassment, extreme verbal abuse, and physical violence.⁸ The 2020 review by the UN Commission on the Status of Women concluded that diagnosis of the challenges also needs to be disaggregated since women in several social sectors are doubly disadvantaged by obstacles to empowerment, especially for those of African descent, women with HIV and AIDS, rural women, indigenous women, women with disabilities, migrant women, and older women.

III: Evidence

Building upon this foundation, what evidence can be used to broaden and update the cross-national, longitudinal, and sub-sectoral analysis of the current state of progress towards gender balance in public life, women’s empowerment and the realization of women’s rights among countries, within societies, and over time?

Single-dimensional indicators

The most commonly reported measure of de jure gender equality in politics, widely employed in both the research and policy communities, is the proportion of seats held by women in the lower house in national parliaments.⁹ This data has several advantages; it has a high degree of reliability, as it is collected as a matter of public record after each election by parliamentary officials and national statistical offices. It also has broad geographic and longitudinal coverage for almost every country worldwide, with the record regularly compiled and published by the Interparliamentary Union.¹⁰ Gender gaps in other senior government leadership positions are also used for comparison, although reliable data for both time-series and cross-national coverage is usually more limited. This includes monitoring the proportion of women serving as local/regional mayors and councilors, parliamentary speakers, cabinet ministers, party leaders, heads of state and heads of government, chief executives and senior officials in the civil service and local/regional governments, and senior judges.

At the same time, it should be understood that the number or proportion of women in parliament only serves as a proxy and imperfect measure of de facto participation and empowerment, for several reasons. Theories of intersectionality emphasize the existence of multiple forms of oppression, where women differ from one another in their ideological views, socioeconomic status, family backgrounds, ethnic identities, and political party affiliations.¹¹ Thus, socially conservative activists, female members in right-

wing parties, and judges often oppose the expansion of women's rights, for example through criticizing affirmative action policies, such as gender quotas, or voting against the provision of reproductive rights, sexual education, and contraception. Women from different social and ethnic groups commonly differ in their views towards moral issues such as prostitution/sex work, abortion, and religious dress. Moreover, authoritarian states with weak legislatures may implement gender quotas as a way to demonstrate their commitment to international norms, even though women representatives are constrained from acting independently and thus exerting meaningful influence on policy decisions. Even in strong and independent parliaments, formal processes and norms of collective party discipline limit the autonomy and powers of individual backbencher members to act without the support of the party senior leadership, for example, to propose bills, to scrutinize government ministers, or to deviate from the instructions of their party whips in legislative debates and parliamentary votes. Similarly, more women appointed as government ministers is usually regarded as an important sign of empowerment, where they can determine public policy, especially in countries with gender parity in cabinet. Alternatively, however, the appointment of a few women ministers may simply reflect tokenism and prove a strictly symbolic gesture, especially in states with strong collective party discipline and/or where decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of the executive top leadership and their elite supporters.¹² Much statistical data therefore counts women's political participation but tell us little, by themselves, about women's political empowerment.

Composite multidimensional indicators

Given the limit of these standard quantitative measures, what alternative indicators provide a reliable and effective way to monitor women's empowerment? Hundreds of statistical indicators have been developed to gauge and compare specific aspects of gender equality in society, such as those covering levels of occupational segregation and pay differentials in the paid labor force, access to schools and educational achievements, longevity, well-being, and health. For this reason, many previous studies have monitored gender equality through aggregate or composite measures. The most prominent composite indices of gender equality include UNDP's Gender-related Development Index (GDI), UNDP's the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), introduced in 1995¹³, and the UNDP's Gender Inequality Index, which covers reproductive health, empowerment, and economic status.¹⁴ Others include the Gender Equity Index (GEI) introduced by Social Watch in 2007,¹⁵ and the Social Institutions and Gender Index of OECD Development Centre from 2007,¹⁶ and the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) developed by the World Economic Forum in 2006. For example, the Global Gender Gap Index provides a multidimensional benchmark which gauges the extent of gender-based gaps along four key dimensions: Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment, tracking annual progress towards closing these gaps over time. The measurement of 'Political Empowerment' in the Index is gauged by the gender gap in the proportion of women and men holding office in national parliaments, government ministries, and serving as heads of states.

[Figure 1 about here]

To develop a more comprehensive measure of 'women's participation and empowerment', this is conceptualized and operationalized in this report by focusing on four dimensions:

- (i) CULTURAL EMPOWERMENT, measured by adherence to *cultural values and social norms* in each society endorsing principles of gender equality and women's rights;
- (ii) CIVIC EMPOWERMENT, where women are active in *civil society* agencies and processes connecting ordinary citizens and the state via informal channels of influence, including through interest group and new social movements (including women and feminist movements), and as

ordinary citizens participating through voting in elections and referenda, party membership and activism, and through traditional and digital media communications;

(iii) DECISION-MAKING EMPOWERMENT, where women are appointed or elected as *elite office-holders* in decision-making positions exercising political authority within government, including as members and leaders in local/regional and national parliamentary assemblies, the judiciary, and civil service; and finally,

(iv) POLICY EMPOWERMENT, where women have autonomy to make their own life choices, enabled by rights guaranteeing equal economic independence, sexual and reproductive choices. This dimension involves a wide range of *policy outputs and outcomes* reflecting women's diverse interests and priorities in the policy agenda, exemplified by laws and regulations concerning property, marital, sexual and reproductive rights, maternal health, childcare, violence against women, and employment rights.

Figure 1 illustrates how these dimensions are conceptualized in an interrelated framework -- and also identifies how they can be monitored and measured through systematic indices. The pillars are understood as distinct but also interrelated, understood as an interactive 'virtuous circle' process. For example, women's empowerment in elected or appointed to leadership roles, and their capacity to shape government laws and policies, can be expected to be strengthened in societies where their voice can be amplified by the demands of active feminist and women's mass movements mobilizing outside of parliament to influence the political agenda, as well as in places where cultural values and social norms generally support the values of gender equality in public life and the role of women in politics. But equally, the inclusion of more women in visible decision-making offices in any state, so that leadership elites look more like the societies from which they are drawn, is likely to engage more women and girls to become interested in public affairs, encouraging them to participate through channels of civic society, such as through electoral turnout, party activism, and online mobilization, as well as to run for office.

To understand the state of women's participation and empowerment in public life, therefore, is important to expand the standard yardsticks and gather a broader and more comprehensive range of evidence. Sex-disaggregated data is also essential to monitor national and global goals for gender equality, women's empowerment, and the problem of violence against women in public life. Recognizing the importance of intersectionality, ideally data for each dimension also needs to be disaggregated for women and men within many sectors in each society, such as by marital and family status, age and generational cohort, household income, education, rural-urban location, and race/ethnicity.

(i) Cultural Empowerment

Cultural values and social norms are the informal processes in mass societies which shape expectations about the appropriate roles for women and girls, as well as being associated with approval of gender equality policies. Values reflect priorities. Social norms are the take-for-granted conventions in each society. Social surveys drawing upon representative samples of the population document changes over time in each society, such as by monitoring general attitudes about the political, domestic, and economic roles of women and men; support for feminist ideals of gender equality; approval of public policies such as those concerning equal opportunity, sex discrimination, reproductive rights, childcare, and affirmative action laws; and attitudes towards the empowerment of women. Analysis of the wealth of survey evidence generally suggests that socially liberal values towards cultural issues such as gender equality, secularization, and homosexuality have advanced most among the younger generation and college educated sectors, especially in affluent post-industrial societies. By contrast, older generations and less educated groups, especially in many developing societies, are typically found to be far more favorable towards socially- conservative values, preferring a conventional division of sex roles between women and

men in both the domestic and public spheres. In turn, traditional cultural values and attitudes help to predict gender inequalities in power and decision-making, including the representation of women in elected office.¹⁷

To examine these issues, building upon previous analysis, this report constructs a Gender Equality Values Index (GEVI), which measures attitudes towards gender equality in politics, the labor force, and education. Previous work examined the distribution of the GEVI Index in early waves of the World Values Study, from 1995 to 2001, in 61 societies.¹⁸ To update the analysis of value change since the Beijing Declaration and Plan of Action, and to expand the geographic coverage, data in this report is drawn from the pooled European Values Survey/World Values Survey (EVS/WVS) waves 3-7, extending the time period for comparison of public opinion over twenty-five years from 1995 to 2020. Across all waves, this dataset covers representative surveys of in total 638,554 respondents living in over 117 societies around the globe, although not all waves carried all items.

The Gender Equality Values Index is generated by combining three survey items:

- MENPOL: *“On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do.”* (Agree coded low);
- MENJOBS: *“When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women.”* (Agree coded low);
- BOYEDUC: *“A university education is more important for a boy than a girl.”* (Agree coded low).

Responses to these items were re-coded in direction, so that higher scores consistently represent greater support for gender equality values. Reliability tests confirmed that the items fell into a single consistent scale.¹⁹ The GEVI Index was summed across the items and standardized to 100-points for ease of interpretation.

[Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2 illustrates the global map, drawing upon responses from 397,147 respondents living in 109 societies where the GEVI index could be constructed and measured in the 21st Century (from the latest measurement in the 2000-2020 EVS/WVS survey waves). The results illustrate two main findings.

Firstly, *approval of gender equality values varies substantially across countries and global regions*. Almost two dozen societies rank as ‘very high’ (over 90%) or ‘fairly high’ (80-89%) on the GEVI 100-point standardized scale. Thus, as many previous studies have documented, Scandinavian societies are the most positive towards gender equality, with mean GEVI scores of over 90% in Norway, Sweden, Iceland and Denmark, all leading the world respectively in this index. Other affluent post-industrial societies in Western Europe also score fairly highly on the GEVI index, with scores over 80%, including France, the Netherlands, Austria, and Germany. Australia and New Zealand are other cases which fall into this category, as well as the United States and Canada, although both the North American cases were more borderline. The top two categories of the most gender egalitarian cultures were dominated by affluent economies and established democracies, with the exception of four middle income economies and newer democracies which also fell into this category, namely Albania, Slovenia and Croatia in Eastern and Central Europe and Uruguay in Latin America. By contrast, however, the map also shows that many global regions remains deeply traditional in their attitudes towards gender equality, exemplified by the cases of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Egypt, Libya, Kuwait and Qatar in the MENA region (scoring 55 out of 100 overall on the GEVI Index), as well developing societies such as Mali and Nigeria in Sub-Saharan Africa, and Myanmar, Indonesia and the Philippines in Asia-Pacific (with an average regional score of 63 out of 100).

Secondly, and equally importantly, *cultural values towards gender equality in education, paid employment and politics have changed very modestly in varied societies around the globe during the twenty-five years since Beijing*. The stagnation and lack of substantial value change is even more striking given massive socioeconomic changes, as monitored in the MDG and the subsequent SDG reports, including gains for girls and women in literacy, education, and training, increases in the proportion of women in paid employment outside of agriculture, and growing international aid targeted to closing gender gaps in development.²⁰

[Table 1 about here]

To document value change, Table 1 illustrates the GEVI index for the 46 varied societies where the index can be measured in successive waves of the EVS/WVS survey in 1995-1999 and in 2010-20. During the last twenty-five years, the GEVI standardized 100-point index rose on average in these societies from 67 to 72, *a gain of only 6 points since Beijing*. There were more substantial improvements (over 10 points) in fourteen middle-income societies, such as in Uruguay, Mexico and Brazil in Latin America and in Albania, Estonia and Romania in Central and Eastern Europe. But at the same time percentage point gains were very modest in most societies under comparison, while six societies saw slight declines, and a revival of more socially-conservative attitudes towards gender roles in education, the workplace, and political leadership, including in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in South Asia, as well as in Nigeria and South Africa, the most populous countries on the African continent.

Overall, therefore, the analysis the available survey data presented in Table 1 suggests that *little, or only limited progress, in strengthening cultural values towards gender equality have occurred since Beijing*. Despite some changes, many developing countries and global regions remain deeply traditional in their cultural attitudes and social norms towards the roles of women and men. The level of economic development (measured by per capita GDP in purchasing power parity) is a significant predictor of the GEVI index ($R=.432$ $P=0.000$ $N. 202$), as are alternative measures of human development, like female life expectancy ($R=.573$ $P=0.000$ $N 56$). The GEVI Index is also strongly associated with V-Dem's estimates of the level of Liberal Democracy in each society ($R=.687$ $P=0.000$ $N. 266$). Cultural theories suggest that values and norms usually evolve slowly in response to changes in underlying socioeconomic conditions, with countries usually becoming more liberal in their social attitudes towards fixed gender roles as they develop economically, a process reinforced by generational shifts and demographic replacement in the population. Nevertheless, enduring historical legacies, religious traditions, and formal institutional structures continue to reinforce socially conservative cultural attitudes towards gender equality in many diverse developing societies around the world, hindering the cultural empowerment for women.

Moreover, this matters for its own sake and because cultural attitudes are strongly related to other dimensions of women's empowerment. At societal level, for example, the GEVI Index of Gender Equality Values is strongly correlated with V-Dem's Women's Political Empowerment Index ($R=.702$ $P.000$). A 'virtuous circle' model suggests that the dimensions of women's empowerment can be understood to influence each other as part of an interactive process. Thus egalitarian values towards women and men's roles in society can be expected to reinforce the recruitment of women for office, such as by reducing discriminatory barriers against women parliamentary candidates in the party selectorate and the electorate, and also generate a climate of public opinion generally favorable towards public policies facilitating women's autonomy, like the provision of childcare and the protection of employment and reproductive rights. And, in turn, where women succeed in attaining visible leadership positions in public life, traditional stereotypes are likely to break down and cultural values are likely become more supportive of women's participation and empowerment in public life.

(ii) Civic Empowerment

The concept of civic empowerment concerns the capacity for women and men to influence parliamentary representatives and the public policy process *indirectly*, through intermediary channels for voice and expression connecting citizens and the state. In this process, varied organizations provide opportunities for citizens to influence the policy agenda and the decision-making process, including through voting in elections and referenda; as well as working through political parties as members, activists and officers; communicating through legacy media and digital technologies; collaborating through traditional interest groups, social movements, and voluntary associations; involvement through demonstrations and protest politics; and direct action forms of grassroots engagement, such as via local community organizations and transnational movements. Both feminist and women’s movement groups are particularly important for policy gains – although achieving agenda change typically involves coalition-building with many other allied actors and networks.²¹

At national level, several societal level indicators from the Varieties of Democracy project allow global and regional estimates of women and men’s engagement in civil society organizations over time. Here we can focus at on comparing the V-Dem measure of women’s civic empowerment, measured by the lack of restrictions on women’s participation in civil society organizations (CSOs). The latter is defined to include interest groups, labor unions, religiously inspired organizations (if they are engaged in civic or political activities), social movements, professional associations, and classic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), but not businesses, political parties, government agencies, or religious organizations that are primarily focused on spiritual practices. A CSO must also be at least nominally independent of government and economic institutions. V-Dem measures of how far women are prevented from participating in civil society organizations, ranging from never (0) to always. One important limitation is that this monitors formal *restrictions* on participation, rather than gauging the involvement of women in CSOs. It is important that women have equal legal rights to freedom of association, but there can still be substantial disparities in who becomes engaged.

[Figure 3 about here]

As Figure 3 illustrates, V-Dem estimates *long-term growth in women’s access to participate in civil society organizations over the span of a century*. According to this measure, just as we observed with Gender Equality Values Index, the MENA region has lagged behind the rest of the world in women’s engagement through these channels. Women have also been most engaged in CSOs in affluent societies and established democracies with a plurality of voluntary associations in Western Europe, North America and Australasia, where the fastest growth was observed during the period from the 1970s to the 1990s, when trends flattened out. Women have traditionally been fairly heavily engaged during the twentieth century in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where there were often Communist party sections organized for women’s branches and associations within the party, trade unions, and other community groups. Other developing societies in Asia-Pacific, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa saw growth in opportunities for women’s civic empowerment from around the 1960s or 1970s until the 1990s.

Most strikingly, *in all regions, however, since Beijing in the mid-1990s, far from advancing further, this growth seems to have plateaued, or even fallen slightly*. In part this may be an artifact of a ‘ceiling effect’, once women have few restrictions on access to CSOs, but a slight decline in participation can also be observed during recent years in some regions, notably Asia-Pacific.

Yet any national-level measures of legal rights to organize and mobilize are inevitably limited, since they do not seek to monitor the degree of actual participation and empowerment by women in civil society organizations. Moreover, women and men are far from homogeneous as groups, and major cultural differences can be observed by the social cleavages of age/generation, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, marital and family status, and type of faith/religiosity.

To explore these contrasts, individual-level data can be examined from the pooled European Values/World Values Surveys. This evidence allows us to monitor gender empowerment in mediating civil society channels, notably through the proportion of women and men reporting voting in elections, as well as the gender breakdown for members of political parties, activists involved in a wide range of voluntary associations and interest groups, supporters of the women's movement, protestors engaged in mass demonstrations, and those involved in online activism through social media.

[Table 2 about here]

For this report, we can focus upon gender gaps for voting participation through elections as the most common form of mass civic engagement – and the role of citizens which influences the choice of elected representatives, the composition of parliaments, and the parties winning government office. Table 2 estimated voting participation in national elections. The gender gap is calculated as the difference between the proportion of women and men who report casting a ballot in these contests (defined by the proportion responding that they 'always' vote).

The results demonstrate that the size and direction of any voting gender gaps vary substantially worldwide. A positive gender gap is evident in ten societies, where at least 6% more women than men report voting, include several post-Communist societies in Eastern and Central Europe and the Balkans, such as Russia, Slovenia and Estonia. In the vast majority of societies, however, no significant gender gaps are evident. By contrast, a negative gender gap in voting is apparent in 19 diverse societies, where at least 6% more men report voting than women. The negative gender gap, with over 10% difference, is found in many Middle Eastern and North African countries such as Kuwait, Egypt and Libya, reflecting the lack of support for gender equality values already documented in the MENA region. Several other developing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa also fall into this group, such as Nigeria, Ethiopia, as well as some varied societies in Asia-Pacific with traditional cultures towards the roles of women and men, such as Japan, Vietnam and Pakistan. This confirms the earlier observation that the V-Dem index of women's political participation is strongly correlated with the GEVI index of Gender Equality Values from the World Values Survey ($R=.619$, $P 0.000$ $N.265$), suggesting that cultural barriers are systematically linked with gender gaps in voting behavior.

(iii) Decision-making Empowerment

The concept of decision-making empowerment emphasizes that elected and appointed positions in public life should reflect the societies from which they are drawn, including the major social cleavages of identity politics, such as those of gender identities and sexual orientations, race, religion, and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, income, education, and social class, and geography and region. In this regard, the inclusion of diverse women leaders in elected and appointed office in proportions designed to reflect their numbers in the general population is seen as a desirable goal, achieving descriptive representation, irrespective of their attitudes and values, partisan affiliations, or feminist orientations. Indicators of progress can be derived from cross-national evidence, typically the proportion of women in local and regional elected assemblies, the lower and upper houses of parliament, in elected or appointed judicial office in the courts, the senior civil service and diplomatic corps, ministerial office, the top brass in the security forces, and, at the apex of power, women leaders serving as heads of state and government.

Thus, the SDG Goal 5.5 specifies ensuring women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life, as monitored by the target 5.5.1, the proportion of seats held by women in (a) national parliaments and (b) local governments.²² Benchmarks ideally measure the proportion of women holding a broad range of elected and appointed offices, including for local, national, and supranational decision-making bodies.

The most comprehensive national-level data on descriptive representation is elected office in legislatures is available from Inter-Parliamentary Union for national parliaments, UN Women for data on women and men in local and regional assemblies,²³ and from the Varieties of Democracy project (V-Dem V10.0 July 2020), documenting national trends in the proportion of women and men in elected and appointed legislative and executive offices. Using the V-Dem data, as in previous charts, the longitudinal comparison of descriptive representation in this report spans the century since 1920, when women in many democracies first gained the franchise.

[Figure 4 about here]

The data tells us that women are underrepresented at all levels of decision-making and most countries today fall short of the “gender balance” target established by the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action. The global share of women in national parliaments (single/lower house) is 25%. Data from 133 countries and areas show a higher share of women in local government, at 36.3% as of 1st of January 2020. Only 13% of countries have reached gender balance (40% or more) in national parliaments, while 15% in local government. Figure 4 indicate steady progress towards achieving gender equality in elected office in many countries, but not all, since the Beijing Declaration.²⁴ In 1995, women were 11.6% of legislators in the single or lower house of national parliaments around the world; by 2020, this percentage of seats was far from parity but it had doubled to 24.9%. In four countries (Rwanda, Cuba, Bolivia and the United Arab Emirates) women have now reached gender balance in legislatures, with at least 50% of seats. Several other diverse countries have also come close to gender parity in their national legislatures, exemplified by South Africa (46.4%), Sweden (47%), Nicaragua (47.3%), and Mexico (48.2%). Women have also made gains in parliamentary leadership roles since the Beijing Declaration, for example the proportion of women speakers has doubled from 10.5% in 1995 to 20.5% today.²⁵ At the same time, progress worldwide remains uneven, for example several national parliaments continue to lag behind with 5% or even fewer women representatives, while even today a few states have no women in parliament. As Figure 4 vividly illustrates in the cases of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, there can also be sharp reversals, caused in these countries by the fall of the Soviet Union and the initial abandonment of legal gender quotas for parliaments, before a gradual recovery in the region.²⁶

This region emphasizes that one of the major reasons for the rise in women in parliament has been the implementation of formal gender quota laws, especially those with thresholds defining the minimum number of women candidates, with legal sanctions for non-compliance and agencies overseeing their implementation, and with gender-ranked lists of candidates alternating male and female nominees. As Figure 5 shows, there were early legal quotas and reserved seats for women in several South Asian countries, but in most regions the use of legal gender quotas expanded rapidly after Beijing. Their adoption and implementation have been most common throughout Latin America, with less use of these laws in established democracies in Western Europe, North America and Australasia, in part because many parties in these countries had adopted informal gender quotas in party rules governing the candidate nomination process.

[Figure 5 about here]

Women in the pipeline, in elected office in local, regional, and national legislatures, gain invaluable legislative and policymaking experience, broadening their networks and visibility, thereby strengthening

their opportunities to enter higher leadership positions, such as becoming ministers and party leaders.²⁷ Yet experience as parliamentary backbenchers does not necessarily mean automatic progress in political career paths. In cabinet office, according to IPU data, one fifth of ministerial portfolios (21%) are held by women, as of 1 January 2020. Fourteen countries, including Canada, France, Costa Rica, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and South Africa have 50% or more women ministers.²⁸ In addition, another 16 countries have 40% or more women ministers, achieving gender balance, but, by contrast, nine countries currently have all-male cabinets. At the apex of political power, as Figure 6 illustrates, 22 countries worldwide have female Heads of State or Government, as of 1 September 2020, representing 7.2% of Heads of State and 6.7% Heads of Government.

[Figure 6 about here]

Descriptive representation – the inclusion of women in leadership positions - generates more socially-inclusive and diverse legislatures which serve many positive functions. In general, legislators elected to office with diverse experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives expand the voices involved in deliberative processes and enrich parliamentary debates. Female leaders can serve as role models encouraging other to participate as ordinary citizens in civil society and for girls and youths to run for office, once eligible.²⁹ Lack of social diversity and inclusion may undermine the perceived legitimacy of decision-making processes by elected and appointed bodies, for example where all male committee hearings are adjudicating on sensitive issues, such as sexual harassment or abortion. The inclusion of women at the table diversifies the life experiences of policymakers and provides a public platform for the expression of women’s priorities and interests.³⁰

By itself, however, the inclusion of more women in elected and appointed office is not always sufficient to strengthen other dimensions of empowerment; instead these relationships are more contingent.³¹ The limitations are exemplified in states where women are appointed or elected to parliamentary assemblies which serve largely as symbolic bodies, lacking the independence, constitutional powers, resources, or institutional capacities to initiate legislation and function as an effective counterbalance scrutinizing the executive branch. In several countries, the proportion of women in parliament has risen strongly, but the legislature has limited powers to constrain the executive, such as in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Rwanda. By contrast, in other states, such as Namibia, Mexico and South Africa, women have gained seats within stronger parliamentary institutions.

(iv) Policy Empowerment

Policy empowerment involves the endorsement of international instruments for women’s rights and their implementation through domestic laws; the inclusion of gender responsive policies and women’s diverse policy priorities, interests, and issue preferences in decision-making processes, outputs and outcomes; and the implementation of gender equality legal and regulatory policies, like the adoption of sex discrimination policies, gender quota laws, reproductive rights, and women-friendly parliamentary procedures.

One way to monitor this cross-nationally and over time is through the Varieties of Democracy indicator of women’s rights, which is understood to include whether countries respect women’s freedom of domestic movement, the right to private property, freedom from forced labor, and access to justice. These four rights are critical for women’s autonomy and ability to make choices. As Figure 7 illustrates, in most global regions the last century has seen a significant advancement of women’s rights, a steady rise can be observed (from different starting points) in most regions with the exception of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where there is a more dramatic ‘U’ shaped curve under communism. Nevertheless, again recent years seem to have experienced either a steady plateau or even a slight downturn in women’s rights in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and Asia-Pacific.

[Figures 7 and 8 about here]

To summarize, these different dimensions can be combined into a single measure where women's political empowerment in Figure 8 is defined as a process of increasing capacity for women, leading to greater choice, agency, and participation in societal decision-making. It is understood to incorporate three equally weighted dimensions: fundamental civil liberties, women's open discussion of political issues and participation in civil society organizations, and the descriptive representation of women in formal political positions. Figure 8 presents the regional trends in this summary measure. As with the previous indices, the general picture which emerges is one of steady progress throughout the decades in established democracies, before a levelling and lack of further progress at the start of the twenty-first century. Latin America and Asia-Pacific see similar gains from the end of World War I until a plateau can be observed during the 1960s and 1970s, then a second advance in the 1990s, with progress stalling during the last decade. The Middle East and North Africa sees slower advances in women's empowerment over successive decades, with clear regression in recent years. Eastern Europe and Central Asia provide contrasting trends, with a sharp fall in women's empowerment during World War II, then a sharp recovery before a steady plateau under Communism, and very modest gains more recently. Lastly, Sub-Saharan Africa provides perhaps the most positive news, with women's empowerment rising steadily from the 1960s onwards.

V: Emerging threats

In general, therefore, the evidence presented in the paper suggests that steady advances for several dimensions of women's participation and empowerment have occurred over successive decades during the twentieth century, ever since women first gained the franchise, a process accelerated after Beijing through codifying women's rights and implementing policy measures such as well-designed gender quota laws for elected office, as many previous studies have observed. During the last decade, however, far from continuing a trajectory of steady global advance towards gender equality, warning signs in particular countries suggest that many world regions appears to be entering a period of stagnation in several dimensions of women's participation and empowerment -- or they may even face risks of a slight regression.

What are the emerging threats preventing further progress in women's participation and empowerment? The evidence is far from well documented but alternative theories focus upon a combination of several factors, including: (i) a cultural backlash in public opinion; (ii) the growth of moderate and extreme 'anti-gender' movements mobilizing counter-protests against women's rights; (iii) the related rise of Authoritarian-Populist political parties and leaders, seeking to reverse gender equality policies; (iv) the deterrence effect of threats and acts of violence on women activists and leaders; and (vi) the recent impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in transforming gendered relationships in society, and the impact of the health crisis for women and girls.

(i) Cultural backlash in society

The 'cultural backlash' thesis suggests increasing polarization between traditional social conservatives and progressive liberals over issues of gender equality.³² A wealth of longitudinal survey evidence in postindustrial nations suggest growing support for liberal cultural values favoring gender equality and women's rights since the 1960s and 1970s, especially among the younger generations and university graduates, although more traditional attitudes persisted in many developing countries. The cultural backlash thesis suggests that a 'tipping point' in the balance of socially conservative and socially liberal forces in society has triggered the recent polarization around these issues. Due to long terms processes of generational change, the proposition of society favoring social conservative values and traditional sex roles has gradually shifted from majority to minority status. In turn, this has generated the counter-

mobilization of women and progressive feminists seeking to defend gains for gender equality. Data from the World Values Survey demonstrates some of the evidence for this argument.

Authoritarianism can be defined as a cluster of values prioritizing collective security for the tribe at the expense of individual autonomy. This ideology contains three core components: 1) the importance of *security* against risks of instability and disorder (foreigners stealing our jobs, immigrants attacking our women, terrorists threatening our safety), 2) the value of *conformity* to preserve conventional traditions and guard our way of life (defending 'Us' against threats to 'Our' values'), and 3) and the need for loyal *obedience* towards strong champions who protect the group and its customs.

The politics of fear drives the search for collective security for the tribe even if this means sacrificing personal freedoms. In this regard, the 'tribe' refers to imaginary community demarcated by signifiers of Us versus Them – the People versus the Other. This is often broadly defined by bonds of nationality and citizenship. Or it can be demarcated more narrowly by signifiers of identity providing symbolic attachments of belonging and loyalty towards the in-group and boundaries towards out-groups, whether by race, religion, and ethnicity, location or age, party, gender, or sex, or any other form. The notion of 'tribe' is therefore distinct from simply joining any loose grouping or membership organization. Tribes are social divisions, often in a traditional society consisting of families or communities linked by economic, religious, or blood ties, with a common culture and dialect, typically having a recognized leader. They involve loyalty, stickiness, boundaries, and shared cultural meanings.

Authoritarian values blended with populist rhetoric can be regarded as a dangerous combination fueling a cult of fear.³³ Populist rhetoric directs tribal grievances 'upwards' towards elites, feeding mistrust of 'corrupt' politicians, the 'fake' media, 'biased' judges, and 'out-of-touch' mainstream parties, assaulting the truth and corroding faith in liberal democracy. Politicians won't/can't defend you. And authoritarians channel tribal grievances 'outwards' towards groups perceived as threatening the values and norms of the in-group, dividing 'Us' (the 'real people') against 'Them' ('Not Us'), stoking anxiety, corroding mutual tolerance and poisoning the reservoir of social trust towards humanity. If the world is seen as full of gangs, criminals, and fanatics, if societies are thought vulnerable to rogue regimes, terrorist groups, and economic rivals, if democracy is broken by social disorder, then logically it is important to build high walls – and empower strong leaders – to protect us and our nation.

This orientation underpins and vindicates the intolerance, racism, misogyny, and xenophobia characteristic of Authoritarian Populist parties. In foreign affairs, this viewpoint favors the protection of national sovereignty, secure borders, a strong military, and trade protectionism, rather than membership of regional organizations, diplomatic alliances, human rights, international engagement, and multilateral cooperation within the United Nations. Moreover, Authoritarian-Populism is closely aligned with socially conservative policies where the state actively intervenes to restrict non-traditional lifestyles, typically by limiting same sex marriage, LGBTQ rights and gender equality, access to contraception and abortion, and affirmative action or quotas – unless, in some cases, these types of liberal policies are framed as a defense of national cultures against attacks by 'others'. Finally, in the public sphere, Authoritarian-Populists favor strong governance preserving order and security against threats of anarchy and social disruption, even at the expense of liberal democratic norms protecting judicial independence, freedom of the media, human rights and civil liberties, the oversight role of representative assemblies, and standards of electoral integrity.

(ii) Anti-gender movements

The cultural backlash has catalyzed the rise of diverse 'anti-gender' social movements, involving a broad coalition of the religious authorities, conservative groups, and political parties which oppose principles of women's rights, gender equality laws, and policies which challenge sex differences.³⁴ Moderate anti-

gender activists mobilize through social media groups, peaceful demonstrations, and conventional channels of political expression. They are flanked by more extreme male supremacy groups regarding women as genetically inferior to men, convinced that the current system oppresses men, and engaging in radical hate acts.³⁵ The anti-gender backlash is thought to have started in Russia and grown on the fringes of politics in America and Europe from the mid-1990s onwards, partly in counter-reaction to the Cairo and Beijing conferences.³⁶ Originally marginalized, a mass movement emerged roughly a decade later. Large-scale mobilizations have often been triggered by specific policy debates, with issues varying from country to country, including those involving debates over legislation about same sex civil partnership and marriage equality, as well as sex education in schools, LGBTQ rights (such as heteronormative opposition to same-sex adoptions and transgenderism), reproductive rights (to abortion, contraception and reproductive technologies), as well as hostility to the sub-fields of gender studies and sexuality research in academia.³⁷ Moderate and radical anti-feminist forces regard women's rights and gender equality strategies as threatening traditional heteronormative values and institutions, notably the customary division of gender roles in the home and childcare, the family and marriage, and religion, as well as leadership and power in public life. The sense of aggrieved entitlement can trigger anger, fear and even violence.

The impact of moderate anti-gender movements can be illustrated by several cases. Germany and France, for example, experienced mass demonstrations against same sex marriage.³⁸ Anti-gender forces in Poland and Hungary have sought to restrict abortion laws, LGBTQ rights, and sex education.³⁹ In Italy, the rise of the Authoritarian-Populist Lega party is thought to have fueled the anti-gender movement and backsliding in gender equality policies.⁴⁰ Constitutional revisions in Egypt have reversing affirmative action measures for women's representation.⁴¹ In the United States, mainstream conservative and evangelical groups are flanked by extreme anti-feminist resistance and anti-gender movements which mobilize through social media like reddit forums, 8chan messaging boards, and other online groups. Fueled by the loss of White male status and feelings of aggrieved entitlement, hate groups asserting male supremacy preach violent misogyny, representing women as genetically inferior and manipulative, threatening to dominate men, as well as using tactics of hate speech, the harassment of feminists, and armed violence.⁴² Radical male supremacy hate groups and young neo-Nazis have become active in the United States, Sweden, and Germany.⁴³

U.S. studies comparing trends in gender equality report that dramatic progress occurred in multiple sectors between 1970 and 2018, such as in employment, occupational segregation, pay gaps and educational attainment, but change has subsequently slowed, or even stalled, in recent years.⁴⁴ Recognizing the rise of threats around the world, in 2018 the Human Rights Council highlighted the need to counter rollbacks in women's rights and growing attacks on these principles, a development attributed to "...rising authoritarianism in political governance, economic crises and rocketing inequality, and politicization of traditionalist religions (which) have posed considerable challenges to the human rights system."⁴⁵

(iii) Authoritarian-populist parties and leaders

The growth of anti-feminist forces in society has also been fueled by the rise of authoritarian-populist parties and leaders in elected office, including in many affluent post-industrial societies which had previously been at the forefront of women's rights.⁴⁶ In countries around the world, the multilateral frameworks of universal human rights and ideals of gender equality are now threatened by socially-conservative Authoritarian-Populist parties, which have gained votes and seats, and entered Ministerial office.⁴⁷ Across Europe, the average share of the vote won by these parties for the lower house in national parliamentary elections has more than doubled since the 1960s, from around 5.4% to 12.4% today.⁴⁸ During the same era, their share of seats has tripled, from 4.0% to 12.2%. These forces have advanced in

some of the world's richest and most egalitarian European societies with comprehensive welfare states and long-established democracies, such as Austria, Norway, and Denmark, as well as in countries plagued by mass unemployment, sluggish growth, and shaky finances, such as Greece and Bulgaria. They have won government office in Eastern and Central Europe, such as in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Poland, as well as taking root in the Netherlands and Germany. They have gained in consensus democracies with proportional representation elections and federal systems (Belgium and Switzerland), and in countries with majoritarian rules (France) and presidential executives (the United States).

[Figure 9 about here]

What is in common among such diverse parties and leaders? The defining feature of Authoritarian-Populist rhetoric and values is the emphasis on the need to defend 'Us' ('our tribe') through restrictions on 'Them' ('the other'). Authoritarian-Populists commonly advocate policies where the state actively intervenes to restrict non-traditional lifestyles, including framing these policies as attacks on national cultures, typically by advocating limiting same sex marriage, LGBTQ rights and gender equality, access to contraception and abortion, and affirmative action or quotas for elected office. Many Authoritarian-Populists endorse these values, such as Fidesz in Hungary and Law and Justice in Poland, although parties do not march in lockstep, for example, the National Rally in France has shown greater support for gender equality policies, while the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands has expressed tolerance of homosexuality. Authoritarian-Populist parties also characteristically seek to restrict the entry of immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and foreigners, and propose policies seeking to protect national traditions, such as official language requirements, or bans on certain religious practices. Nationalism and nativism underpin and vindicates the intolerance, racism, and xenophobia characteristic of Authoritarian-Populist parties. In foreign affairs, these values find expression through policies favoring the protection of national sovereignty, secure borders, a strong military, and trade protectionism, while downplaying the role of diplomatic alliances, human rights, international engagement, and multilateral cooperation within the United Nations and related inter-governmental agencies. Authoritarian-Populists also favor strong governance preserving order and security against threat, at the expense of liberal democratic norms protecting judicial independence, freedom of the media, human rights and civil liberties, executive oversight by representative assemblies, and standards of electoral integrity. The rise of these forces is exemplified by a socially conservative shift in the Republican party, drawing upon a broad coalition of support among the Evangelical religious right, a process accelerated by shifts in balance of the Supreme Court.

These developments have heightened party polarization around issues of women's and LGBTQ rights, gender equality, and reproductive rights. This is exemplified most clearly by cases where governments have sought to actively roll back sexual and reproductive rights, like Poland's ruling Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość or PiS) 2019 'Stop Abortion' bill, seeking to tighten already restrictive facilities in Poland, and a 2015 law criminalizing sex education. In Nigeria, the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) act became law in 2014. And under the Trump administration in the United States, there have been around 450 proposed laws seeking to reduce abortion rights, from attempts to ban abortion outright from the moment that a fetal heartbeat has been detected to cases where pregnancy was the result of rape or incest. The administration also cut off funding to any reproductive health organization, like International Planned Parenthood Federation, seeking to facilitate abortion services or advice in clinics around the world, thereby also weakening the provision of contraception, maternal health, antenatal care, and sexually transmitted diseases.⁴⁹

(iv) The threat of violence deterring women's engagement in public life

In turn, the growth of polarization over cultural issues, and the rise of extreme anti-gender groups, has heightened risks of violence against women in visible leadership positions in public life. The 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women became the first international instrument explicitly addressing violence against women, providing a general human rights framework for national and international action. It defines violence against women broadly as any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.⁵⁰ International concern helped to stimulate growing research into the causes of gendered violence, seeking to document its magnitude, impact and policy remedies, recognizing abusive patterns such as sexual assault, domestic violence, and physical assaults.⁵¹

Until recently, however, the potential consequences of political violence for deterring women's participation and representation has often been underestimated. Violence against women in politics can be understood as 'any act or threat of gender-based violence, resulting in physical, sexual, psychological harm or suffering to women, that prevents them from exercising and realizing their political rights, whether in public or private spaces, including the right to vote and hold public office, to vote in secret and to freely campaign, to associate and assemble, and to enjoy freedom of opinion and expression.' (UN Women/UNDP 2017). During the last decade, reports have highlighting concern about physical attacks, harassment, and abuse directed against women in politics, including as activists, voters, parliamentary candidates and elected representatives.⁵² Political violence has been documented mainly through personal testimonies by women leaders describing their experience of harassment, intimidation, and even threats of killings. The reports suggest endemic problems of political violence: for example, the Interparliamentary Union (IPU 2016) conducted interviews with 55 women parliamentarians and found that four out of ten reported that they had been subject to threats of death, rape, beatings or abduction. These studies have drawn international attention to these issues, and started to identify policy interventions which could mitigate the risks, but they have been unable to determine whether boys and men share similar experience of political violence, especially in contentious elections and conflict-ridden societies. Moreover, gendered patterns may be expected to vary according to the type of violence; for example, a study comparing several developing countries such as Bangladesh, Guyana and Timor Leste, based on incidents of election-related violence collated by IFES, concluded that women were more likely to be involved in acts involving psychological abuse and sexual assault, while men were more at risk from acts of physical harm.⁵³

Women probably face the gravest dangers when running as candidates in elections held in traditional cultures and in transitional states with a recent history of armed conflict, festering inter-communal rivalries, and weak rule of law, such as contests held in Afghanistan, Zimbabwe⁵⁴, Syria, and DRC. In Afghanistan, for example, several women candidates have been killed in election campaigns, and these practices deter others from campaigning through public rallies.⁵⁵ In India, Pakistan and Nepal, female candidates, their families, and women voters routinely face threats of violence, due to insufficient implementation of laws, lack of support from police and judiciary, the socio-economic divide, and current power structures.⁵⁶ The problem of violence against women in elections (VAWE), and policy interventions, has received growing attention in Latin America, including in Mexico, Bolivia, Honduras, and Brazil.⁵⁷ Armed conflict and civil unrest persists in several states in the region, such as Venezuela, but other widespread risks arise from problems of narco-related cartels and human trafficking, blamed for 130 deaths among male and female politicians and party workers in the July 2018 Mexican elections.⁵⁸

Long-established democracies are also far from immune; in several Anglo-American parliaments, women MPs report that they face sexism, harassment, and threats, including in Canada, New Zealand, and the

UK.⁵⁹ Extreme acts of violence can touch the lives of politicians everywhere, as exemplified by the murder of the MP Jo Cox in 2016, and the non-lethal shooting of two members of Congress, Steve Scalise in 2016 and Gabby Giffords in 2011. Women MPs at Westminster describe how they have been subjected to violence ranging from direct physical threats, intimidation, damage to their property, and notes slipped under their doors, to bullying and harassment by journalists, and abusive, threatening and violent comments online. For some, the abuse started when they were candidates, whilst some only experienced it after being elected.⁶⁰ Official policy complaints show how the use of social media has exacerbated a climate of harassment and threats.⁶¹ In the UK parliament, policy complaints records show that online attacks and abuse are disproportionately directed towards women and minorities.⁶² Amnesty International documented high volumes of abusive tweets during the 2017 UK election, including death threats, directed towards women and ethnic minority MPs.⁶³ Similarly, a broader comparison of 86 countries identified violence against women online a "problem of pandemic proportion", reporting that three quarters of women online had been exposed to cyberviolence, online harassment, stalking threats, and other abuse.⁶⁴ Therefore, accumulating evidence suggests grounds for concern about the gendered impact of violence against politicians, in all parts of the world. In-depth interviews with women parliamentarians highlight their risk perceptions and experiences. Equivalent evidence needs to be gathered from male politicians, however, to establish whether they share similar perceptions about the personal risks of holding elected office.

(v) The impact of COVID-19

Finally, most recently, the social, economic and political impact of the COVID-19, the worst global pandemic in a century, seems likely to be exacerbated problems facing more vulnerable and insecure populations, including women and girls, and women in elected office.⁶⁵ The pandemic continues to unfold around the world, so it currently remains too early to understand its full societal consequences. Nevertheless, the pandemic lockdown seems likely to disrupt or reverse decades of steady gains in gender equality by reinforcing the tradition division of men and women's roles and responsibilities in the family and care of dependents, in schools and education, and in labor markets and paid work, as well as heightening risks of domestic violence.⁶⁶ Deepening tensions arising during the pandemic from the lockdown, physical distancing, inadequate healthcare, and economic disruption seem likely to exacerbate the risks of gender-based domestic violence and sexual abuse in the home.⁶⁷

The 2020 U.N. report monitoring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals highlighted that women and girls are being hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic: "The crisis is creating circumstances that have already contributed to a surge in reports of violence against women and girls, and may increase child marriage and FGM. Moreover, women are likely to take on most additional care work owing to the closure of schools and day-care centers. They are also on the front lines in fighting the coronavirus, since women account for nearly 70 per cent of health and social workers globally."⁶⁸ The U.N. Secretary General's report highlighted the way that the pandemic has deepened pre-existing gender inequalities across every sphere, from healthcare to the economy and social protection.⁶⁹ The broader effects of the coronavirus crisis have catalyzed a public health crisis, a steep economic recession, worsening poverty, homelessness, and unemployment.

Early analysis of sex-segregated data suggest that men seem to have higher mortality rates from the virus, for reasons which remain unclear but which probably relate to differences in life experiences, behaviors, and pre-existing conditions.⁷⁰ The data on COVID-19 cases reported by Global Health 50/50 estimate that women appear to be slightly more likely to be diagnosed with the virus.⁷¹ The global situation currently remains unclear, however, until more sex-segregated data is collected by official agencies in each country and standardized by international agencies.⁷²

Nevertheless, there are good reasons to believe that women are more vulnerable to the social and economic consequences of the pandemic, potentially weakening recent gains in gender equality in paid employment and education.⁷³ Elderly populations resident in retirement communities, assisted living facilities, nursing homes, and sheltered housing, which tend to be disproportionately female, face high risk of clusters of outbreaks and lethal infection. Female employees and care-giving staff working in these homes are also vulnerable; in the U.S., for examples, during spring 2020 about a fifth of virus-related deaths were linked to nursing facilities.

Occupational sex-segregation means that low-paid women in essential services in the labor force also face direct risks of coronavirus contagion. Workers at the forefront of the essential services responding to the crisis are disproportionately female, from health-care professionals such as nurses, physicians, public health administrators, pharmacists, and epidemiologists developing vaccines, to health facility service staff like cleaners and laundry workers, carers in homes for the elderly, and low-paid jobs at checkout counters in grocery stores. For example, the WHO estimates that women constitute 70% of the health work force caring for those affected by the pandemic.

Moreover, school closings mean that responsibilities for *education* have shifted to the home and family, with much of the unpaid domestic work of childcare falling most heavily upon mothers, due to their traditional caregiver roles. During school lockdowns, women in the labor force have had to cope with juggling the demands of working from home with supervising home schooling their children.

The crisis has also triggered lay-offs and furloughs in labor markets, reversing some of women's hard-won gains in *economic participation*. Women are the majority of service sector workers, and they are often employed in sectors such as childcare and schools, retail, hospitality and tourism which have been hard hit by the recession. In developing countries, jobs have quickly shrunk in the informal sector, like domestic work and cleaning, where many women are employed. Women often have less access to social protection like health care and sick leave, as well as lower savings and pay, weakening their capacity to cope with economic downturns. The economic recession, rising financial pressures and household debts, and extended periods of home confinement are also all likely to have worsened risks of *gender-based domestic violence*, while the closure of shelters has limited the capacities of support services to respond.

In addition, the UNFPA warns that due to the quarantine lockdown and travel restrictions women and girls also face heightened risks of *pregnancy, sexual disease, and abuse*, and the closure of public services and private clinics means less access to contraception and reproductive rights.⁷⁴

It remains unclear how these impacts have influenced the broader *political* ramifications of the pandemic, such as by sidelining the role of parliaments and postponing or cancelling elections.⁷⁵ The postponement or even cancellation of elections, and the adjournment of parliamentary sittings, in particular, are both likely to heighten risks to democracy and limit the role of parliaments in serving as a check and balance on the powers of the executive. For example, from February to mid-August 2020, International IDEA reports that at least 70 countries and territories have decided to postpone elections due to COVID-19.⁷⁶ The pandemic also heightens the risks of public participation through elections, restricting voter turnout and face-to-face local campaigning by parties and candidates.

It still needs to be established how the social and economic effects of the crisis affects women and men in elected office and decision-making leadership positions, however, including their capacity to combine work with family responsibilities; the opportunities for elected officials to interact with constituents and to campaign; the way that parliamentarians' roles change with remote work via digital technologies; and how assemblies function in an era of physical distancing. Further studies need to examine how far these developments have negative consequences for political representation, including for achieving greater gender equality in elected and appointed office. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned:

“COVID-19 could reverse the limited progress that has been made on gender equality and women's rights”.⁷⁷

VI: Key lessons and policy recommendations

Finally, given the analysis, what policy recommendations follow? Three priorities are recommended to be considered.

Recommendation 1: *that the UN General Assembly convenes a Fifth World Conference on Women in 2005, to build upon Beijing, revitalizing the commitment of the world's governments and mobilizing transnational feminist organizations and women's networks to tackle the emerging challenges facing women's political participation and empowerment, and the threats of violence in public life.*

Recommendation 2: *that UN agencies, coordinated by UN Women, multilateral regional organizations, NGOs, and national statistical offices in all member states, monitor a wider range of more comprehensive indicators for all the dimensions of women's participation and empowerment, and the risks of violence for women in public life, compiling more comprehensive metrics from existing global datasets at national and individual levels which go beyond the proportion of women and men in local and national parliaments.*

It is critical that a broader range of indicators are used to monitor developments in future years through gathering more comprehensive metrics. In particular, the broader conceptualization of women's participation and empowerment should be mainstreamed into measurable indicators and specific targets, going beyond comparing the proportion of women and men in elected and appointed office. It is important to improve gender balance in all decision-making positions but, under several conditions, symbolic gains for women in national parliaments through implementing techniques like legal quotas do not necessarily translate into women's empowerment. Rather than relying upon a single metric, the goals should be to expand the four dimensions discussed in this report-- namely cultural, civic, decision-making, and policy empowerment. The metrics used to gauge progress in these regards should also be disaggregated, wherever possible, to take account of the diversity of women's experiences, identities, and interests. In many cases, this requires going beyond existing official statistics to take advantage of standard cross-national and time-series datasets with global coverage, widely used in the research community, like the Varieties of Democracy Project and the World Values Surveys.

Recommendation 3: *that UN Women commissions new research documenting the systematic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's participation, empowerment, and the threat of violence against women in public office, coordinating this initiative with the work of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, officials in national parliaments and local governments, NGOs such as International IDEA and iKNOWPolitics, and related gender research institutes. There is widespread concern about the social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for vulnerable populations, with the effects potentially capable of reversing decades of progress in mitigating female poverty, improving girl's schooling, and reducing domestic violence. The impact of the pandemic on women's participation and empowerment, as well as for social cohesion and democracy more generally, currently remain uncertain. In particular, the pandemic has resulted in the suspension of sessions in many national parliaments, strengthened the role of the executive over the capacity of the legislature in its oversight and scrutiny role, as well as leading to the postponement or cancellation of elections. Further study is needed to understand the consequences of these developments for women's participation and empowerment, as well as the risks of violence.*

Figure 1: Dimensions of gender equality and women's empowerment

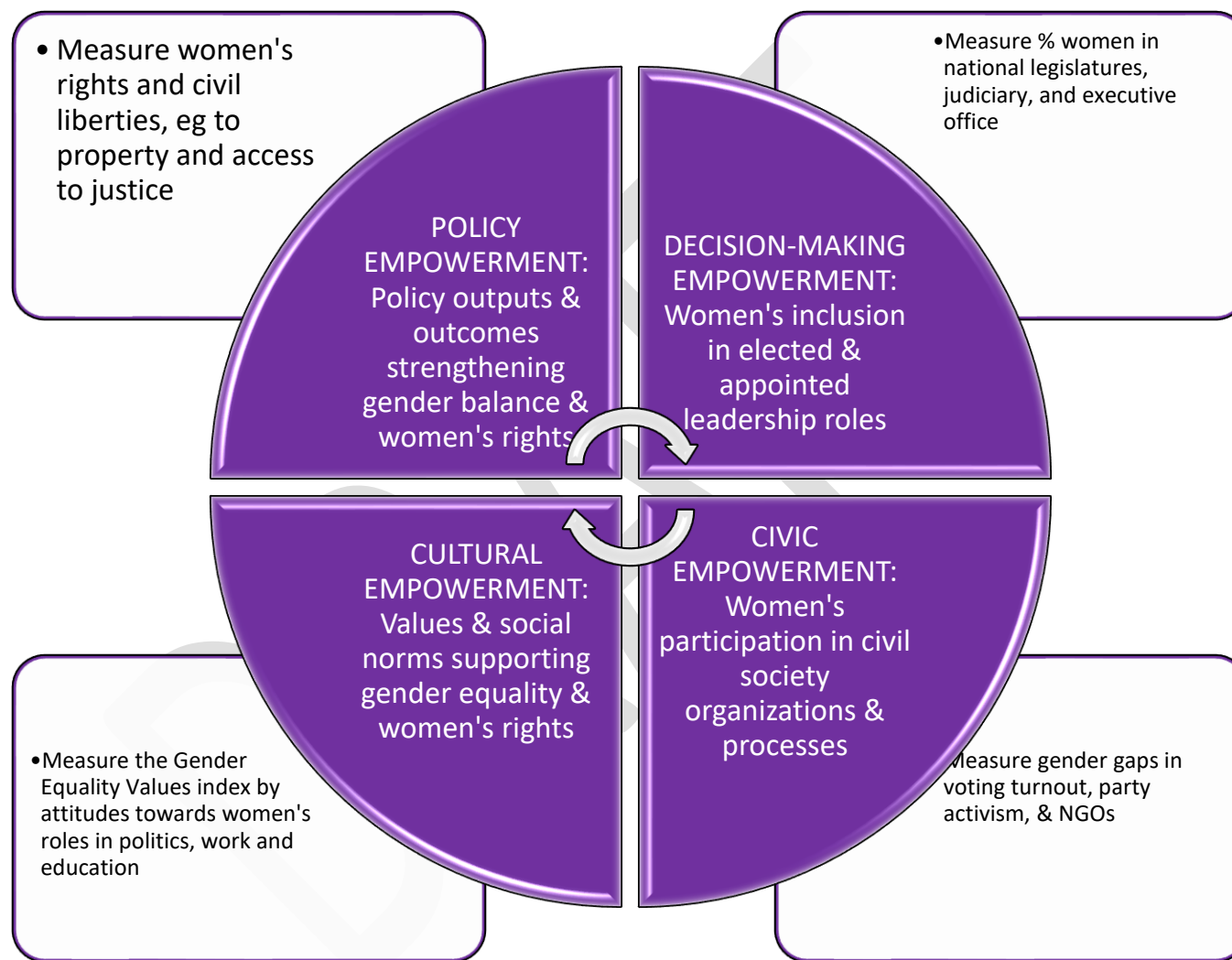
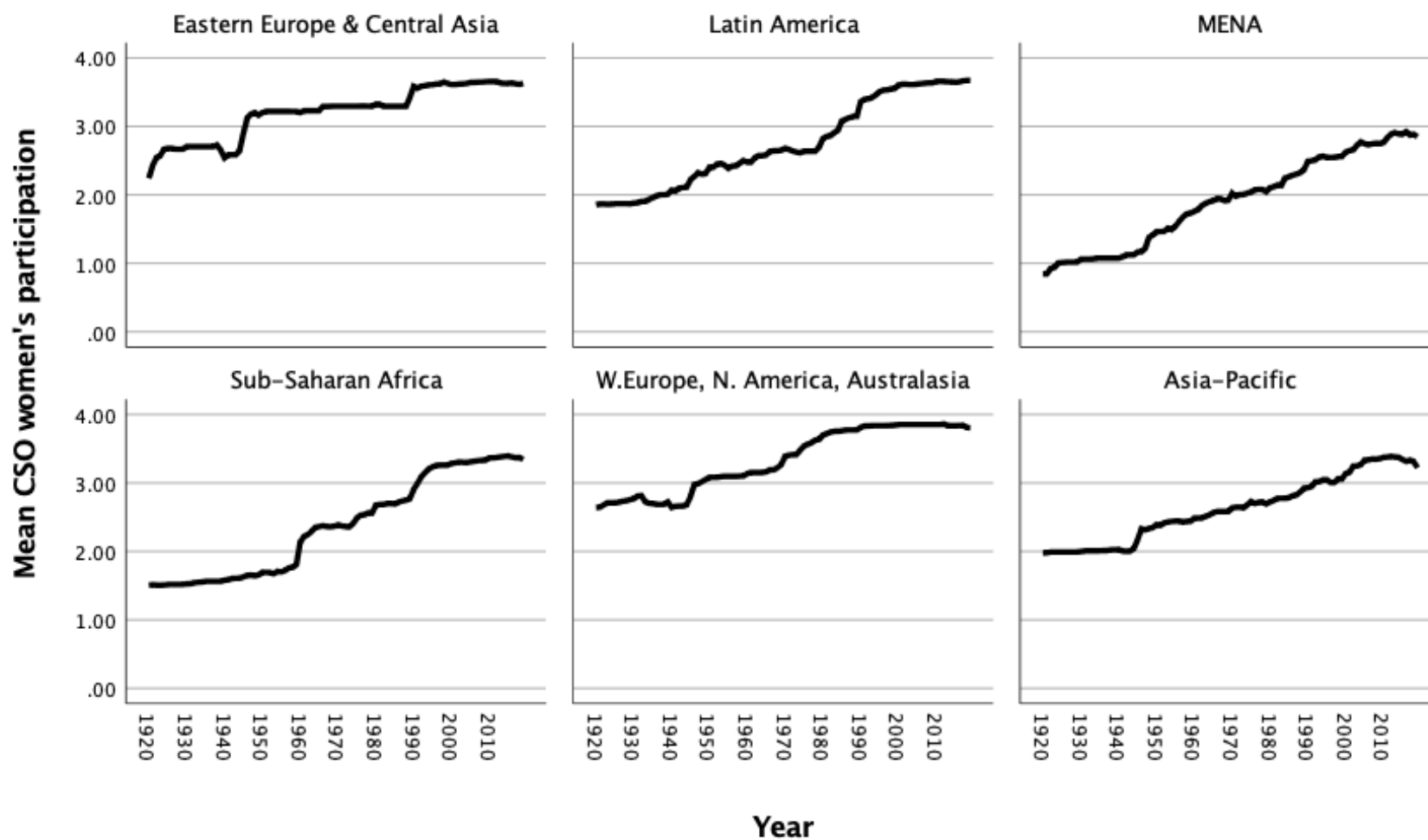


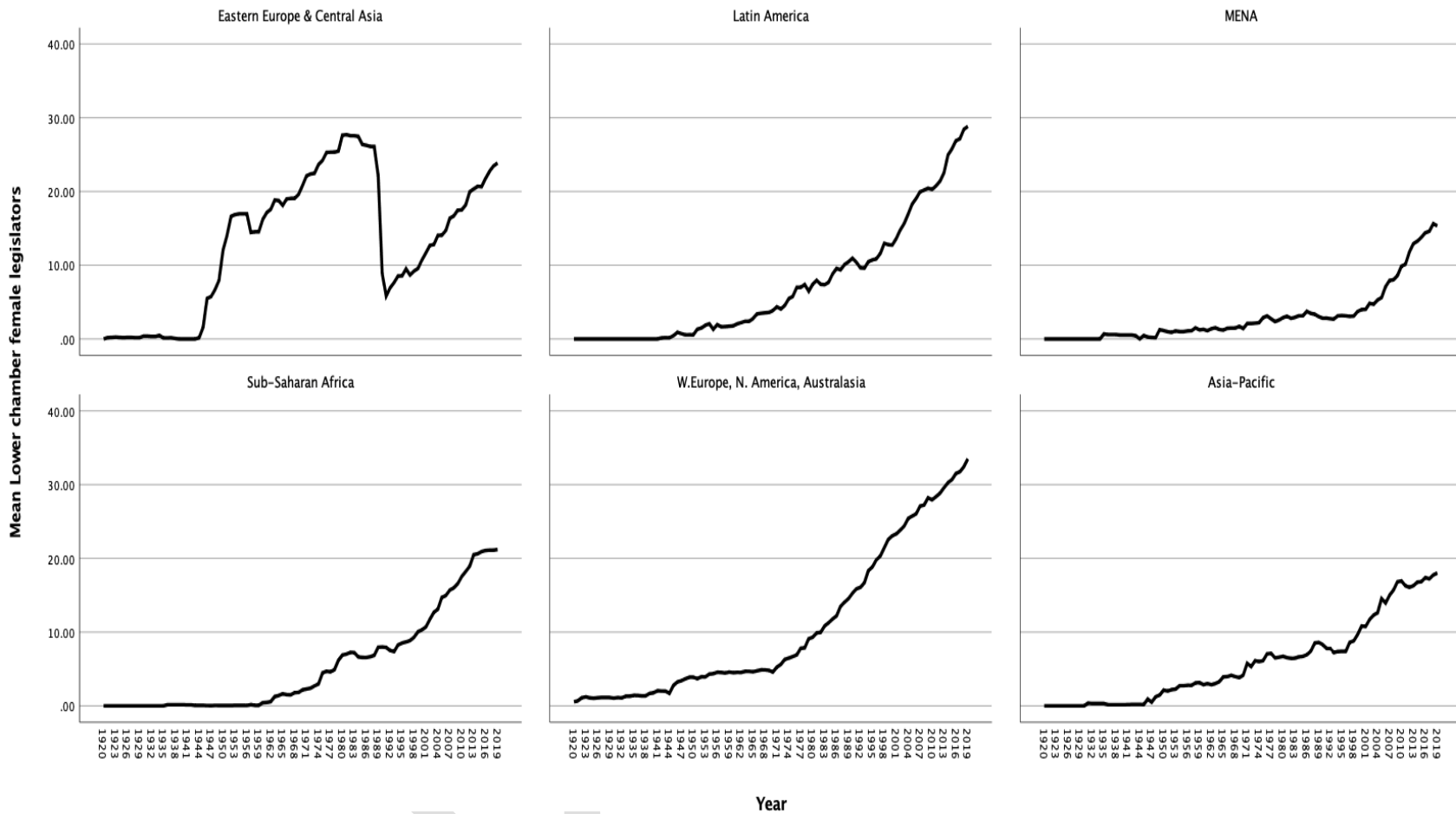
Figure 3: A century of women’s civic empowerment



Note: The index is constructed from expert estimates of restrictions on women’s participation in civil society organizations, (v2csgender), where a higher score means fewer or no restrictions.

Source: Varieties of Democracy V10.0 (July 2020)

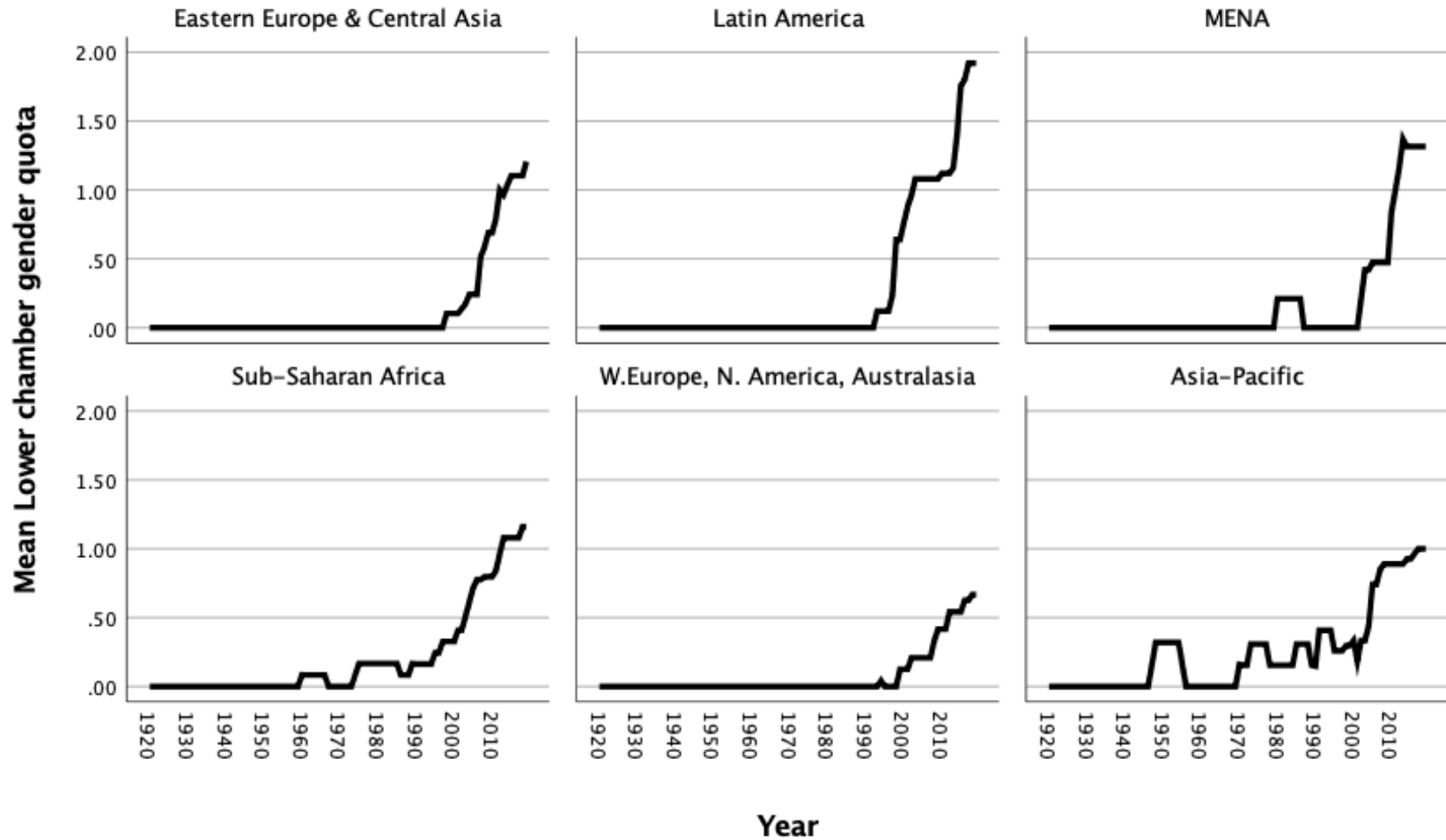
Figure 4: A century of women in parliament



Note: The percentage (%) of the lower (or unicameral) chamber of the national legislature who are female.

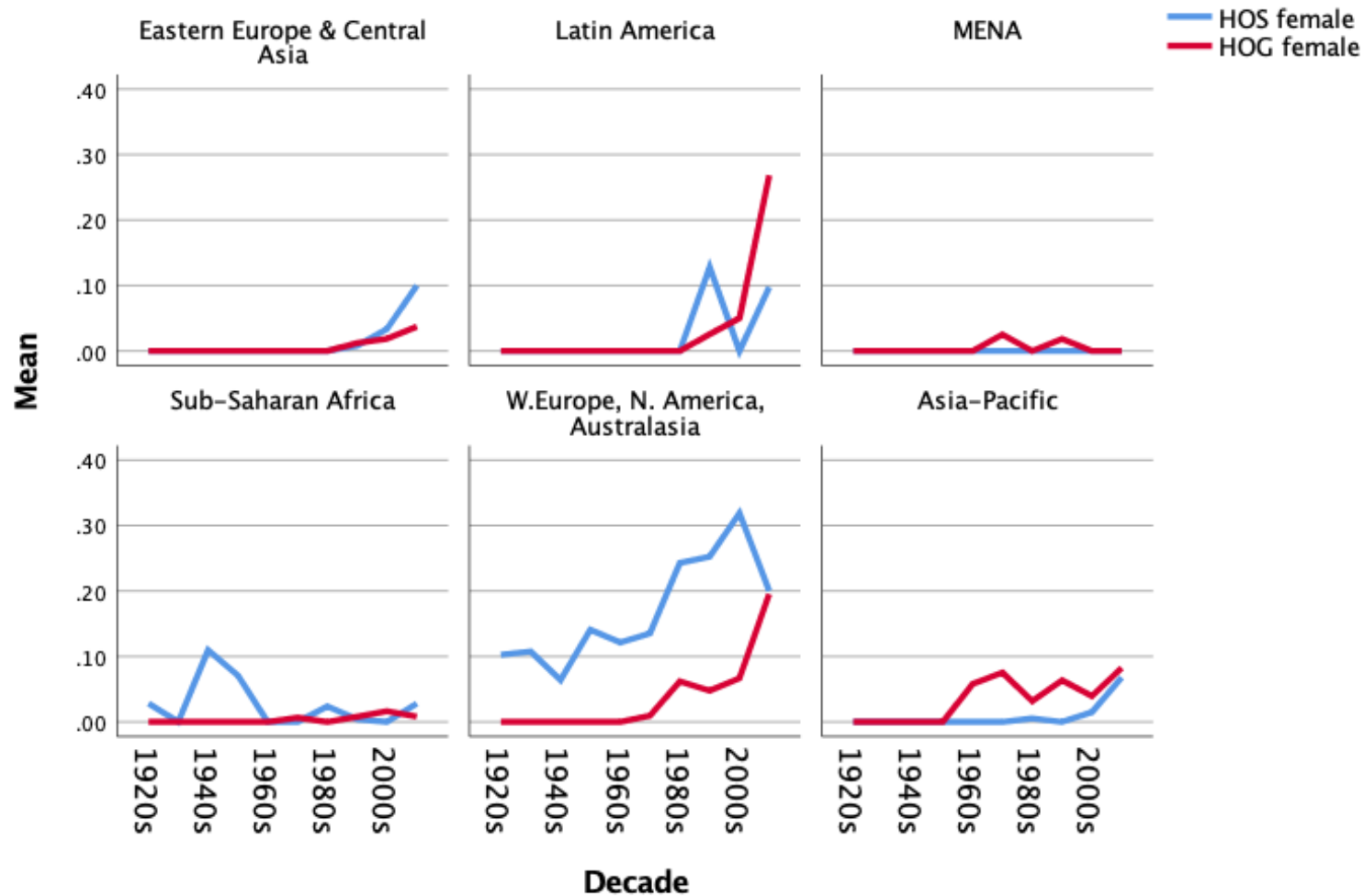
Source, Varieties of Democracy V10.0 (July 2020)

Figure 5: A century of gender quota laws



Note: Is there a national-level gender quota for the lower (or unicameral) chamber of the legislature? National-level quotas either reserve some seats for women in the legislature (as a whole or per district) or mandate through statutory law that all political parties must nominate a certain percentage of female candidates or candidates considered for nomination. **Source,** Varieties of Democracy V10.0 (July 2020)

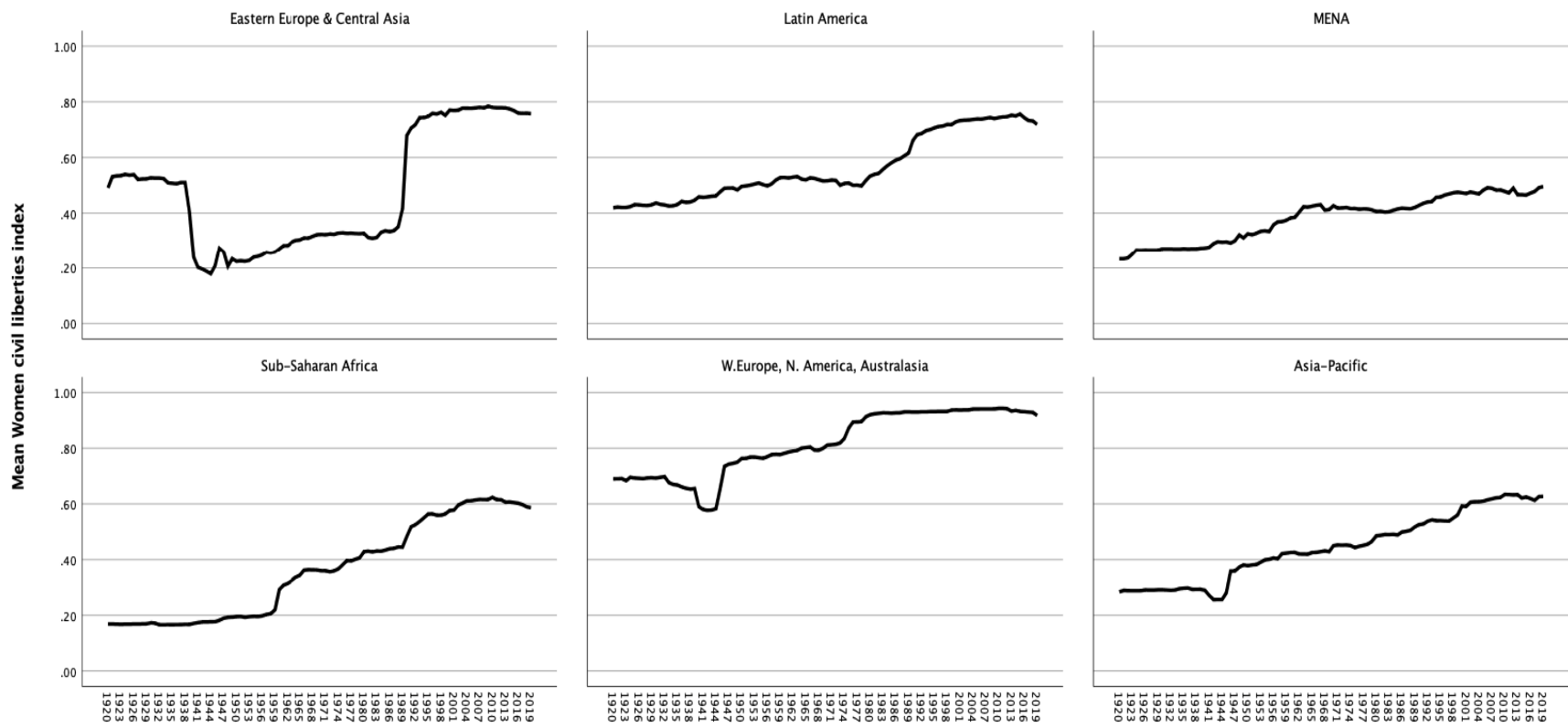
Figure 6: A century of women as Heads of Government and Heads of State



Note: Heads of State may have symbolic or substantive power and may have multiple titles, such as presidencies, monarchies, and governorships. Similarly Heads of Government may have varied titles, such as Prime Minister, Chairman, and Chancellor, as well as diverse powers and responsibilities.

Source, Varieties of Democracy V10.0 (July 2020)

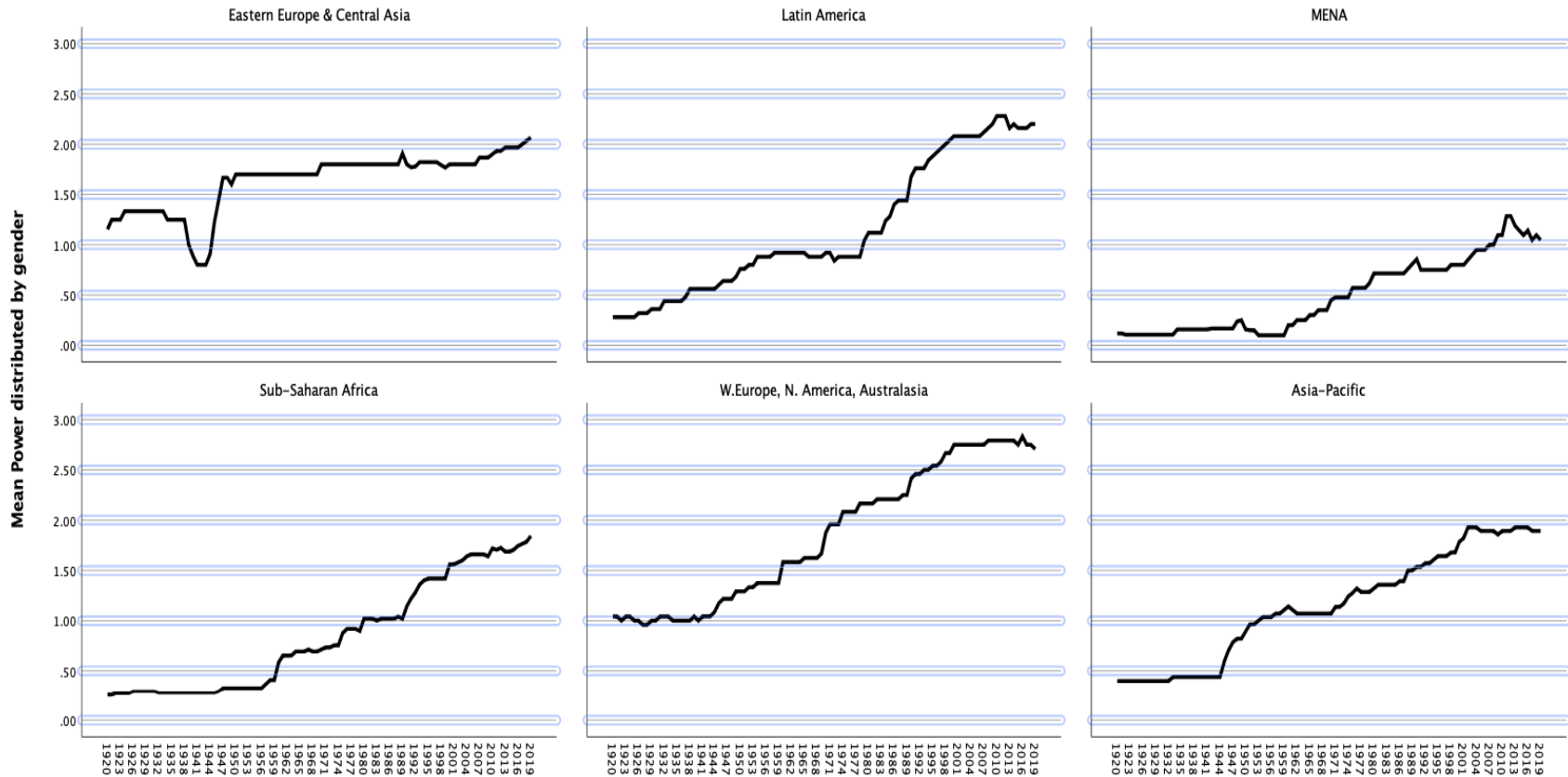
Figure 7: A century of women’s policy empowerment



Note: Women’s policy empowerment is understood to include freedom of domestic movement, the right to private property, freedom from forced labor, and access to justice.

Source: Varieties of Democracy V10.0 (July 2020)

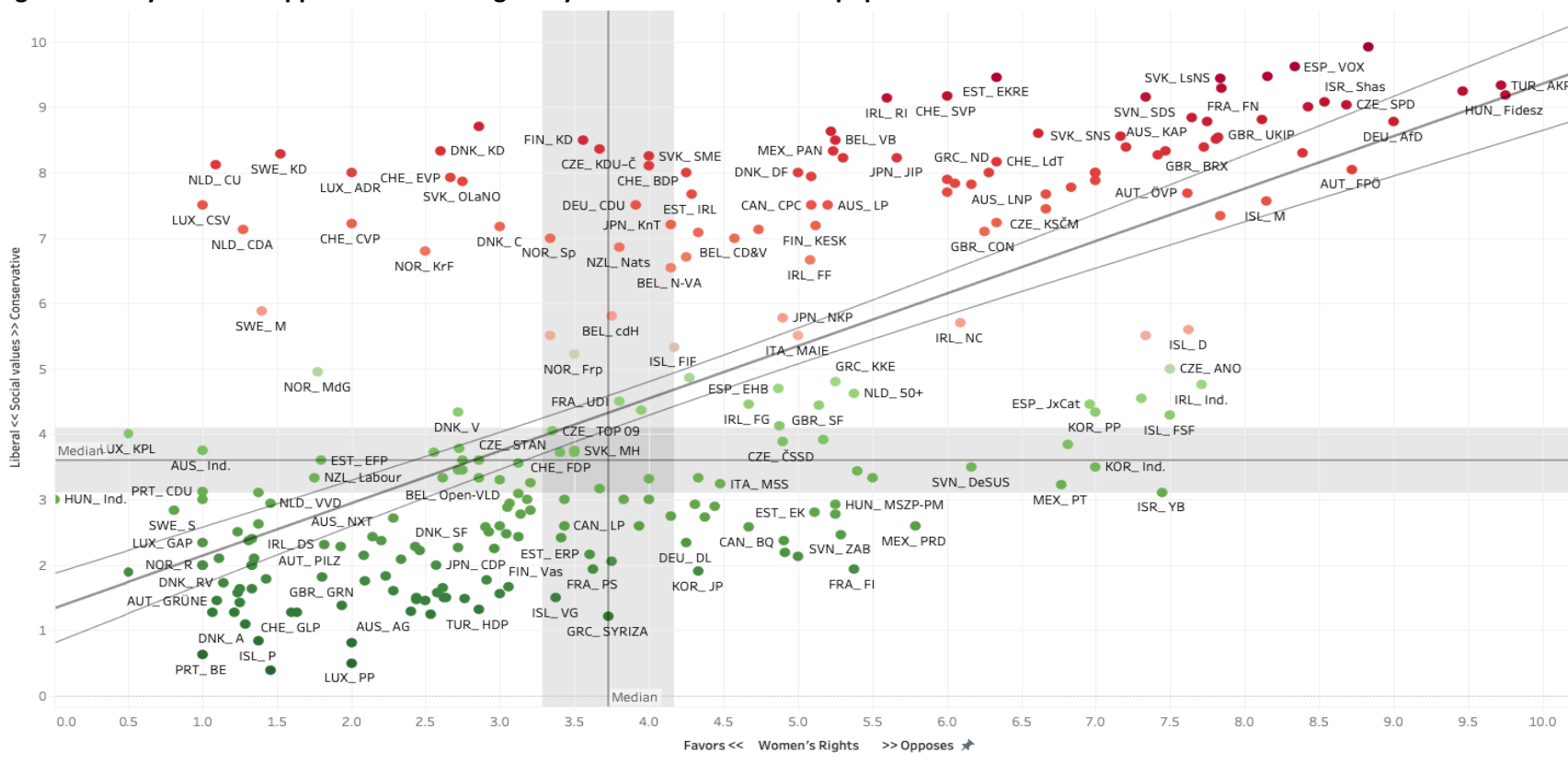
Figure 8: Summary: A century of women’s political empowerment



Note: Women’s political empowerment is defined as a process of increasing capacity for women, leading to greater choice, agency, and participation in societal decision-making. It is understood to incorporate three equally weighted dimensions: fundamental civil liberties, women’s open discussion of political issues and participation in civil society organizations, and the descriptive representation of women in formal political positions.

Source, Varieties of Democracy V10.0 (July 2020)

Figure 9: Party favors or opposes women’s rights by their social values and populist rhetoric



Notes: Women’s Rights: “Does the party favor or oppose women’s rights?” **Social values** are measured by: “Parties can also be classified by their current social values. Those with LIBERAL values favor expanded personal freedoms, for example, on abortion rights, same-sex marriage, and democratic participation. Those with CONSERVATIVE values reject these ideas in favor of order, tradition and stability, believing that government should be a firm moral authority on social and cultural issues. Where would you place each party on the following 0-10 scale?” **Populism**, coloring the bubbles, is measured by: “Parties can also be classified by their current use of POPULIST OR PLURALIST rhetoric. POPULIST language typically challenges the legitimacy of established political institutions and emphasizes that the will of the people should prevail. By contrast, PLURALIST rhetoric rejects these ideas, believing that elected leaders should govern, constrained by minority rights, bargaining and compromise, as well as checks and balances on executive power. Where would you place each party on the following 0-10 scale?” Red=high, green=low

Source: Global Party Survey, 2019. www.GlobalPartySurvey.org

Table 1: Change in the Gender Equality Values Index since Beijing, 46 societies

Country	1995-1999	2010-20	Change
Uruguay	66	82	15
Albania	67	82	15
Romania	58	70	12
Estonia	64	76	12
Puerto Rico	75	87	12
Poland	62	75	12
Taiwan ROC	61	73	12
Georgia	55	66	12
Mexico	64	76	11
Croatia	69	80	11
Brazil	68	78	10
Slovenia	71	81	10
Belarus	59	68	10
Spain	75	84	10
Australia	76	85	8
Colombia	68	76	8
Japan	62	69	7
Czech Republic	66	73	7
Norway	87	94	7
Bosnia and Herzegovina	66	73	7
Montenegro	64	70	7
Armenia	55	61	7
Hungary	69	75	6
Peru	71	77	6
New Zealand	79	85	6
USA	76	82	6
Lithuania	67	72	6
Bulgaria	66	72	6
Slovakia	61	66	6
Ukraine	63	68	5
Argentina	74	79	5
South Korea	61	64	4
Turkey	58	62	3
Russia	61	64	3
Finland	84	87	3
Chile	71	73	3
Azerbaijan	56	59	2
Sweden	89	91	2
Macedonia	68	70	1
China	65	66	1
South Africa	69	66	-3
Bangladesh	59	55	-3
Nigeria	57	53	-3
Philippines	61	57	-4
Pakistan	54	49	-5
India	65	59	-6
Average	67	72	6

Note: See Figure 2 for the construction of the index. Source: European Values/World Values Survey, 2000-2020.

Table 2: Gender gaps in likely voting participation in national elections

Country	Women	Men	Gender Gap
Belarus	59%	51%	8%
Estonia	49%	41%	7%
Finland	80%	74%	6%
Russia	46%	39%	6%
Slovenia	52%	45%	6%
Ukraine	65%	59%	6%
Lithuania	33%	27%	6%
Bulgaria	62%	56%	6%
Taiwan ROC	74%	68%	6%
Trinidad and Tobago	73%	67%	6%
Kazakhstan	51%	47%	4%
Philippines	84%	80%	4%
Jordan	50%	46%	4%
Brazil	81%	78%	3%
Ecuador	92%	89%	3%
Uruguay	93%	90%	3%
New Zealand	87%	85%	2%
France	68%	66%	2%
South Africa	57%	55%	2%
Thailand	73%	71%	2%
Hungary	67%	66%	2%
Denmark	83%	81%	2%
Georgia	71%	70%	1%
Poland	62%	61%	1%
Iceland	82%	81%	1%
Guatemala	66%	65%	1%
Serbia	49%	48%	1%
Sweden	84%	83%	1%
Spain	67%	66%	1%
Algeria	29%	28%	1%
Indonesia	82%	81%	1%
Peru	90%	89%	1%
Norway	79%	79%	0%
Albania	78%	77%	0%
Kyrgyzstan	68%	68%	0%
Turkey	74%	75%	0%
Argentina	85%	85%	0%
Singapore	73%	73%	0%
Haiti	11%	12%	-1%
Yemen	55%	56%	-1%
Yugoslavia	62%	62%	-1%
Bolivia	88%	89%	-1%
Romania	62%	63%	-1%
Chile	60%	61%	-1%
Greece	72%	73%	-1%
Netherlands	73%	74%	-1%
Puerto Rico	40%	42%	-2%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	73%	75%	-2%
Iran	50%	52%	-2%
Australia	87%	89%	-2%
Austria	64%	67%	-2%

Mexico	65%	67%	-2%
Germany	75%	77%	-3%
Nicaragua	49%	51%	-3%
Slovakia	39%	42%	-3%
Azerbaijan	35%	38%	-3%
South Korea	60%	63%	-3%
Montenegro	56%	59%	-3%
Colombia	61%	64%	-3%
Italy	73%	76%	-3%
China	6%	9%	-3%
Macedonia	54%	57%	-3%
Bangladesh	57%	60%	-4%
United Kingdom	60%	63%	-4%
Croatia	64%	68%	-4%
India	82%	86%	-4%
Iraq	66%	70%	-5%
Myanmar	24%	29%	-5%
Ghana	70%	75%	-5%
Lebanon	47%	52%	-5%
Rwanda	51%	56%	-5%
Armenia	57%	62%	-5%
Cyprus	65%	70%	-5%
Switzerland	36%	41%	-5%
Uzbekistan	52%	58%	-5%
Czech Republic	45%	51%	-6%
Zimbabwe	46%	52%	-6%
Malaysia	41%	47%	-6%
Tunisia	24%	31%	-7%
Tajikistan	62%	70%	-8%
Japan	55%	63%	-8%
USA	56%	64%	-8%
Vietnam	19%	27%	-8%
Morocco	12%	21%	-9%
Andorra	31%	40%	-10%
Hong Kong SAR	26%	35%	-10%
Egypt	34%	44%	-10%
Palestine	53%	63%	-10%
Nigeria	40%	52%	-12%
Ethiopia	29%	41%	-12%
Libya	41%	52%	-12%
Qatar	41%	53%	-12%
Kuwait	26%	41%	-14%
Pakistan	42%	57%	-15%
Average	58%	60%	-2%

Note: Q: “When national elections take place, do you vote always, usually or never?” % ‘Always’.

Source: European Values/World Values Survey, 2010-2020.

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