

Measuring women’s political empowerment and investigating the role of women’s civil liberties in democratization



International Women’s Day March in El Fasher, North Darfur. UN Photo/Albert González Farran

KEY FINDINGS

- The link between women’s political empowerment and positive developmental outcomes are recognized within both the academia and the policy arena, yet appropriate and sufficient measures of women’s political empowerment are absent.
- The new V-Dem Women’s Political Empowerment Index (WPEI) overcomes many challenges faced by existing measures in terms of coverage over time and across countries. It is also more comprehensive by capturing different dimensions of women’s political empowerment.

Introduction

Women’s political empowerment and civil liberties are essential to democracy and development. This policy brief presents the key findings of two V-Dem working papers within the field. Sundstrom et al. (2015) present a new and more comprehensive way to measure women’s political empowerment. Wang et al. (2015) explore the role of women’s civil liberties in democratization.

New measures of women’s political empowerment

Women’s political empowerment is increasingly recognized as critical to modern states and a high priority issue in international development cooperation. Scholars and practitioners alike see a link between women’s political empowerment and positive development outcomes for women, children, and society as a whole. (e.g. Sen 1997, Beaman et al. 2012). However, despite several attempts to measure and track women’s political empowerment, reliable measures to test such important theories are lacking. Working Paper 19 presents the Women’s Political Empowerment Index (WPEI) that allow for analysis and comparisons of women’s rights for all countries in the world from 1900 to 2012—making it one of the most comprehensive measures of women’s political empowerment available.

Sundström et al. (2015) define women’s political empowerment as “a process of increasing capacity for women, leading to greater choice, agency, and participation in societal decision-making” (Sundström et al 2015: 4). The definition is three dimensional and captures the most prominent aspects of empowerment. Compared to other measurements, the WPEI enables a more precise measurement, and contain a larger temporal scope of countries than existing measures (Sundström et al 2015: 2). In addition,

the V-Dem measure has more extensive coverage for medium and low development countries than prior indices. Moreover, it includes indicators that are important in nonwestern contexts, such as women’s freedom of domestic movement and from forced labor.

- 1) The women *civil liberties index* measures the dimension of choice, meaning whether women are able to make meaningful decisions of critical areas of their daily lives. It includes indicators of women’s freedom of domestic movement, freedom from forced labor, property rights, and access to justice.
- 2) In order to capture the dimension of agency, the women *civil society participation index* includes indicators of women’s freedom of discussion, participation in civil society organizations (CSO), and representation in the ranks of journalists. It captures women’s ability to engage in public debate freely.
- 3) The women political participation index reflects the extent to which women are represented in formal political positions, both in terms of presence of women in the legislature as well as political power distribution by gender.

To construct the women civil liberties index the authors conduct separate Bayesian factor analysis (BFA) for each of the index based on indicators shown in Table 1. The average of these three are taken in order to compose the overall women political empowerment index (Sundström et al. 2015, pp. 12-15).

To demonstrate the utility of the index, the authors of Working Paper 19 carry out an empirical demonstration analysis and investigate if economic development and democratic transition lead to women’s empowerment. Based on a time-series cross-section analysis, their findings

WOMEN POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT INDEX

1) Women civil liberties index

- Freedom of domestic movement for women
- Freedom from forced labor for women
- Property rights for women
- Access to justice for women

2) Women civil society participation index

- Freedom of discussion for women
- CSO women's participation
- Percent (%) female journalists

3) Women political participation index

- Power distributed by gender
- Lower chamber female legislators

Table 1. V-Dem Women's Political Empowerment Index (WPEI), its three sub-indices and indicators.

HOW WOMEN'S RIGHTS CONDITION SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS TO DEMOCRATIC RULE

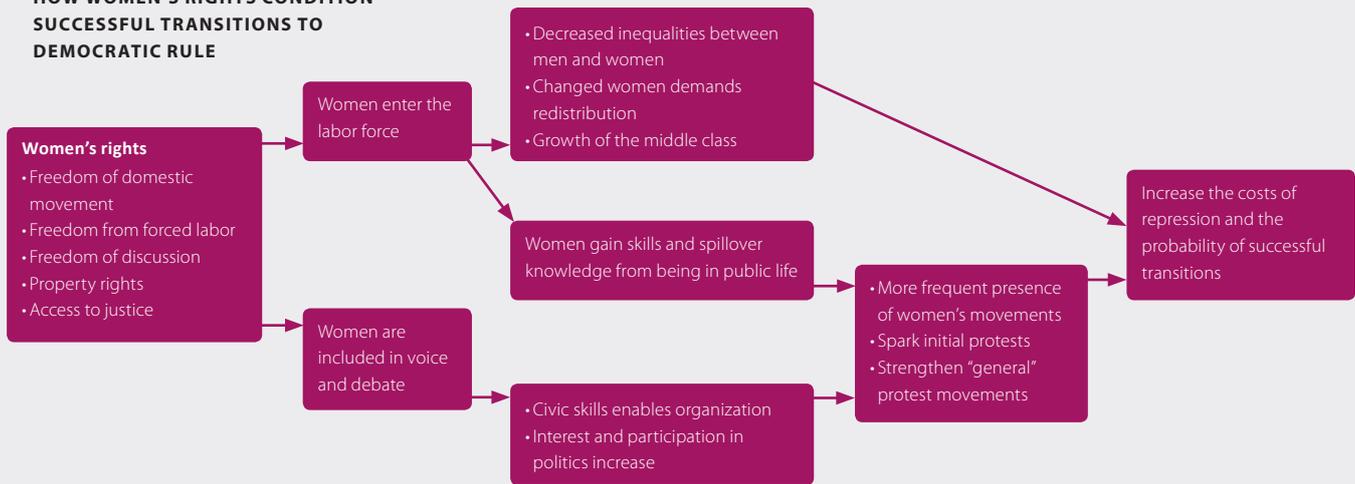


Figure 2. Women's rights and successful transitions to democratic rule (Source: WP12: 12).

suggest that, as expected, increases in the level of democracy have a positive effect on women's political empowerment. In addition, the relationship between democratization and the level of women's empowerment appears to be stronger than between economic development and women's empowerment. However, both—democratization and economic development—significantly influence women's empowerment (Sundström et al. 2015, p. 21).

The role of women's rights in democratization

Working Paper 12 (Wang et al. 2015) examines the role of civil liberties, and in particular women's rights, for successful transitions to democracy. Previous research has largely focused on socioeconomic and institutional factors, motivating a systematic examination of the question whether political liberalization has to precede democratization for successful transitions. Furthermore, the authors argue that the gender dimension of democratization has previously been overlooked within the research field. Wang et al. argue that 'both men's and women's liberal rights are essential conditions for democratization to take place' (Wang et al. 2015, p. 2).

However, it is difficult to establish if the entitlement to civil rights always precedes the establishment of competitive elections for political leaders, and thus constitutes a precondition for democratization - or the other way around by utilizing conventional time-series cross-section analysis approaches (Wang et al. 2015, p. 3). To unravel this relationship,

the authors apply a new approach, involving social sequence analysis and Bayesian dynamic systems analysis. Their findings suggest that civil rights are a "necessary condition for democratic transition to take place." (Wang et al. 2015, p. 5). In the flowchart below, the mechanisms behind this relationship are illustrated (Figure 2).

The authors argue that improvement of civil liberties for women, in turn, increases ruler's costs of repressing citizens through two 'routes'. First, as more women obtain basic liberties, such as property rights and the freedom of movement, women are better able to voice opposition, organize movements, and challenge the regime either alone or by joining other opposition forces. Secondly, when more women enter the workforce, the general preference for social policies increases, which are more likely to be achieved in a democratic tax structure. The advancements in women's civil rights can also lead to a growing middle class, which has long been considered a key factor in democratization (Wang et al. 2015, p. 7).

For the advancement of liberties and rights to take place for both women and men, scholars have argued that the so-called 'cost of repression' should increase. Countries where women are denied their basic rights, are less likely to democratize since the potential cost of redistribution through democratization surpasses that of repressing revolts. In addition, resistance movements—by women alone and by women teaming up in mainstream organizations—are stronger when women are given the means to resist authoritarian rule.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- V-Dem women's empowerment indices provide a new empirical basis for understanding the development and the role of women's political empowerment for academics, policy makers and practitioners.
- The indices may be used to evaluate factors that shape women's empowerment as well as consequences of increasing women's rights.
- Democracy promotion efforts needs to pay increased attention to the role of civil liberties and women's liberalization in particular, since new findings suggest that a country first needs to assure civil rights for both genders before transitioning to electoral democracy.

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V-Dem is a new approach to conceptualizing and measuring democracy. The project's multidimensional, nuanced and disaggregated approach acknowledges the complexity of the concept of democracy. With four Principal Investigators, two Project Coordinators, fifteen Project Managers, more than thirty Regional Managers, almost 200 Country Coordinators, several Assistant Researchers, and approximately 2,600 Country Experts, the V-Dem project is one of the largest-ever social science data collection projects with a database of over 15 million data points.



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