



Women's Political Empowerment: A New Global Index, 1900–2012

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Summary. — The political empowerment of women is a societal process crucial to development and progress. The V-Dem women's political empowerment index (WPEI) provides information about women's civil liberties, civil society participation, and political participation globally. Spanning from 1900 to 2012, three dimensions of empowerment, and over 170 countries, it is among the most comprehensive measures of women's empowerment available. This paper presents a conceptualization of women's political empowerment and provides an overview of the construction of the index and operationalization of its three sub-dimensions: Women's civil liberties, civil society participation, and political participation. Compared to other indices measuring women's empowerment, such as the GDI, the GEM, the GII, and the CIRI data on human rights, the V-Dem index allows more precise measurement and is superior in temporal scope and coverage of countries of the Global South. The paper demonstrates the benefits of this new index and its sub-dimensions through several empirical illustrations.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Women's political empowerment is increasingly recognized as critical to modern states. Scholars and practitioners alike see a link between women's political empowerment and outcomes for women, for children, as well as for society as a whole (e.g., Alexander, Bolzendahl, & Jalalzai, 2016; Bratton & Ray, 2002; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Gerrity, Osborn, & Mendez, 2007; Sen, 1997; Swiss, Fallon, & Burgos, 2012). For example, research demonstrates relationships between the descriptive, formal, and substantive representation of women and important outcomes such as democratization, corruption, horizontal accountability, and inequality (e.g., Rule, 1994; Swamy, Knack, Lee, & Azfar, 2001; Waylen, 1994; Wängnerud, 2009). The benefits of empowering women are also increasingly addressed in the academic literature investigating economic and social development (e.g., Abu-Ghaida & Klasen, 2004; Branisa, Klasen, & Ziegler, 2013; Imai, Kobina, Gaiha, & Kulkarni, 2014; Janssens, 2010; Sraboni, Malapit, Quisumbing, & Ahmed, 2014; Wyndow, Li, & Mattes, 2013).

Attention to gender is also increasingly significant to the international community. The declarations of a wide range of international bodies—led primarily by the United Nations, but including the Inter-Parliamentary Union, African Union, Commonwealth, Council of Europe, European Union, and Organization of American States—urge member-states to achieve a minimum of 30% women in all elected positions (Krook, 2006, p. 114; Towns, 2010). With the inclusion of women's political representation and the empowerment of women and girls in the fifth Sustainable Development Goal, women's political empowerment is a high-priority issue in international development cooperation (Mosedale, 2014). In policy statements such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, there is a dual focus: First, women's empowerment is a goal in itself, and second, it may bring about other processes of prosperity (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002). The issue of women's political

empowerment is hence of high interest to various stakeholders working to reduce poverty, be it advocacy organizations, scholars of development studies, or government officials.

Despite its importance to both scholars and practitioners, as well as several attempts to measure and track women's empowerment, we still do not have adequate measures to test extant theories. Scholars have argued that prevailing measures combine disparate dimensions of power (Alkire et al., 2013; Hanmer & Klugman, 2016; Malhotra et al., 2002), are misinterpreted and misused (Schüler, 2006; see also Caprioli et al., 2009; Liebowitz & Zwingel, 2014), or do not have the spatial or temporal coverage to truly test theories (Cueva Beteta, 2006; Klasen, 2006). Critically, existing measures rarely have paid sufficient attention to measurement error and noise. There is hence a need to present succinct and theoretically relevant estimates comparable across time and space, while taking uncertainty into account. Hanmer and Klugman

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(2016, p. 257) recently confirmed that while the concept of women's empowerment is well developed "progress on the empirical front has faced major challenges around developing tractable measures and data availability."

This paper presents a new index that overcomes many prior limitations. The Varieties of Democracy project (V-Dem) Women's Political Empowerment Index (WPEI) that we developed and discuss here, gauges women's political empowerment with significant spatial and temporal scope: From 1900 to 2012 in 173 countries. The goal of this index is to conceptualize, operationalize, and measure women's political empowerment comparably across wide periods of time and many countries. The index includes three sub-dimensions: civil liberties, civil society participation, and political participation for women. Each sub-index is conceptualized as a latent trait, constructed from several indicators, and estimated with Bayesian Factor Analysis allowing for appraising of uncertainty and error. The index is based on assessments from over 2,600 country experts who provided ordinal ratings for dozens of indicators, aggregated using cutting-edge Bayesian item response theory modeling, to ensure both reliability and comparability (Pemstein, Tzelgov, & Wang, 2015).

The next section defines the concept of women's political empowerment. We then describe existing indicators gauging women's empowerment generally and with respect to human rights. We proceed to describe the construction of the new index. We correlate our measure with some existing measures as a means of external validation. The final section demonstrates the application of our index by exploring whether economic development and democratic transitions lead to women's political empowerment. We conclude by summarizing the merits of the new index and its sub-indices and outline some future areas for promising applications.

2. THEORETICAL DEFINITION

Women's empowerment is a multifaceted concept and is typically defined with several dimensions, such as "rights, resources, and voice" (World Bank, 2001), "resources, perceptions, relationships, and power" (Chen, 1992), or "resources, agency and achievements" (Kabeer, 1999b). Our focus is on women's *political* empowerment. Politics is the arena for societal decision making. Individuals who hold formal and official positions in government allocate scarce resources, e.g., tax revenues, and direct resources to some groups at the expense of others (Bratton & Ray, 2002; Franceschet & Piscopo, 2014), and have the power to enforce their decisions, ultimately with force. Decisions by politicians affect individual choices by encouraging some behaviors and outlawing others. Those with formal or informal political power hold power over other social institutions, such as the family or education, and are able to codify particular practices into law (Martin, 2004). Looking at the makeup of individuals in formal positions of power as well as important positions in civil society highlights who is legitimated to make society-wide decisions.

We define women's political empowerment as a *process of increasing capacity for women, leading to greater choice, agency, and participation in societal decision-making*. Our definition is three dimensional, capturing the three most prominent strands in thinking on empowerment: that of choice, that of agency, and that of participation. We also make the argument that these three dimensions of empowerment must be measured longitudinally.

(a) Choice

One strand of thinking on empowerment emphasizes individuals' ability to make choices over areas of their lives. Choice is central to Naila Kabeer's influential writings: "One way to think about power is in terms of the ability to make choices: to be disempowered, therefore, implies to be denied a choice" (Kabeer, 1999a, p. 426–427). This is echoed in Gita Sen's (1993) definition, where empowerment is "altering relations of power...which constrain women's options and autonomy" (cited in Desai, 2010, p. 5; see also Malhotra et al., 2002, p. 6).

A focus on choice stresses the importance for women of being able to make meaningful decisions on critical areas and key aspects of their lives (Kishor, 2000). What are these key aspects? They relate to a battery of rights that are fundamental yet historically denied to women. It is now appreciated that women's rights are human rights (Bunch, 1990). Thus, for women's political empowerment, choice is linked to the human rights discourse, which implies ability and freedom for women (Kerr, 1993).¹ Human rights include freedom of expression, association and assembly, freedom to move, practice religion, and participate in the selection of political leaders and freedom from violations to physical integrity (Cingranelli & Richards, 2010).

Formal legal frameworks are most typically considered in the human rights literature (Landman & Carvalho, 2009). But for women, customary violations of rights, regularly embedded in informal culture rather than formal legal frameworks, are as important to consider. These are most likely to be present in the domestic or local life of women: "household and interfamilial relations are a central locus of women's disempowerment in a way that is not true for other disadvantaged groups" (Manuh, 2006; see also Alkire et al., 2013). In defining the dimension of choice in women's political empowerment, therefore, we must assess needs and interests that are "emerging out of the routine practices of everyday life" (Kabeer, 1999b, p. 441).

With this perspective, having the freedom to move is an essential aspect of women's empowerment. Clausturation—the confinement to the domestic sphere—is a fundamental part of disempowerment (Kishor, 2000). The process of leaving this sphere, such as "[women's] 'ability to move about one's village' or 'ability to visit a health center without getting permission'" is one empirical measure of female empowerment (Malhotra et al., 2002, p. 20; see also Hanmer & Klugman, 2016). Legal restrictions on travel without permission for women may exist alongside customary restrictions.

A basic level of control over resources also furthers empowerment. Control over resources entails the freedom from forced labor and the right to engage in paid labor but also the freedom to own property. Engels (2010) attributed women's subordination to the rise of male-owned private property resulting in women's increasing economic reliance on men. Some feminist theorists argue that women's inheritance and control of property is the most important factor in securing economic and other powers (Blumberg, 1984; Chafetz, 1990). When women cannot own land or hold bank accounts, it legitimates other discriminatory customs (Braun & Dreiling, 2010). Anderson and Eswaran (2009) stress that it is not income for women per se that is important for their autonomy, but rather having a livelihood that is not dependent on a husband. When women have control of property, land, and loans, it broadens their economic power and their ability to exercise choice in a range of domains (Burroway, 2012).

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