

CASE STUDY: GENDER EQUALITY

Global State of Democracy 2023 Report

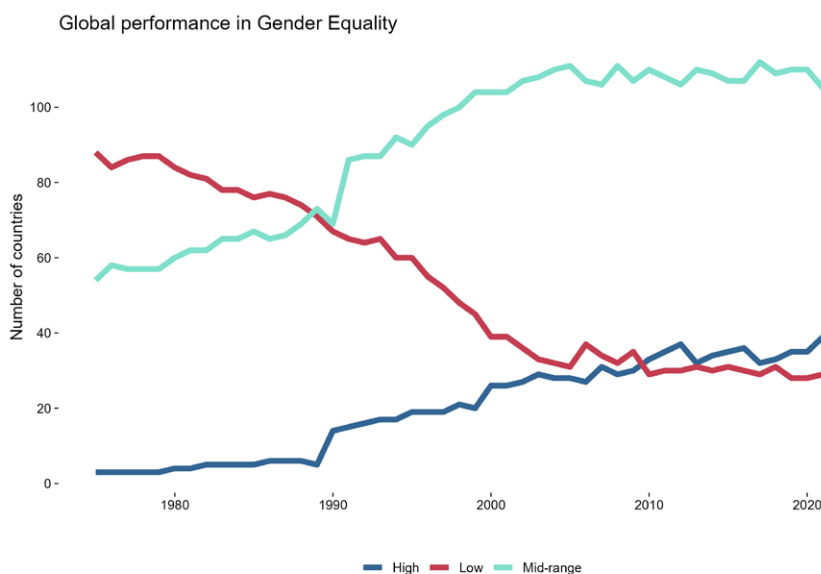
Atsuko Hirakawa and Rumbidzai Kandawasvika-Nhundu

THE STATUS OF GENDER EQUALITY

At the end of 2022, Gender Equality scores in the Global State of Democracy (GSoD) dataset were decidedly mid-range (Figure 1). Although mid-range global scores have long been the norm (since 1983), it is important to note that there has been slow improvement over time.

There has been slow but steady growth in measures of Gender Equality over time.

Figure 1. There has been slow but steady growth in measures of Gender Equality over time

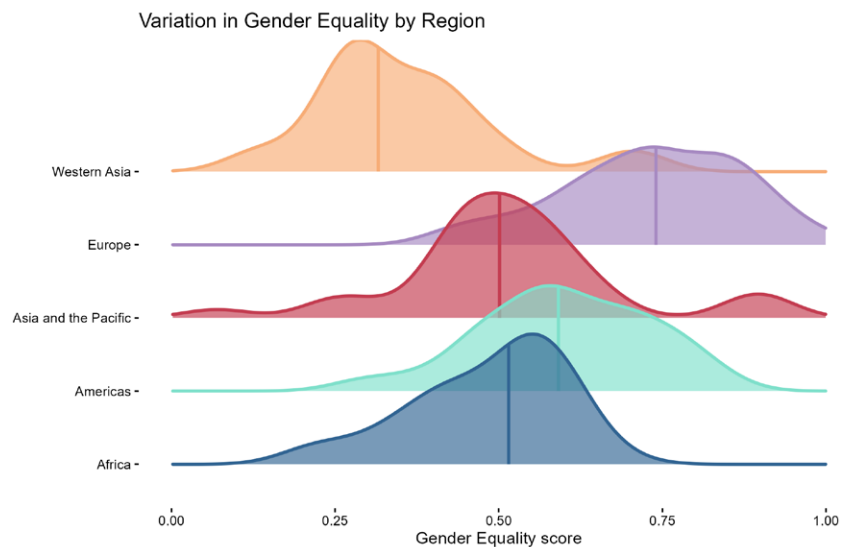


Source: Global State of Democracy Indices, v. 7.1, International IDEA, 2023, <<https://www.idea.int/data-tools/tools/global-state-democracy-indices>>, accessed 19 September 2023.

Europe has stood out for significant advances, especially in Iceland, Finland, Malta and Moldova.

Figure 2 shows that global averages belie important regional variation. Over the past five years, Europe has stood out for significant advances, especially in Iceland, Finland, Malta and Moldova. In that same period, Malta and Moldova moved from mid-range to high levels of performance; all four countries are in the world's top 25 per cent of performers in terms of Gender Equality.

Figure 2. Europe performs ahead of other regions with regard to Gender Equality



Source: Global State of Democracy Indices, v. 7.1, International IDEA, 2023, <<https://www.idea.int/data-tools/tools/global-state-democracy-indices>>, accessed 19 September 2023.

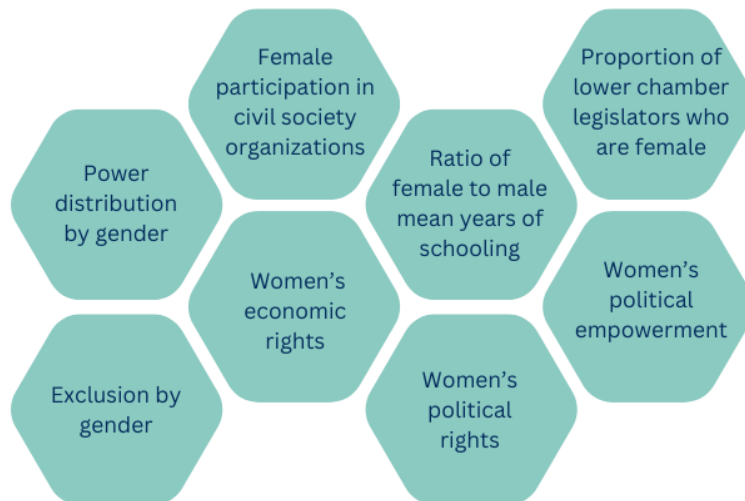
Slovenia is also notable for its progress in women's parliamentary representation (at 40 per cent). In 2022, the country elected its first female president (OHCHR 2023a). The country also outnumbers Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development members in the share of women in senior positions in the public sector (Government of the Republic of Slovenia 2023).

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Europe is not alone. Looking back over the last decade, countries as diverse as The Gambia, Georgia, Kenya, Suriname and Taiwan have seen advances. The Gambia is also notable for significant five-year advances, due in part to improvements in GSoD Indices measures of women's participation in civil society, access to schooling, and power distribution. Indeed, it is notable that two of the Supreme Court's five judges and the President of the Court of Appeal are female (Jawara n.d.). In addition, women outnumber men in literacy. At the same time, these gains take place in a context that is still severely challenging for women and is marked by higher unemployment rates for women, early marriage, the prevalence of gender-based violence and low rates of women in high-level government positions (UN Women n.d.).

Figure 3. Gender Equality in the GSoD Indices

How Gender Equality is measured in the GSoD Indices



Source: Global State of Democracy Indices, v. 7.1, International IDEA, 2023, <<https://www.idea.int/data-tools/tools/global-state-democracy-indices>>, accessed 19 September 2023.

Over the past five years, concerning declines have occurred in Belarus, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Palestine; the latter three are among the world's bottom 25 per cent of performers in Gender Equality (Figure 3).

GAINS FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS: EVIDENCE FROM 2023

Despite the somewhat stagnant global context, evidence from 2023 is encouraging. After Spanish footballer Jenni Hermoso revealed that she had not consented to Luis Rubiales's kiss in the aftermath of the team's World Cup victory, Spain's #MeToo movement came out in force to support her. The mass public backing she received eventually led to Rubiales's provisional suspension ([The Conversion 2023](#); [OHCHR 2023b](#)).

Gender-based violence

In Belgium, a historic new framework law defines and criminalizes femicide. It also ensures mechanisms for data collection and provides for police and magistrate trainings related to such crimes ([International IDEA 2022a](#)). Following years of advocacy in Bahrain, lawmakers abolished a law that had allowed rapists to escape accountability if they married their victims ([International IDEA 2023b](#)). Uzbekistan criminalized domestic violence, and Portugal enhanced its protection mechanisms for victims of crimes against sexual freedom ([International IDEA 2023r](#); [International IDEA 2023l](#)).

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Sexual consent

Several countries have made gains with regard to sexual consent laws. Japan and Romania both raised the age of consent, from 13 to 16 in the former and from 14 to 16 in the latter ([International IDEA 2023f](#); [International IDEA 2023m](#)). In Switzerland, a new law broadens the definition of rape by removing the requirement of physical force, threat or coercion and includes an ‘implicit no’ to account for victims who are in a state of shock ([NADJA 2023](#); [Brussels Times 2023](#); [Le News 2023](#)). This move has been hailed as a historic victory for survivors of sexual violence and their advocates ([Amnesty International 2023](#)). Spain also passed historic reforms in December 2022, which removed the requirement for victims to prove violence or intimidation had occurred. After the law accidentally allowed for previously convicted perpetrators to be released early, however, amendments that reintroduced a distinction between sexual assault with and without violence or intimidation were passed ([International IDEA 2022i](#)). Critics say these changes shift the burden back onto the victims ([International IDEA 2023n](#)). Combating violence against women remains at the top of the list in the fight for gender equality globally and regionally, and European Commissioner Ursula von der Leyen called for a ‘No means no’ law for European Union members in her recent State of the Union address ([European Commission 2023](#)).

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Reproductive rights

The right to reproductive health also saw some notable gains. Those include the approval of equal abortion access for all women in India, the easing of abortion restrictions in Finland, and the approval of abortion and reproductive laws in Spain ([International IDEA 2022e](#); [International IDEA 2022c](#); [International IDEA 2023o](#)). Furthermore, Honduras lifted the ban on emergency contraception, while Japan approved the nation’s first abortion pill ([International IDEA 2023d](#); [International IDEA 2023e](#)).

Political and economic rights

Fiji moved towards removing the requirement for women to legally change their name on their birth certificate in order to register to vote ([International IDEA 2023c](#)). Spain introduced a new law on gender parity in political and business institutions with a 40 per cent target, while the Philippines adopted an anti-discrimination law to safeguard women employees ([International IDEA 2023p](#); [International IDEA 2022h](#)). Positive moves were also seen in women’s representation, including the appointment of the first female judges to Namibia’s Supreme Court and the election of Mexico’s first female Chief Justice (of the Supreme Court) ([International IDEA 2023J](#); [International IDEA 2023m](#)). Mexico’s Congress also appointed the first female chief to the National Electoral Institute ([International IDEA 2023h](#)).

SETBACKS REVERSING DECADES OF GAINS

Certainly, important problems remain. Gender-based violence continues to threaten women’s basic security around the world. The critical need to

eliminate violence against women in politics and address the proliferation of technology-facilitated gender-based violence and abuse cannot be over-emphasized. Bolivia was the first country in the world to pass a national law which specifically criminalizes ‘political violence and harassment against women’. Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico and Peru have proposed similar legislation. The Latin America and the Caribbean region is also leading in enacting ‘specific laws on cyberstalking and harassment, grooming and cyber-bullying’ which largely affect women ([Restrepo Sanín 2018](#)).

Gender-based violence has peculiar impacts in the contexts of conflict: Ethiopia, Mali, Sudan and Ukraine stand out in this regard ([International IDEA 2022b](#); [International IDEA 2023g](#); [International IDEA 2023q](#); [UNFPA 2022](#)).

The United States Supreme Court’s overturning of *Roe v Wade* marked the end of 49 years of reproductive freedom in that country. The decision’s consequences have been far-reaching, with a multitude of states having passed new restrictions in the past year. The decision has disproportionately impacted economically marginalized women, who may not have the means to find options such as travelling to other jurisdictions ([Berg and Woods 2023](#); [New York Times 2023](#); [Levinson-King 2023](#); [Center for Reproductive Rights n.d.](#)). On the positive side, however, public support for abortion is on the increase ([Levinson-King 2023](#)). Further restrictions on women’s abortion rights were also seen in Hungary and Poland ([International IDEA 2022d](#); [International IDEA 2023k](#)).

In Afghanistan, the Taliban’s takeover has erased ‘20 years of progress for women and girls’ ([OHCHR 2023b](#)), prohibiting women from attending universities, working at non-governmental organizations, and visiting public areas such as parks. Beauty salons have also been banned, and 60,000 women are expected to lose their jobs ([International IDEA 2023a](#)). In Iran, protests demanding women’s rights, sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini, who resisted the compulsory hijab, led to violent crackdowns, which included the use of rape and sexual assault ([International IDEA 2022g](#); [International IDEA 2022f](#)). Nevertheless, Iranian women continue their struggle, with social media playing an integral part in their activism ([Sepehri Far 2023](#)).

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WAY FORWARD FOR TACKLING SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

Finally, there continues to be a disconnect between participation in decision making, which consistently scores low globally, and indicators related to health, education and labour ([UN Women and UNDP 2023](#)). Discriminatory social norms, cultural beliefs and gender stereotypes continue to underpin practices and behaviours that perpetuate gender inequalities in the social, political and economic spheres. Corruption, which undermines democracy, ‘exacerbates unequal power dynamics [and] limits women’s access to public resources, information and decision making, thus reinforcing social, cultural, and political discrimination’ ([Fuentes Téllez n.d.](#)). Today, gender disinformation and online

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abuse against women in politics are increasingly used to erode the gains on gender equality, women's empowerment and democracy.

Addressing corruption and a lack of transparency within political parties—the real gatekeepers to elected office in most countries in the world—is also essential to increase accountability and build democratic resilience. Engaging men as allies and beneficiaries of gender equality will require men to challenge rigid gender norms, as this is crucial to advancing inclusive democracy.

It is important to address data gaps regarding women's empowerment and gender equality.

Finally, it is important to address data gaps regarding women's empowerment and gender equality. These include data on women's participation in household decision making and access to household income, as well as on emerging or long-standing issues such as vulnerabilities resulting from climate change, status and well-being of women and girls facing intersectional inequalities, and the role of technology in combating or entrenching institutional gender bias (UN Women and UNDP 2023).

Gender equality is an imperative for thriving democracies. Any effort to build strong democracies and inclusive institutions will be flawed if they exclude or marginalize half the world's population. Thus, sustainable interventions that focus on promoting positive messages that portray shared decision making in all spheres, and equal respect for the human rights of girls and boys, and men and women in all their diversity are required.

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