



The Global State of Democracy IN FOCUS

No. 6, March 2019

Political Gender Equality and the Global State of Democracy Indices

Key facts and figures

- Gender equality, as measured in the GSoD Indices, has seen remarkable progress over the past 42 years, and every region has experienced some improvement.
- Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and North America (in descending order) are the regions that have most increased their Gender Equality scores since 1975. The Middle East and Iran, and Asia and the Pacific, have shown the slowest rate of increase.
- Although all regions have seen improvements in their Gender Equality scores, inequalities between regions have persisted since 1975, with only Latin America and the Caribbean improving its standing relative to other regions.
- Women's representation in the lower chamber of parliament has grown dramatically across all regions since the mid-1990s.
- There are 28 per cent of countries in the world with parliaments where women are above the critical minority threshold of 30 per cent; in 1997, this figure was just 3 per cent.
- The participation of women in executive cabinets has also seen dramatic growth in the last 20 years, although the rate of improvement is much slower than in the legislative branch.
- Eight countries that have high levels of women in parliament perform poorly on other measures of democracy. In these countries, the political agency of women may be limited even though they have access to political office.
- Despite having high levels of women legislators in the lower chamber, both Burundi and Nicaragua have seen their Representative Government scores fall significantly. In Burundi, this backsliding has also affected its Checks on Government and Impartial Administration scores, both of which continue to fall.
- Institutional aspects of democracy should be considered when examining gender equality. This allows a nuanced understanding of the political agency of women.
- The Social Group Equality subcomponent should be considered when analysing gender equality—this can shed light on whether gender equality is reaching all segments of society.

Summary of findings

This *GSoD In Focus* showcases global and regional data around trends in and the progression of gender equality, based on data from the Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Indices. The GSoD Indices are International IDEA's measurement of democracy for 158 countries between 1975 and 2017.

The political position of women today is better than just 20 years ago. Trends in the GSoD Indices Gender Equality subcomponent show improvement in gender equality in every region of the world. Women are in more positions of political power, are more represented in the political sphere, have higher access to education and less barriers to civil society participation. In 1997, only 3 per cent of countries had a lower chamber legislature made up of more than 30 per cent women; in 2017, this had risen to 28 per cent of countries. These gains should be celebrated, although much progress remains to be made before most countries have a critical minority of women in parliament. Furthermore, progress with women in ministerial positions is slower. Although gender equality is a necessary ingredient for a healthy democracy, some of the countries in the GSoD sample have a high proportion of women in political office coupled with low levels of democratic performance overall. While these countries are often hailed for their high levels of gender equality, these gains need to be analysed critically, as women's political agency within regimes that have democratic deficits may be limited.

1. The GSoD Indices Gender Equality subcomponent

The GSoD Indices include Gender Equality as an important aspect of the conception of democracy. The GSoD measurement on gender is closely connected to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) on gender equality, specifically Targets 5.1 and 5.5, and can be used to complement the UN minimum set of gender indicators to monitor progress in the implementation of SDG 5.

The GSoD Indices' subcomponent on Gender Equality measures women's access to political power. These indicators cover gender equality in the number of elected officials, along with additional indicators on women's political participation and empowerment. Five indicators from two different data sets have been used to create this measurement:

- the proportion of women in the lower chamber legislature (Varieties of Democracy—V-Dem);
- the proportion of women appointed to cabinet-level positions (V-Dem);
- women's barriers to participation in civil society organizations (V-Dem);
- political power distributed by gender (V-Dem); and
- ratio of female versus male mean years of schooling (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation).

This measurement of Gender Equality provides a more robust measurement than single indicators on women's participation in government. The trends of this measurement are explored in Section 2. Overview of trends in Gender Equality.

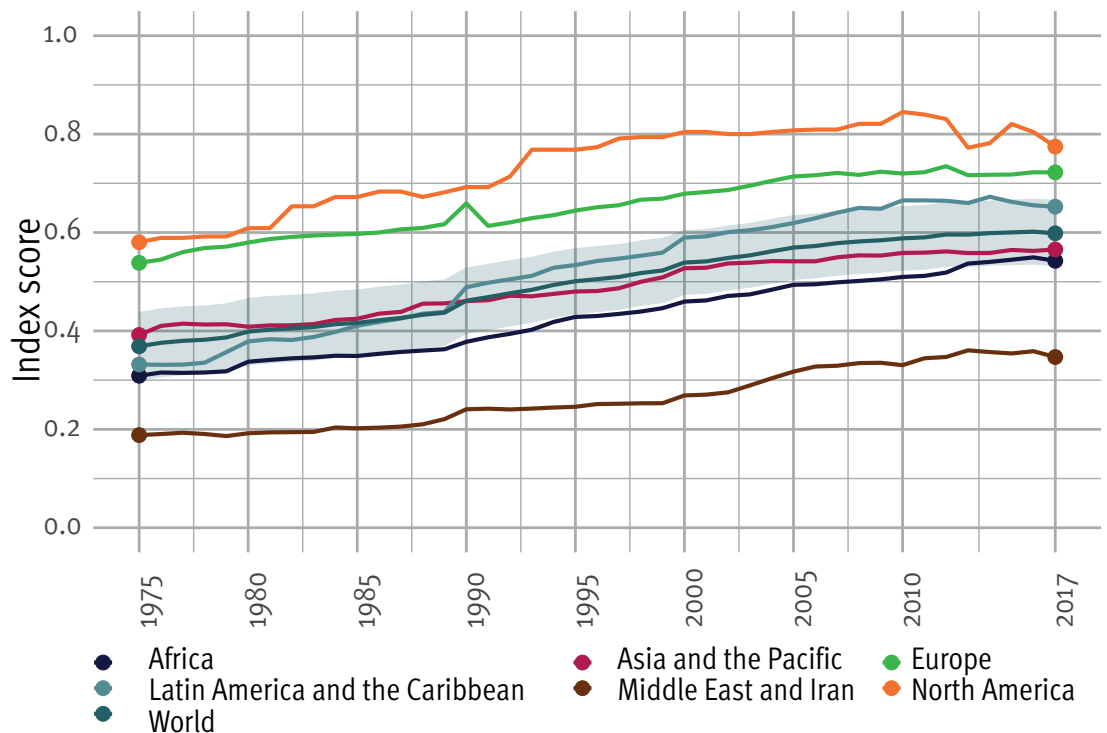
The Gender Equality subcomponent focuses on gender equality with regard to political participation and access to political power. It does not cover other aspects of gender equality, such as access to health care, equality in the labour market, or sexual and gender-based violence. Nor does it directly cover the agency of women politicians. Furthermore, this measurement does not cut across women's

representation within different marginalized groups, ignoring the intersectionality of inequalities and discrimination that can be magnified by class, ethnicity, religion, disability status or sexuality. Studying the intersectionality of discrimination against women is methodologically difficult to do at global cross-national level, as there is still an unevenness of data available across countries (Paxton et al. 2007). The GSoD Indices provide a measurement of Social Group Equality, which measures the political inclusion of a broad range of marginalized groups along socio-economic, ethnic, racial and religious lines. Both Gender Equality and Social Group Equality subcomponents are discussed in the GSoD In Focus *Inclusion and the Global State of Democracy Indices* (International IDEA 2018b).

2. Overview of trends in Gender Equality measurement

FIGURE 1

Trends in Gender Equality measurement



Note: Scoring runs from 0 to 1, with 0 representing the lowest achievement and 1 the highest.

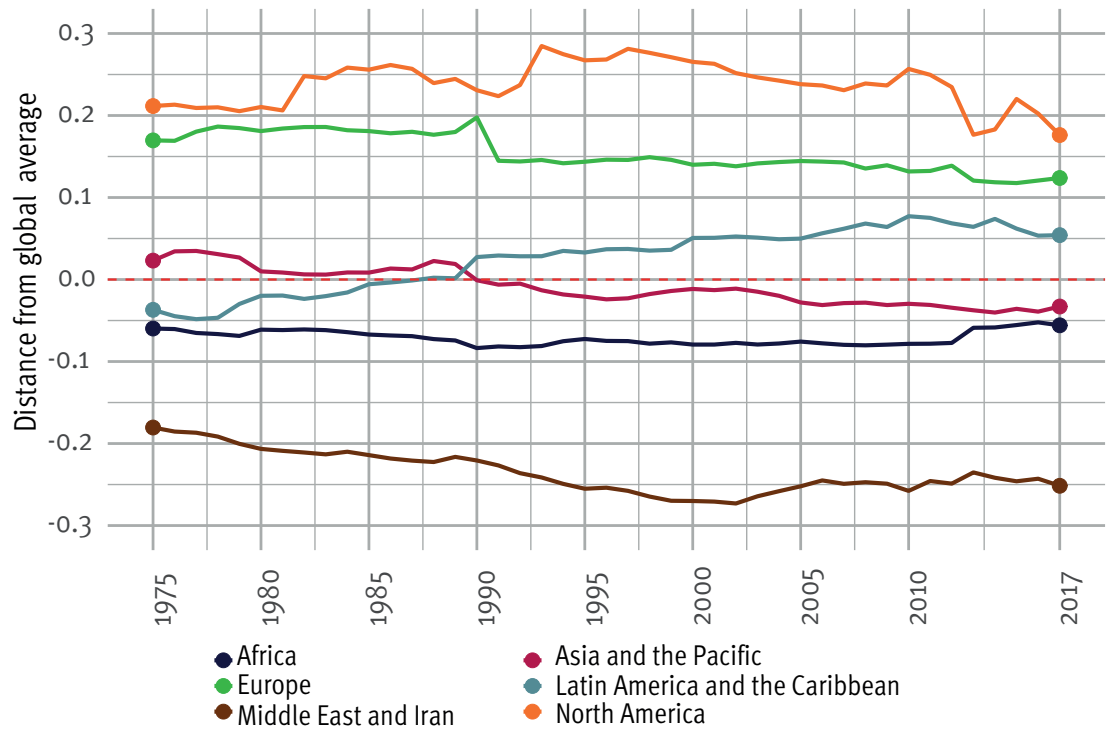
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices (2018), <<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices>>.

Gender equality has seen remarkable progress over the past 42 years and this improvement has occurred across every region (see Figure 1). Latin America and the Caribbean is the region that has shown the greatest improvements, nearly doubling its score from 0.33 in 1975 to 0.65 in 2017. Africa has shown the second fastest rate of improvement, progressing from 0.32 in 1975 to 0.54 in 2017. Asia and the Pacific has had the second slowest rate of improvement, while the Middle East and Iran, the region that started with the lowest levels in 1975, has also shown the slowest rate of improvement. At the country level, Spain, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Nepal and Rwanda (in descending order) are the countries in the world that have seen the greatest improvements in the Gender Equality measurement since 1975.

However, while there have been universal improvements within regions on the Gender Equality measurement, stark regional differences and inequalities remain. Figure 2 shows how regions have developed relative to the global average. Only Latin America and the Caribbean has progressed to reverse its global positioning, moving from lagging slightly behind the global average to performing

FIGURE 2

Distance from global average in Gender Equality measurement



Note: This figure shows the trends over time in Gender Equality per region relative to the global average. The red dotted line represents the global average. All regions scoring above 0 are outperforming the global average, whereas all regions below 0 are performing worse than the global average.

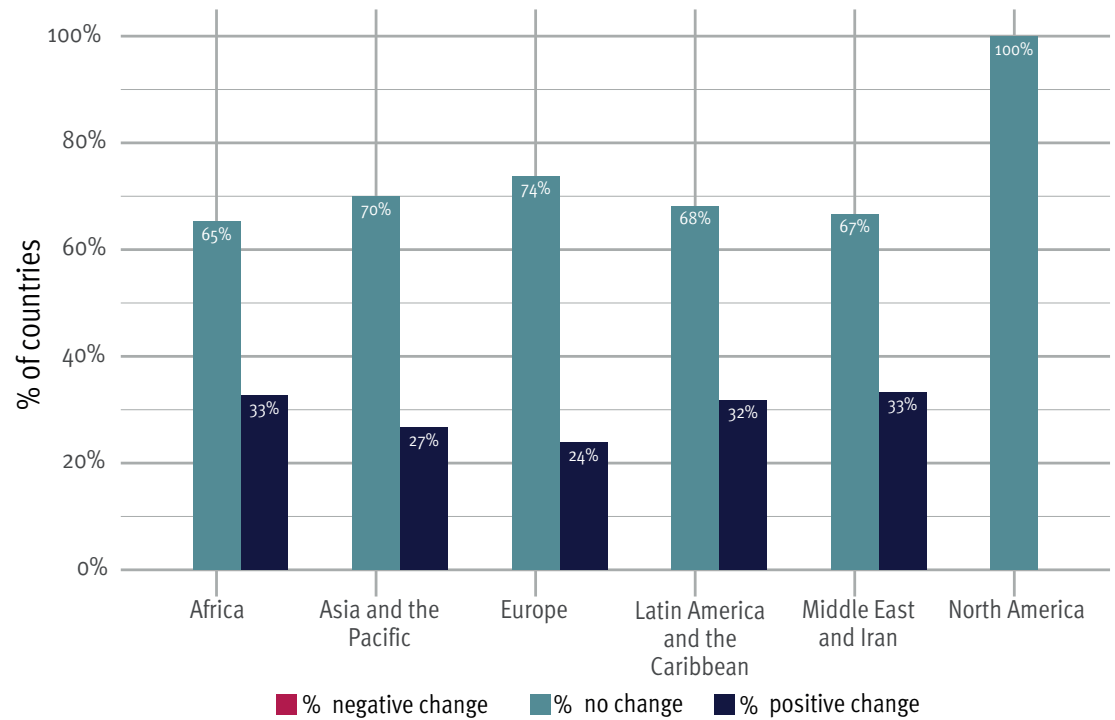
Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices (2018), <<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices>>.

slightly higher. Asia and the Pacific has had the opposite trajectory, from outperforming the global average in 1975, to underperforming the global average in 2017. Despite the substantial improvement in Africa, the region is just as far from the global average in 2017 as it was in 1975. In 2017, the Middle East and Iran was even further from the global average than it was in 1975.

At the country level, there has been widespread improvement over the last 20 years (see Figure 3). Countries across all regions (except for North America, consisting only of Canada and the United States, which have relatively high levels of gender equality) have seen improvement on the Gender Equality measurement—a total of 42 countries in the world from 1997 to 2017. Notably, not a single country saw a significant decline during this 20-year period. However, in the short term (2012–2017), three countries have seen a statistically significant decrease in Gender Equality: Brazil, Pakistan and the United States. All three of these countries had elections in 2018, which may affect their scores moving forward. In 2018, the United States saw a record number of women legislators elected, following a two-year period of women-focused political activism, such as the record-breaking Women’s March and the #MeToo movement. These movements grew as a response to what activists considered sexist political discourse during the United States 2016 presidential election, and sexual assault and harassment cases by men in positions of power. In Brazil, the newly elected president Jair Bolsonaro has announced plans to remove content about gender equality, violence against women and LGBTQ issues from the nation’s textbooks (Jeantet 2019). In 2018, Pakistan saw its first election since the Elections Act of 2017 was passed, which implemented a 5 per cent quota in party lists, criminalized stopping women from voting and nullified the results from any constituency where women’s turnout was less than 10 per cent (Dastaageer et al 2018; Mahmood 2018).

FIGURE 3

Country-level changes in Gender Equality measurement: Developments 1997–2017



Note: This figure shows the percentage of countries per region that have seen a negative, neutral or positive change on the Gender Equality measurement from 1997 to 2017. Only statistically significant changes are included.

Source: International IDEA, The Global State of Democracy Indices (2018), <<https://www.idea.int/gsod-indices>>.

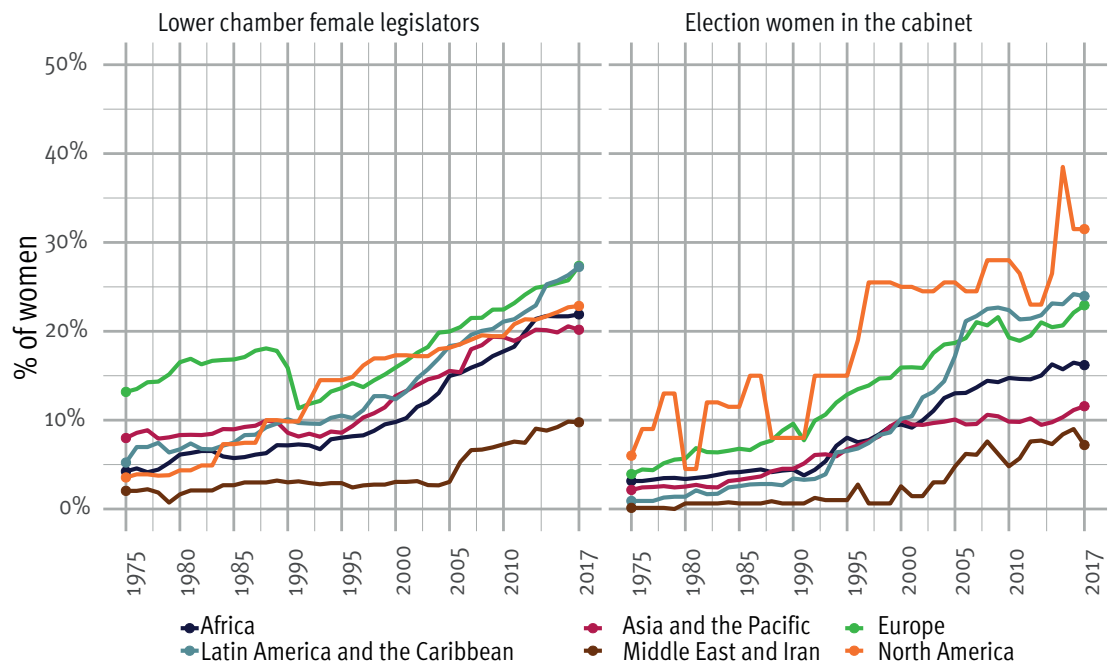
3. Trends in women in political office

This section explores the trends in women’s positions in political office. Statistics on women in political office are often used as indicators of female political empowerment, including in the UN’s Minimum Set of Gender Indicators (UN Statistics Division 2018). The lower chamber and women in ministerial positions data comes from the V-Dem project, where 2017 is the most recent data available (Varieties of Democracy 2018).

Since 1975, and especially since the mid-1990s, there has been an increase in the percentage of women in the lower legislative chamber and women in cabinets across all regions (see Figure 4). These developments follow increased international attention to gender equality, which led to the inclusion of gender equality in the Millennium Development Goals and later in the Sustainable Development Goals (Permanyer 2010). They also stem from a wider adoption of gender quotas, moving from 3 per cent of countries in 1990 to 40 per cent in 2015 (Huges et al. 2017). Gender quotas have proven to be a remarkably effective tool to increase women’s presence in national legislatures (Tripp et al. 2007).

FIGURE 4

Trends in women in political office



Note: This figure shows the average percentage of women in the lower chamber, and women in cabinets by region from 1975 to 2017.

Data source: Varieties of Democracy, V-Dem Dataset – Version 8 [Country-Year/Country-Date] (2018), <<https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemcy18>>

Women’s representation in the lower chamber

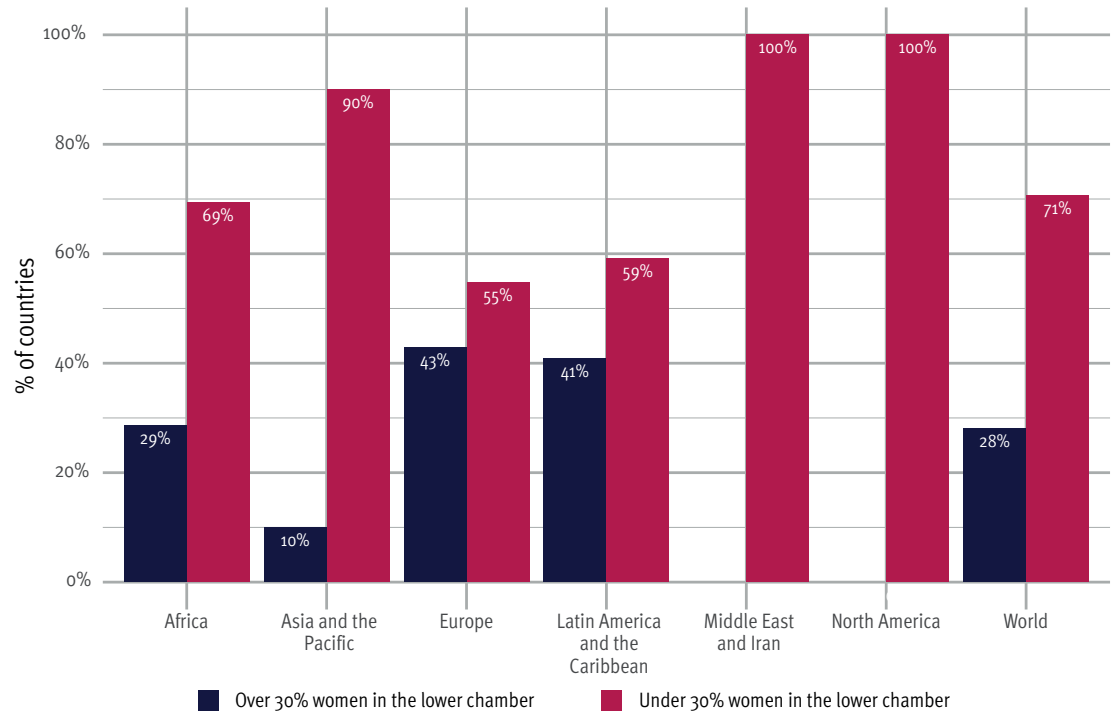
In 2017, all regions apart from the Middle East and Iran had an average of over 20 per cent women’s representation in the lower chamber. Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean, had the highest proportion, both with a 27 per cent average. This is followed by North America at 23 per cent, Africa at 22 per cent, and Asia and the Pacific at 20 per cent. The Middle East and Iran had the lowest proportion at just under 10 per cent.

These figures show a remarkable gain from just 20 years ago when there were only two regions (Europe and North America) where, on average, women made up over 10 per cent of legislators in the lower chamber. Latin America and the Caribbean region has seen the most rapid gains in this indicator, increasing its average percentage of legislators who were women by 16 percentage points. This is followed closely by Europe and Africa, which have both seen an average increase of 13 percentage points. Asia and the Pacific, the Middle East and Iran, and North America have all seen improvements of less than 10 percentage points, with North America showing the lowest level of improvement—although North America is still one of the best-performing regions in the world in terms of Gender Equality. Overall, the global rate of improvement has slowed in the last decade. From 1997 to 2007, the global average for women as a percentage of parliament improved by 7.2 percentage points, from 10.4 per cent to 17.6 per cent. In the last decade, this improvement has been slower, expanding only 5.2 percentage points to a global average of 22.8 per cent.

Despite these generally positive gains, no regional average has reached the critical minority point of 30 per cent of legislators being women (International IDEA 2009). However, certain subregions (North and West Europe, East Africa, and Central America and Mexico) have crossed the 30 per cent critical minority threshold. Only 28 per cent of countries in the world have reached the critical

FIGURE 5

Percentage of countries over the 30 per cent critical minority threshold, 2017



Note: This figure shows the percentage of countries by region over the 30 per cent critical minority threshold for women in the lower chamber for 2017.

Data source: Varieties of Democracy, V-Dem Dataset – Version 8 [Country-Year/Country-Date] (2018), <<https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemcy18>>

minority threshold (see Figure 5). In 1997, only 3 per cent of countries fell into this category. Europe has the highest percentage of countries where over 30 per cent of parliament is women at 43 per cent; this is followed closely by Latin America and the Caribbean at 41 per cent, Africa at 29 per cent, and Asia and the Pacific trailing behind at 10 per cent. Neither the Middle East and Iran nor North America have any countries over the critical minority limit.

At the country level, Rwanda, Bolivia, Ethiopia, Nicaragua and Ecuador have shown the largest rate of improvement since 1997. These countries have moved from well below the critical minority threshold, to well above it; and, in the case of Bolivia and Rwanda, they have moved beyond the 50 per cent threshold.

Women in cabinets

For women in ministerial positions, there is larger regional variation. North America has the highest percentage of ministerial positions filled by women, at 32 per cent, followed by Latin America (24 per cent), Europe (23 per cent), Africa (16 per cent), Asia and the Pacific (12 per cent) and the Middle East and Iran (7 per cent). However, in the executive, gender parity is further away than in the legislative chambers. It is only in North America where the percentage of ministerial positions held by women is greater than the percentage of legislators who are women in the lower chamber. Asia and the Pacific has the biggest difference between the two, with 20 per cent of legislative positions held by women but only 12 per cent of cabinet positions.

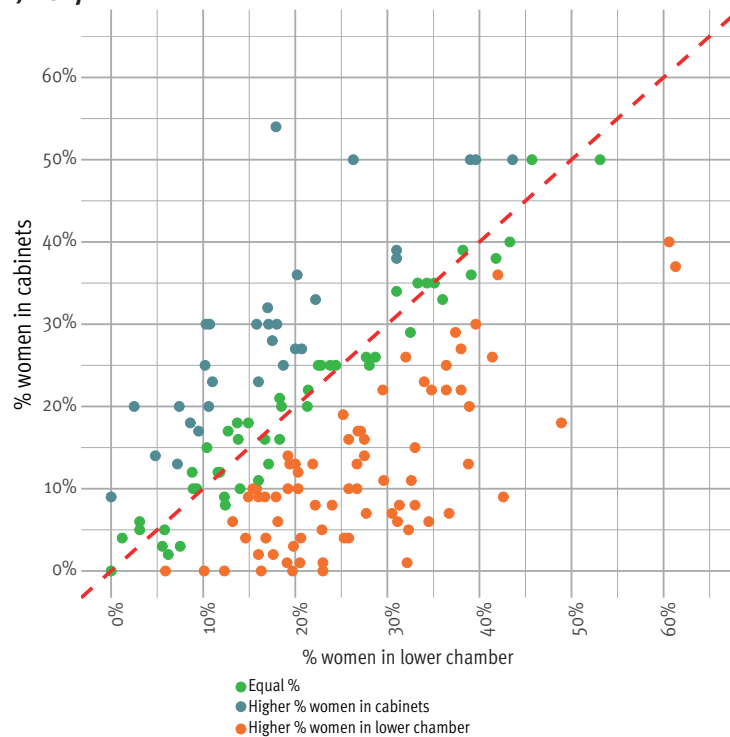
TABLE 1

Ten-year country-level developments for women in political office (2007–2017)

	Countries where the numbers of women in political office is increasing	Countries with no change	Countries where the numbers of women in political office is declining
Women in the cabinet	75	19	55
Women legislators in the lower chamber	114	4	35

FIGURE 6

Percentage of lower chamber that is female by percentage of cabinet positions filled by women, 2017



Note: This figure shows the relationship between the percentage of the lower chamber that is female and the percentage of cabinet positions filled by women in 2017. Each dot represents a single country. Countries below the diagonal line have a lower percentage of the cabinet than the lower chamber consisting of women.

Data source: Varieties of Democracy, V-Dem Dataset – Version 8 [Country-Year/Country-Date] (2018), <<https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemcy18>>.

In a particular country, the level of women in the lower chamber does not always translate to similar levels of women in cabinet positions. Figure 6 shows the correlation between these two measurements. More countries have a higher percentage of the lower chamber rather than the cabinet made up of women. This discrepancy may be a delayed effect. Much of women’s participation in ministerial positions can be affected by the number of women in political positions in general (Krook et al. 2012). As the rapid adoption of gender quotas have effectively increased the pool of eligible candidates for ministerial office, this increasing pool may, with time, lead to greater gender parity in ministerial posts. Note that the percentage of ministerial positions held by women does not distinguish between the type of ministerial portfolio held; historically women have been appointed to less powerful ministerial posts (Krook et al. 2012).

4. Women in political office and levels of other democratic performance

Looking at just the trends of women in political office can obfuscate the true political agency that women have, with agency defined as the ability to define goals and act on them (Kabeer 1999). While women may hold office, their political agency to effect policy may be institutionally limited. Therefore, it is important to examine indicators of gender equality together with other measurements of democracy, in order to gain more insight of the political agency of women politicians.

Two measurements from the GSoD Indices have been used to critically examine the performance of some countries with high levels of women in the lower legislative chamber: Representative Government, which measures free and equal access to political power, emphasizing contested and inclusive popular elections for the legislative and directly or indirectly elected executives; and Checks on Government, which measures effective control of executive power. These measurements work in tandem, with Representative Government measuring the vertical accountability of government through elections, and Checks on Government capturing horizontal accountability through critical institutions.

There are eight countries which rank in the top 25 per cent in 2017 for percentage of the lower chamber made up of women, but are in the bottom 25 per cent in the Representative Government or Checks on Government measurements (see Table 2). In these countries, actual political gender equality may be limited, as the ability for all citizens to choose their leaders fairly is severely restricted and the legislative function to restrict executive power isn't effectively realized in practice. While women may be included in the political space, this space may not be able to exercise political agency. In all eight of these countries, the chief executive is male. This paradox may be the result of a trade-off. When faced with international pressure, less democratic regimes may choose to adopt policies that increase gender equality and women's rights, at least on paper, to strengthen the façade of democracy, rather than make other democratic reforms which may be a more direct threat to political power (Bush 2011; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2016; Donno et al. 2019).

TABLE 2

2017, Women in Legislative Positions and Checks on Government

Bottom 25% in Representative Government	Bottom 25% in Checks on Government
Top 25% in Women in Lower Chamber	Top 25% in Women in Lower Chamber
(% of in Women in Lower Chamber)	(% of in Women in Lower Chamber)
Belarus (35%)	Angola (38%)
Burundi (36%)	Belarus (35%)
Cuba (49%)	Burundi (36%)
Ethiopia (39%)	Cuba (49%)
Nicaragua (46%)	Ethiopia (39%)
Rwanda (61%)	Nicaragua (46%)
Uganda (34%)	Rwanda (61%)

Worryingly, over the last 10 years, both Burundi and Nicaragua have seen their Representative Government scores fall significantly. In Burundi, this backsliding has also affected its Checks on Government and Impartial Administration scores, both of which continue to fall. Angola has seen improvements in Representative Government, and this is largely due to the introduction of elections in 2008, since when the country's scores have stagnated. None of the above countries have seen an improvement on Checks on Government. This closing of democratic space affects all citizens, not least women who, despite having a presence in political office, are operating in a democratically constrained environment.

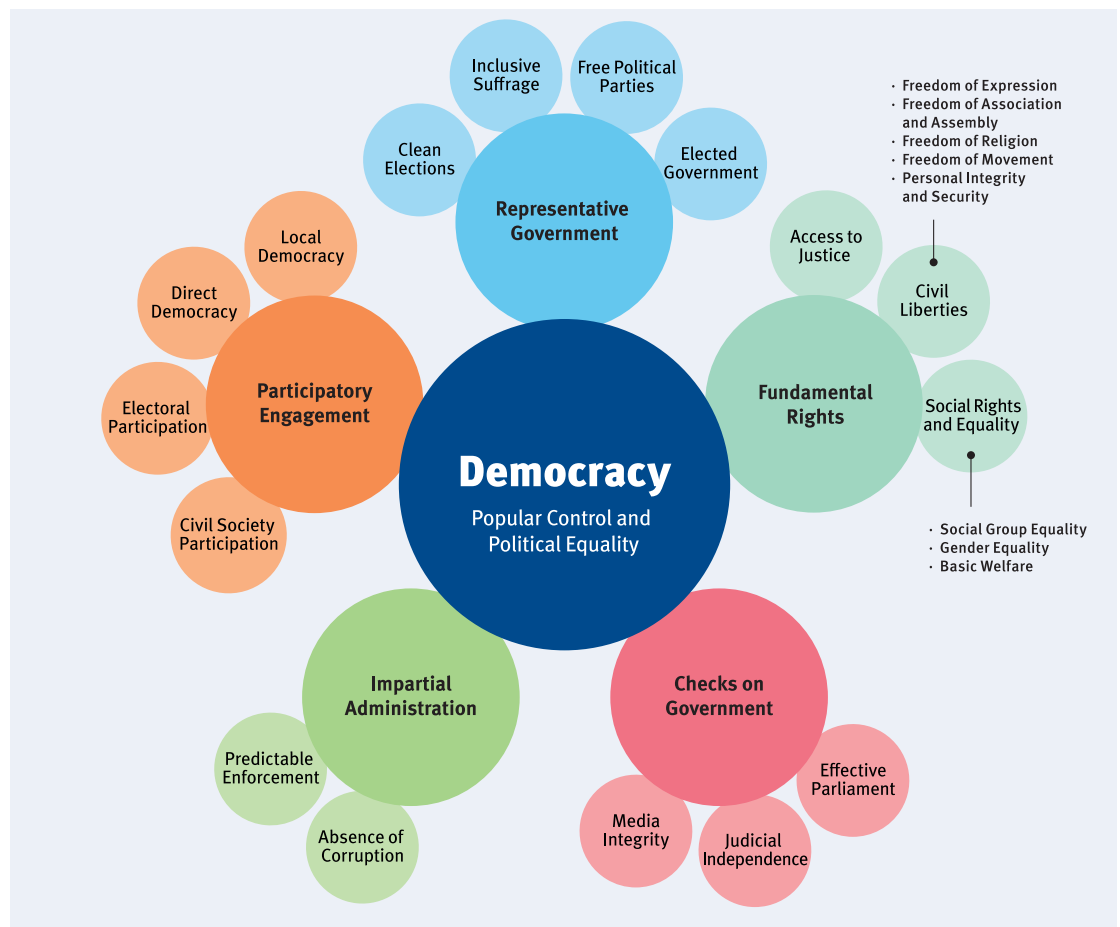
5. Conclusion

International IDEA is committed to the inclusion of gender equality across all aspects of its work. Therefore, gender equality is a prominent feature of the GSoD Indices conceptual framework. Gender Equality is integrated into the GSoD Indices framework as a subcomponent of the Fundamental Rights attribute, which measures individual liberties and access to resources in a country. This attribute emphasizes social rights that support fair political representation and democratic accountability (see Figure 7). The GSoD data confirms that significant progress on gender equality has been made in the past decades. However, significant challenges remain to reach political gender parity, and policy efforts to reach that goal need to be maintained and pursued across all regions of the world.

The GSoD Indices take a disaggregated approach to measuring democracy. This approach allows for a nuanced analysis of a country’s performance on political gender equality. While a country may have high performance on indicators of Gender Equality, it may perform poorly on other aspects of democracy. Using other measurements of democracy that have a single ‘mash-up’ index of democracy tends to hide issues related to gender equality. The GSoD Indices therefore provide a valuable multidimensional analytical framework that allow users to analyse political gender equality in relation to other indicators of democracy and democratic performance. The data can be explored for 158 countries in the world from 1975 until now, on <<http://www.idea.int/gsod-indices>>.

FIGURE 7

Conceptual framework of the Global State of Democracy Indices



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About the GSoD Indices

The Global State of Democracy Indices measure global-, regional- and country-level democratic trends over time, from 1975 to 2017. The conceptual framework for the Indices is based on International IDEA's broad definition of democracy, which emphasizes popular control over public decision-making and decision-makers, and equality between citizens in the exercise of that control (Beetham et al. 2008).

In the GSoD conceptual framework, this definition is translated into five main attributes of democracy: Representative Government, Fundamental Rights, Checks on Government, Impartial Administration and Participatory Engagement. These are then subdivided into 16 subattributes and 8 subcomponents, to give 29 aspects of democracy based on 97 indicators.

The GSoD Indices take data, 70 per cent of which is from the Varieties of Democracy project (V-Dem), from 12 different datasets. More information about the overall framework can be found in *GSoD In Focus* No. 1 (International IDEA 2018a).

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About this series

In 2018, International IDEA launched the new GSoD In Focus series. These short updates apply the GSoD Indices data to current issues, providing evidence-based analysis and insights into the contemporary democracy debate.

Where to find the data

The GSoD Indices are available on the International IDEA website. Users can generate their own data visualizations and extract data at the country, regional and global levels across the attributes and subattributes for specific years or for selected time periods starting from 1975. The Indices are updated annually.

<<http://www.idea.int/gsod-indices>>



About International IDEA

Founded in 1995, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), is an intergovernmental organization that supports sustainable democracy worldwide. The Institute is the only intergovernmental organization with a global mandate solely focused on democracy and elections, and is committed to be a global agenda-setter in the democracy-building field. With 32 Member States from all continents, International IDEA supports the development of stronger democratic institutions and processes; and fosters sustainable, effective and legitimate democracy through the provision of comparative knowledge resources, dialogues and partnerships at the global, regional and country levels.

The Global State of Democracy Initiative is headed by the Democracy Assessment and Political Analysis (DAPA) Unit. For queries regarding the GSoD Initiative or the GSoD Indices, please contact the DAPA team and GSoD Helpdesk at GSoD.Indices@idea.int.

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