

# Democracy, gender equality, and security

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POLICY BRIEF

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## Summary

A detailed survey of the existing empirical literature reveals a robust but not always straightforward correlation between the strength of democracy,<sup>1</sup> gender equality, and security.<sup>2</sup> Research concerning these relationships is relatively new and critically important for democracies of all stripes to consider given the strong evidence demonstrating the positive societal effects of gender equality.

### About the Project

This policy brief is part of a series of papers on democracy, security, and violent extremism prepared for the Community of Democracies' Democracy and Security Dialogue. The project seeks to foster greater collaboration among democratic governments, donors, civil society and academics to improve security outcomes and create a more conducive environment for the strengthening of democracy around the world. For more on the project and related materials, including the final report, visit [www.brookings.edu/democracy-security-dialogue](http://www.brookings.edu/democracy-security-dialogue).

Overall, research shows that democracy and gender equality form a mutually reinforcing relationship in which higher levels of liberal democracy are a necessary but not sufficient condition for higher levels of gender equality and physical security of women. In addition, higher levels of gender equality are strongly correlated with a nation's relative state of peace, a healthier domestic security environment, and lower levels of aggression toward other states. Strategies to strengthen democracy and human rights, therefore, should emphasize women's empowerment, accountability for violence against women and girls, and closing the political and economic gender gap. Similarly, efforts aimed at achieving gender equality should emphasize more inclusive societies, including attention to such factors as race, age, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. The international community should work collaboratively with civil society and the private sector to prioritize policies designed to mainstream gender equality across the board.

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## What the evidence tells us

Despite the importance of equality for all, including women, as a fundamental principle of liberal democracy, there is much debate in the academic literature regarding the precise relationship between the quality of democracy, gender equality, and security. Early studies found inconclusive and often contradictory empirical results. Richards and Gelleny,<sup>3</sup> for example, found a positive relationship between gender equality and democracy, whereas Bego<sup>4</sup> found no relationship, and Paxton<sup>5</sup> and Yoon<sup>6</sup> a negative one. Recently, more nuanced studies have been able to dissect the relationship further by revisiting the political, economic, and security dimensions of democracy and gender, and reach more robust conclusions.

*Political and economic equality:* Studies focusing on gender equality as measured by women's political and economic participation have found a robust positive correlation between democracy and gender equality with a few important distinctions. Högström argues that the overall positive correlation disappears when one looks at nations at different income levels separately,<sup>7</sup> while Beer found the correlation is robust even when controlling for income, if a state's present democratic quality is replaced by democratic "stock" (a nation's democratic history, including women's suffrage).<sup>8</sup> Bjarnegård and Melander observe a curvilinear relationship between gender equality and democracy in which the two factors are positively correlated up to a certain point, then diverge.<sup>9</sup>

Brookings researchers, using a simplified bivariate analysis, found a moderate positive correlation for gender equality at middle and higher democratic quality levels (correlation coefficients of 0.41 and 0.43, respectively), and no correlation among autocratic countries. In other words, countries with higher levels of liberal democracy more consistently exhibit gender parity than weak democracies, and even more so than autocracies, which show more inconsistent and/or wider gender gaps. However, some countries with above average democratic

quality scores showed a below average gender equality record (e.g., some South American democracies and former Soviet states). Together, this suggests that the most significant improvement in gender equality is observed at the margin between weak democracies and fully consolidated democracies.<sup>10</sup>

Research on domestic social policy in parliamentary democracies bolsters the case for a positive relationship between higher quality democracies and increasing gender parity. Consistent with the results of Atchison and Down's research on legislatures, governments with higher percentages of female ministers pursue more targeted policies that support gender equality. Atchison and Down's analysis further argued that the presence of women in a cabinet had more impact on gender parity policies than their presence in parliaments.

*Physical security and violence against women:* Recent research has gone beyond earlier studies' emphasis on political and economic participation to focus on the physical security of women as an additional measure of gender equality. In this regard, a strong correlation (correlation coefficient of 0.6) between lower levels of violence against women<sup>11</sup> and higher levels of democratic quality has been found—with evidence that states with a combination of higher GDP per capita and higher quality of democracy have the lowest levels of violence against women.<sup>12</sup>

There is further evidence that the relationship between violence against women and democracy is weak to non-existent among autocratic and weakly democratic countries (displaying correlation coefficients of only 0.16 and 0.2 respectively), but moderate and significant at higher levels of democratic quality, even when tested with an alternative measurement of democracy (correlation coefficient 0.53).<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, a small number of countries categorized as autocratic record levels of violence against women lower than their peers (e.g., Kazakhstan, China, and Azerbaijan). The level of institutional

capacity and the enforcement of specific subsets of values (e.g., communist legacy) could help explain this positive effect on the level of women's physical security in some less democratic countries.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, differing definitions of what constitutes violence against women, underreporting by victims for fear of reprisals, underreporting due to social norms that tolerate gender-based violence, underreporting by governments in an effort to artificially inflate gender equality scores, and poor or nonexistent data collection can also explain this phenomenon.<sup>15</sup>

Overall, there is relatively strong evidence suggesting the existence of a democratic threshold for higher levels of gender equality in terms of both women's physical security and economic and political participation. For example, all of the countries with the lowest levels of violence against women are also countries with high levels of liberal democracy.<sup>16</sup> The evidence further suggests that gender equality increases with increased democratic quality among more established democracies, and that high democratic quality is a necessary but not sufficient condition for high gender equality. This suggests that strong institutions capable of enforcing regulatory policies against gender discrimination, as well as the prevalence of specific subsets of values, norms, or practices, can have a positive effect on gender equality.

*Gender equality and national security:* It is also important to recognize the robust body of empirical work documenting a positive relationship between gender equality and national security—more gender-equal societies are less likely to engage in internal and external violence.<sup>17</sup> For example, Hudson et al.<sup>18</sup> use physical security of women measurements to show that there is a strong and significant relationship between the physical security of women and a state's score on three different measures of relative peacefulness.<sup>19</sup> The results indicate that physical security of women is a more useful predictor of the peacefulness of a state, the degree to which a state is of concern to the international community, and the quality

of relations between the state and its neighbors than levels of democracy and wealth within a country.

Looking at intrastate armed conflict, Melander provides evidence of a clear association between gender equality, measured as both female representation in parliament and female-male higher education attainment ratios, and lower levels of conflict.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, there is some evidence suggesting that the positive relationship between democracy and relative peacefulness only holds if democracy is accompanied by an increase in gender equality.<sup>21</sup> Koch and Fulton argue that, although women in executive positions tend to be as hawkish as men, when the proportion of women in legislatures increases, aggressive policy measures like use of force and defense expenditures decrease.<sup>22</sup> According to an Inter-Parliamentary Union survey of women political leaders, legislatures involving women pay more attention to "soft" issues of security such as social welfare, legal protection, and transparency in government and business.<sup>23</sup>

## Explanations

Possible explanations behind the relationship between democracy and gender equality are wide-ranging. The most prominent view is that democratic systems tend to strengthen gender equality through increasing civic space for women's activism,<sup>24</sup> expanding women's engagement in the political process through voting,<sup>25</sup> and/or decreasing arbitrary constraints against women's political representation.<sup>26</sup> Others, however, reverse the link, seeing gender equality as a driver of democratization through increased economic and political empowerment by a broader sector of society.<sup>27</sup> Finally, a third group of scholars argue that the relationship's most important explanatory factor is modernization, which in turn drives cultural change and the promotion of progressive liberal values, including democracy and gender equality.<sup>28</sup>

Countries at lower and middle levels of democratic quality likely do not provide enough civic space or possibilities for engagement for the mutually reinforcing mechanism between democracy and gender equality to work. Highly variable levels of gender equality among weak democracies and autocracies (e.g., Kazakhstan and Rwanda, which score above the mean for their peers, compared to Yemen and Pakistan, which score below) are likely due to factors unrelated to democracy such as political ideology, institutional capacity, and cultural or religious norms and heritage.<sup>29</sup> Biases against women in positions of political power remain deep. However, these variables cannot explain the positive trends in gender equality observed in more consolidated democracies. For example, among the nations with the highest levels of freedom as measured by Freedom House, seven countries, including Sweden and France, have very little violence against women. On the other hand, eight countries rated as “free,” including Estonia and Uruguay, have moderately high levels of violence against women—underscoring the necessary but not sufficient condition discussed above. This variance could be attributed to values and norms that do not intersect the relationship between democracy and gender equality,<sup>30</sup> outside factors such as income levels,<sup>31</sup> or differences among democratization processes.

There are two main arguments made regarding the mechanisms through which gender equality influences peace and security—both based on the insight that

domestic politics and foreign policy reflect each nation’s values and attitudes towards gender equality.<sup>32</sup> The first argues that there are essential differences in character between women and men, women being inherently less aggressive, and that a more gender-equal society is more peaceful due to more prominent female characteristics. The second argument claims that women are not essentially more peaceful than men and that observed differences are due to evolutionary pressures and social learning that result in adaptive behaviors.<sup>33</sup> Critiques of this work revolve around more nuanced understandings of the role of colonialism, race, and slavery in the development of a society’s level of male violence and dominance, and the legacy of institutionalized oppression that persists in both weak and strong democracies.

On the relationship between national security and women’s security, scholars underline that a society’s tolerance of inequality and gender-based violence can influence its foreign policy, resulting in aggressive behavior in the international system. At the domestic level, research has found that gender inequality is higher in countries affected by civil conflict<sup>34</sup>—circumstances that are usually persistent in countries with low levels of democracy. This suggests that the rise of human trafficking and violence against women—roughly 98 percent of sex trafficking victims are female<sup>35</sup>—could be both a symptom and an outcome of diminished institutional capacity in countries struggling to transition from weak to stronger democracies.

Although there is a positive though moderate relationship between democracy and gender equality, it tends to be rather weak among hybrid regimes. Hence, it cannot be assumed that democratization itself will automatically bring about greater gender equality. However, it also is evident that the most significant improvements regarding gender equality are achieved when countries fully transition into strong, consolidated democracies. Therefore, and considering the necessary role high-quality democracy plays in improving gender equality and security, it is essential for the international community to emphasize women's empowerment and the importance of adopting policies that advance gender equality in any efforts to support countries with incomplete democratization processes.

In this context, the international community also should reaffirm the critical importance of states' implementation of United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolutions 66/130 (2011) and 58/142 (2003), which address women's political participation. These resolutions underscore that the active engagement and participation of women in the political sphere, on equal footing with men, is central to strengthening democratic processes, attaining gender equality, and achieving sustainable development. While some progress toward gender parity in politics is evident, states continue to fall short of internationally set targets.<sup>36</sup>

Based on these findings, the international community should adopt a range of measures to level the playing field for women and take special steps to address domestic and other forms of violence against women. The Community of Democracies, as a forum committed to the basic principle of equality for all, has a particular obligation in this regard. It should strengthen the capabilities of all of its Working Groups to integrate measures to promote women's equality in their activities

(e.g., by gathering information regarding gender inequalities and risks to women's security), as well as to share good practices of gender inclusiveness. The Working Group on Women and Democracy could play a lead role in coordinating and monitoring these efforts. Furthermore, based on the evidence that strong institutional capacity, especially in conjunction with democratic practices, has a positive effect on gender equality and security, the Community of Democracies should promote institutional mechanisms to protect women's security through gender-sensitive laws and regulations and their enforcement.

The international community should consider the following specific measures regarding gender equality and security:

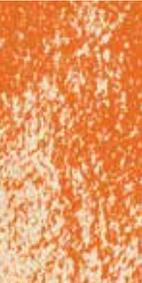
**Expand political participation.** States should adopt mechanisms to ensure that all women have equal opportunity to be part of national legislatures, including privileging female candidates to correct imbalances<sup>37</sup> and providing targeted support and protection of female candidates and legislators, especially in countries where women are underrepresented in political parties.

- ▶ States should support legislation that ensures women's effective participation in all levels of politics and lawmaking, from local councils to cabinet positions. Special efforts should be made to include women from minority and lower-income groups.
- ▶ States should improve female participation in other political processes, especially when it comes to security sector reform and judicial reform in weak and transitioning democracies.



**Empower women economically.** Economic empowerment of women is key to ensuring resilience against gender-based violence and opportunities for political participation. States should therefore strongly support policy initiatives focused on closing the wage gap relative to men, including paid parental leave and child care.

- ➔ In this regard, states should grant women access to business opportunities and enact land reform—particularly in developing countries.
- ➔ Declaring safe havens with enforceable protection provisions where women can develop economic activities free of harassment has resulted in higher levels of equality and security (e.g., women’s marketplaces with no alcohol consumption, special access to health and legal services, etc.). States and international institutions should work with businesses to promote initiatives such as land redistribution policies, tax exemptions for private businesses in exchange for funding of safe havens or supporting entrepreneurial women, and set common economic incentives for foreign investment to fund more inclusive businesses.
- ➔ States should enhance cooperation with the International Labor Organization and its respective regional offices where appropriate, to support and advance policy initiatives that expand women’s participation in their respective labor markets and to narrow the wage gap between women and men.



**Counter discrimination against women.** States should prioritize the ratification and implementation of international conventions against all forms of discrimination and the adoption of special measures to protect at-risk women (e.g., refugees or internally displaced women and girls).

- ➔ **Reduce gender-based violence and human trafficking.** Ensuring the physical security of women

and girls, especially in their homes, schools, and workplaces, needs to be both a collective and an individual goal of states. This objective can be accomplished in several ways.

- ➔ States should tackle human trafficking by training police agencies to take a victim-centered approach in identifying and protecting trafficking victims and those most vulnerable to becoming victims, criminalizing gender-based violence, and ensuring access to justice.
- ➔ States should promote inter-agency law enforcement cooperation in the struggle against transnational human trafficking networks, as well as the establishment of a permanent mechanism to share democratic good practices among law enforcement.
- ➔ States should collaborate with civil society to gather information and exert pressure for stronger legislation and policies to prevent human trafficking and gender-based violence. Policies should address the root causes of trafficking and gender-based violence such as cultural biases against women and a lack of economic opportunity and upward mobility for women and girls.



**Protect women’s rights activists.** The international community should engage actively with states to better protect advocates dedicated to defending women.

- ➔ The Community of Democracies should encourage all states, especially those with higher levels of democracy, to publicly support grassroots organizations involved in advocacy work on behalf of women, and shelter at-risk female activists in less democratic regimes.

**Stimulate greater discussion of and research into gender-based violence and discrimination.**

The international community should promote and support efforts by the free press and intellectual community to research, explain, and condemn gender-based violence and discrimination against women.

- ➔ The Community of Democracies should work with specialized think tanks and journalists already conducting research on gender-based violence or discrimination against women.
- ➔ The Community of Democracies, through its Working Group on Women and Democracy, should reach out to journalists—men and women alike—to promote public discussion regarding gender biases and positive representations of women in the media.

**Mainstream gender equality in security and defense.** The international community should support policy initiatives focused on mainstreaming gender in the work of ministries with responsibility for defense, security, and foreign policy.

- ➔ States should conduct gender audits in their ministries with responsibility for security, defense, and foreign policy to determine the extent to which gender mainstreaming has been undertaken and which policies, if any, have been implemented.
- ➔ The Working Group on Women and Democracy should establish, in partnership with regional organizations like the African Union and the Organization of American States, a training and capacity

building mechanism to assist individual countries with implementation of the U.N. Security Council Resolution (SCR) 1325 (2000) on women, peace, and security and UNGA Resolutions 66/130 (2011) and 58/142 (2003).

**Enable female diplomats to engage in high-level decisionmaking.**

The Community of Democracies should support a more active diplomatic role for women leaders and ensure their involvement at the highest levels of decisionmaking in foreign policy and national security debates.

- ➔ The Community of Democracies should encourage embassies to host receptions, networking events, and academic forums, in conjunction with relevant organizations, on how to ensure more active participation of women in foreign policy and diplomacy.
- ➔ Specialized training and the drafting of handbooks on gender equality could help enhance expertise and educate all diplomats on the importance of gender equality in support of advancing the careers of female diplomats.
- ➔ States' foreign services could establish a support/solidarity network of women in foreign policy and national security to further support gender parity in decisionmaking.
- ➔ The Community of Democracies should establish a standing advisory board of women diplomats and other interested persons, to provide input and recommendations to states in integrating gender equality and gender security in foreign policy decisions.

## Endnotes

- References to the strength or weakness of democratic governance and human rights are derived from quantitative and qualitative assessments contained in three comparable indices of liberal and electoral democracy (V-Dem), civil liberties and political rights (Freedom House), and regime type (Polity IV). The term “hybrid regimes” refers to countries that fall in the category of weak democracy or weak autocracy, without specific regard to current trends forward or backward.
- For the purposes of this policy brief, the term “gender equality and security” refers principally to (1) the equality of opportunities and outcomes for women in comparison to men, and (2) the physical security of women from violence. The paper also discusses security as it relates to international and domestic peace and stability. While gender-related scholarship is increasingly addressing the role of men and boys as both agents and victims of gender-based discrimination and violence, additional qualitative and quantitative data are needed to draw authoritative conclusions.
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- “Brookings Working Paper on Democracy and Gender Equality and Security,” (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2017).
- The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 1993, defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.” UNGA Resolution No. A/RES/48/104.
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- The alternative correlation analysis was made with the Polity IV measurement of quality of democracy.
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- The three measurements used by the authors for relative peacefulness: The Global Peace Index (GPI), States of Concern to the International Community (SOCIC), and Relations with Neighbors (RN). Hudson et al. further calculated that more deaths occurred in the twentieth century by virtue of being female (e.g., female infanticide, sex-selective abortion, maternal mortality, etc.), than by war or civil strife.
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32. Valerie M. Hudson, Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill, Mary Caprioli, and Chad F. Emmett. *Sex and World Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
33. Valerie M. Hudson et al., "The Heart of the Matter."
34. Melander, "Gender Equality and Intrastate Armed Conflict," 696.
35. International Labour Organization, *ILO Global Estimate of Forced Labour: Results and methodology* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2012), 12.
36. For example, only 23 percent of national legislators today are women, falling short of the goal set by the United Nations in 1995 of 30 percent. See "Women in national parliaments," Inter-Parliamentary Union, <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>.
37. Village councils in India, for example, reserve positions for women for ten years (Duflo 2012).