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The Proportion of Women in National Parliament as a Measure of  
Women's Status in Society

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# The Proportion of Women in National Parliament as a Measure of Women's Status in Society

## Abstract

Representation in decision-making is often used as an indicator of the wider integration of women in political and everyday life. This research note examines whether the proportion of women in national parliament really can be regarded as a measure of women's status in society. It is argued that the proportion of women in parliament is a reasonably good indicator of status, with the benefit of being based on readily available data.

## Introduction

The presence of women in positions of decision-making is often regarded as an indicator of the extent to which women are integrated in society, both in political and everyday life (Walby, 1997; Novosel, 2005; Clay, 2006; Social Watch, 2008). The argument is that where women's status in society is higher, women are more likely to participate in the public sphere, since there are fewer obstacles to their involvement. An increased participation in the public sphere leads to a higher proportion of women in public positions of responsibility, which is reflected in the proportion of women in national parliament—a central position in the public sphere (Vallance, 1979; Thomas, 1994; Squires, 1996; Childs, 2000; Kimmel, 2004). In this sense, it can be argued that a high proportion of women in national parliament is indicative of what is sometimes referred to as good gender relations: a society where women are not routinely excluded from the public sphere. This argument that the proportion of women in national parliament is indicative of women's status in society has never been tested empirically. In this research note, I examine to what extent the representation of women in national parliament can be considered a measure of women's status in society overall. In order to do so, the proportion of women in parliament is compared to conventional indicators of women's status in society.

## *Data and Measures*

This research note uses the proportion of women in national parliament as of July 2006, as reported by the *Inter-Parliamentary Union* (IPU, 2006). The analysis in this research note is restricted to countries classified by *Freedom House* (2006) as 'free' or 'partly free,' leaving 131 countries. The intuition behind the exclusion of countries classified as 'unfree' is that in many of the countries without free elections, representation in national parliament is unrelated to actual positions of power. The analysis presumes meaningful and competitive elections, with the result that presence in parliament is linked to power in the countries. In some places this fundamental assumption of justice is violated, such as in repressive regimes (de Rezende Martins, 2004; Matland, 2006; Baldez, 2006; Khan, 2007); and the exclusion of countries classified as 'unfree' addresses this issue.

The proportion of women in the population is not entirely constant across countries, and the results reported here can be replicated with measures that take into account the actual proportion of women in the population. In almost all countries, the substantial difference is small and negligible. Since

the results presented in this research note are not dependent on the inclusion or exclusion of any single country, such small differences are of no major concern. A noticeable variance in the proportion of women in parliament can be observed between countries. The distribution of women's proportions in parliament in free and partly free countries includes the whole range between 0% and almost 50%. The distribution is unimodal with a median of 15%.

Indicators commonly used to capture the status of women in a society are the percentage of girls in secondary education, and the percentage of women in paid work (UNDP, 2005). UN data—based on national records—are generally used to quantify these percentages (UN Statistics Division, 2006; World Bank, 2006). Similarly, the time passed since women gained suffrage (UNDP, 2005) is sometimes taken as an indicator of women's status in society. A different approach to measuring women's status in society utilizes attitudinal questions from the *World Value Survey* (2006). These questions consider the role of women in society, and attitudes in this regard can be expected to reflect women's overall status (Hollstein, 2006).

When studying what they called the global gender gap in 2005, the *World Economic Forum* (WEF) developed a scale that is thought to capture women's status more accurately than the above measures (Lopez-Carlos & Zahidi, 2005). This scale includes measures of economic participation, economic opportunity, political empowerment, educational attainment, as well as health and well-being. A similar albeit simpler measure was developed by the UN (UNDP, 2005). This measure of gender empowerment is similar in that it combines different factors capturing the status of women in society: political participation, economic participation, and power over economic resources. By combining a number of indicators, both scales imply that there is a single dimension to status, which can be enumerated by combining different tangible aspects of status.

The proportion of female members of parliament is often thought to reflect the status women enjoy in a particular society, and taken as an indicator to this extent (Thomas, 1994; Squires, 1996; Childs, 2000; Lopez-Carlos & Zahidi, 2005; UNDP, 2005; European Commission, 2006). Following the theoretical reasoning outlined at the beginning of this research note—higher status is reflected in higher participation in the public sphere—it can be expected that *the proportion of women in parliament closely matches other indicators thought to measure women's status in society*.

## Findings

In this section, I will compare the proportion of women in national parliament with a series of measures commonly used to approximate the status of women in society. These measures include the participation of girls in secondary education, the proportion of women in paid work, attitudes towards the role of women in society, as well as two scales which consider multiple factors.

Data on educational participation, to begin with, were taken from the *World Bank* (2006). There are a number of related indicators collected, one of which is the proportion of girls in secondary education. There is a relatively weak but statistically significant correlation between the percentage of girls in secondary education and the proportion of women in parliament ( $r=0.23$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). The effect is more marked for older democracies ( $r=0.45$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), and in fact cannot be found for countries where democratic rule was established in the past 20 years ( $p>0.1$ ).

Related measures, such as the ratio between girls and boys in secondary education, or the difference in literacy rates in adults do not correlate highly with the proportion of women in parliament ( $r=0.11$  and  $r=0.03$  respectively). Neither of these associations is statistically significant ( $p>0.1$ ). The correlation between the proportion of women in parliament and the average number of years

girls spend in education as compared to boys is stronger ( $r=0.28$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). This measure itself correlates highly with the percentage of girls in secondary education ( $r=0.52$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Again, the association with the proportion of women in parliament is more marked in older democracies ( $r=0.48$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

Data on the proportion of women in the labour force were taken from the *UN Statistics Division* (2006). The relationship between the proportion of women in paid work and that in parliament overall is unclear. The direction of the weak correlation is as expected, but the correlation itself is weak and statistically insignificant ( $r=0.07$ ,  $p>0.1$ ). As with the measure of girls' education above, the relationship is stronger in old democracies ( $r=0.22$ ), but still not significant ( $p>0.1$ ). This suggests that the proportion of women engaged in paid work and the political counterpart may be unrelated factors.

The story is different, however, when only women in professional jobs are considered, as opposed to all kinds of paid work. The correlation between the proportion of women in professional jobs and the proportion of women in parliament is 0.23, significant at the 0.05 level. For this effect, there is no marked difference between old and new democracies. This suggests that whilst the proportion of women in work overall seems unrelated to the political participation of women, there is an association between jobs of higher status and representation in parliament.

Looking at the number of years since women gained voting rights (UNDP, 2005), a significant correlation with the proportion of women in parliament can be observed ( $r=0.29$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). This means that in countries where women played a role in the public sphere for longer, their representation in parliament is also greater. This association, however, does not indicate what kind of mechanism underlies this relationship.

One possibility is that the presence of women in the public sphere affects attitudes towards women. This effect might be indirect, and take time to be picked up (Phillips, 1995). The interest is on women's role in society in general; and there are different questions in the *World Value Survey* (2006) that appear suited. There are questions asking the respondents whether it is problematic if a husband earns less than the wife does, whether university education is more important for boys than for girls, and whether boys or girls are preferred as children. In all these instances, the national mean is used as an indicator of the prevalent attitudes in society. These national averages differ significantly between countries.

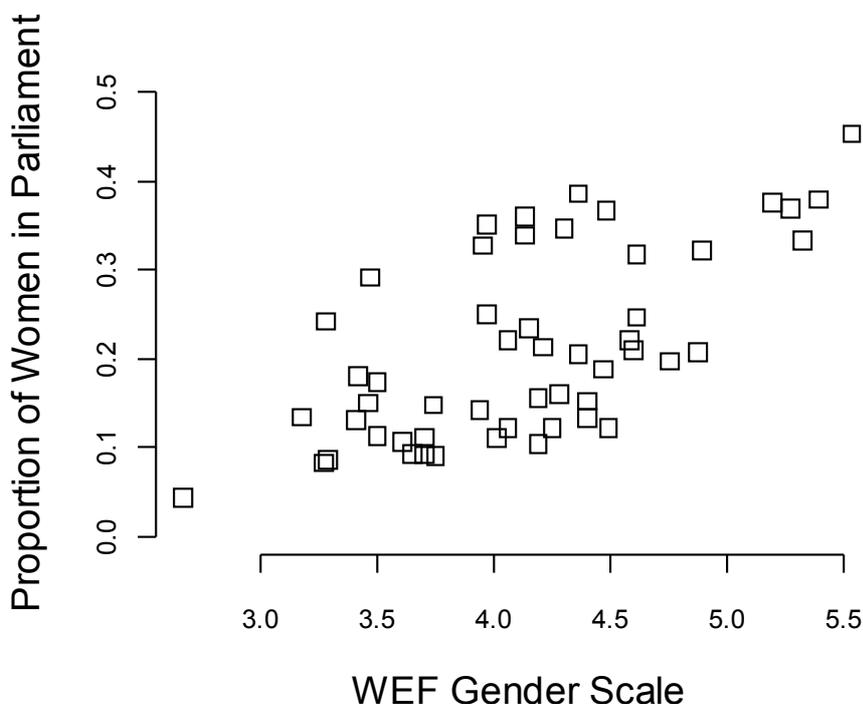
The correlation between the number of respondents agreeing with the statement that it is a problem if a wife earns more than the husband and the proportion of women in parliament is  $-0.50$  ( $p<0.000$ ). The correlation is slightly higher when the statement on university education is used ("A university education is more important for a boy than for a girl"):  $r=-0.56$ ,  $p<0.000$ . In contrast, however, there is no significant association between parents declaring a preference for boys ("If you were to have only one child, would you rather have it be a boy or a girl?") and the proportion of women in parliament. The correlation in this case is weak and not statistically significant ( $p>0.1$ ). This suggests that preference for girls or boys is unrelated to women's political representation, whilst the other two attitudinal factors are linked.

Up to this point, this research note considered indicators based on a single aspect of women's status in society. Composite measures of status are also in use, attempting to capture the complexity and multitude of factors that together determine the status of women in society. Here, the *UN Gender Empowerment Index* (GEI) and the WEF gender scale are used. The GEI covers 69 countries, the WEF gender scale 52.

Rather than relying on a single measure, the UN *Gender Empowerment Index* (UNDP, 2005) makes use of multiple indicators. Included are considerations of political participation, economic participation, as well as control over economic resources. Despite its name, the scale measures the status of women in society, with men being included only by implication. The correlation between this measure of status and the proportion of women in parliament is very strong ( $r=0.72$ ,  $p<0.000$ ). This is not entirely surprising, since the proportion of women in parliament is one of the indicators used to calculate the GEI. However, the strength of the association indicates that there is more to this relationship than a shared factor.

That there is more to the association than a shared factor becomes apparent when using the WEF gender scale. This scale of women's status in society is more sophisticated, incorporating a larger number of factors (Lopez-Carlos & Zahidi, 2005). The correlation between the WEF gender scale and the proportion of women in parliament is strong and statistically highly significant ( $r=0.61$ ,  $p<0.000$ ). It is slightly higher when looking at old democracies only ( $r=0.70$ ,  $p<0.000$ ).

**Figure 1. The Proportion of Women in Parliament Compared to the WEF Gender Scale**



*The relationship between the proportion of women in parliament and the WEF gender scale. N=52.*

The correlation between the proportion of women in parliament and the WEF gender scale is stronger than the correlations between the proportion of women in parliament and the conventional measures of education or labour force participation. It is slightly weaker, however, than the *Gender Empowerment Index* used by the UN. Considering the extent to which the UN measure relies on the same factor than the proportion of women in parliament, this is less surprising. What is more, the countries covered by the two more sophisticated measures differ slightly, which may be a source of the small difference between the GEI and the more elaborate WEF measure.

The correlation between the proportion of women in paid work and the WEF scale is 0.69; that between the percentage of girls in secondary education and the WEF scale is 0.53. The correlation between work-based measures and the WEF scale is stronger in new democracies ( $r=0.74$ ); that between the education-based measures and the WEF scale is not affected by the age of democracy. These correlations can be understood as indicators of the different factors constituting women's overall status in different societies.

## Discussion

The proportion of women in parliament is often used as a measure of women's status in society. In this research note, I have compared the proportion of women in national parliament with conventional measures—girls in secondary education, and women in paid work—, as well as conceptually superior multidimensional scales. The results presented indicate that in free and partly free countries, the proportion of women in parliament is closely associated with other measures of women's status in society. This fits well with the theoretical argument outlined at the onset, that the proportion of women in parliament is indicative of women's political status. However, there are different aspects or dimensions that add up to women's overall status, including participation in education, in the labour force, as well as decision-making. All these separate dimensions of status can be thought to be linked (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Social Watch, 2008), which means that one-dimensional measures can be useful approximations.

The fact that the proportion of women in parliament correlates less highly with indicators based on a single factor than with the scales used by the UN or the WEF is probably a sign of the different aspects of women's status that are picked up by each of the indicators. None of the measures based on a single aspect—be it women's representation in parliament, their participation in professional jobs, or girls in education—can be justified as measuring women's status overall on theoretical grounds. The high correlations between the different measures indicate that composite scales such as the GEI or the WEF scale are likely to capture status in a generic sense. The high correlations also mean that all of these one-dimensional measures can probably provide a reasonable approximation of status using simple and readily available data. Following this argument, the readily available proportion of women in parliament is thus as good as other measures that capture a single dimension of women's status.

However, the proportion of women in national parliament as a measure of women's status in society has a key advantage over other simple indicators and the more sophisticated scales: unambiguous measurement and complete availability of data. This makes the proportion of women in parliament a practical measure of women's status in society, with easily and unambiguously measured numbers. The measurement of other one-dimensional indicators such as participation in the labour force—especially with the focus on professional jobs—and educational attainment can be more challenging. This ease of measurement in the case of the proportion of women in parliament facilitates a consistent means of enumerating status: a necessary aspect for comparative analyses.

The analysis in this research note focused on the status of women, but it appears reasonable to suggest that the argument also holds for other groups in society, such as ethnic minorities. As in the case of gender, it is essential that the status of any group in society is understood in a multidimensional manner. What this research note argues then, is not that more simple measures can be justified on theoretical grounds, but that empirically such measures—correlating highly—present a useful indicator where data may not be so readily available.

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