# Exploring the Links between Women's Status and Democracy

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Antidemocratic forces are accelerating globally, as are organized efforts to roll back the rights of women. To explore the gendered threats to democracy, we quantitatively analyze the relationship between women's status—measured by the Women, Peace and Security Index—and a country's level of democracy—measured in terms of election integrity, freedom of association and assembly, and checks on executive power. We find that countries where women are doing well tend to be the same countries exhibiting strong indicators of democracy. These results show that empowering women and building resilient democracies go hand in hand. Our analysis generates recommendations for how bridging WPS and democracy-building efforts can counter threats to women's political participation, strengthen democratic resilience, and increase accountability for inclusive governance.

## Introduction

From democratic backsliding in Tunisia, Turkey, Ethiopia, Poland, and Hungary to the rise of far-right coalitions in Israel and Italy, threats to democracy and civil liberties are accelerating worldwide. For the past 16 years, democracy has been receding globally, with the share of countries classified by Freedom House as "free" plummeting from 46 percent in 2005 to 20 percent in 2021.[1]

At the same time, antidemocratic forces are engaging in organized efforts to roll back the rights of women, undermining the health of democracies.[2] In 2021, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan withdrew the country from the Istanbul Convention, a legal framework to protect women from violence and promote gender equality.[3] In 2020, Poland's Constitutional Tribunal, whose independence the ruling Law and Justice party has undermined for years, instituted a "near-total ban" on abortion.[4]

These rollbacks are taking place amid growing rates of violence against women in politics,[5] including alarming increases in online gender-based violence[6] and harassment targeting women.[7] In Bolivia, women reaching parity in the Plurinational Legislative Assembly has prompted a surge in harassment and attacks against women in politics.[8] Global alliances between right-wing populists, men's rights activists, ultraconservative religious groups, and citizen associations mobilizing against abortion, LGBTQIA+, and women's rights have curtailed civic spaces and increased hostility against women and other marginalized groups.[9] The murder of British MP Jo Cox by a racist in the midst of the Brexit campaign demonstrated the deadly extremes that violence against women in politics can reach.[10]

The simultaneity of democratic backsliding and backlash against women's rights prompts the question: How, and why, are they connected?[11] In some cases, right-wing populists mobilize patriarchal norms, foment gender-based violence, and undermine women's rights as strategies to erode democratic institutions.[12] This brief seeks to illuminate these interconnections. We argue that

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countering rollbacks on democratic freedom requires sustained efforts to address patriarchal backlash and protect women's rights. In fact, empowering women can be a key entry point to build democratic resilience.[13]

Although we cannot say for certain whether greater gender equality is a cause or consequence of stronger democracies (or both a cause and a consequence), it is clear that any democracy work that does not see gender equality as a core principle is not actually "democracy work." There can be no governance by the people and for the people if half of the people are disproportionately affected by barriers to political, social, and economic participation.

Our research shows that women's status in a country and the country's democratic health are strongly correlated. We analyze the link between women's status—measured by Georgetown University's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Index (described below)—and a country's level of democracy—measured in terms of election integrity, freedom of association and assembly, and checks on executive power. In our sample of 96 democratic countries, we find that the status of women is strongly and significantly associated with all three dimensions of democracy, with election integrity displaying the strongest relationship. These findings demonstrate that empowering women and safeguarding democracy go hand in hand and strengthen the evidence-based case for the integration of the WPS and democracy agendas.

The WPS Agenda, with its dual focus on protecting women from violence and promoting women's meaningful role in decision-making, is an existing policy framework that can be leveraged to strengthen democratic institutions and fortify women's rights against patriarchal backlash.[14] To date, 105 countries have developed WPS National Action Plans (NAPs).[15] These offer guidance and concrete entry points for legislators, policymakers, and activists who are working to secure women's human rights, prevent violence against women, and ensure women's meaningful participation in decision-making.

WPS NAPs can support inclusive governance and democracy-building, but they remain underutilized. Among Global North countries, the majority of WPS NAPs are outward-facing and delegate implementation to their foreign and defense ministries.[16] The process of developing and implementing a NAP requires a government to consider its priorities, responsibilities, values, risks, and security threats from a gender, or ideally intersectional, perspective. Recognizing that the threat to women's rights is a threat to democracy also means NAPs can play a role in safeguarding democracy through the protection of women's rights at home and abroad. Based on our findings, we offer recommendations for improving women's political participation, strengthening democratic resilience, and increasing accountability for inclusive governance.

## Lack of Consensus: What We (Don't) Know

Previous studies have sought to examine quantitatively the relationship between the level of democracy and the status of women cross-nationally. However, these studies, utilizing varied indicators of women's status, have presented a fragmentary, contradictory, and incomplete picture.[17] Studies using different indicators have come to different conclusions,[18] and even studies using the same indicators have produced different findings.[19] Other research suggests that levels of economic development mediate the relationship between certain operationalizations of women's status and levels of democracy.[20] Some scholars argue that the main explanatory factor is not democracy or development but, rather, gender values, particularly toward women in politics.[21]
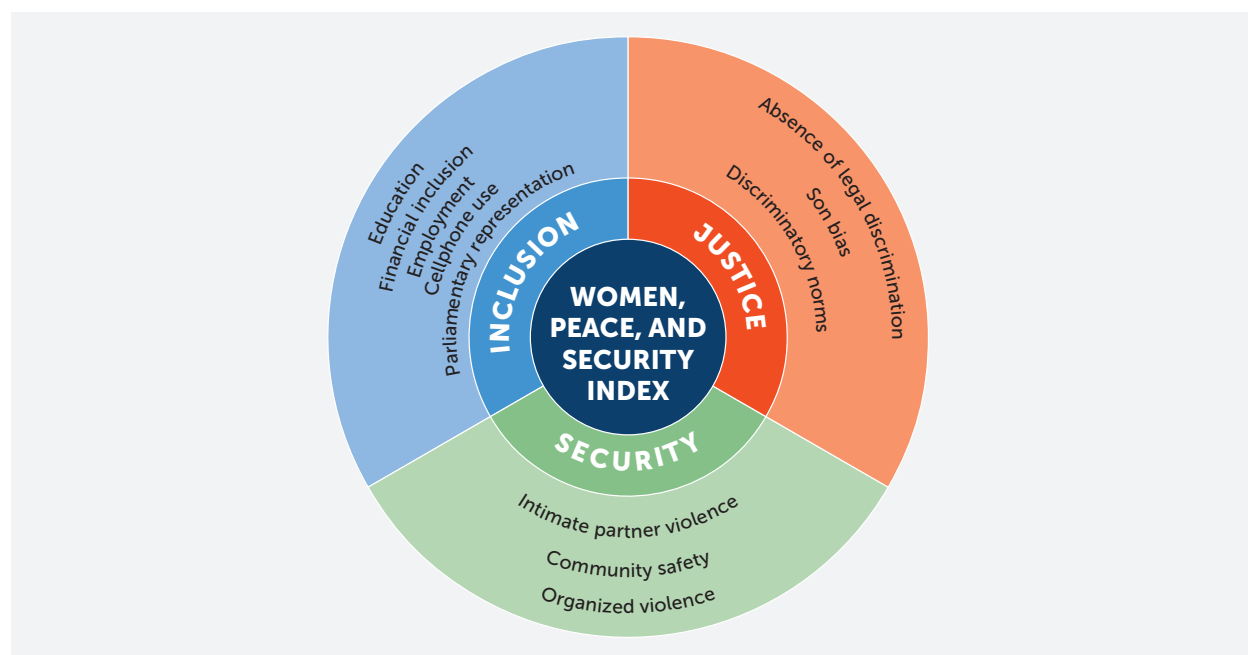
Varying greatly in how they measure democracy and the status of women, the existing quantitative studies have two key limitations. First, the wide range of metrics leads to mixed findings, which makes it difficult to draw overarching conclusions about how the status of women is related to democracy. Second, because these studies often rely on single metrics of women's status and democracy, they fail to capture a holistic snapshot.

Our analysis mitigates these shortcomings and deepens the field's understanding of the links between democracy and the status of women.

## Conceptual Framework and Methodology

How are different measures of democracy related to dimensions of women's status? We capture women's status using the WPS Index, which multidimensionally measures the status of women in 170 countries.[22] Each country is ranked and scored based on its performance across 11 indicators classified under the three dimensions of inclusion (economic, social, and political); justice (formal laws and informal discrimination); and security (at the family, community, and societal levels) (see figure 1). Although there are a growing number of gender indices, the WPS Index is the only one to combine issues of women's inclusion, justice, and security and is unique in capturing the absolute status of women rather than gender gaps or inequalities. The WPS Index thus offers a novel opportunity to compare women's status in a country against indicators of democracy.

There are many democracy indices that measure countries' overall levels of democracy and their performance on particular pillars of democracy.[23] Based on the quality of available data, coverage of distinct aspects of democracy, and the absence of confounding gender variables, we selected the following pillars and corresponding metrics of democracy:

- *Contestation*: The degree to which genuine competition exists in a political system.[24] This is measured using the Varieties of Democracy's (V-Dem) **Clean Elections Index**, which accounts for the autonomy and capacity of the election management body; the incidence of electoral irregularities, intimidation, and violence; and the general perception that the election was free and fair.[25]

- *Freedom of association and assembly*: The degree to which civic groups are able to organize independently of the state. It is measured using International IDEA's **Freedom of Association and Assembly Index**, which captures civil society autonomy, freedom of association and assembly for citizens and citizen groups, and workers' rights.[26]

- *Checks and balances*: The degree to which different institutions hold power that enables them to limit one another, provide oversight, and ensure accountability.[27] This is measured using International IDEA's **Checks on Government Index**.[28]

Across a sample of 96 countries classified as "free" or "partly free" by Freedom House, we compare these three pillars of democracy against overall performance on the WPS Index.[29] Further, we analyze how the three democracy pillars correlate to the WPS Index's subdimensions of inclusion, justice, and security. While not intended to determine causality, our analysis reveals important relationships between the status of women and the status of democracy.

# Women's Status and Democracy: The Evidence

Among free and partly free countries, performance on the WPS Index is positively and significantly correlated with performance on all three democracy indices. Our findings indicate that countries where women are doing well tend to be countries with fair elections, autonomous civil societies, and independent and accountable government institutions.

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To uncover more about what may be driving this relationship, we compare the countries' performance on each of the pillars of democracy—contestation, freedom of association, and checks and balances—against their performance on each of the WPS Index's subdimensions: inclusion, justice, and security. Leveraging these finer-grained comparisons allows us to identify strategic entry points to safeguard democracy and women's rights.

## Contestation

Of the three democracy metrics, the Clean Elections Index is the most strongly associated with countries' overall WPS Index scores (see table 1). Correlations among all of the WPS Index's subdimensions are also statistically significant.

These findings suggest that countries that hold fairer elections also tend to exhibit lower levels of formal and informal discrimination against women and have higher levels of women's educational attainment, cell phone access, representation in parliament, and economic participation.

It may be that where elections are more competitive, women are more likely to represent important political constituencies. Leveraging their enhanced bargaining positions, women might be able to access state offices and influence state policies more easily in competitive than in noncompetitive electoral spaces, where women would likely have a much weaker bargaining position. Greater bargaining power may tend to create conditions where discriminatory laws and practices against women are more likely to be dismantled or less likely to be formulated in the first place.[30]

| | Clean Election Index | Checks on Government Index | Freedom of Association and Assembly Index |
|---|---|---|---|
| WPS INDEX (overall score) | 0.74 | 0.67 | 0.63 |
| Inclusion | 0.68 | 0.68 | 0.62 |
| Justice | 0.68 | 0.59 | 0.61 |
| Security | 0.54 | 0.43 | 0.39 |

\*  We use Spearman's rank-order correlation, which measures the strength and direction of monotonic association between two ranked variables. Values closer to 1 indicate a stronger relationship. All correlations are significant at the level p<0.01.

## Checks and Balances

Of the three democracy metrics, the Checks on Government Index has the second strongest correlation with countries' overall WPS Index scores. Compared against the WPS Index's subdimensions, this pillar of democracy exhibited much more variability than contestation (see table 1).

As with the case of contestation, inclusion is driving this relationship, with justice and security demonstrating less strong, though still statistically significant, relationships. These findings indicate that those countries where executive power is balanced and limited by an effective legislature, an independent judiciary, and a robust media tend to be countries with high levels of women's participation in political and economic life. Checks and balances, however, appear to be slightly less relevant to justice and significantly less relevant to security.

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When power is dispersed across multiple branches of government, each branch represents a forum through which women's groups can pursue their interests. If one branch of power becomes hostile to women's interests, women's groups have the ability to go "forum-shopping," pursuing their interests at fora that appear more amenable to arguments about women's rights. For example, women's groups might turn to the judiciary when the legislature is unwilling to act on women's issues or, alternatively, to the legislature when the judiciary is staffed with antagonistic judges. When women cannot find support from government institutions, the media can serve as an external check on the government by catalyzing public opinion to demand action.

A lower checks and balances score—which indicates the centralization of effective power in the executive and a lack of accountability—means that there are fewer fora for women's groups to pursue their interests. While a concentration of power might enable dramatic shifts in policy, the centralization of power also tends to inhibit policy continuity. We expect that more balanced political

systems with fora for women's groups to pursue their interests would favor the representation of women's interests in the long term. Without institutional counterweights that credibly commit a government to a policy agenda, new executives are not obligated to uphold the policies they inherited. For example, in the United States, Democratic and Republican presidents have taken turns rescinding and reinstating the Mexico City policy since it was first enacted by the Reagan administration.[31] Also known as the Global Gag Rule, the policy prohibits foreign NGOs from using any US global health assistance funds to "perform or actively promote abortion as a method of family planning."

## Freedom of Association and Assembly

The correlation between the Freedom of Association Index and countries' overall WPS scores is moderately strong and statistically significant. Correlations with each of the three subdimensions of the WPS Index—inclusion, justice, and security—are also statistically significant (see table 1).

The mobilization of nongovernmental women's groups and networks is a critical mechanism for influencing policy.[32] As a higher level of associative freedom indicates the presence of fewer formal constraints on autonomous civil society activity, it likely also indicates a higher probability that such activity will shape policy.[33] Existing studies bear this out, showing that improvements in civil liberties improve women's representation in parliament.[34]

The moderate correlation between the WPS Index and the Freedom of Association Index may be the result of a competitive civil society space. A high level of freedom of association also extends to groups and networks antagonistic to women's interests. While a high level of freedom of association might indicate that state policies can be influenced by civil society advocacy, it might also indicate a high degree of civil society competition over state policies. Therefore, state policies might not reflect women's interests specifically. Because the democracy indicators do not account for gender equality, it is possible for a country to have autonomous civil society organizations and still exclude women from politics and civic space. Women may also still be at risk of violence, as freedom of association does not necessarily mean safety from harassment or other forms of attacks. For example, Iceland ranked first on International IDEA's Freedom of Association and Assembly Index in 2021, yet a recent study found that one out of three women in Iceland experiences workplace sexual harassment or violence during her lifetime.[35]

## Coda about Security

Security is a necessary precondition for women's participation in politics and civil society. While it does not guarantee meaningful political inclusion, its absence can undermine it. Of the three subdimensions of the WPS Index, the relationship between security and the metrics of democracy is less strong, but it is still statistically significant. The metrics we selected for democracy speak primarily to institutional integrity and cannot describe broader social and cultural processes that determine attitudes toward gender equality. Political volatility in free and partly free countries with ongoing democratic movements might lead to an overall increase in violence, which is likely to affect women in multiple and particular ways.[36]

# Recommendations

Overall, these findings show that countries where women are doing well tend to be the same countries that have strong indicators of democracy. In light of this, policymakers should view investments in women as investments in strong democratic systems. Strengthening democracy requires addressing gendered blind spots. The WPS Agenda succinctly diagnoses the gendered oversights that often plague democracy programming and provides political and policy tools for overcoming them.

## Policymakers should view investments in women as investments in strong democratic systems.

Although many democracy programs do incorporate a focus on women's political status and participation, rarely are these programs explicitly linked to the WPS Agenda. This separation limits the extent to which these two fields can benefit from each other, particularly in terms of coordination, resource sharing, and impact. WPS NAPs are a readily available resource for governments and civil society to identify and address gendered blind spots and improve the integration of WPS and democracy work.

The WPS Agenda and democracy-strengthening efforts share common goals, including the protection of human rights and ensuring freedom from political violence. The WPS Agenda's Relief and Recovery pillar aligns thematically and temporally with democracy-building efforts in postconflict transitions, highlighting significant opportunities for strategic interventions. It is during postconflict transitions when citizens (re-)build democratic institutions and (re-)write constitutions that NAPs need to intersect with and support democracy-building efforts. WPS NAPs offer a tool to ensure laws and policies support women's inclusion and meaningful participation in governance and relief and recovery efforts. In relation to the democratic pillars of contestation, checks and balances, and freedom of assembly, we identify the cross-cutting themes of accountability, inclusion, open civic spaces, and the prevention of political violence against women as leverage points

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to advance both WPS and democracy efforts. We highlight a variety of actions governments and other stakeholders can take to promote women's rights and democratic resilience.

### Fortify internal and external checks and balances against breaches of democratic and gender equality norms and strengthen accountability measures.

Dispersing power across different branches of government multiplies the number of avenues through which women can pursue their political interests. Further, with each branch "checking" the others, the dispersion of power could strengthen accountability processes for women. Legislative and legal

mechanisms to advance gender equality must be paired with accountability processes, whether in the form of oversight, naming-and-shaming, sanctions, or criminal penalties. The insufficient implementation of laws aimed at protecting women from gender-based violence and advancing gender equality erodes democratic resilience and undermines faith in the rule of law.[37] For example, 134 countries have adopted at least one type of gender quota for the lower house of parliament (or unicameral parliament), but many continue to fall short of targets, and in numerous countries, political parties are failing to comply. In Côte d'Ivoire, for instance, parties are legally required to ensure that at least 30 percent of candidates on party lists are women and that party lists alternate the names of men and women candidates, yet only 14 percent of those elected to the National Assembly in 2021 were women.[38] Accountability measures increase the costs of malign actions and institutionalize procedures for seeking justice, advancing gender equality, and guaranteeing women's rights.

> **To support accountability and ensure the effectiveness of checks and balances for both democratic resilience and women's rights:**
> - the international community should urge governments to carry out quota requirements put in place to enhance women's opportunities for elective office, condemn breaches in democratic mechanisms that affect women, and publicly oppose legislation that rolls back women's rights;
> - civil society organizations should provide training and resources to equip women in politics and journalism with tools to counter disinformation campaigns;
> - news organizations should recruit and train women journalists to increase the proportion of women reporting on politics and in positions to hold governments accountable; and
> - governments should protect press freedom and guarantee accountability for violence against journalists, including gender-based violence and intimidation.

## Capitalize on inclusive institutional setups to improve women's status by integrating WPS and democracy work.

It is well documented that more inclusive peace processes promote better and more stable outcomes.[39] Evidence from other contexts suggests that bolstering women's inclusion should lead to better democratic outcomes too.[40] The WPS Agenda promotes women's meaningful participation in peace negotiations and postconflict transitions. Women's inclusion at these critical junctures can translate to more inclusive constitutions and governance structures, which can increase women's empowerment in the postconflict period. A stronger focus on democracy in WPS work would draw attention to the design of institutions and how they produce system-level effects to benefit women more equally. Policymakers could use these insights to design, and in some cases redesign, institutions to improve women's position as political actors. For instance, proportional representation electoral systems consistently elect more women to parliament than majoritarian electoral systems.[41]

> **To promote women's meaningful inclusion and participation in politics as a pathway to strengthen democracies:**
> - political parties should adopt gender equality measures and institute internal gender quotas where appropriate to give women a fair chance to compete and should provide resources and financial support for women's political campaigns;

- in electoral systems using party lists for proportional representation, political **parties should adopt** candidate lists that alternate men and women candidates to enable women to compete equally;
- governments that disburse public funding to political parties should consider developing funding criteria based on parties' commitments to gender equality;
- governments should develop recruitment channels to increase women's representation at all levels of the judicial system; and
- governments should leverage tools such as gender mainstreaming and intersectional gender analysis to ensure democracy agendas are inclusive and actively address barriers to women's meaningful participation once elected to office.

## Protect women's political rights and support democratic mobilization.

More robust democratic institutions tend to strengthen women's bargaining position in politics as voters, as politicians, and as rights-bearing citizens. Importantly, they also afford broader, open spaces for autonomous and political mobilization. Research shows that when movements are inclusive, they are more likely to succeed.[42]

**To ensure women are able to exercise their right to vote and mobilize against threats to democracy and women's rights:**
- government officials should support election integrity by commissioning independent observers and training them on how to monitor and report gender-based violence and intimidation of women voters and politicians;
- legislators should prioritize passing gender-sensitive laws that prevent voter intimidation and suppression and institute accountability mechanisms if measures are not taken to prevent violations;
- state and local governments should partner with women civil society leaders, women human rights defenders, and women politicians from diverse backgrounds to develop strategies to defend and protect civic space, including online fora; and
- the international community should work with civil society organizations to develop strategies to mitigate risks to women advocating for human rights, gender equality, and democracy.

## Address political violence against women to build democratic resilience.

Targeted violence against women erodes democratic health, and women from historically marginalized groups face heightened risks. Living in a democracy is not synonymous with living in safety for women, especially for women of color. Research shows that women of color candidates are more likely to receive violent online abuse,[43] demonstrating the need for an intersectional approach to the mitigation and prevention of political violence against women. Violence against women in politics, civil society, and journalism poses myriad barriers to women's engagement in social, political, and economic life,[44] including making civic space less safe for women and discouraging women from running for office or engaging in political mobilization.

**To address political violence against women:**

- governments should adopt gender-sensitive laws that criminalize political violence, including gendered online harassment and abuse;
- political parties and governments should develop new processes to protect women in politics from online and personal attacks;
- police should be trained to recognize and respond to incidents of gender-based violence and harassment in civic spaces and against politicians, civil society leaders, and journalists, including the heightened risks faced by women from historically marginalized groups;
- governments should partner with civil society groups and the private sector to develop new social media standards and mechanisms for addressing technology-facilitated gender-based violence; and
- governments should hold social media platforms accountable if they fail to adopt measures that prevent gendered forms of online harassment, abuse, and disinformation.

**Building resilient democracies and advancing the status of women go hand in hand.** While further research is needed, our findings nevertheless indicate that democracy work should be more attentive to women's security and inclusion in democracies, partial democracies, and countries transitioning from conflict. Rather than operating in silos, stakeholders working on democracy and WPS issues must come together to advance common goals of building just, equitable, and inclusive societies.

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