



Article

Women's participation and challenges to the liberal script: A global perspective

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Abstract

Existing scholarship documents large worldwide increases in women's participation in the public sphere over recent decades, for example, in education, politics, and the labor force. Some scholars have argued that these changes follow broader trends in world society, especially its growing liberalism, which increasingly has reconfigured social life around the choices of empowered and rights-bearing individuals, regardless of gender. Very recently, however, a variety of populisms and nationalisms have emerged to present alternatives to liberalism, including in the international arena. We explore here their implications for women's participation in public life. We use cross-national data to analyze changes in women's participation in higher education, the polity, and the economy 1970–2017. We find that women's participation on average continues to expand over this period, but there is evidence of a growing cross-national divergence. In most domains,

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women's participation tends to be lower in countries linked to illiberal international organizations, especially in the recent-most period.

Keywords

Gender equality, liberalism, women's rights, world society

Introduction

The increased participation of women in the public sphere is one of the hallmark changes of the past century. The period witnessed the global expansion of women's suffrage, schooling, and labor force participation (Charles, 2011; DiPrete and Buchmann, 2013; Ramirez and Wotipka, 2001; Ramirez et al., 1997); rights became enshrined in state constitutions, laws, and national ministries (Russell, 2015; True and Mintrom, 2001); and political representation grew as women became elected officials (Paxton et al., 2006). Even within the privacy of the home, women gained greater autonomy and voice (Frank et al., 2010). All these changes were undergirded by a thick layer of world society institutions, including women's international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), as well as intergovernmental organizations and agreements, such as the 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Berkovitch, 1999; Wotipka and Ramirez, 2008).

Despite the expansive changes, the world continues to be deeply and unequally gendered (Barone, 2011; Charles and Bradley, 2009), and one can identify places where improvements in women's participation have remained elusive. Indeed, we see a contemporary wave of contestations over women's rights, associated with challenges to the liberal script from ideologies of populism, nationalism, and religious conservatism. Some countries have experienced outright rebukes from political leaders and administrative bodies. In 2017, Russia's parliament voted 380–3 to decriminalize domestic violence when it does not persist or cause 'substantial bodily harm'. Family matters, goes the logic, should be left to heads of family. Meanwhile in Hungary, the government banned gender studies from universities, castigating it as an ideology rather than a science. At the same time, backlashes against reproductive rights have resulted in the restriction and criminalization of abortion in countries as diverse as Poland and the United States. One can point to similar developments elsewhere, with illiberal governments and movements leveraging discourses of the family, the nation, and religion to call for the restoration of so-called traditional gender arrangements (Bluhm et al., 2021; Graff et al., 2019).

A striking dimension of these contestations is their global roots. For example, the United Nations Family Rights Caucus emerged in 2008 and now counts members from more than 160 countries and boasts connections with numerous intergovernmental and international nongovernmental organizations. While the caucus does not explicitly critique women's public participation, it prioritizes their private roles as wives and mothers in the 'natural' family (Berkovitch, 1999). In 2009, the caucus blocked references to reproductive rights from an official document of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Many similar cases of global blowback suggest the growing institutionalization of illiberal frameworks and movements in world society (Bob, 2012; Bromley et al.,

2020; Hadler and Symons, 2018; Motadel, 2019; Velasco, 2020). Indeed, world society appears to be increasingly divided. While liberal understandings of gender are built into much global discourse and organization, some international alliances are clearly challenging dominant liberal frameworks.

We examine the implications of this shifting global context for women's rights across the globe: how are globally organized illiberal challenges affecting women's participation in the public sphere? While some country cases suggest that illiberal challenges weigh down women's participation in particular contexts – for example, in higher education in Hungary (Schofer et al., 2018) – the general impact of illiberal challenges remains uncertain, especially given evidence that women's public participation continues its ascent in other country contexts (Hughes and Paxton, 2019). We need systematic analyses of the relationship between illiberal movements in world society and women's rights and participation. Whereas resistance to women's participation in public life is not new, the contemporary illiberal attacks, especially in the international arena, are striking and warrant fuller investigation. They run counter to the long-standing rise of women in world society.

To shed light on the issue, we examine cross-national and longitudinal data on women's participation in higher education, the polity, and the economy from 1970 to 2017, using panel regression models. We test several propositions about the factors shaping women's participation in these domains. Following our main research question above, we focus especially on the influence of countries' membership in illiberal international alliances. We find that women's participation on average continues to expand. But there is evidence of a growing cross-national divergence, arising from differential ties to world society, with women's participation lagging behind in countries linked to illiberal international organizations. *Vis-a-vis* women's participation, mainstream world society's positive influence is well established, but the countervailing influence of illiberal challengers is not. Our focus on these global illiberal pressures offers a useful addition to the literature, which generally locates obstacles to gender equality in domestic contexts. Our quantitative approach complements existing qualitative work that calls attention to these global dynamics.

We begin by outlining the role of the global environment in shaping women's participation across national contexts, with particular focus on the liberal models that became globally dominant after the fall of the Soviet Union. We then consider the (re-) emergence of often globally organized oppositions to liberal world society and theorize their possible implications for women's rights and participation. After noting the various national factors that also shape women's incorporation into the public sphere, we detail our data and methods, present the results of our regression analyses, and conclude our paper with a discussion of the contributions, limitations, and further implications of our findings.

World society and women's participation

World society and comparative political sociologists have suggested that a substantial impetus for women's participation worldwide arises from a sweeping postwar liberalization of the global institutional context, which legitimated new global models of women's

rights and participation (Paxton et al., 2006; Ramirez and Wotipka, 2001; Ramirez et al., 1997; Wotipka et al., 2018). Over this period, global liberal ideologies and inclusive human rights norms were enshrined in international organizations (like the United Nations) and treaties (like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women), and they promoted the cause of women across virtually every sector of world society. Of course, the liberal ideology was not alone in its promotion of women. Communist ideology did the same and women made significant gains in the communist sphere (Lapidus, 1978). While liberalism promoted the public elevation of women as individuals, communism similarly undermined traditional roles of women, but in the more collectivist guise of workers. After the fall of the Soviet Union, however, the liberal version of gender egalitarianism became globally dominant. Today, there is a rich world infrastructure dedicated to women built around ‘a liberal cultural logic that treats individual persons as the fundamental building blocks of society’ (Charles, 2020: 87) and is embodied in treaties, declarations, transnational social movements, international NGOs, and a diffuse web of activists and citizens (Ferree and Mueller, 2004; Hughes et al., 2015, 2018; Paxton et al., 2020).

Importantly, existing scholarship shows that support for women’s rights and participation in world society has propelled the increased public incorporation of women at the national level. While the impact of global context on national outcomes often builds incrementally (see Hironaka, 2014), in the women’s domain it has facilitated large-scale social change, for example, in women’s suffrage and women’s parliamentary representation (Fallon et al., 2012; Hughes et al., 2015; Paxton et al., 2006; Ramirez et al., 1997; Tripp and Kang, 2008). A critical insight is that countries with higher levels of embeddedness in world society tend to adopt the liberal and women-supportive policies and principles enshrined in world society, suggesting the following baseline hypothesis for our analysis:

Proposition 1: We expect higher levels of women’s participation in public life in countries with higher embeddedness in liberal world society.

Illiberal shifts in world society?

The liberal creed – the unwavering faith in models of society rooted in the liberty of individual actors and human rights – diffused from its Western strongholds after World War II and reached a zenith in world society in the neoliberal period of the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. For a brief moment, liberalism’s rivals appeared vanquished, inspiring one political scientist to proclaim triumphantly, ‘the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government’ (Fukuyama, 1989: 4).

Already, however, a panoply of oppositions were mobilizing to counter the preeminence of liberalism, many building on the groundwork of earlier alternatives. On the left, for example, an anti-globalization coalition of labor and environmental groups coordinated protests against the World Trade Organization in 1999. Shortly thereafter on the right, the anticolonial Islamic terrorist group al-Qaeda orchestrated attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. Despite obviously great differences, the two sides formed

emergent wings of resistance to the neoliberal world order. Various illiberal oppositions gathered steam during the Great Recession of 2008–2011 – the most severe economic contraction since the Great Depression – precipitated by the collapse of US real estate and financial markets. The economy downshifted globally, most of all in North America and Europe, throwing the legitimacy of the liberal global system increasingly into question (Guillén, 2018). A key result has been a worldwide surge in illiberal populisms and nationalisms, built around nativist claims and emphases on religious traditionalism, law and order, and sovereignty (Kyle and Gultchin, 2018). While these phenomena are obviously not new, the 2008 crisis dramatized the vulnerabilities of liberal (economic) models and provided much material for populist and nationalist politicians promising protection from ‘savage globalization’ (Brubaker, 2017: 378; see also Bonikowski, 2017; Eichengreen, 2018; Rodrik, 2018). The process was not purely material, though the recession certainly generated unemployment and economic insecurities. The crisis also fueled a wider disenchantment with liberal models of the economy, society, and state. Indeed, illiberal opponents have increasingly channeled economic hardship into support for a much broader cause (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018), including traditional gender roles (Orenstein and Bugarič, 2020).

We shortly return to the implications of these illiberal frames for women’s rights, but for now the important point is that these contestations transformed not only national contexts but also the global environment, with illiberal state and civil society actors utilizing old and new international organizations to mobilize against liberal prescriptions and to advocate for alternative visions, for instance, built around statist or nationalist ideologies or conservative religious frames. Such illiberal international alliances challenged liberal touchstones in the international arena, including democracy (Debre, 2020; Libman and Obydenkova, 2018), lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) and sexual rights (Hadler and Symons, 2018; Trimble, 2013; Velasco, 2018), nongovernmental organizations (Bromley et al., 2020), education (Schofer et al., 2018), and more (Bob, 2012).

Illiberal global alliances also push back against liberal gender norms, with a recent article noting that ‘in recent years, antifeminism has made great strides on the global stage’ (Cupać and Ebetürk, 2020: 3; see also Chappell, 2006; Goetz, 2020; Sanders, 2018). Specifically, gender itself has increasingly emerged as a key axis through which rising illiberal actors frame their discontent with the modern international system (Corredor, 2019; Cupać and Ebetürk, 2020). Existing scholarship identifies several international organizations that have emerged as nodes of opposition against the liberal model, based in religious doctrines and populist and nationalist ideologies that meaningfully intersect with gender (Bob, 2012; Bromley et al., 2020; Corredor, 2019; Hadler and Symons, 2018; Korolczuk and Graff, 2018; Motadel, 2019; Velasco, 2020). Consequently, matters of gender justice are becoming increasingly contested and destabilized in world society, as international organizations and ideologies opposing the liberal script gain in influence. We introduce concrete cases in the data and methods section below, but conceptually this growing influence of illiberal alternatives in international organizations points to an increasingly divided world institutional environment. What we cautiously term a ‘postliberal’ world society may be on the rise, with liberal hegemony on the world stage certainly not vanquished but substantially challenged (Börzel and Zürn, 2021; Rupnik, 2016).

Our goal here is to explore how this shifting global context is impacting women's participation in public life. Given that the liberal premises of world society advance the cause of women as fully constituted individuals whose personhood should be protected within a regime of human rights (Paxton et al., 2020), one would expect the recent global developments to curtail women's participation at the national level. Of course, not all illiberal frameworks seek to restrict women's participation in the public sphere. However, existing scholarship points to a 'powerful relationship between gender and the rise of the global Right' (Graff et al., 2019: 542). While contemporary illiberal strands are diverse and analytically distinct (see Bonikowski, 2017), they share a departure from liberal emphases on individual human persons as the main loci for rights and authority. Instead, they tend to emphasize collective bodies as the natural order of things: an imagined 'people', the nation and the state, religious communities, and the family.

Appeals to a 'natural' and 'traditional' family in particular have emerged as a striking commonality across illiberal movements, with clear implications for the envisioned role of women in society (Chappell, 2006). Framed as a defense against liberal 'gender ideology', illiberal activists and leaders of various stripes have appealed to such rhetoric to ensconce women within the collective bodies of the family, the community, the nation, and religion (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018). In other words, the role of women in society is not based on autonomous individualism but rather on women's place in the family, the nation, and other corporate entities (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018). Studies of gender and nationalism stress the latter themes, depicting gender as a symbolic issue through which the proper national order is articulated (Cusack, 2000; Kramer, 2009). Country cases exemplify these dynamics. For example, in Poland 'genderists' were increasingly demonized as 'enemies of the nation' and as 'an international conspiracy threatening Polish culture and the safety of Polish families' (Graff, 2019: 551). In India, a Hindu nationalist campaign defended against the incursions of Muslim men on Hindu women and the Indian nation (Kapur, 2019: 553). In other country contexts, too, illiberal understandings of women became the 'lingua franca' of activists, from the Philippines to Russia to the United States (Graff et al., 2019: 542).

While the most incendiary discourse often centers on issues like abortion (Boyle et al., 2015), we here consider the implications of these illiberal trends for women's participation in core domains of the public sphere: higher education, the polity, and the labor market. Envisioning women's social roles from within the framework of a traditional family is not incompatible with their public participation. At the same time, the massive expansion in women's public participation that has marked recent history rested in good part on the assumption that women have equal rights to men and ought to have equal opportunities to enter education, political life, and the labor market (Charles, 2020). In contrast, contemporary illiberal discourses stress the legitimacy and, in some cases, superiority of more traditional women's roles distinct from those of men, like motherhood (Trimble, 2013). The policy expressions of such discourses include, for instance, rather aggressive pronatalist policies, such the ones implemented in Poland and Hungary. Framing women in these more traditional roles can imply that their most legitimate place is in the home rather than the public sphere, suggesting that today's resurgence of global illiberalisms may well have negative implications for women's public participation.

Overall, these arguments about the eroding legitimacy of the liberal world order over the recent-most period, especially in the wake of the Great Recession, and the growing institutionalization of illiberal challenges in international organizational structures generate two further hypotheses:

Proposition 2: We expect lower levels of women's participation in public life in countries tied to illiberal organizations in world society.

Proposition 3: We expect lower levels of women's participation in public life in the 'postliberal' period after 2008.

And yet despite illiberal tendencies in world society, it is also clear that liberal principles and organizations – including those dedicated to promoting women's rights – continue to be strongly institutionalized at the world level and in many national contexts (Meyer, 2010). For instance, a recent article finds strong support for gender liberalism in a survey of attitudes in 34 African countries (Charles, 2020). Indeed, as Poland instituted a near-total ban on abortion, Argentina, and more recently Mexico, passed a sweeping bill legalizing the practice. Moreover, it is worth noting that populist and nationalist reactions are not principally directed at lowering the status of women per se; instead, they assert the primacy of the family (and/or the nation or religion) over rampant individualism. The calls are to reshape gender roles more than to reorder gender rank (although impacts on rank may well follow). While illiberal voices are certainly chipping away at – or modeling alternatives to – liberal conceptions of gender equality, this continued salience of liberalism suggests a further, more moderate, possibility. Perhaps the 'postliberal' period has not brought a general decline in women's participation, as suggested by our proposition 3, but instead divergence, polarization, and/or fissiparous tendencies in world society: an enduring central stream of continuing liberalism and growing offshoots of illiberalism. We thus envision an interaction effect, theorizing that the recent contestations over liberal models may amplify the negative effects of illiberal international linkages, even if expansion on average continues. These considerations lead us to formulate a final hypothesis:

Proposition 4: We expect lower levels of women's participation in countries tied to illiberal organizations in world society in the 'postliberal' period after 2008.

Domestic explanations as control variables

Although we stress the importance of international factors, the literature on women's participation typically foregrounds a range of domestic factors, from economic development to political mobilization. We introduce the main lines of argumentation, which we later operationalize via our control variables.

Domestic economic context

A first set of explanations ties women's participation in public life to domestic economic circumstances. National economic development may provide openings for the

participation of women while economic contractions may undercut it. One idea is that economic growth leads to material satisfaction and elevates the importance of post-materialist values, including gender equality (Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Inkeles and Smith, 1974). Through this lens, economic development foments changes in attitudes toward women and gender, fueling the expansion of women's participation in higher education, the polity, and the labor force.

Another idea is that economic development elevates women's participation by transforming local labor markets and economic sector composition (Rostow, 1960). A core assumption is that economic development necessitates 'the rise of universalistic mechanisms for allocating people to jobs' (Chang, 2000: 1660), weakening the gendered division of work. From this perspective, economic development is assumed to lower gender barriers, though this effect may be distorted in poorer countries (Benería and Sen, 1981; Sen and Grown, 1988). Yet, the evidence is overwhelming that by raising families out of poverty, economic development benefits women (Duflo, 2012). As such, higher levels of women's participation in public life might be expected in countries with higher levels of economic development.

Domestic educational context

The mainstream literature also ties women's public participation to domestic educational contexts. The dominant imagery is rooted in human-capital theory (Becker, 1964), which posits that as education becomes the paramount measure of human worth in contemporary societies – tied to skills, opportunities, productivity, and pay – the benefits accrue across gender, albeit in lower amounts for women (Blau and Kahn, 1992; Calkin, 2018). Education may simply change calculations regarding the relative benefits of working in the paid labor force versus the home (King and Hill, 1993). But, education may also be seen as a source of shifting values, attitudes, and even identities. Some phenomenological perspectives also envision a positive relationship between education and women's participation. In these accounts, the emphasis is on scripts rather than skills, and elevations in women's participation follow from the rise of generic models of personhood and actorhood, over and above gender (Nakagawa and Wotipka, 2016). Most of this work focuses on women in the labor force (Charles, 2011), but some shows that education supports women's political participation (Brady et al., 1995; Fallon et al., 2012). From these studies, one might assume that higher levels of women's participation in public life are found in countries with higher levels of education.

Domestic political context

A third set of explanations roots changes in women's participation in domestic political circumstances (Welzel et al., 2002; Inglehart and Norris, 2003), with particular emphasis on democracy (Beer, 2009; Richards and Gelleny, 2007). The idea is that democracies enable the institutional incorporation of women (e.g. voting), extra-institutional mobilization (e.g. social movements), and the political leverage that follows (Ferree and Tripp, 2006; Tarrow, 1988). In many sectors, participation soars with democratization (Schofer and Meyer, 2005 on higher education), though authoritarian regimes may achieve the

same results coercively (Donno and Kreft, 2019; (Paxton et al., 2007). Democracies open space for women by protecting individual rights for free association and public speech and reducing state repression (Waylen, 2007). Moreover, women's movements enabled the development of democracies through institutional pressures to expand suffrage and increase political representation (Paxton et al., 2006). Accordingly, one might expect higher levels of women's participation in public life in countries with higher levels of democracy.

Data and methodology

We seek to understand changes in the participation of women in higher education, politics, and the economy, for roughly 150 countries over the period 1970–2017.¹ We develop a large-N statistical analysis to estimate associations between variables of interest and measures of women's participation, net of controls for other conventional factors. This strategy allows us to discern whether our key measures (e.g. country ties to illiberal organizations, detailed below) are associated with declines in participation. The strength of this approach is that it draws on a very large sample of countries and years, allowing us to identify general patterns across the globe. The approach might be complemented in the future by comparative case studies, which allow more detailed examination of particular processes and mechanisms.

Specifically, we use panel regression models with country fixed effects (FE), which focus on longitudinal variation around country means rather than cross-national variability (Halaby, 2004; Wooldridge, 2010). FE panel models have the advantage of effectively controlling for time-invariant country differences due to factors such as region, colonial history, and so on. We chose FE models based on a Hausman test, but the results were similar with random effects panel models, as we show in Table 3 in Appendix 1. Some of our arguments address cross-national variation, so it is useful to see that the results can be replicated in models that address such variation. Moreover, random effects models allow us to include regional dummies to show that our illiberal international governmental organization (IGO) measure captures more than simply regional divergence. We present cluster-robust standard errors, which are robust to some forms of model misspecification as well as heteroskedasticity (Wooldridge, 2010).

Dependent variables

To operationalize our three outcomes – women's participation in higher education, politics, and the economy – we draw on commonly used measures. To assess participation in higher education, we use women's enrollment in higher education institutions. There are other aspects of women's participation in higher education (for instance, as faculty members), but enrollments provide a basic indicator of inclusion. For political participation, a new index offers us a multidimensional operationalization, encompassing women's participation in formal political institutions (e.g. legislatures) and civil society, as well as their access to political institutions like courts. Finally, we operationalize women's economic participation with labor force participation. Again, while there are other dimensions of women's economic participation (e.g. as managers or business owners),

participation in the labor force is fundamental to economic incorporation. The following paragraphs present details and data sources.

Women's participation in higher education is measured using the gross women's tertiary enrollment ratio, which reflects the number of women enrolled in schooling levels 5 and 6 under the International Standard Classification of Education criteria, which corresponds to conventional understandings of higher education. Gross enrollment ratios are defined as the number of women enrolled divided by the relevant population age group. Data come from the World Bank's (2019) World Development Indicators dataset.

Women's political participation is measured by an index of political empowerment from the Varieties of Democracy dataset version 10 (Coppedge et al., 2019; Pemstein et al., 2019). The measure encompasses (1) women's civil liberties (including measures of women's access to courts and freedom of movement); (2) women's civil society participation (including measures of women's membership in civil society organizations and women journalists); and (3) women's political participation (including women in the legislature and women's political power). Related measures (e.g. just focusing on women's civil society participation or women in parliament) yield similar results (available upon request).

Women's labor force participation. We use a conventional measure to assess women's participation in the economy: the percentage of women aged 15–64 years who are economically active, defined as supplying labor for the production of goods or services (World Bank, 2019). The data come from the World Bank's (2019) World Development Indicators dataset.

Independent variables

INGO memberships. Women's participation is likely to be associated with country embeddedness in world society, where more embeddedness means more exposure to institutionalized models of liberal feminism and women's rights. The world society literature has frequently operationalized world society embeddedness using measures of country memberships in international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs). This strategy is based on Boli and Thomas's (1999) seminal work, which argued that INGOs embody and propagate global cultural discourses and norms, and thus may be used as an indicator of global cultural influence. Countries with the most INGO memberships are those that are most affected by global culture and norms. Note that we also examined women's INGOs, which are a particularly relevant subset of INGOs. The results were essentially identical, but women's INGOs are not available in the most recent years. We used the general INGO measure to maximize the years in our dataset. This is a logged measure of memberships in INGOs held by citizens of a given country, coded from the Yearbook of International Organizations (Union of International Associations, 1970–2017).

'Postliberal' period. We distinguish the 'postliberal' period with a post-2008 variable, meaning that years after 2008 are coded as '1' whereas other years are coded as '0'. Our rationale for operationalizing the 'postliberal' period in this manner emerges from our

theoretical discussions above. As noted, the near hegemony of neoliberal models in the 1990s showed signs of weakening earlier, but illiberal reactions surged in the aftermath of the Great Recession, and thus we set our turning point at 2008. Alternative measures of the ‘postliberal’ period, such as decade, work roughly similarly.

Illiberal organizations. To operationalize countries’ connections to globally organized illiberal challenges and internationally circulating illiberal scripts, we measured country memberships in three main intergovernmental organizations (IGOs). Scholars have increasingly noted polarization in world society and the uptake of anti- or illiberal ideologies in some international organizations (Beckfield, 2010; Bob, 2012, 2019; Hadler and Symons, 2018; Schofer et al., 2018; Velasco, 2020). Countries’ memberships in such illiberal international organizations can be seen as a proxy for their embeddedness in international networks and ideologies that oppose or offer alternatives to liberal world culture. Of course, there exist other ways of operationalizing the international circulation of illiberal scripts, for example, based on social media. Our selection of country ties to international organizations that espouse illiberal scripts builds on a long tradition of using linkages to international organizations to capture international diffusion processes as well as a growing body of work that highlights the influence of such illiberal bodies on social life.

Specifically, guided by Schofer et al. (2018), we count annual memberships in the following international organizations: Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. While not rejecting liberalism in its entirety, each organization has been the site of recent mobilizations against dimensions of the liberal model, including democracy, human rights, and LGBT rights (see Ambrosio, 2008; Cooley and Schaaf, 2017; Kayaoğlu, 2013).² Our measure is a dichotomous measure that varies over time, indicating countries that are members of any of these organizations. We code our measure broadly, including countries with provisional or observer status as well as full members. To identify members of these organizations, we used the Intergovernmental Organizations dataset from the Correlates of War project (Pevehouse et al., 2020; Wallace and Singer, 1970), supplemented by membership information gleaned from the organizations’ websites.

‘Postliberal’ period × Illiberal organizations. We also include an interaction variable between the ‘postliberal’ period and our illiberal organizations measure. We use this to test our fourth hypothesis, built around the idea that contention over liberal models in the ‘postliberal’ era may amplify the negative effects of illiberal international linkages rather than leading to general declines in participation. In other words, even if the overall world trend remains upward, the interaction variable allows us to see if there is evidence of a growing divergence, wherein illiberal trends in the ‘postliberal’ era are tempering women’s participation in countries with greater exposure to illiberal scripts.

Controls

Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita captures a country’s overall level of development and wealth, as well as the general level of societal modernization that is associated

with women's participation. We use real GDP based on purchasing power parity (PPP) in inflation-adjusted US Dollars from the Penn World Table dataset (Feenstra et al., 2013), logged to reduce skewness.

Secondary school enrollment. The general expansion of schooling is an important control for the analysis of women's participation in higher education, and it is a key source of modern values and attitudes on women's participation generally. We use the gross enrollment ratio from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (World Bank, 2019). Net enrollment ratios yield identical results (but are available for fewer cases).

Democracy. Women's participation may be affected by a society's level of democracy. We use the Polity IV 21-point scale from the Polity IV project dataset, which distinguishes between autocratic and democratic systems (Marshall et al., 2013 (version updated to 2018)). The scale ranges from -10 indicating a complete autocracy to 10 indicating a complete democracy.

We have explored other controls appropriate to particular outcomes in corollary analyses. For instance, we have examined additional controls for the fertility rate, primary school enrollment, trade, foreign aid, regime type, civil war, religion and religious-based regime, and others (not presented, available upon request). We also discuss patterns among outcomes for men, as a point of contrast, and analyses of ratios of women to men (below).

Descriptive statistics for all measures can be found in Table 2 of Appendix 1.

Results

Table 1 presents findings from panel regression models analyzing women's participation in three areas: higher education, politics, and the labor force. We are interested primarily in the impact of the 'postliberal' period, illiberal organizations, and the interaction of the two.

Models 1 and 2 present our analysis of the women's higher education enrollment ratio. Consistent with prior work, women's participation is significantly greater in countries that are affluent (GDP per capita) and have larger enrollments at the secondary level. Also, we observe a conventional world society effect: countries with more organizational ties to the international community – a proxy for the influence of international norms that strongly support women's rights and educational expansion – have significantly more women enrolled in higher education. We also see in Model 1 that the 'post-liberal' time period does not capture a downward inflection in women's participation in higher education and in fact shows the opposite. However, countries linked to illiberal organizations, which espouse alternatives to the liberal world order, have significantly fewer women enrolled in higher education. The coefficient is quite large, corresponding to an enrollment ratio that is about 13 percentage points lower.

Model 2 adds an interaction between the recent period and illiberal organization. The interaction is negative and significant, suggesting a pattern of divergence over recent years between countries with and without illiberal links. The broad pattern is consistent with our arguments that linkages to illiberal organizations undercut liberal gender norms more so in the more recent period, a pernicious backlash impact.

Table 1. Panel-regression models testing the effects of illiberal organizations on women's participation in higher education, polity, and economy, 1970–2017.

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Higher education participation		Political participation		Labor force participation	
INGO mem	7.73*** (1.20)	7.96*** (1.22)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.29 (0.28)	0.43 (0.29)
Illiberal orgs	-12.94*** (3.02)	-11.12*** (2.98)	0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	-3.93** (1.35)	-3.18* (1.32)
Post-lib period	9.60*** (1.46)	13.45*** (2.09)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	1.77*** (0.40)	2.75*** (0.52)
Post-lib period*		-7.51* (3.19)		-0.05*** (0.01)		-2.21* (0.88)
Illiberal orgs						
GDP p/cap, log	11.22*** (3.03)	11.34*** (3.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	0.89 (1.16)	1.04 (1.22)
Secondary enroll	0.28*** (0.06)	0.26*** (0.05)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.08*** (0.02)	0.08*** (0.02)
Democracy	0.05 (0.18)	0.06 (0.18)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	-0.17** (0.06)	-0.16** (0.06)
Constant	-139.40*** (28.55)	-141.68*** (28.51)	0.28** (0.10)	0.26** (0.10)	41.97*** (9.50)	39.66*** (10.01)
Observations	3721	3721	6083	6083	3696	3696
R ²	0.576	0.584	0.694	0.700	0.193	0.211
Countries	151	151	153	153	151	151

INGO: international nongovernmental organization; GDP: Gross domestic product; LF: labor force.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Models 3 and 4 address women's political participation and empowerment. Again, control variables generally have plausible effects. We see positive and highly significant effects of secondary education and democracy on the outcome. Furthermore, the liberal norms of world society, measured by INGO ties, are positively associated with women's political participation. The period effect, as in the previous case, is positive, suggesting that the most recent period carries on the liberal trends prevalent previously. The effect of illiberal IGO ties is positive but not significant. Model 4 adds the interaction between the post-2008 period and illiberal IGOs. Again, the interaction is negative, suggesting an illiberal backlash in the most recent period among countries tied to illiberal organizations. The effect size is similar to the post-2008 time dummy. While most of the world continues to improve in terms of women's political participation, countries with greater exposure to illiberal scripts in world society have leveled off (on average).

Models 5 and 6 address women's participation in the labor force. We see that educational expansion is associated with more women in the labor force, while democracy is associated with fewer (perhaps reflecting the high levels of women's labor force participation in Communist countries). The effect of INGO ties is positive but insignificant. Like prior analyses, we see a general post-2008 trend toward

greater participation, but the measure of illiberal IGO memberships is negative and significant. Model 6 adds the interaction between the recent period and illiberal organizations. Yet again, the interaction is negative and significant. While much of the world is rapidly liberalizing, countries linked to illiberal organizations and discourses lag substantially behind. Both the main and interaction effects of illiberal IGOs are sizable, corresponding to rates of women's labor force participation that are more than two percentage points lower.

Robustness check: Analyses of men

One potential criticism of this study is that we focus only on women's participation and do not address the possibility that parallel trends may be occurring among men. Illiberalism may lead to general declines in political freedoms, for instance, that could affect political participation irrespective of gender. To address this, we explored parallel models that address higher education enrollments, political participation, and labor force participation among men (not presented; available upon request). We found that the illiberal backlash was much more consequential for women, and in some cases did not affect men at all. The area where men were affected most was in higher education, perhaps suggesting a generalized illiberal backlash against higher education (Schofer et al., 2018), but even there the adverse effect on women was 40% larger. Our purpose is not to argue that men are unaffected by the recent global rise of illiberalism or to offer a systematic empirical comparison of men and women. But, on the face of it, we believe we can safely dismiss the notion that our results purely reflect general dynamics (e.g. declining civil liberties) that affect men and women equally.

In addition, we explored alternative versions of our dependent variables, where available, that capture ratios of women to men (e.g. the ratio of women to men enrolled at the tertiary level). The results were very similar to the findings shown here. We opted for the non-ratio dependent variables presented above, because changes in ratios might be driven by changes for men rather than changes for women.

Discussion and conclusion

The past century was marked by extraordinary gains in women's participation in the public sphere (Dorius and Firebaugh, 2010). Conventional analyses root these remarkable changes in national economic and political forces. In contrast, scholars of world society and comparative politics emphasize their contingency on the wider world. The 'rise of women' (DiPrete and Buchmann, 2013) was fueled by a global environment that supported women's participation – initially through both liberal and communist rationales, but later on through a primarily liberal world order built around principles of individual rights and equality.

Against the backdrop of a changing world context, unsettled by rising nationalism and populism, our article finds diverging national trends vis-a-vis women's participation in higher education, the polity, and the labor force. The positive main effect for the post-2008 period shows that women's participation on average continues to grow, suggesting that the growing salience of illiberal voices has not led to widespread retrenchment – at

least thus far. Instead, our analyses indicate that recent illiberal trends in world society appear to be affecting primarily those countries that are embedded in illiberal international structures. As indicated by our negative interaction effect, the continued trend toward expansion is significantly reduced in countries that have ties to international organizations with documented histories of espousing illiberal scripts. Another way of looking at this finding is that even though linkages to such illiberal organizations have a negative effect for all but one of our outcomes throughout the entire period, this negative effect is even stronger in the ‘postliberal’ era. Exposure to illiberal scripts in the international arena can help curtail women’s advances, and these tendencies are amplified in the contemporary era, when the liberal model is contested (Börzel and Zürn, 2021).

In some sense, these findings might appear paradoxical: how can the ‘postliberal’ period bring a continued expansion in women’s participation at the same time as exacerbating the negative influence of illiberal international alliances? We interpret our findings as showing polarizations in world society over time, as opposed to a general shift in the international system. A growing body of work, including our own, shows that illiberal frameworks and organizations are building influence in world society. And yet the trends do not portend a wholesale collapse of the liberal system. Instead, they signify a fracturing global landscape, in which liberal models remain strong but illiberal ones gain legitimacy, generating cross-national divergence, as we found here for women’s participation. This theorization is consistent with recent research on polarization around LGBT rights (Hadler and Symons, 2018) and abortion (Boyle et al., 2015).

Departing from earlier work emphasizing domestic factors, such as national economic development, our analyses highlight obstacles to women’s advances that originate in world society, and thus we join a burgeoning literature that calls attention to supranational dynamics that obstruct gender equality. The key insight is that international pressures are not necessarily a ‘positive’ force for women’s rights. Counteracting pressures also develop in global forums and disperse illiberal scripts that call for gender traditionalism. Much of the scholarship documenting these processes has been qualitative and case-based (Corredor, 2019; Cupać and Ebetürk, 2020; Korolczuk and Graff, 2018). We add a quantitative, comparative analysis that allows us to assess systematically the influence of such illiberal global scripts on cross-national and longitudinal bases. Our findings reinforce the insights that have emerged from qualitative studies: illiberal alliances have made headway in world society, with troubling implications for women in the public sphere among participating countries. This is not just a theoretical observation, but also has practical implications. It suggests that it is important for women’s rights activists to attend to challenges not just in domestic settings, but on the world stage as well. Increasingly, it seems, battles over women’s rights and participation are fought in international spaces.

Of course our study, like any, has limitations. Although we stress the unique insights offered by our large-N analysis, our approach is less helpful for understanding how the processes we document play out in national settings. There may be differences, for instance, in the ways that illiberal scripts cross from world society to diverse country contexts. For example, in some places they may be championed by state actors that promote illiberal policies, whereas in others they may be taken up by civil society movements that target local norms. Qualitative comparisons could thus usefully complement our quantitative approach, tracing variations in how illiberal international pressures end

up curtailing women's advances. A further limitation is that our analyses only focus on women's participation in higher education, the polity, and the labor force. While we observe illiberal influences in these domains, the effects might be even greater in areas such as reproductive rights or protection from gender-based violence, where some of the most vitriolic illiberal discourse has been voiced. Indeed, it might be even easier for illiberal leaders and movements to target women's rights that were not earlier granted to men (Ramirez and McEneaney, 1997).

Despite these limitations, our paper opens numerous directions for future research. We highlight the role of global factors in curtailing women's advances, and future research could delve more deeply into the various pathways through which such illiberal international organizations impact women's rights. Our interpretation is that these ties should largely be seen as *proxies* for countries' embeddedness in counter-movements to the liberal world order (Corredor, 2019). Any single organization is unlikely directly to channel opposition against liberal women's rights to its member states. Altogether, however, memberships can serve as a proxy for more diffuse connections to illiberal pressures in the international system. Nonetheless, future research could explore whatever direct pathways of diffusion these ties capture. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, for instance, organizes a 'Women's Forum', and materials from this and similar conferences could be analyzed to unpack ideas around gender and women's rights articulated in these spaces.

As explained above, our findings also point to an interesting coexistence of liberal and illiberal frames and organizations within world society. Future research could investigate this issue more explicitly, perhaps by analyzing the extent to which ongoing challenges to liberal gender norms are themselves couched in liberal language. This is a rather striking feature of many oppositional mobilizations (Bob, 2019); the men's rights movement offers a conspicuous case. The movement embraces many not-so-liberal goals, built around the grievance that the rise of women entails the fall of men. And yet the challenge itself is marshaled by reference to the normative power of rights; the rise of women is framed as problematic because it has violated the rights of men. Future research could examine such appeals to liberal normative frameworks to advance illiberal goals in the gender domain, thus shedding light on the continued salience of the liberal creed, even in a 'postliberal' era of contestation.

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Notes

1. Our panel dataset is unbalanced because some countries are not independent over the entire period and due to missing data.
2. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a Eurasian political, economic, and security alliance that emerged in 2001 from a predecessor group, the Shanghai Five, founded in 1996. The members as of 2020 are China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Further, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Egypt, Israel, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Ukraine participate as observers, dialogue partners or aspiring members. The organization emphasizes ideas of national development, state security, and traditional values, articulated around opposition to universalistic liberal imperatives such as human rights (Ambrosio, 2008). The Commonwealth of Independent States appeared in 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union to facilitate cooperation in economic, political, and military affairs and to coordinate aspects of trade, finance, law-making, and security. Its 2020 members are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan; Turkmenistan is an associate member. The organization emphasizes anti-liberal norms in the Eurasian region. It has legitimated dubious elections and has been described as creating ‘a new space for authoritarian pushback to international human rights regimes’ (Cooley and Schaaf, 2017: 162). The Organization of Islamic Cooperation emerged in 1969 with the goal of ‘promoting among themselves close cooperation and mutual assistance in the economic, scientific, cultural and spiritual fields, inspired by the immortal teachings of Islam’ (OIC, 1969). There are 57 member states in 2020, 53 of which are Muslim-majority countries. The organization has historically resisted liberal human rights visions (Kayaoglu, 2013) and has engaged in opposition against LGBT rights at the UN (Hadler and Symons, 2018).

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Résumé

Les études existantes font état d'une augmentation considérable, à l'échelle mondiale, de la participation des femmes à la sphère publique au cours des dernières décennies, notamment dans l'éducation, la politique et la population active. Certains chercheurs ont fait valoir que ces changements s'alignent sur des tendances plus générales de la société mondiale, en particulier son libéralisme croissant, qui a de plus en plus reconfiguré la vie sociale autour des choix d'individus dotés d'une autonomie accrue et de droits, indépendamment de leur sexe. Très récemment, cependant, divers populismes et nationalismes sont apparus pour présenter des alternatives au libéralisme, y compris sur la scène internationale. Nous explorons ici leurs implications pour la participation des femmes à la vie publique. Nous utilisons des données transnationales pour analyser les changements intervenus dans la participation des femmes à l'enseignement supérieur, à la vie politique et à l'économie entre 1970 et 2017. Il ressort que, en moyenne, la participation des femmes continue à augmenter au cours de cette période, mais qu'il existe des preuves d'une divergence transnationale croissante. Dans la plupart des domaines, la participation des femmes a tendance à être plus faible dans les pays liés à des organisations internationales illibérales, en particulier dans la période la plus récente.

Mots-clés

Droits de la femme, égalité des sexes, libéralisme, société mondiale

Resumen

La investigación previa muestra un importante aumento en la participación de las mujeres en la esfera pública en todo el mundo en las últimas décadas, por ejemplo, en la educación, la política y la fuerza laboral. Algunos investigadores han argumentado que estos cambios siguen tendencias más amplias en la sociedad mundial, especialmente el creciente liberalismo, que ha reconfigurado la vida social cada vez más en torno a las elecciones de individuos empoderados y titulares de derechos, independientemente del género. Sin embargo, muy recientemente ha surgido una variedad de populismos y nacionalismos que suponen alternativas al liberalismo, incluso en el ámbito internacional. Aquí se exploran sus implicaciones para la participación de las mujeres en la vida pública. Se utilizan datos internacionales para analizar los cambios en la participación de las mujeres en la educación superior, la política y la economía entre 1970 y 2017. Se ha hallado que, en promedio, la participación de las mujeres continúa expandiéndose durante este período, pero hay evidencia de una creciente divergencia entre países. En la mayoría de los ámbitos, la participación de las mujeres tiende a ser menor en países vinculados a organizaciones internacionales iliberales, especialmente en el período más reciente.

Palabras clave

Derechos de la mujer, igualdad de género, liberalismo, sociedad mundial

Appendix I

Table 2. Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Higher ed enrollment % women	3,710	25.98	27.320	0	144.099
Women's political empowerment	6,061	0.629	0.220	0.094	0.976
Women in LF %	3,696	55.67	17.13	6.349	91.948
INGO membership (log)	6,148	6.12	1.150	0	8.384
Illiberal IGO membership	6,148	0.386		0	1
Post 2008	6,148	0.184		0	1
Illiberal IGO X 2008	6,148	0.094		0	1
GDP p/cap (log)	6,148	8.811	1.268	5.246	12.34
Secondary enrollment	6,148	59.23	34.32	0	163.93
Democracy	6,148	1.598	7.400	-10	10

INGO: international non-governmental organization; IGO: inter-governmental organization; GDP: Gross domestic product; LF: labor force.

Table 3. Panel-regression models with random effects (and regional dummies) examining the effects of illiberal organizations on women's participation in higher education, polity, and economy, 1970–2017.

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Higher education participation		Political participation		Labor force participation	
INGO mem	7.82*** (1.11)	8.02*** (1.12)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.30 (0.28)	0.45 (0.29)
Illiberal orgs	-9.50*** (2.42)	-7.80** (2.43)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	-4.10** (1.30)	-3.35** (1.29)
Post-lib period	10.49*** (1.36)	14.27*** (2.04)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	1.81*** (0.39)	2.79*** (0.52)
Post-lib period*		-7.41* (3.19)		-0.05*** (0.01)		-2.20* (0.88)
Illiberal orgs						
GDP p/cap, log	8.38*** (2.25)	8.56*** (2.24)	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	0.75 (1.10)	0.90 (1.16)
Secondary enroll	0.28*** (0.05)	0.26*** (0.05)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.08*** (0.02)	0.08*** (0.02)
Democracy	0.07 (0.17)	0.08 (0.17)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	-0.17** (0.06)	-0.16** (0.06)
Eastern Europe	33.13*** (5.83)	29.55*** (5.72)	0.06* (0.03)	0.06* (0.03)	6.51* (2.97)	4.87 (3.09)
Latin America	15.51** (4.81)	8.48 ⁺ (4.57)	0.00 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	-4.22 (2.80)	-6.43* (2.95)
Asia	20.38*** (5.73)	12.52* (5.35)	0.04 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	4.75 (4.35)	2.18 (4.37)
Africa	30.98*** (7.34)	18.12** (6.99)	0.10** (0.03)	0.07* (0.03)	14.23*** (4.31)	9.41* (4.48)
MENA	15.03** (5.55)	10.07* (5.08)	-0.09* (0.04)	-0.10** (0.04)	-26.06*** (4.24)	-27.94*** (4.24)
Constant	-163.70*** (25.65)	-131.07*** (24.72)	0.19 ⁺ (0.11)	0.25* (0.10)	28.45** (10.49)	41.28*** (11.22)
Observations	3,721	3,721	6,082	6,082	3,696	3,696
Countries	151	151	152	152	151	151

GDP: Gross domestic product; MENA: Middle East and North Africa.

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$; **** $p < 0.001$.

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