In the U.S., politics has led to a resurgence in civic engagement and activism with the #MeToo social media campaign, 2017 Women’s March, and abolish ICE protests. On a global scale, political engagement in terms of voting rights, protest and campaign activities, and political leadership have historically been, and continue to be, of interest to gender and development scholars. To measure political participation, organizing, and leadership, different types of assessments are used including multi-country web-based surveys, public country-level data archives, and individual-level scales or items. These tools help quantify women’s representation in politics, societal attitudes on gender differences in political participation, and women’s involvement in political activities.

**Online Surveys and Polls: Multiple Countries**

Global political measures often utilize web-based measures such as the World Values Survey and the Gallup World Poll. The World Values Survey is a nationally representative survey of 113 countries measuring attitudes and beliefs around democracy, national identity, politics, gender equality, religion, and individual welfare. Administered 6 times over the last 37 years (1981-2014), WVS data enables scholars and government officials to examine country-level changes in political participation over time (i.e., the willingness of residents to sign petitions, participate in boycotts/strikes, and attend demonstration; Inglehart et al., 2016). Disaggregation of these data by gender can enable leaders and humanitarian organizations to assess country differences in the gender parity of political activism and engagement.

The WVS also includes an item on gender role beliefs pertaining to political leadership. Specifically, respondents are asked to rate their level of agreement to the statement: “On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do.” Public perceptions of women in power can bear on a woman’s campaign success and eventual representation in government (Dolan, 1998). As women political leaders are more likely to put forth legislation that deals with healthcare, water/sanitation, families, and children, and tend to be more successful in their policy efforts (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Paxton, Kunovich, & Hughes, 2007), their representation in formal bodies of government can be a critical component to empowering women and promoting gender equitable laws.

Online polls are also useful in measuring contemporary political or societal issues. Beginning in 2005 with data from 160 countries, the Gallup World Poll measures attitudes toward the election process, cross-country relations, and leadership on a largely biannual basis for a fee (Gallup, 2018). For example, World Poll respondents have been asked their level of satisfaction with the fairness of elections in their country and about international relations (i.e., whether relations have improved between their country and others). Respondents have also been asked whether they approve or disapprove of their country’s current leader (Gallup, 2018). Even though poll questions do not explicitly deal with gender equality and empowerment in
politics, participant gender information is recorded. This makes it possible to compare how attitudes towards political leadership or governmental policy varies by gender.

**Public Data Archives: Country-level**

Gender inequity in political representation is a universal problem. Over the last 50 years, only 47 percent of countries have ever had a female head of state – with only 15 female heads of state in power in 2016 (World Economic Forum, 2016). Women holding parliamentary seats are also quite rare. Worldwide, women hold less than 25 percent of parliamentary seats with fewer than 20 percent of seats held by women in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and the Arab States (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016). Still assessments of women’s political representation use the proportion of seats held by women in national or subnational elected bodies as a marker of equity. Country estimates on the proportion of women who hold seats in national parliaments worldwide from 2000 to 2018 are maintained by the United Nations Statistics Division (see unstats.un.org/sdgs /indicators). This statistical indicator is also built into comprehensive gender equality measures like the Gender Inequality Index (GII; United Nations Development Programme, 2016).

The GII calculates inequality in terms of health, empowerment, and economic status. Health indicators include the country-level maternal mortality rate and adolescent birth rate whereas economic status indicators include female and male employment rates. National political representation (i.e., parliamentary seats held by females vs. males) is included as a measure of empowerment along with female and male secondary-education completion rates (United Nations Development Programme, 2016). The multidimensional nature of the GII allows for the examination of disparities across contexts while still highlighting the importance of political gender parity in fostering equality. Country GII values can be compared against non-gender focused measures such as the Human Development Index (United Nations Development Programme, 2016) and Multidimensional Poverty Index (United Nations Development Programme, 2016) to see if gender inequality coincides with other forms of inequality.

**Scales or Items: Individual-level**

To understand community or local ideas of political gender equality and empowerment individual-level data is collected primarily using scales or single-item indicators. These measures can be given to lay people to understand their engagement and attitudes toward politics, policymakers to understand core gender issues, and female political figures to understand their personal experiences or challenges.

**Public Political Action and Perceptions.** Individual efficacy and support for community politics can be measured by items such as “How sure are you that you could express your opinion at a community meeting? and “How sure are you that you could attend a community meeting?” (CARE, 2014). In addition, the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), a global policy research center, recently compiled several political and civic indicators that can be used to understand voting patterns, political participation, and beliefs about women leaders (Glennester, Walsh, & Diaz-Martin, 2018).

Indicators compiled in the J-PAL report include a subset of items specific to village level politics. For example “did you vote in the last elections for [village council]”, “did you ever approach the [village council leader] about your needs or village issues”, and “it would be a good idea to elect a woman as the [head] of your village” (Beaman, Chattopadhyay, Duflo, Pande, & Topalova, 2009; Glennester et al., 2018). There are also follow-up items directed at the response to village political participation and reasons for non-participation which can be used to understand the mechanisms driving women’s participation in politics. Research highlighted in this report also addresses non-village level beliefs about women’s roles and ability to be a
leader. Taken from a post-civil war reconciliation study in Sierra Leone, participants are asked if they agreed with the following statements: “Women can be good politicians and should be encouraged to stand in elections” and “Women should stay at home to take care of their kids” (Cilliers, Dube, & Siddiqi, 2016; Glennester et al., 2018). In another study focused on savings groups in Ghana, participants were asked the extent they agreed that “Women should have the same chance of being elected to political office as men” and “Men make better leaders than women, and should be elected rather than women” (Glennester et al., 2018; Karlan, Savonitto, Thuybaert, & Udry, 2017). Traditional gender role norms and biases can be important targets for change when trying to get more women elected in public office. Belief oriented measures can therefore be used to monitor and evaluate changes in the acceptance of female leadership.

Policymakers and Gender Equality. Attitudinal measures can be directed at politicians to understand governmental interest in political gender equity issues and experiences of gender-based violence. In a report surveying policymakers from developing countries (Colombia, India, Indonesia, Kenya and Senegal), policymakers were asked their opinion on the state of gender equality in their country, tested on their knowledge of gender equality statistics, asked to rank order challenges specific to women and girls, and rated the importance of gender equality in policymaking (Equal Measures 2030, 2017). As policymakers are tasked with guiding and creating legislation, these data serve as an invaluable means to gauge governmental awareness and support for gender equality issues.

Female Politicians and Discrimination, Harassment, and Violence. In an Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016) study of female Parliament members from 39 countries, it was found that 81.8% of women surveyed personally experienced one or more acts of psychological violence, 21.8% were subjected to one or more forms of sexual violence, 25.5% were subjected to one or more acts of physical violence, and 44.4% received threats of death, rape, beatings, or abduction. Due to the alarming nature of these statistics, sexual harassment and gender-based violence measures should also be a focus of political gender empowerment scholarship. The extent of psychological and bodily harm women in politics face may provide clues on how society can help support women in leadership positions post-election.

Recommendations
Contemporary political measures of gender equality and empowerment include counts/proportions of elected female representatives, attitudes towards women in politics, experiences or priorities of politicians, acts of civic engagement, and perceptions of agency in political participation. These measures are valuable but fail to account for the larger social and cultural dynamics that shape women’s participation in politics. The safety, health, and mobility of women and girls inevitably affects their ability to engage in politics. Measures dealing with violence against female politicians during and after elections (Ballington, Bardall, & Borovsky, 2017), the social networks of women engaged in political activism, and gender norms preventing women’s political empowerment should therefore also be developed to provide a more complete picture of female political empowerment and equality (Glatte & Vries, 2015; Mcclurg, 2003).

The bulk of political gender equality and empowerment measures also lack validation testing. Developed for polls or baseline surveys in the field, little attention is directed at the reliability and accuracy of measures. As the trustworthiness and reproducibility of a measure should always supersede its popularity in terms of importance, we recommend more studies be conducted on the psychometric properties of political equality and empowerment measures. Women and girls have the ability to inform policy and inspire change but to do so they need to be represented and supported at all political levels – from local advocates to national leaders.
Survey assessments, polls, and public data archives remain some of the most promising means to understand and encourage the political gender equality and empowerment of women and girls.

References


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