

Fragmentation of Women's Organizations and the Expression of Women's Political Power Worldwide, 1999-2020

Abstract for general public

Why is the political power of women low across the world? Despite changes to beliefs about women's role in politics and the inclusion of more women in the labor market and political institutions worldwide, gender continues to be a dividing line between those with more power and those with less. If political power refers to an imbalance between social groups – men and women – then women's political empowerment is how women overcome this imbalance. This empowerment can be expressed as the distribution of power between men and women and women's potential to engage in politics. To explain expressions of women's political power, other studies have focused on prevailing gender norms, how institutions maintain this inequality and the slow progress of transnational social movements that attempt to eliminate inequalities through policy changes. The "politics of presence" theory has long held that there is women's progress toward political equality when there are women in political organizations and women's organizations.

However, to understand why progress toward gender equality is so slow and why the political situation of women is better in some countries than others, we must understand the institutional constraints and the obvious ideological fragmentation of "women's organizations." Just as the phrase and measurement of "women's interests" is problematic – women are not a monolithic group – women's organizations at the national or international level differ widely between "traditionalist" and "egalitarian". Gender ideology captures the views on gender roles. Traditionalists view women as caregivers and define the private sphere of family as their primary responsibility. Egalitarians strive for equality between men and women in all spheres of social life and support women's political empowerment. Even within an ideological field, there can be fundamental differences in goals and approaches that set organizations at odds with each other.

The core concepts of this project that explain the expression of women's political power are "fragmentation," which here refers to the degree of ideological diversity between women's organizations, and "institutional constraints," which are about how accessible it is for ordinary citizens to cast their voice in political decisions and the adoption of national and international gender equality policies. I test theories that ideological fragmentation in women's non-governmental organizations can explain women's enduring political inequality across the world. Some theories argue that fragmentation is bad for women's equality because organizations expend too much effort fighting one another for attention; another theory says that fragmentation is good because it is a diverse environment for robust intellectual debate and encourages women to organize; a third theory says that fragmentation is bad for now, but will be good for the expression of women's political power in the future. My central thesis is that ideological fragmentation within and between women's organizations combined with institutional constraints influences the process of change toward women's political empowerment.

To test this thesis, we need a measure of the fragmentation of women's organizations. As such, I create a Fragmentation of Women's Organizations Index with three main components - ideology, national embeddedness, and international reach – from a massive database of NGOs. One of the main challenges of this project is to code the ideology of women's organizations, and to overcome that, I modify others' research on these codes. After I build the database with this fragmentation index and measures of institutional constraints, I will use a variety of multivariate regression techniques to test the theories. For a few months, I will visit the University of Goteborg to consult with the creators of well-known datasets on women's political empowerment and significant scholars in the field. I will present my research in international scientific events and prepare scientific papers for high-visibility journals. Along the way, I will create a project website to publicize the results. After the project ends, I will archive the data I collected for others to use.

This three-year project advances the social sciences to study how fragmentation, institutions, and power interact. It offers the scholarly field of women in politics. It provides a new theory of how organizational fragmentation specifically relates to women's political empowerment, tests these theories empirically, and supplies new publicly available data on organizational fragmentation.