

POLICY BRIEF



Increasing women's support for democracy in Africa

Democracy is generally seen as a force for good, but women in sub-Saharan Africa are less likely to support democracy than men. Research shows how discriminatory social institutions — including biases in family law and civil liberties and gaps in protections against physical violence— are contributing to this gap.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Despite progress in recent years, women in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) still face deeply-rooted obstacles to achieve their full potential both as contributors and beneficiaries of social and economic development.

Recent studies have also pointed to another gender gap: women in the region are less likely than men to consider democracy the best political regime, and tend to be less politically active. This work has shown that a number of factors influence attitudes toward democracy, including age, education, access to media, and exposure to corruption. Little research has been directed at determining why this gap exists, however, and its policy implications. For instance, this difference raises the question of whether women's behaviour could erode the much-needed legitimacy of democracy in SSA, a region where democratic gains have been uneven.

KEY FINDINGS

- Support for democracy is gendered. Our research shows that women express lower support for democracy than men in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Gender inequality in the family code, physical integrity, and civil liberties negatively affect women's support for democracy.
- There are factors that increase the probability that women will support democracy, including higher education and age, and equal access to rights in the eyes of the law and in society at large, among others.

There has also been little examination to date of the role that social institutions might play. Social institutions are long-lasting norms, traditions, and codes of conduct that guide people's behaviour and interactions. These may be formal or informal and they capture the extent to which women are discriminated against in a society. While many studies have examined the impact of these institutions on such issues as food security, migration, and education, few have focused on how social institutions affect women's behaviour in politics.

To identify the causes of this gender gap, researchers analyzed data for 19 SSA countries drawn from the Afrobarometer, a series of national surveys on citizens' attitudes. Social institutions were measured using the 2012 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Social Institutions and Gender Index (OECD-SIGI) data and its five components spanning major socioeconomic areas that affect women's lives.

This brief shares findings from the research with an aim to inform policy responses by decision-makers in SSA working on women's empowerment, governance, and democratic institutions

METHODS

The analysis presented in this brief was conducted using three rounds of the Afrobarometer (2002-03, 2004-05, and 2008-09). These national surveys gathered data on attitudes toward democracy, governance and economic conditions, political participation, national identity, and social capital. They also collected a large set of sociodemographic indicators such as age, gender, education level, poverty level, language and ethnicity, and political party affiliation. Carried out in 19 SSA countries, the three rounds of surveys covered 27,713 individuals aged 18 to 64.

To measure social institutions, the research used the 2012 OECD-SIGI. This cross-country measure of discrimination against women has five components: family code, civil liberties, physical integrity, son preference or bias, and restrictions on access to different kinds of resources. The goal was to identify the types of inequality in social institutions that affect women's attitudes toward democracy.

RESULTS

Support for democracy in SSA is gendered

Analysis of Afrobarometer data confirmed that a significant gender gap exists in support for democracy in the region. Close to 74% of men indicated that democracy was the preferred choice of government, against nearly 66% of women.

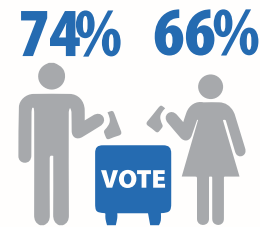


Table 1: Support for democracy by gender in sub-Saharan Africa

Responses	Men %	Women %	% Gender gap
Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.	73.58	65.64	7.94 (0.0055)***
In some circumstances a nondemocratic government can be preferable.	10.78	11.39	0.61 (0.0038)
For someone like me it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.	10.32	12.76	2.44 (0.0038)***
I don't know.	5.31	10.21	4.9 (0.00038)***

Note: Standard errors are in parenthesis. *** denotes statistical significance at the 1 percent level.

Source: Afrobarometer, round 4 (2008–9).

Factors that increase the probability of supporting democracy include:

- Higher levels of education
- Age: older respondents are more supportive of democracy than younger respondents

- Urbanization: However, this effect becomes insignificant when employment status and access to various media sources are considered
- An understanding of what democracy entails
- Participation in political and public activities, such as voting.

The data does not provide any indication as to why the gender gap persists, however.

Gender inequality in the family code, physical integrity, and civil liberties negatively affect women's support for democracy.

Adding the OECD-SIGI's components (see box: Defining social institutions) to the model showed that discrimination within family and marriage structures significantly reduces women's support of democracy. In countries with a high degree of discrimination in the family code, women are far less supportive of democracy than those who live in more equitable countries.

The same is true when the physical integrity and civil liberties components are analyzed. The research has shown the important role social institutions play in shaping women's attitudes toward democracy in SSA countries. Gender inequality in these institutions limits women's ability to shape their lives: this loss of independence also appears to reduce their support for democracy, compromising much-needed democratic legitimacy in their own countries.

One explanation may be that women who experience more autonomy in their personal lives are more likely to demand or favour the freedom to choose their political leaders. It could also indicate that women in these societies see the political system as a way to protect their autonomy and serve their interests and needs: they are therefore more supportive of a democratic political system.

Access to resources and a son preference do not appear to influence support for democracy.

- More access to resources increases men's support for democracy, but not women's.
- A preference for male offspring does not influence women's political attitudes.

These results hold over time: the research compared the 2009 and 2012 versions of the OECD-SIGI and combined the three rounds of the Afrobarometer. The gender difference in support for democracy was maintained over time.

DEFINING SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

The OECD-SIGI includes five components focused on gender discrimination, both inside the household (family code, physical integrity) and outside (resources, civil liberties):

- *Family code* – captures institutions that influence women's decision-making in the household and gender inequality in terms of minimum age of marriage, parental authority, and inheritance rights.
- *Physical integrity* – includes violence against women and the existence of legal protection for women from rape, domestic violence, and genital mutilation, for example.
- *Civil liberties* – measures women's freedom of participation, taking into account whether they can access public space without the agreement or accompaniment of a male family member.
- *Resources* – considers the access of women to several types of property, such as land, bank loans, and other forms of credit.
- *Son preference* – indicates the degree of gender bias in mortality and the preference for male offspring.



Photo: World Bank Flickr

POLICY INSIGHTS

The way women are treated inside and outside the home has major political implications. For example, preferences in political regimes can be influenced by the degree to which laws and norms are biased towards women, particularly norms regarding family life and women's autonomy.

Given evidence that women living in a country with more equitable laws and norms are clearly more supportive of democracy, policies to reduce gender inequality in social institutions at the household and macro-societal levels are paramount. The results will not only promote gender equity, a valuable goal in its own right, but can also increase women's support for democracy. This in turn, could have implications in stabilizing democratic regimes in Africa.

*This brief presents findings and policy lessons identified in a paper prepared by researchers from the United Nations University-MERIT and the University of Göttingen through the GrOW initiative. See: Maty Konte & Stephan Klasen. 2016. "Gender difference in support for democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa: Do social institutions matter?" *Feminist Economics*, 22:2, 55-86. Brief produced by Stephan Klasen, Mary O' Neill and Alejandra Vargas.*

Opinions stated in this brief and the paper it draws from, are those of authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the GrOW program partners.



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