



Women's Rights and Political Empowerment in Benin, Bolivia, Malawi, and Morocco

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1. Introduction

For the first time in about 70 years, the global average for women’s political empowerment is no longer advancing. At the same time, gender equality is not in decline globally, which means that the recent trend of democratic backsliding observed across several countries is not affecting women disproportionately. Yet, in many countries, democratic freedoms continue to be unevenly distributed between men and women although women’s political inclusion and equal access to power is prominent on the global agenda, as reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2015). This report examines the extent to which key democratic components such as civil liberties, civil society and political participation include women.

In the next sections, we conceptualize and examine three different dimensions of women’s political empowerment: the civil liberties dimension, the civil society dimension and the political participation dimension. Within each section, we analyze recent global trends with data from 1950 to 2017 with a special focus on Benin, Bolivia, Malawi, and Morocco, selected by the European Commission.

We find that the four countries of focus have experienced substantial improvements from 1950 to 2017 on all the dimensions of women’s political empowerment – civil liberties, civil society participation, and political participation - which seem to mirror the global trend. In recent years however, these improvements have slowed down and, in some cases, even declined.

2. Historical Development of V-Dem Indices on Women’s Rights and Political Empowerment

V-Dem’s Women’s Political Empowerment Index builds on a definition of women’s political empowerment as “a process of increasing capacity for women, leading to greater choice, agency, and participation in social decision-making” (Sundström et al. 2015). Women’s political empowerment is a complex concept, and the index seeks to capture different aspects by building on three different sub-indices – Women’s Civil Liberties Index, Women’s Civil Society Participation Index, and Women’s Political Participation Index. These three indices are weighted equally in the overall index.

2.1 Women and Civil Liberties

This section considers historical developments in civil liberties for women, operationalized using V-Dem’s Women’s Civil Liberties Index. This index captures whether women have the ability to make meaningful decisions in key areas of their lives. It consists of four indicators (lowest level of aggregation): Freedom of domestic movement, Freedom from forced labor, The right to private property, and Access to justice. The index ranges from zero to one, where “0” represents a low degree of women’s political empowerment, and “1” represents a high degree.

Figure 1. Structure of the Women’s Civil Liberties Index

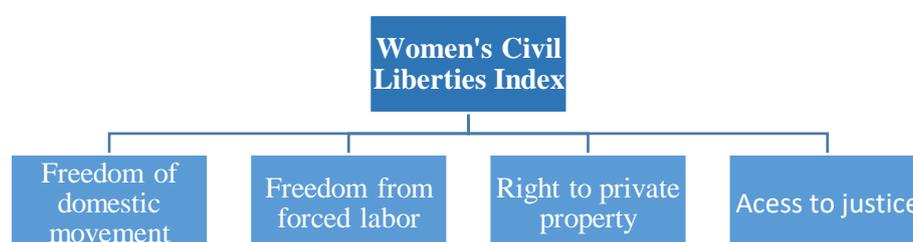
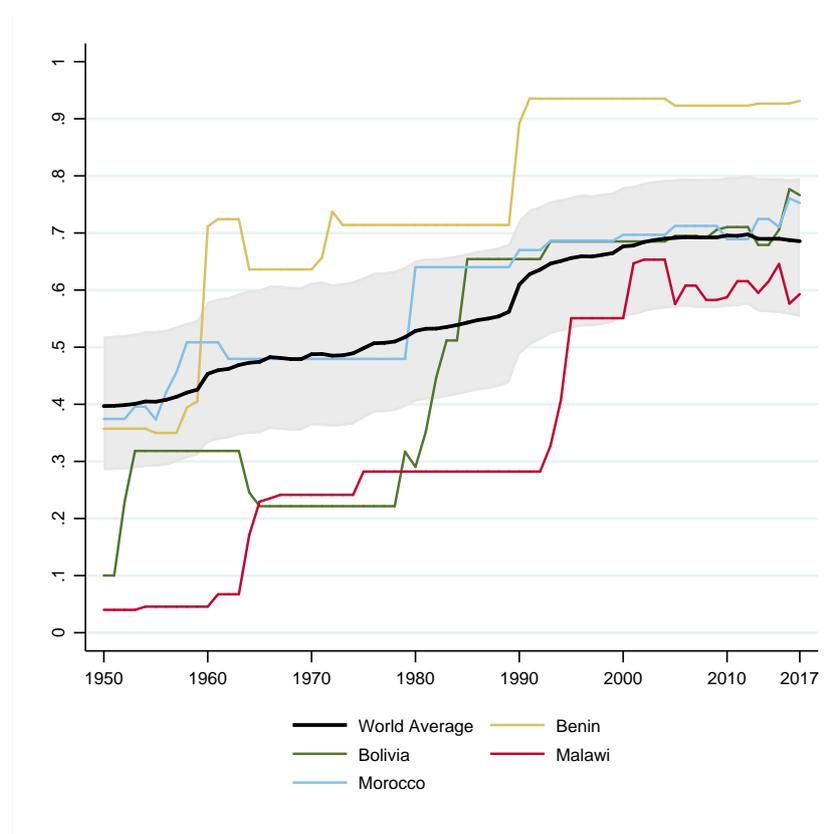


Figure 2 illustrates the development in Women’s Civil Liberties Index, from 1950 to 2017. During this period three of the countries – Benin, Malawi and Morocco became fully independent, and all four countries experienced some form of democratic development– either in the form of full-scale democratic transition or limited liberalization reforms. We plot the global averages of women’s civil liberties over this period as well as the developments in each country. The thick black line in *Figure 2* illustrates how the global level of women’s civil liberties have increased steadily from 1950 to 2017, indeed, while the average level was 0.4 in 1950, the average level in 2017 was 0.7. At the same time, the figure also suggests that improvements in women’s civil liberties have slowed down during the last decades – in fact, there has been little or no improvements at all since around 2000.

In line with the global trend, all four focus countries have experienced substantial improvements when it comes to civil liberties for women from 1950 to 2017. Benin experienced two major jumps in the women’s civil liberty score – the first one, following independence in the late 1950s and the second following the democratic transition in 1994. Today, the country scores much higher than the global average. Malawi follows a similar path, with two major jumps reflecting the country’s independence in 1962 and the end of King Hassan II’s rule in 1993. Yet, while the situation has improved a lot since the highly repressive environment in 1950, Malawi’s score on

the Women’s civil liberties index has always been and still is substantial lower than Benin and below the global average. Out of the four focus countries, Morocco started out with the highest level of respect for women’s civil liberties in 1950. Since then, there has been small improvements, especially around 1980, but the level of civil liberties has been strikingly stable since then, except from a minor increase during the Arab Spring and the recent decade. Finally, the respect for women’s civil liberties jumped dramatically in Bolivia in the early 1980. Yet, like Morocco, the situation has not improved much since, and the levels of women’s civil liberties have remained relatively stable up until recent years where a small positive development is visible.

Figure 2. *Women’s Civil Liberties Index, with global average and the four countries*

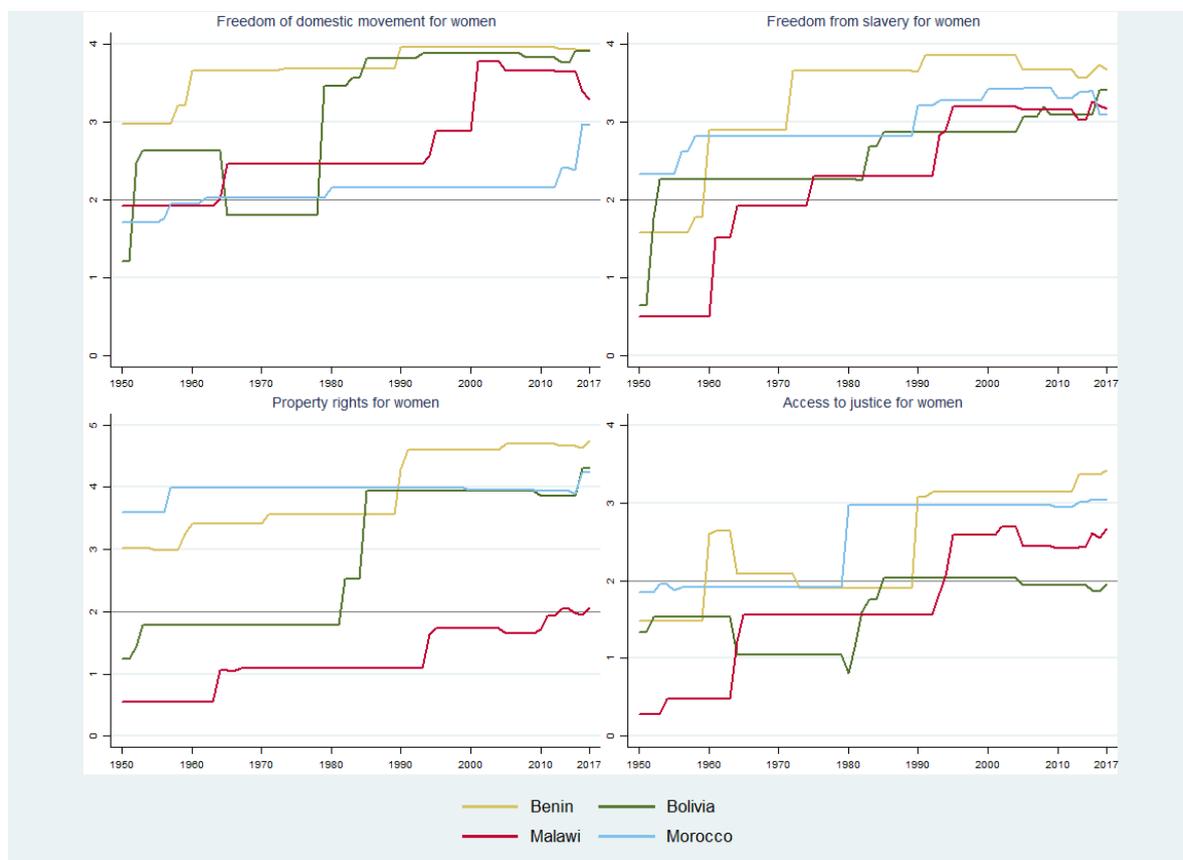


Note: The index runs from 0-1, from low to high levels of civil liberties

In Figure 3 we plot each indicator that go into the Women’s Civil Liberties Index - Freedom of domestic movement, Freedom from forced labor, The right to private property, and Access to justice. Several notable patterns stand out. First, it is clear that the low levels of Women’s Civil Liberties in Malawi (compared to the other three countries and the global average) is affected by the low levels of Property rights for women. While Malawi scores around the average for most indicators, the country performs poorly when it comes to women’s property rights. Second,

compared to the other aspects of women’s empowerment, all the four countries underperform on the measure access to justice for women. Although women’s access to justice has improved in most countries since 1950, three out of four countries never reach a score above 3 on this indicator – suggesting that women’s access to justice often is violated. In Bolivia, which receives the lowest score on this indicator (below 2), women have more limited access to justice. Finally, three out of four countries receive high scores during the last decade on the indicator measuring domestic movement for women. The only notable exception is Morocco, where parts of the female population experience restrictions on their right to move freely domestically. It should also be noted that Malawi has experienced some decreases on this indicator in recent years.

Figure 3. Indicators by Country, 1950-present



Note: The indicators Freedom of domestic movement for women, Freedom of slavery, and Access to justice for women run from 0-4, the indicator Property rights for women runs from 0-5, from low to high levels of civil liberties

2.2 Women and Civil Society Participation

This section examines the historical developments of women's ability to express themselves and to form as well as participate in civil society groups using V-Dem's Women's Civil Society Participation Index (Figure 4). The index aims to capture women's abilities to openly discuss political issues, participate in civil society organizations, and percent of female journalists.

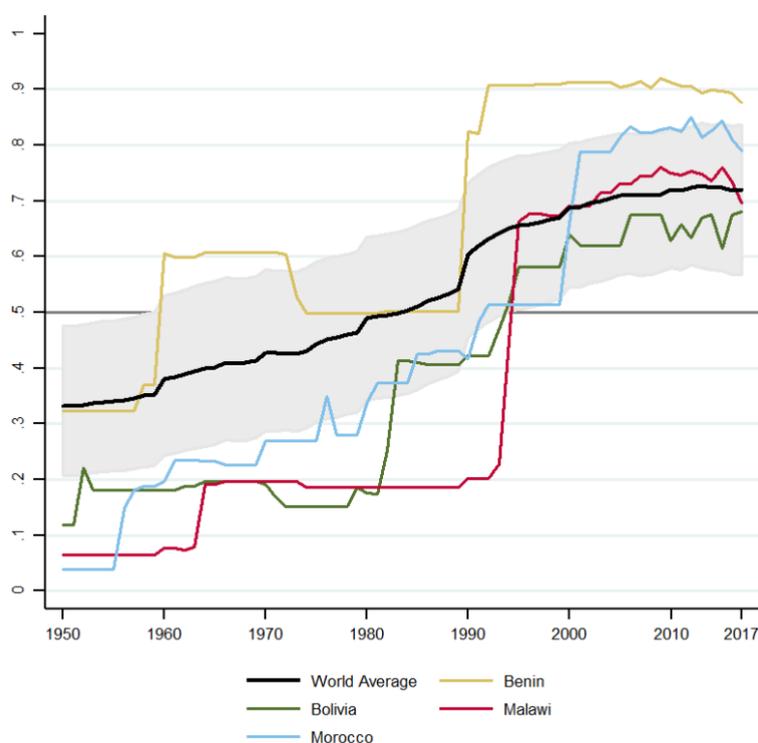
Figure 4. Structure of the Women Civil Society Participation Index



In line with the global trend (Figure 5, black line), V-Dem data indicates that women's participation in civil society organizations has increased over time globally. As of today, Benin (yellow line) reach the highest level on the index among the four countries. The country's first sign of a positive increase appears in the end of the 1950s, right before Benin's (at that time Dahomey) independence in 1960. After independence, significant improvements with the regards to women's civil society participation remain on the same level until the coup d'état in 1972 and the following autocratic regime. With the country's return to democracy in 1990, large improvements for women's abilities to participate in civil society are visible, reaching a close to a perfect score on the index.

In Malawi (red line), the situation for women improved following independence in 1964, but it is not until after the fall of the totalitarian regime in 1994 that the situation for women improves substantially. However, just like the global trend, the situation is, since the mid-2010s, no longer improving. After continuous improvements since the 1950s, with the largest improvements following the end of King Hassan II's rule, a declining trend is visible for Morocco (blue line) as well. Bolivia's score (green line), the country with the lowest scores, have gradually improved since 1950 and the most prominent increase took place already in the beginning of the 1980s and with the reestablishment of democracy after a period of dictatorship (1980-1982).

Figure 5. Women Civil Society Participation Index, with Global Average and the Four Countries



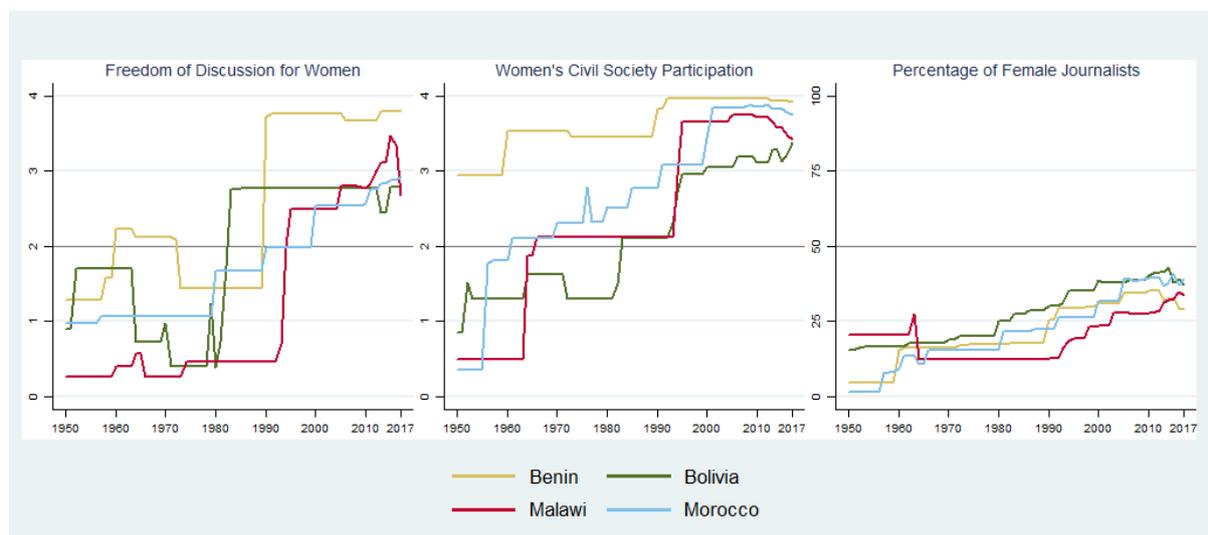
Note: The index runs from 0-1, from low to high civil society participation.

While *Figure 5* illustrates developments in the aggregated Women’s Civil Society Index, this report also explores whether there are differences between the index’s sub-components. *Figure 6* maps the indicators that constitute the index, measuring the Freedom of discussion for women, Women’s participation in civil society and the Percentage of female journalists. The indicator measuring Women’s freedom of discussion has improved in all countries since 1950. In Benin, the indicator follows largely the same development as the aggregate index on Women’s civil society participation. The same goes for Morocco and Malawi, but in the case of the latter with a decrease in recent years. In Bolivia, however, the indicator takes a much steeper increase in the beginning of the 1980s to today’s levels.

Furthermore, the indicator on Women’s civil society participation measures the frequency of with which women are prevented from participating in civil society organizations, with lower levels indicating high frequency and high levels indicating low frequency. Generally, this indicator behaves differently from the general index on women’s empowerment. In Morocco, the indicator starts increasing already in the 1950s and reaches today’s levels where women are rarely hindered from participation in civil society organizations. However, the extent to which

women are able to discuss political issues is lower. The same applies to Benin and Malawi where women’s civil society participation improves earlier than Freedom of discussion for women. It is only in the case of Bolivia where the indicator Freedom of discussion reaches a high levels before Women’s participation in civil society organizations. While the development of women’s abilities to discuss political issues and participate in civil society organizations developed differently and fluctuate more across the countries, the Percentage of female journalists largely displays the same gradual development in all countries, reaching between 30-40 percent today. Interesting to note is that while Benin scores very high on the other two indicators, Percentage of female journalists is decreasing.

Figure 6. Indicators by Country, 1950-present

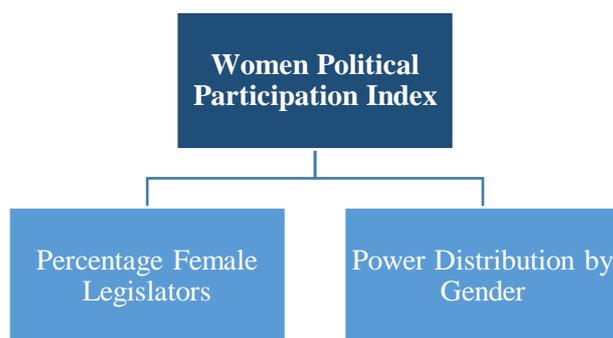


Note: The indicators Freedom of Discussion for Women and Women’s Civil Society Participation run from 0-4, from low to high participation. The Percentage of Female Journalists is measured from 0 to 100.

2.3 Women and Political Participation

In this section we examine women’s political participation. We use V-Dem’s Women Political Participation Index, which measures women’s descriptive representation in the legislature and whether they have an equal share in the overall distribution of power. The index is constructed by two indicators (Figure 7). The first indicator measures the share of women in the national legislature and the second indicator measures power distribution by gender. The latter ranges from zero (men have nearly the monopoly of power) to one (women have roughly equal access to political power). The two indicators are aggregated into the Women Political Participation Index.

Figure 7. Structure of the Women Political Participation Index

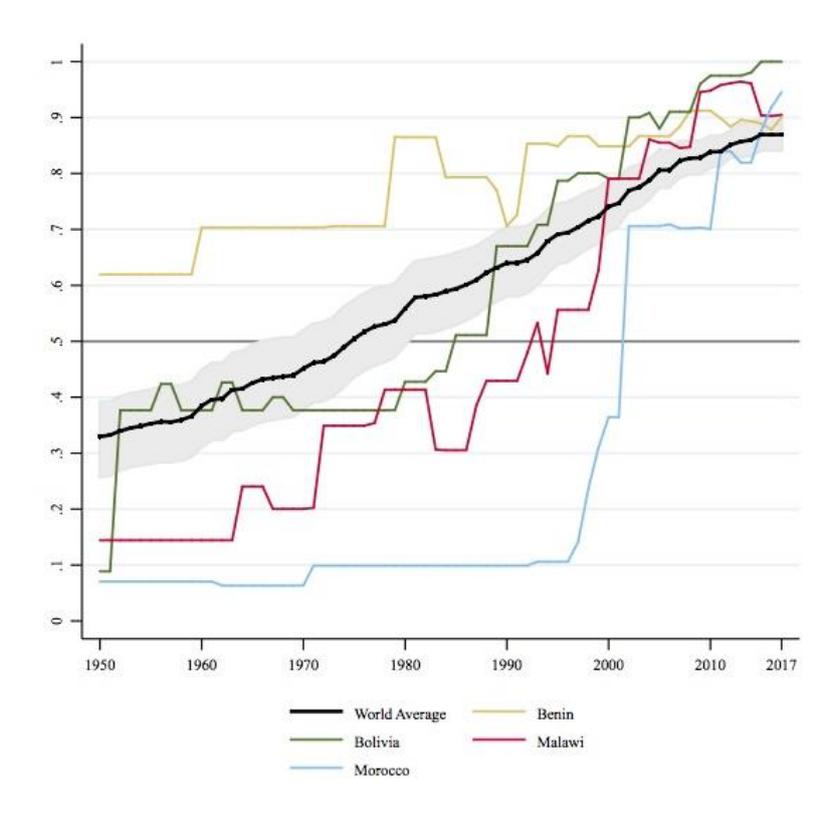


What is the state of women’s political participation in the world and in the examined countries? *Figure 8* illustrates that the global level of women’s political participation (black line) has advanced substantially since 1950, and has done so consistently until the first years of the new millennium. Since around 2010 the advancement of women political participation has slowed down. When analyzing the developments of the countries of interest in this report, we observe significant variations.

Of all countries, Benin (yellow line) has historically had higher scores than the world average on women’s participation. By 1950 the global average was 0.32, the Benin score was twice as high (0.62). Moreover, in 1960s we observe a significant improvement in women’s political participation in Benin, and then again in the 1980s (now above the world average). Yet, by the mid-1980s, women’s representation decreased significantly reaching 1960s levels. Women’s representation improved somewhat in the 1990s and in 2010 and has remained relatively stagnant since then, converging for the first time with the global average. The developments in Bolivia (green line) has comparatively been faster. By 1950, the country score (3.7) almost match the global average. Yet, after under-performing between the 1960s and 1980s the country underwent significant improvements and by 2015 the Bolivian score reached the rating of the countries examined. Malawi and Morocco have for most part of the last decades under-performed. In despite of significant improvements since the 1950s, Malawi’s score (red line) was for a long period lower than the global average for women’s political representation and did not catch up until the end of the 1990s. Following this significant improvement, women’s participation in the country follow the global trend. It is worth mentioning that since 2015 a significant deterioration of women’s political participation is observed in Malawi, which contrasts the recent global developments. Finally, Morocco had very low scores when it comes to women’s participation in the 20th century. Yet, by the end of the 1990s, and particularly in the

year 2000, the country experienced the most significant improvement recorded in this analysis. The country managed to move from a score below 0.1 to 0.7 in few years. Overall, the 2000s were marked by stability but after 2010, and particularly around the time of the Arab revolution, the country experienced significant changes. In 2017, women’s participation seems to have stagnated around the globe, compared to the developments in previous year.

Figure 8. Women Political Participation Index, with global average and four selected countries, 1950 to 2017



Note: The index runs from 0-1, from low to high political participation.

Further examinations of the indicators - the Presence of women in national legislatures and Power distribution by gender – provide a more detailed analysis and shed light on specific developments. Figure 9 presents the Percentage of female legislators and Power distribution by gender between 1950 and 2017. As illustrated by the figure, in Benin (yellow line) power distribution by gender has been relatively high throughout the period. At the same time, women have for the most period been under-represented in parliament with the exception of the improvements recorded in 1979 8 percent of the elected legislators were females.

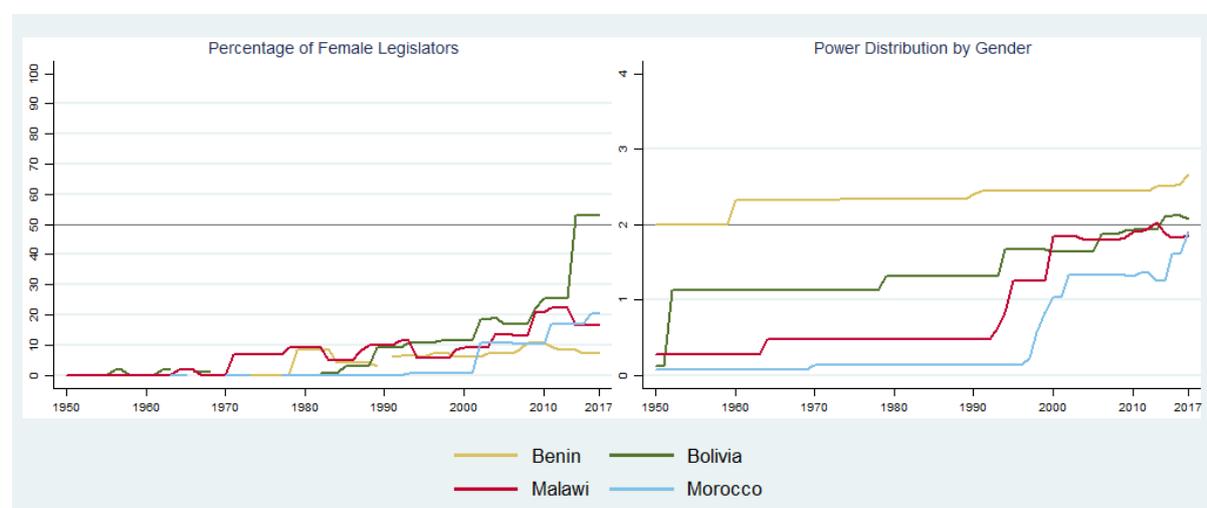
In Bolivia (green line), power distribution has been fairly low throughout but has in the last decades displayed improvements. The presence of women in the chamber of representatives has

increased in recent decades, and in 2014 the share of women in the parliament reached 53.1 percent, only Rwanda (61.3%) and Cuba (53.2%) have higher female representation.

The developments in Malawi (red line) have been slower. The scores for the presence of women in the national legislature and power distribution by gender have been poor for most of the time period. Improvements on the power distribution indicator are only observed starting in the 1990s, and stagnate at the beginning of the 2000s. Moreover, women have remained under-represented in the national legislature, in 2009 the share of women increased from 13 percent to 21 percent but was reduced again the last election where the share of female legislators was 16 percent.

Finally, in Morocco (blue line) Power distribution by gender improved significantly in the second half of the 1990s and, following the Arab revolution improvements are noticeable and the indicator continue to improve. The share of women in the national legislature increased only in 2006, when they represented 10 percent of the elected representatives, ever since, the share of women has increased steadily, 17 percent in 2011 and 21 percent in 2016.

Figure 9. Indicators by Country, 1950-present

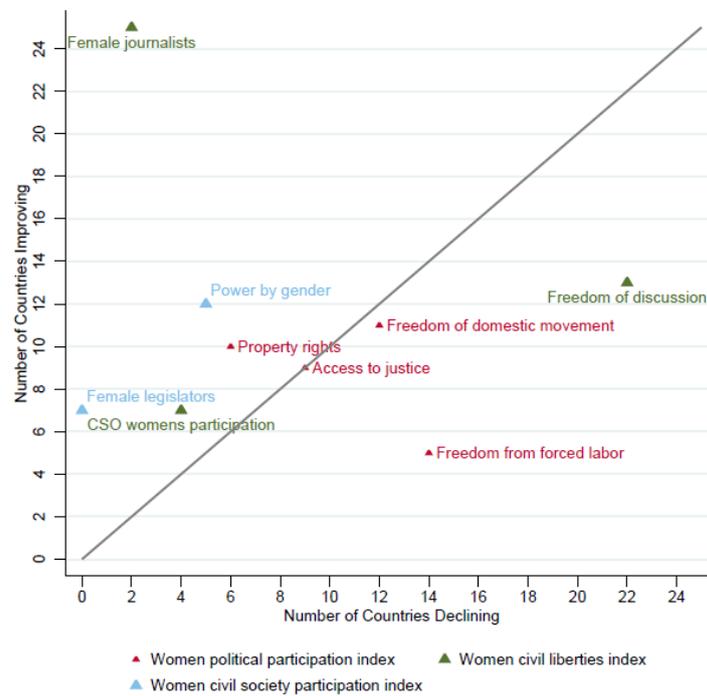


Note: The indicator Percentage of Female Legislators is measured from 0 to 100. The indicators Power Distribution by Gender run from 0-4, from low to high participation.

3. Recent Developments

In addition to the four countries of focus, we also examine changes in the indices and indicators of the Women’s Political Empowerment Index across the globe comparing 2007 to 2017. In *Figure 10* we plot the different indices covering female political empowerment 2007 and 2017. Indicators above the line have experienced positive changes during the decade and indicators below the line have declined. The scale indicates how many countries that declined or improved. The coloring indicates which index an indicator is part of. In brief, there are variations in the different components of the Women’s political empowerment index that adds nuances to the finding that the women’s overall political empowerment has been relatively stable during the past ten years. *Figure 10* illustrates that there are advancements on indicator level when it comes to for instance, Share of female legislators, Property rights for women and Power distributed by gender. The most striking finding is the large group of countries that improved on Share of female to male journalists; while two countries have experienced significant declines in Share of female journalists, more than 24 countries have improved. In contrast, many countries have also experienced a decline in Freedom from forced labor for women. The level of Freedom of discussion for women has also declined overall, with around 22 countries experiencing significant declines on this indicator. The latter development is in line with a general backsliding in democracy components related to elections and civil society – for both men and women – in many countries around the globe.

Figure 10. Indicators of Women’s Political Empowerment: Number of Countries Registering Significant Changes



4. Conclusion

Reflecting the global trend, the four countries have experienced substantial improvements from 1950 to 2017 on V-Dem’s three dimensions of women’s political empowerment – the civil liberties dimension, the civil society dimension and the political participation dimension. The report also finds that although women’s political empowerment improved dramatically over the past century, since the mid-2010s the improvements slowed down and declining tendencies are observed in some of the measures.

Furthermore, the countries’ developments vary across indicators and time, and often change following regime changes. Benin stands out with the highest scores on many of the measures we examine in this report. The country has been very active in the promotion of gender equality in the last decades. The 1990 Constitution of Benin prohibits the discrimination based on sex and grants men and women equal social, political and economic rights which are associated with a boost in gender equality that we observe in the empirical analyses. Furthermore, in subsequent years, the country ratified several international conventions for gender equality and in 2009 the Government adopted a National Policy of Gender promotion which aims to achieve gender equality by 2025. Based on this evidence, it appears that the active role of the Government of

Benin in promoting gender equality is associated with women's political empowerment in the country, which stands out compared to the global average.

The remaining three countries, Bolivia, Malawi and Morocco also experience positive developments but vary on extent in the different areas. It is particularly worth noticing that in despite of substantive positive changes in all areas, the countries lag behind in specific dimensions compared to the global averages. Such underperformance is observed in Malawi in relation to women's civil liberties, in Bolivia on women's civil society participation and, until very recently, in Morocco on the extent to women participated in politics. This evidence suggests that more efforts need to be done by societal, national and international organizations in these areas.

Lastly, as we show in the final plot and analysis, the most striking finding is the large group of countries that improved their share of female journalists, an improvement that is also visible among our focus countries. This finding is of crucial importance for women's political empowerment, and democracy at large because the increasing presence of women in the newsroom contributes, as Armstrong (2004) argues, to extending the definitions of news by bringing attention to topics that are relevant to women, such as sexual harassment and gender equality itself¹.

¹ Armstrong, C. L. (2004). The influence of reporter gender on source selection in newspaper stories. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 81, 139–154.

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