Women’s participation in the post-liberal era: A global perspective

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Abstract

Scholars of comparative politics, gender, and world society have documented large worldwide increases in women’s participation in the public sphere over recent decades. Women’s participation in schooling expanded greatly. Women’s suffrage spread from Europe to the globe. Women’s rights and participation grew increasingly enshrined in state policy, and women took on central roles in governing bodies. And, of course, women entered the paid labor force en masse. 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. 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 enduring liberal tendencies but also that in the recent-most period countries linked to illiberal international organizations tend to be more tempered on these measures. We discuss implications for world society theory, which arose in a phase of expanding liberalism.

Keywords
Women’s rights, gender equality, liberalism, world society
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**Introduction**

The increased participation of women in the economic, political, and social spheres is one of the hallmark social 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, Soysal, and Shanahan, 1997); rights became enshrined in state constitutions, laws, and national women’s ministries (Russell, 2015; True and Mintrom, 2001); and political representation grew as women became elected officials (Paxton, Hughes, and Green, 2006). Even within the privacy of the home, women gained greater autonomy and voice (Frank, Camp, and Boutcher, 2010). And all of these changes occurred beneath a thick layer of women’s international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), intergovernmental organizations and global agreements, culminating in the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women adopted in 1979 (Berkovitch, 1999; Wotipka and Ramirez, 2008).

Despite the global trends, the world continues to be deeply and unequally gendered (e.g. Barone, 2011; Charles and Bradley, 2009), and one can identify places and groups in which improvements in women’s rights and participation have remained elusive. Moreover, recent years have seen instances of outright rebuke from political leaders and administrative bodies. In 2017, Russia’s parliament voted 380-3 to decriminalize domestic violence so long as it does not persist more than a year and does not cause ‘substantial bodily harm.’ The justification, drawing on older logics of family authority by men, is that family matters should be left to the family. Meanwhile in Turkey, there is proposed legislation that would allow men accused of having sex
with underage girls to avoid punishment if they marry their victims, which critics claim would legitimize child marriage and statutory rape as well as enable child abuse and sexual exploitation.

Globally, the United Nations Family Rights Caucus that emerged in 2008 does not critique women’s participation in public life per se, but it promotes women’s participation as wives and mothers in the so-called natural family (Berkovitch, 1999). In 2009, the caucus successfully lobbied efforts to remove references to reproductive rights from an official document of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women and, one year later, assisted a panel on International Women’s Day in condemning feminists for undermining the critical role of mothers in society. With members from more than 160 countries and a wide range of alliances with intergovernmental and international nongovernmental organizations, the caucus has proved a formidable voice on the world stage.

To be sure, rejections of women’s participation in public life – and the corresponding call for more traditional gender roles in private units such as the family or religion – are not new to the most recent period. One can simply look to ongoing efforts in the United States to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment for an historical instance of how cultural beliefs about traditional gender roles can stall and, in some cases, undermine legislative action. But what is perhaps so striking about the expansion of women’s participation in public life is its very endurance despite these differences and attacks. The parliamentary actions in Russia or the activities of the United Nations Family Rights Caucus, not to mention incendiary statements made by political leaders such as Filipino president Rodrigo Duterte or former U.S. President Donald Trump, are striking precisely because they are so counter to the widespread institutionalization of women’s participation in world society.
Our goal in this paper is to test the effects of the growing chorus of voices calling for more traditional gender arrangements. We do so by examining cross-national and longitudinal data on women’s public participation in higher education, the polity, and the economy. Some recent trends indeed contain portents of change. For instance, women’s enrollments in higher education have peaked and declined in Hungary since the late 2000s, Brazil is seeing similarly recent drop-offs in women’s political empowerment, and women’s participation in the labor force is on the wane in Nigeria. And yet at the same time, women’s participation in the public sphere continues its ascent in a considerable number of countries (see e.g. Hughes and Paxton, 2019 for the political sphere). Still, the general impact of contemporary illiberal mobilizations on women’s participation remains unclear. Our aim is to highlight growing illiberal mobilizations that cast the rights of women as secondary to those of the family, the nation, or religion, and to investigate the impact of these changes on women’s incorporation into the public sphere. And while we find evidence of rising centers of reaction, we ultimately find that the liberal trend of world society – and its implications for women – persists.

**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 post-war liberalization of the global institutional context, which has resulted in the establishment of new global models of women’s rights and participation (e.g. Paxton et al., 2006; Ramirez, Soysal, and Shanahan, 1997; Ramirez and Wotipka, 2001; Wotipka, Nakagawa, and Svec, 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, from development to environment to security. 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 (e.g. Silova and Magno, 2004). 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 McClurg, 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 have 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, Swiss, and Viterna, 2012; Hughes et al., 2015; Paxton et al., 2006; Ramirez, Soysal, and Shanahan, 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-friendly policies and principles enshrined in world society, suggesting the following hypothesis:
Proposition 1: We expect higher levels of women’s participation in public life in countries with higher embeddedness in the global institutional context.

**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 of history: ‘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, 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 anti-colonial 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 U.S. real estate and financial markets. The economy downshifted globally, most of all in North America and Europe, and the legitimacy of the liberal global system was increasingly questioned (Guillén, 2018). History continued after all.
A key result has been a global surge in illiberal populisms and nationalisms, built around nativist claims and emphases on religious traditionalism, law and order, and sovereignty (Kyle and Gultchin, 2018). These contestations transformed not only national contexts. They reshaped the global environment as well, with illiberal state and civil society actors challenging liberal touchstones in the international arena, including free markets (Irwin, 2002), education (Schofer, Lerch, and Meyer, 2018), LGBT and sexual rights (Hadler and Symons, 2018; Trimble, 2013; Velasco, 2018), non-governmental organizations (Bromley, Longhofer, and Schofer, 2020), and more (Bob, 2012).

We introduce concrete cases in the data and methods section below, but conceptually the rise of illiberal alternatives in international organizations throughout the nineties and aughts points to an increasingly divided world institutional environment. What we cautiously term a ‘post-liberal’ world society may be on the rise, with liberal hegemony on the world stage certainly not vanquished but substantially challenged (Rupnik, 2016; Börzel and Zürn, 2021).

In relation to our focus, a growing literature examines the role of global alliances in pushing 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 discontents with the modern international system (Corredor, 2019; Cupać and Ebetürk, 2020). Moreover, 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 (e.g. Bob, 2012; Bromley, Schofer, and Longhofer, 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 as these opposing organizations and ideologies develop. As such, investigating this divide gives insights into the post-liberal transition more broadly.

Our goal here is to explore how this shifting global context is impacting women’s participation in public life. Given that the role of liberal world society is to 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. Country examples certainly point to issues of women and gender as key battlegrounds for populist and nationalist reactions. Such reactions, framed within discourses of ‘gender ideology,’ countered liberal egalitarianism with images of the ‘natural’ and ‘traditional’ family, ensconcing 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 to be defined through their roles as individuals with free association; instead, the rights and roles of women must be constituted in how they advance collective goals via the family and nation (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018). 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 asserted ‘virile Hindu masculinity’ against the incursions of Muslim men on the Indian nation and especially its Hindu women (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, Kapur, and Walters, 2019: 542). These patterns fit with work on gender and nationalism, which has long noted gender as a symbolic issue.
through which conceptions of the proper national order are articulated (e.g. Cusack, 2000; Kramer, 2009).

Even so, it is also clear that liberal principles and organizations – including those dedicated to promoting women’s rights – continue to be strongly institutionalized in world society and in many national contexts (Meyer, 2010). For instance, a recent article finds surprising levels of 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 passed a sweeping bill legalizing the practice – an historic achievement for this Catholic country. 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, it thus remains an open empirical question to what extent and in what kinds of countries the ongoing changes in the global institutional order are curbing women’s participation in public life.

Of course, oppositions to liberalism generally and gender equality specifically are longstanding. But both have strengthened in recent years, perhaps especially after the 2008 financial crisis dramatized the vulnerabilities of the international system (Guillén, 2018). Indeed, illiberal opponents have increasingly channeled economic hardship into support for their cause (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018). Hungary’s Orban, for example, increasingly tied populist economic responses to the financial crisis to a larger social agenda that included promoting traditional gender roles (Orenstein and Bugaric, 2020).
These arguments about the eroding legitimacy of the liberal world order over the recent-most time period, especially in the wake of the Great Recession, and the growing institutionalization of illiberal challenges in international organizational structures generates 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.

At the same time, our discussion indicates that empirical patterns might be more nuanced. We thus envision an interaction effect, in acknowledgement of the possibilities (a) that our time variable measuring postliberalism may tap late (but still liberal) liberalism more than illiberalism, and (b) that our measure of illiberal organizational ties may reflect general embeddedness more than embeddedness in world structures that offer alternatives to liberalism. The interaction effect implies divergence, polarization, and/or fissiparous tendencies in world society in the recent-most period: an enduring central stream of continuing liberalism and growing offshoot streams of illiberalism.

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 influenced by the world society, it is important to recognize that the literature on women’s participation is substantial and invokes a range of causal factors, from economic development to political mobilization. Our discussion below briefly reviews the main lines of alternative argumentation and applies them to the question at hand. Accounting for these more domestic explanations is imperative to provide assurance that the alterations in women’s participation in public life are indeed due to occurrences within world society.

**Domestic economic context**

A first set of explanations ties women’s participation in public life to domestic economic circumstances. National economic development may support the participation of women while economic contractions may undercut it. There are several underlying imageries, many rooted in functionalist and modernization visions of society and social change. One idea is that economic growth leads to the satisfaction of material needs and elevates the importance of postmaterialist values, including gender equality (Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Inkeles and Smith, 1974). Through this lens, economic development brings sweeping changes in cultural attitudes toward women and gender, fueling the expansion of women’s participation and rights in higher education, the polity, and the labor force (Inglehart and Norris, 2003).

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. A
related expectation is that the trajectory from agriculture to industry to service diminishes the prominence of manual labor and thus decreases the importance of ascriptive criteria such as gender. From this perspective, economic development is assumed to lower gender barriers. For poorer countries, critics of globalization contest that a reliance on low paid and skilled labor results in detrimental impacts on women (Benería and Sen, 1981; Sen and Grown, 1988), yet the evidence is overwhelming that by raising families out of poverty, economic development greatly 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 education becomes the paramount measure of human worth in contemporary societies. More education means more skills, more opportunities, more productivity, and more pay, and the benefits accrue regardless of – or at least despite – gender, albeit in lower amounts for women (Blau and Kahn, 1992; Calkin, 2018). Many specific mechanisms have been theorized. 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 (e.g. Nakagawa and Wotipka, 2016). Much of this work focuses on the move of women in the labor force (Charles, 2011), but it is also important to note that education is central to supporting political
participation in the public sphere (e.g. Brady, Verba, and Schlozman, 1995; Fallon, Swiss, and Viterna, 2012). Again, scholars have variously focused on mechanisms involving concrete skills as well as broader arguments about the empowering effects of schooling. From these arguments, 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 (Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Welzel, Norris, and Inglehart, 2002), with particular emphasis on democracy (e.g. Beer, 2009; Richards and Gelleny, 2007). The core imagery is that democracies enable institutional incorporation (e.g. voting), extra-institutional mobilization (e.g. social movements), and the political leverage that follows (Ferree and Tripp, 2006; Tarrow, 1988).

Democratic systems of governance are built around universalistic promises of civil and political liberties that delegitimate exclusions based on ascriptive criteria. In many sectors, participation soars with democratization (e.g. Schofer and Meyer, 2005 on higher education enrollments), though some scholars note that authoritarian regimes may achieve the same results coercively (Paxton, Kunovich, and Hughes, 2007; Donno and Kreft, 2019). 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, Hughes, and Green, 2006). As such, women’s participation in public and political life is now inextricably woven into any and all legitimate measures and definitions of democracy (Paxton, 2000). Drawing from these arguments, one might expect
higher levels of women’s participation in public life in countries with higher levels of democracy.

Data

We seek to examine general changes in the participation of women in higher education, politics, and the economy, for roughly 150 countries over the period 1970–2017. Our panel dataset is unbalanced because some countries are not independent over the entire period and due to missing data. We focus on three measures of women’s participation in society, all from well-known data sources, to paint a broad-based picture.

Dependent variables

*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 that meets the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) criteria for levels 5 and 6, 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 are taken from the World Bank’s (2019) World Development Indicators dataset.

*Women’s political participation* is measured by an index of political empowerment from the V-Dem dataset version 10 (Coppedge et al., 2019; Pemstein et al., 2019). The measure is based on three distinct measures: (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 (not presented; 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).

**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. We use the conventional indicator, memberships in international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). Note that we also examined women’s INGOs, which are a particularly relevant subset of INGOs. Results were essentially identical, but women’s INGOs are not available in the most recent years. We used the general INGO measure in order to maximize the span of years in our dataset.

*Post-liberal period.* We distinguish the post-liberal period with a post-2008 variable. The high period of legitimacy characteristic of the neoliberal period in the 1990s showed signs of weakening earlier. But post-liberalism surged in the core in the Great Recession, and thus we set our turning point at 2008. Alternative measures of the post-liberal period, such as decade, work roughly similarly.

*Illiberal organizations.* We use memberships in three main inter-governmental organizations (IGOs) to gauge exposure to illiberal scripts. Scholars have increasingly noted polarization in world society and the uptake of anti- or illiberal ideologies in some international organizations (e.g. Beckfield, 2010; Bob, 2012, 2019; Hadler and Symons, 2018; Schofer et al.,
2018; Velasco, 2020). We use a modified version of the illiberal organization measure from Schofer et al. (2018), which reflects annual memberships in the following international organizations: Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). While not rejecting liberalism in its entirety, each organization has been the site of recent mobilizations against various dimensions of the liberal model, such as democracy, human rights, and LGBT rights (see e.g. Ambrosio, 2008; Cooley and Schaaf, 2017; Kayaoğlu, 2013). 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.

Post-liberal period * Illiberal organizations. We also include a variable for the post-liberal period interacted with illiberal organizations, to acknowledge the possibility that each variable alone may capture enduring – if challenged – liberalism. Maybe the simple period variable works as an indicator of late liberalism, and maybe the simple organizations variable functions as a measure of general international embeddedness. The interaction variable captures a third possibility: that it is the combination of the period effect and the organization effect that makes a difference for women’s participation.

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 (Feenstra et al., 2013). The measure is logged to reduce skewness.
Secondary school enrollment. The general expansion of schooling is an important control variable for the analysis of women’s participation in higher education, and it is viewed as a key source of modern values and attitudes on women’s participation generally. We use the gross enrollment ratio from the World Development Indicators (World Bank, 2019). Net enrollment ratios yield identical results (but are available for fewer cases, so we do not use that measure).

Democracy. Women’s participation may be affected by a society’s level of democracy. We use the Polity IV twenty-one-point scale, which distinguishes between autocratic and democratic systems (Marshall, Gurr, and Jaggers, 2013 [version updated to 2018]). 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 A1 of the Appendix.

Methods

We use panel regression models to analyze women’s participation for nearly 150 countries between 1970 and 2017. Specifically, we employ 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). Fixed effects 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 fixed effects based on results of a Hausman test,
but results were quite similar with random effects panel models, as we show in Table A2 in the Appendix. Some of our arguments address cross-national variation, so it is useful to see that 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 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 issues such as heteroskedasticity (Wooldridge, 2010).

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 post-liberal time 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 of schooling. 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 thirteen 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.

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 sizeable, 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. For instance, whereas Table 1 Model 6 shows a strong negative interaction effect (illiberal orgs * post-liberal period) on women’s labor force participation, the interaction was positive (non-significant) for men. The area where men were affected most was in higher education participation, perhaps suggesting a generalized illiberal backlash against higher education (Schofer, Lerch, and Meyer, 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 (for example, the ratio of women to men enrolled at the tertiary level). 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 of these remarkable changes tend to stress the role of national economic and political forces. In contrast, scholars of world society and comparative politics have long emphasized 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 paper finds enduring liberal trends, but also rising centers of reaction, where women’s advances are tempered or even levelling off. 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 retrenchment across the board – at least thus far. At the same time, this continued growth is significantly reduced in countries that have ties to international organizations with documented histories of espousing illiberal scripts. Rather than a
general drift towards lower participation among women, our results suggest growing polarizations or divisions in world society over time. This finding fits with recent research on world society polarization about LGBT rights (Hadler and Symons, 2018) and on regional centers of reaction against abortion (Boyle, Kim, and Longhofer, 2015).

While we operationalize national exposure to illiberal scripts in the international arena in terms of country ties to illiberal organizations, we see these ties largely 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, it would be worthwhile to 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.

Such investigations could also shed light on the extent to which ongoing challenges to liberal 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 particularly conspicuous case. The movement embraces many not-so-liberal goals, built around the grievance that the rise of women has brought the end of men. And yet the challenge itself is marshalled by reference to the normative power of rights; the rise of women is framed as problematic because it has violated the rights of men. Along with our finding of enduring liberal trends, such appeals to liberal normative frameworks to advance illiberal goals reveal the continued salience of the liberal creed.
Overall, the core contribution of our paper is to provide quantitative, comparative evidence of rising contestations over liberal world culture and to document the diverging national trends vis-à-vis women’s participation that seem to be emerging in this context. Such an investigation compliments the largely qualitative and case study scholarship beginning to document these processes (Corredor, 2019; Cupać and Ebetürk, 2020; Korolczuk and Graff, 2018). With this contribution, we also expand on the world society literature itself. The bulk of this tradition highlights liberalizing changes, given the expanding authority of liberal world culture over the second half of the twentieth century, especially the post-Cold War era.

Increasingly, however, world society scholars attend to questions of resistance and opposition (e.g. Boyle, 2005; Boyle, Kim, and Longhofer, 2015). Our study contributes to this work by illuminating the increasing influence of illiberal frameworks and organizations in world society. While such a ‘post-liberal’ world society may not involve the wholesale collapse of the liberal system, our findings suggest it may bring a more fractured global landscape that can generate divergence at the national level.
Notes

1. 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 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, lawmaking, and security. Its 2020 members are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan; Turkmenistan is an associate member. 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.
References


Motadel D (2019) Nationalist internationalism in the modern age. *Contemporary European*


Democracy Institute.


Tables

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLES</th>
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<th>Political Participation</th>
<th>Labor Force Participation</th>
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<td>7.73***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.20)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.28)</td>
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<td>0.01</td>
<td>-3.93**</td>
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<td>(0.02)</td>
<td>(1.35)</td>
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<td>0.02***</td>
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<td>Coefficient</td>
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<td>(0.01)</td>
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<td>11.34***</td>
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<td>0.06</td>
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## Appendix

**Table A1. Descriptive statistics.**

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<th>Std. Dev.</th>
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<th>Max</th>
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Table A2. 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.

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