

While a substantial literature explores gender differences in participation in the United States, Commonwealth countries and Western Europe, little attention has been given to gender's impact on participation in the developing world. These countries have diverse experiences with gender politics: some have been leaders in suffrage reforms and equal rights, while, in others, divorce has only recently been legalized. Surprisingly, however, there is no evidence that economic development provides an impetus for more equal levels of participation. Instead, the most important contextual factors are civil liberties and women's presence among the visible political elite. Participation is an essential component of representative democracy. Citizens influence government through elections, lobbying, protest and other forms of political participation. It is an indicator of governmental legitimacy, citizens' acceptance of a democratic form of government, and the sense of collective responsibility and civic duty that are associated with consolidated and stable democracies.

Differential rates of participation for any subgroup deserve attention, but gender differences are particularly worthy of attention. Historically, women have been deliberately excluded from political power and participation in democracies, and differentials in participation have often persisted even with the removal of formal barriers to voting and holding office. Yet in the developed world, gender differentials have faded or even reversed, with women voting at higher rates than men. However, we know very little about the determinants and extent of the gender gap in other countries. There are only a handful of multicountry studies of gender and participation.

The main theoretical model for these cross-cultural analyses is one of economic development: as incomes rise, women gain in economic resources, and sex roles and cultural values change. While this is an important result, it leaves a rich diversity of questions untested. For example, what features of transitional societies affect gender and participation differentials? Does religion imprison or empower women? Is education the great equalizer, as in the developed world, or are its effects constrained? And perhaps most importantly, how does the gender gap vary as a function of context - not just individual factors, but also broader societal institutions?