



# Women's Assessments of Gender Equality

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## Abstract

Women's assessments of gender equality do not consistently match global indices of gender inequality. In surveys covering 150 countries, women in societies rated gender-unequal according to global metrics such as education, health, labor-force participation, and political representation did not consistently assess their lives as less in their control or less satisfying than men did. Women in these societies were as likely as women in index-equal societies to say they had equal rights with men. Their attitudes toward gender issues did not reflect the same latent construct as in index-equal societies, although attitudes may have begun to converge in recent years. These findings reflect a longstanding tension between universal criteria of gender equality and an emphasis on subjective understandings of women's priorities.

## Keywords

women, gender, gender equality

Who defines gender equality? Social analysts have long been split on this question. Universalist approaches define gender equality through indicators that apply to all societies, such as gender differences in health, education, political representation, and paid labor. These approaches, which we call *index-equality*, have been adopted by global indices that rank countries by such criteria. Subjectivist approaches, in contrast, focus on women's priorities and experiences, even if some women's perspectives may strike outsiders as nonegalitarian. These approaches, which we call *subjective-equality*, are often adopted in cross-national surveys.

This article juxtaposes the two approaches, using seven global indices and six cross-national surveys, and finds a disconnect between index-equality—how countries rank on universal indicators of gender equality—and subjective-equality—how women report their own experiences and ideals. Women in societies that rank low in index-equality do not report consistently worse life experiences than men. They assess their country's gender equality higher than in index-equal societies. At the same time, women's attitudes toward gender equality in countries that rank low in index-equality do not hang together in the same way that they do for women in index-equal societies. Even on a high-profile issue such as violence against women, women in index-unequal societies may not express support for women's rights, as defined by global institutions, although attitudes appear to have shifted on this subject over the past two decades.

In other words, gender-equality looks quite different from the perspective of women's survey responses than it looks from the perspective of global gender-equality indices. This does not mean that universal indicators should be abandoned, but it highlights a complication that global indices overlook: Women around the world do not necessarily share the concept of gender-equality that these indices promote.

## Two Centuries of Debate

The tension between universal definitions of gender equality and subjective definitions emerged in the late eighteenth century with the first proclamations of women's rights in Western Europe. Olympe de Gouges (1771:6–7), a French revolutionary, published *The Rights of Women* as a companion piece to the Declaration of the Rights of Man, with equally universal aspirations: to recognize “the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of the woman,” who “is born free and lives equal to man in rights.” Laws must apply equally to women and men. Women who are found guilty of

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capital crimes must be executed, just as men are; women who wish to participate in public life must be allowed to speak publicly, just as men are; women must be conscripted and taxed and employed as men are. Women's property rights must be respected, as men's are. These sentiments were revolutionary, and Gouges recognized that many women did not share her approach to gender equality. "Woman, awake," she wrote, urging women to adopt her universal standards. "The tocsin of reason is making itself heard throughout the universe; recognize your rights" (Gouges 1791:11–12).

Similarly, Mary Wollstonecraft (1792), an English radical and author of *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, also framed gender equality as a universal cause. She too recognized that many women did not share this cause; they were so "degraded" that they "despise the freedom which they have not sufficient virtue to struggle to attain." Wollstonecraft acknowledged that it will "require some time to convince women that they act contrary to their real interest" (pp. 109–10, 96).

Other proponents of women's rights adopted a different approach, focusing less on defining and promoting universal rights than on embracing existing priorities. Mary Anne Radcliffe (1799), the English author of *The Female Advocate; or an Attempt to Recover the Rights of Women from Male Usurpation*, noted that not all women possess "the Amazonian spirit of a Wollstonecraft." Rather than call on women to adopt such a spirit, she articulated what she deemed to be the current demands of Englishwomen: "not power, but protection" (Radcliffe 1799:44). Similarly, Hannah Mather Crocker (1818) in the United States, author of *Observations on the Real Rights of Women*, objected that Wollstonecraft's approach was "unfit for practice." She offered a religiously informed alternative vision of women's empowerment in a "Christian system," where "it is woman's appropriate duty and particular privilege to cultivate the olive branches around her table," which will "spread forth to form new circles in society" (Crocker 1818:41, 16–18).

The tension between universalist approaches to gender equality, like Gouges's and Wollstonecraft's, and subjectivist approaches, like Radcliffe's and Crocker's, arose again at the turn of the twentieth century, when women's movements mobilized across the globe, emphasizing commonalities of interest among "women of all nations," as stated in the founding document of the first international women's rights organization, the International Council of Women (Berkovitch 1999:24; see also Rupp 1997). At the same time, some prominent activists rejected the notion of universal rights that transcended local priorities. A leader of the women's movement in England, for example, refused to join the International Council of Women on the grounds that English women did not "have anything in common" with women in the United States and other countries, "the conditions of their lives and the purposes of their respective societies being so different" (Berkovitch 1999:25). In France, many advocates

for women's rights objected to Anglo-American visions of gender egalitarianism that they considered unsuitable for their own society (Offen 1988:144). A proponent of women's rights in India, while translating a European statement for gender equality, argued for culturally specific adaptations "due to the difference between the societal system in the west and the societal system here" (Botting and Kronewitter 2012:485).

At the turn of the twenty-first century, universalist approaches to women's rights began to be adopted by inter-governmental organizations, beginning with the Declaration on the Equality of Women, issued by the World Conference of the International Women's Year in 1975, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979 (Berkovitch 1999:141–47). Since 1995, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has developed a series of metrics to measure gender inequality worldwide—part of a flurry of global ranking reports (Cooley and Snyder 2015; Liebowitz and Zwingel 2014)—culminating in the Gender Inequality Index (GII), which was introduced in 2010 (UNDP 2010:89–94).

These universalist approaches have been promoted disproportionately by women from wealthy societies of the Global North (Hughes et al. 2018; Merry 2007), whose perspectives may not represent the priorities of women in the rest of the world. A number of women's movements have raised subjectivist objections to universalist approaches to gender equality. These critiques include—among others—postmodern and postcolonial approaches that emphasize "the diversity of women's agency" in place of "a universalized Western model of women's liberation" (Grewal and Kaplan 1994:17); local feminisms that have "abandoned the myth of global sisterhood and acknowledged profound differences in women's lives and in the meanings of feminism cross-nationally" (Basu 1995:3); multicultural feminisms that challenge hegemonic Euro-American formulations (Mohanty 2003); and intersectional approaches that privilege "lived experience," in all its variety, as the primary criterion for the analysis of inequalities (Collins 2009).

Many of these subjectivist critiques share a "decolonizing" approach to feminism that replaces "general and abstract conceptions of gender and identity" with a focus on "important differences among local, cultural understandings of these ideas." This approach seeks to build a transnational feminist movement based on "the complexity and richness of diversity of experiences and identities" while "challenging universalist methods, practices, and ways of knowing." Transnational feminism involves "normative commitments. . . . However, just which set of normative commitments is continually open for debate" (McLaren 2017:2, 8, 9, 14).

For more than two centuries, these two visions, universalist and subjectivist, have grappled both with the definition of gender equality—does it comprise a single set of ideals or multiple sets?—and with the act of definition—who has a

say in the process of identifying these ideals? This recurrent tension reflects a fundamental question about human dignity: whether to study people in terms of their own criteria of human value or in terms of the observer's criteria. Debates on this subject often revolve around the extent to which people may be unaware of their own position or interests, as defined by the observer, possibly because of cultural convictions, false consciousness, hegemony, manipulation, brainwashing, ignorance, or the microphysics of power/knowledge. Alternatively, utilitarians and phenomenologists accept subjective reports at face value and claim no grounds for disputing them. Between these positions, most social scientists try to sort out the relative merits of universalist and subjective judgments.

The tension between these judgments is the focus of considerable research. Zakia Salime (2011) and Brandon Gorman (2019), for example, have explored the competition and interaction between women's movements in North Africa that promote European-inspired ideals and movements that adopt Islamic discourses of gender equality. Rajaram and Zararia (2009) investigate three women's rights organizations in one city in India—each group drawing on leftist, feminist, or local approaches to rights—that even use different words for rights. Peggy Levitt and colleagues (2013), studying women's organizations in Peru, note how global discourses became “vernacularized” in different ways at different periods in the country's recent history. These qualitative studies highlight the contrast between universalist appeals to Western models and subjectivist appeals to the authenticity of alternative models.

However, most cross-national quantitative research on gender equality focuses either on universalist indicators, drawing on the growing body of national-level data, or subjective indicators, drawing on the large archive of cross-national individual and household surveys. Several studies have begun to address the tensions between universalist and subjective assessments of gender equality (Foa and Tanner 2011; Hayes and Boyd 2017; Inglehart, Ponarin, and Inglehart 2017; Jayachandran 2015; Tesch-Römer, Motel-Klingebiel, and Tomasik 2008). These studies examined a single gender equality index and one (or in one study, two) cross-national surveys; the current article offers the robustness of multiple data sources, analyzing seven international indices of gender equality and six cross-national surveys.

To examine whether women's experiences and attitudes track the universal definitions adopted by global indices of gender equality, we proceed in four stages, each of which involves distinct statistical analyses of the most relevant survey questions we were able to obtain. Each stage of the analysis compares universalist indices of gender equality with a different aspect of subjective equality:

1. Do women in index-unequal societies report worse life experiences than men?

2. Do women in index-unequal societies consider their countries less gender-equal than women in index-equal societies?
3. Do women's perceptions of gender equality reflect the same latent construct in different societies?
4. Has women's support for global ideals of gender equality diffused beyond index-equal societies?

These analyses find that gender equality looks quite different from the perspective of women's survey responses than from the perspective of global indices. Women around the world do not necessarily share the concept of gender equality that universalist indices measure and promote. This study is descriptive rather than causal or normative. It does not attempt to explain these findings or advocate for either universalist or subjectivist approaches but instead documents tensions between these approaches, raising issues for future research.

## Data

The article draws on all available international gender equality indices and cross-regional surveys that include items relevant to women's experience and attitudes. Among gender indices, we present our primary findings using the GII, the international community's preeminent and most widely cited measure of women's position in society. The United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report has ranked each country on the basis of this index annually since 2010 and calculated the index retrospectively for the years 1995, 2000, and 2005. The GII is intended to combine “three critical dimensions for women—reproductive health, empowerment and labour market participation— . . . in one synthetic index” drawing on five indicators: maternal mortality ratio, adolescent birth rate, female-to-male ratios in secondary and higher education, women's percentage of parliamentary seats, and women's labor force participation (UNDP 2010). These indicators are combined to create a single score for each country (Gaye et al. 2010). This study has inverted and standardized the index so that positive scores reflect greater gender equality and negative scores reflect lesser gender equality, for consistency with other gender equality indices (van Staveren 2013). Results for GII are presented in the main text; results for the following gender equality indices are discussed in the text and presented in the supplemental material (also standardized for comparison across indices) as checks for robustness:

Cingranelli-Richards (Cingranelli, Richards, and Clay 2014) indices of women's economic rights (WECON) and women's political rights (WOPOL), part of the CIRI Human Rights Data Project, assessing each country for each year between 1981 and 2011; Gender Equality Index (Foa and Tanner 2011), calculated for the years 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005, and 2010 as part

of the Indices of Social Development produced by the International Institute of Social Studies at Erasmus University in Rotterdam, Netherlands;

Global Gender Gap (Schwab et al. 2015), published by the World Economic Forum each year since 2006;

Social Institutions and Gender Index (Branisa, Klasen, and Ziegler 2009; Kolev, Nowacka, and Ferrant 2014; OECD Development Centre 2012), developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Centre, calculated for non-OECD countries in 2009, 2012, and 2014;

Varieties of Democracy (Coppedge et al. 2018), Women Political Empowerment Index, Version 8, covering each year from 1900 to 2017;

World Bank (2018), Country Policy and Institutional Assessment, Gender Equality Rating, available in the World Bank's World Development Indicators data set, covering 75 to 81 poor countries in the years 2005 to 2014.

To compare index-equality with subjective-equality, we examined the six largest cross-regional, nationally representative surveys that we could identify and obtain, listed here in alphabetical order:

Demographic and Health Surveys (2018), fielded over many years in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. A question on wife beating was asked in 67 countries with 2,505,490 respondents between 1997 and 2015.

Gallup International Association (2000, 2006), Voice of the People survey, a cross-national survey conducted almost every year since 2000. Questions about gender equality and related attitudes were asked in 2000 (53,273 respondents in 59 countries) and 2006 (60,593 respondents in 63 countries).

Gallup World Poll (2016), billed as the world's largest survey and comprising annual samples in 166 countries over 2006 to 2015, with a total decade-long sample size of 1,558,530 respondents. Individual-level responses were not available for this study, which relies on the mean response for each gender for each country-year.

Pew Global Attitudes Project (2009–2012), with more than two dozen countries selected from every continent. A question on life satisfaction (2009) was asked in 25 countries, with 26,271 respondents, and questions on women's rights (2010 and 2012) were asked in 28 countries, with 30,288 respondents.

World Health Survey (2004), fielded by the World Health Organization. A question on control over important matters in one's life was asked in 47 countries in 2004, with 230,398 respondents.

World Values Survey (2014), waves 5 and 6, 2005 to 2014, the world's most comprehensive cross-national

social-scientific survey. A question on freedom was asked in 102 countries, with 332,996 respondents; a question on life satisfaction was asked in 103 countries, with 337,855 respondents; and a series of questions on gender-related attitudes were asked in 79 to 97 countries, with 155,652 to 292,270 respondents.

Within each survey, we draw on the items that speak most directly to women's experiences of and attitudes toward gender equality. None of these items are included in more than one survey, so each survey is analyzed separately. Where multiple items speak to the same research question, the analyses are presented side by side as a check on the robustness of the findings from any single survey. Some of the survey items are binary, and others are ordinal; we have retained the original response categories. Survey items were reverse-coded where necessary to place universalist responses consistently at the same end of the scale.

For each survey, we identified individual characteristics for use as control variables in hierarchical models. For consistency across surveys, we recoded these characteristics (where available) as follows:

Age: in years (18–80);

Educational attainment: no education (0), some primary (1), some secondary (2), some tertiary or more (3);

Gender: man (0), woman (1);

Household income (or household wealth, if income was not recorded): below median category or lowest tertile in each country (–1), median category or middle tertile (0), above median category or upper tertile (1);

Religiosity: importance of religion in one's life: not at all important (1), not very important (2), rather important (3), very important (4).

These surveys were merged with gender equality indices by country-year; where an index was not available for a given year, we used the index value for the adjacent year. (Results were similar without the inclusion of adjacent-year values.)

## Results

### *Do Women in Index-Unequal Societies Report Worse Life Experiences Than Men?*

*No, there are few significant differences in the life experience ratings of women and men in index-unequal societies.*

To gauge subjective life experience, we identified all cross-national survey items aspiring to measure broad assessments of freedom, choice, control, and life satisfaction.

Control over one's life:

Gallup World Poll, 2006–2015: In this country, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your freedom to choose



what you do with your life? (0 = dissatisfied, 1 = satisfied).

World Health Survey, 2004 (item Q8000): How often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life? Important things in life may be related to job, family, health (reverse-coded so that 1 = very often to 5 = never).

World Values Survey, 2005–2014 (item A173): Some people feel they have completely free choice and control over their lives, while other people feel that what they do has no real effect on what happens to them. Please use this scale where 1 means no choice at all and 10 means a great deal of choice to indicate how much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out.

Life satisfaction:

Gallup World Poll, 2006–2015: Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. Suppose we say that the top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you, and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time, assuming that the higher the step the better you feel about your life, and the lower the step the worse you feel about it? Which step comes closest to the way you feel?

Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2009 (item Q2): Next, please tell me how satisfied you are with your life overall—would you say you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied? (reverse-coded so that 1 = very dissatisfied and 4 = very satisfied).

World Values Survey, 2005–2014 (item A170): All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Using this card on which 1 means you are completely dissatisfied and 10 means you are completely satisfied, where would you put your satisfaction with your life as a whole?

Country-level means of women's and men's responses to these questions tracked one another closely, with women reporting slightly less control and slightly greater satisfaction than men (Figures S1–S8 in supplemental material). On a global scale, these results confirmed findings of previous studies on gender differences in these indicators (Arrosa and Gandelman 2016; Graham and Chattopadhyay 2013; Matteucci and Vieira Lima 2014; Meisenberg and Woodley 2015; Seguino 2007; Tesch-Römer et al. 2008; Zuckerman, Li, and Diener 2017; Zweig 2015).

Universalist approaches to gender equality lead us to expect women to report less positive life assessments than men in countries that are less index-equal. However, individual-level hierarchical linear models controlling for age, education,

household income, and religiosity (where available) failed to find a consistent correlation between index-equality and gender differences in life assessment (Tables S1–S8 in supplemental material). The marginal effect of being a woman, displayed across different levels of the Gender Inequality Index in Figure 1, shows that in three of four survey items, women assessed their lives no more negatively, relative to men's assessments, in index-unequal countries than in index-equal countries. The exception was the World Values Survey item on control over one's life (Figure 1B). Other global gender indices generated similar patterns of marginal effects (Figure S9 in supplemental material). Further details of this and the article's other analyses are available on request.

These results constitute an important nonfinding consistent with several similar studies on this subject using a variety of indicators (Graham and Chattopadhyay 2013; Matteucci and Vieira Lima 2014; Meisenberg and Woodley 2015): Women do not consistently report lower levels of control or satisfaction than men in countries that global gender indices rate as gender-unequal.

We leave possible explanations for this nonfinding for future research. Here, we turn next to a survey question that asked women directly if their society had achieved gender equality.

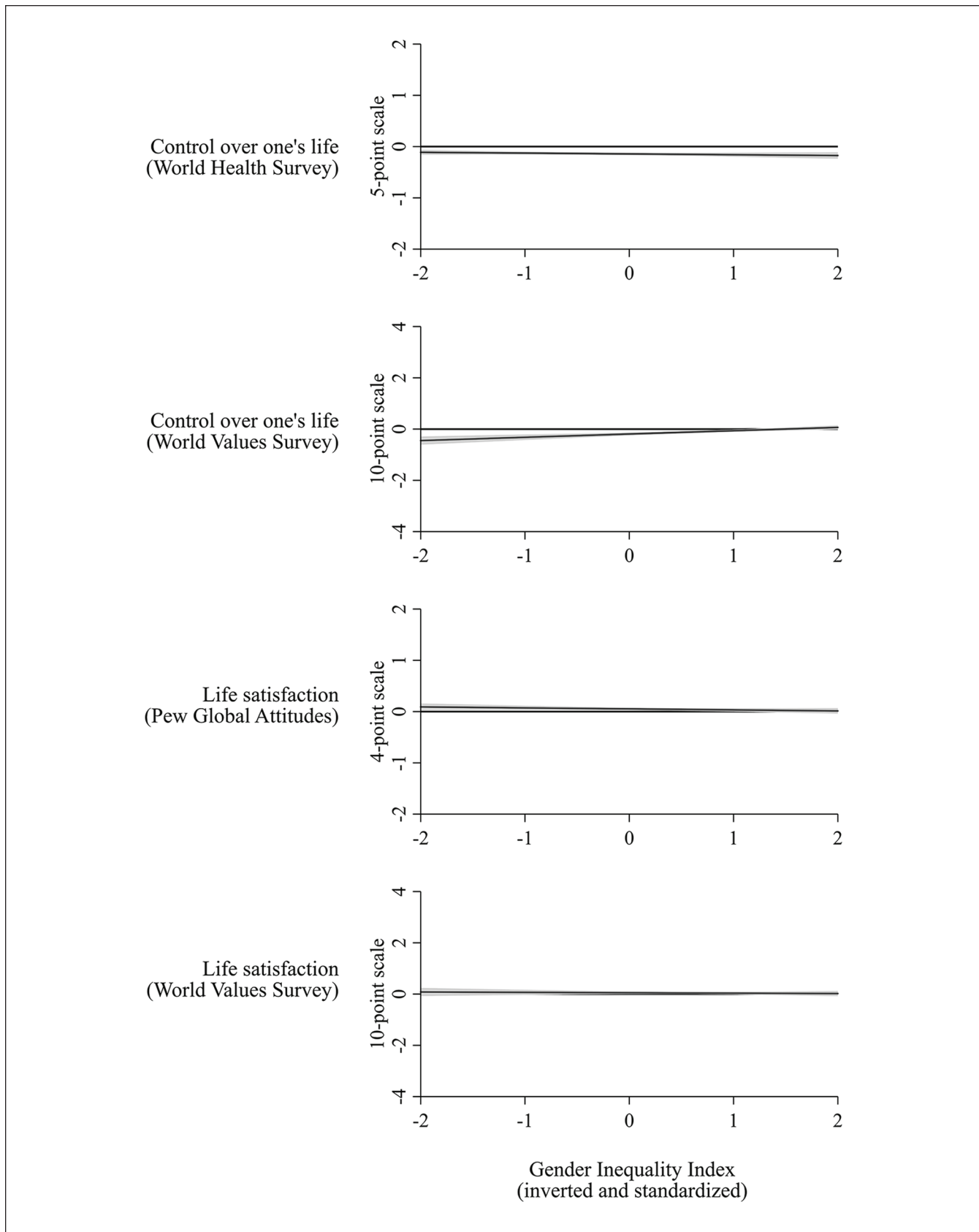
### *Do Women in Index-Unequal Societies Consider Their Countries Less Gender-Equal Than Women in Index-Equal Societies?*

*No, women in index-unequal societies were more likely than women in index-equal societies to report that women have equal rights with men in their country.*

We were able to identify only one cross-national survey that included a direct assessment of gender equality in the respondent's country:

Gallup International Association, 2006 (item Q9A): I'd like you to tell me whether you agree or disagree? Women have equal rights with men in [your country] (reverse-coded so that 0 = disagree and 1 = agree).

Women's responses to this question did not match well with global gender indices. In fact, the bivariate correlation (–.32) and Spearman's rank-order correlation (–.33) between these percentages and the Gender Inequality Index (inverted so that higher values indicate more gender equality) were negative and statistically significant: Fewer women considered women to have equal rights with men in index-equal countries than in countries that the index rated as gender-unequal. Figure 2 illustrates this disparity: Countries that ranked high on index-equality (the top of the right column) often ranked low on subjective-equality (the bottom of the left column) and vice versa. None of the other gender-equality indices were positively correlated with women's assessments of gender-equality, either in



**Figure 1.** Marginal effect of being a woman on self-assessment of control and life satisfaction.



**Figure 2.** Comparing survey-based and index-based rankings of gender equality, 2005–2006. The left column lists countries from most gender-equal to least gender-equal, based on women's responses to a 2006 Gallup International Association survey. The right column lists countries from most gender-equal to least gender-equal, based on the 2005 Gender Inequality Index. Steep lines connecting the two columns indicate mismatches between women's subjective rankings and the index's universalistic rankings.

the 2006 survey or with slightly different question wording in 2000 (Figures S10, S11 in supplemental material). This finding is confirmed in hierarchical linear models, controlling for individual-level age and education and the country-level percentage of men rating the country gender-equal (Tables S9, S10 in supplemental material).

This finding suggests that women in index-unequal countries may conceive of gender equality differently than the factors that are included in gender-equality indices. To examine whether that is the case, we turn to the cross-regional survey with the largest number of gender-related questions.

### **Do Women's Perceptions of Gender Equality Reflect the Same Latent Construct in Different Societies?**

*No, women's conceptualization of gender equality in index-equal countries does not reflect women's conceptualizations in index-unequal countries.*

Recent waves of the World Values Survey included eight questions on gender-related attitudes, the most of any large-scale cross-regional survey:

- World Values Survey, 2005–2014 (responses were recoded when needed to align the high end of the scale with the expectations of index-equality):
- When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women (recoded so that 1 = agree, 2 = neither, 3 = disagree) (item C001).
- Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay (1 = strongly agree, 4 = strongly disagree) (item D057).
- On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do (1 = strongly agree, 4 = strongly disagree) (item D059).
- A university education is more important for a boy than for a girl (1 = strongly agree, 4 = strongly disagree) (item D060).
- Men make better business executives than women do (1 = strongly agree, 4 = strongly disagree) (item D078).
- I am going to name a number of organizations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: Is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all? The women's movement (reverse-coded so that 1 = none at all, 4 = a great deal) (item E069.15).
- Many things are desirable, but not all of them are essential characteristics of democracy. Please tell me for each of the following things how essential you think it is as a characteristic of democracy: Women have the same rights as men (combined with the question "Having a democratic political system"; recoded so that 1 = an essential characteristic of democracy and democratic political system very good or fairly good; 0 for other responses) (items E233 and E217).
- Please tell me for each of the following statements whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between: For a man to beat his wife (reverse-coded so that 1 = always justifiable, 10 = never justifiable) (item F199).

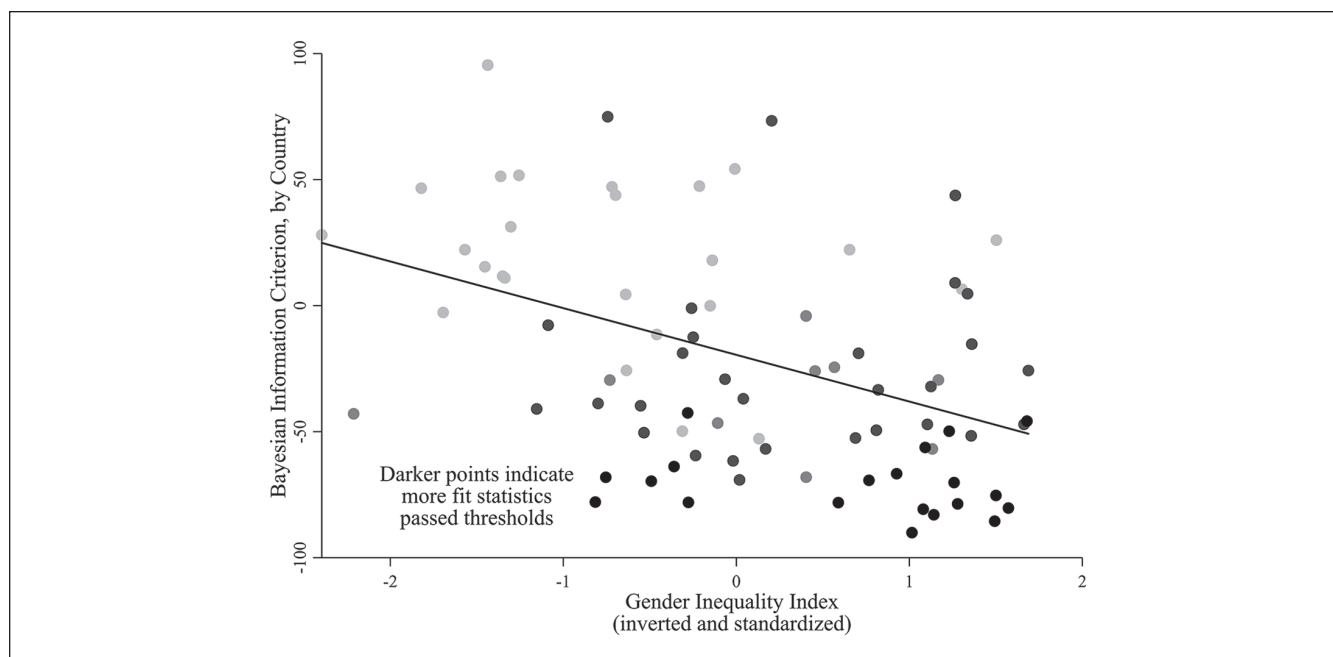
Several recent studies have questioned the measurement invariance of gender attitudes in cross-national surveys (André, Gesthuizen, and Scheepers 2013; Constantin and Voicu 2015; Inglehart and Norris 2003; Lomazzi 2018; van Vlimmeren, Moors, and Gelissen 2017; Weziak-Bialowolska 2015). Most of these studies aimed to overcome measurement invariance issues to construct a single cross-national index of subjective-equality. Our approach is different. Rather than assess whether a single latent construct of subjective-equality exists throughout the world, we seek to examine whether women's subjective understandings of gender inequality in different countries are associated with index-equality. The traditional method to assess measurement invariance involves multigroup confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). To explore patterns of model fit across countries, however, we ran CFA models for each country-year separately (Figure S12 in supplemental material). This approach had the advantage of retaining all the country-years in which these items were included, whereas multigroup CFA models did not converge when all country-years were analyzed simultaneously. Our CFA models treated the items as categorical variables, except the 10-point scale on wife beating, and were estimated using the weighted least squares means and variance adjusted estimator (WLSMV) to account for the categorical nature of the survey items.

We then plotted the fit statistics from these 96 CFAs against index-equality measures to examine the association between model fit and index-equality. The primary fit statistic for the model, the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), is plotted in Figure 3 against the Global Inequality Index. A BIC score above 0 is considered an unacceptably poor fit; the more negative the BIC score, the better the fit (Raftery 1995).<sup>1</sup> Shading of the scatterplot indicates the number of other fit statistics that are considered satisfactory: Comparative Fit Index (CFI) > .95, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) > .95, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) < .05 (Bollen forthcoming; Cheung and Rensvold 2002; Hooper, Coughlan, and Mullen 2008). Because of the large sample sizes, we do not report whether chi-square *p* value > .05, but the pattern is similar if this additional fit statistic is also included. (The fit statistics for each country-year are listed in Table S11 in supplemental material.)

As illustrated by the downward-sloping fitted line in Figure 3, the World Values Survey's gender-equality items

<sup>1</sup>One outlier case is omitted from the scatterplot in Figures 3 and S13 but included in calculations for the fitted lines and correlations with index-equality: Russia (2011), with a Bayesian Information Criterion statistic of 168 and an inverted, standardized Gender Inequality Index rating of −.02.





**Figure 3.** Fit statistics for women's latent gender-equality attitudes by country. Countries rated as more gender-unequal by the Gender Inequality Index (left) are more likely than countries rated as more gender-equal (right) to have positive Bayesian Information Criterion statistics for gender-related attitudes in the World Values Survey (2005–2014), indicating worse model fit. Other fit statistics display the same pattern: Fewer of them pass standard thresholds in index-unequal countries than in index-equal countries.

hang together far better in index-equal countries than in countries that the Gender Inequality Index rated low on gender equality. The BIC is far more negative—indicating that the indicators are more likely to measure a single latent construct—in the countries of northwest Europe, for example, than in recently decolonized countries. The other fit statistics display this pattern as well, as do the results when plotted against all but one of the other gender equality indices (Figure S13 in supplemental material). Similar findings emerge with men. None of the eight items' significance levels is correlated with index-equality, so differences in fit are not due to any particular item but to respondents' overall understandings of gender equality, as reflected in the model fit.

We propose that measurement invariance has substantive implications: Differences in fit suggest that gender-related questions in the World Values Survey do not represent the same single underlying gender-equality attitude outside of index-equal countries.

Thus far, the data sets have limited us to cross-sectional analyses. To explore the possibility of change in women's attitudes toward gender-equality, we turn to a set of gender-related survey items that have been fielded in multiple world regions for the longest span of time.

### *Has Women's Support for Global Ideals of Gender Equality Diffused beyond Index-Equal Societies?*

*Yes, at least one global ideal of gender equality, opposition to wife beating, appears to have diffused recently beyond index-equal societies.*

The right not to be beaten by one's husband emerged from a feminist emphasis on women's physical security (Merry 2007; Schechter 1982; Tierney 1982). This right has become widely acknowledged over the past half-century but not universally so, as shown in a series of questions asked in the Demographic and Health Survey over the past two decades:

Demographic and Health Survey, 1997–2014 (items v744a–v744e) (recoded as a single variable so that 0 = justified in any or all of the scenarios, 1 = justified in none of the scenarios):

- Wife beating is justified if she burns the food, 0 = not justified, 1 = justified.
- Wife beating is justified if she argues with him, 0 = not justified, 1 = justified.
- Wife beating is justified if she goes out without telling him, 0 = not justified, 1 = justified.
- Wife beating is justified if she neglects the children, 0 = not justified, 1 = justified.
- Wife beating is justified if she refuses to have sex with him, 0 = not justified, 1 = justified.

We follow the logic of each of these items and treat the series of questions as a binary: whether wife beating is justified or not under any of these scenarios. (Similar findings result from an additive scale that assumes each item is equally important.) As several studies have noted, the wording in these items is ambiguous: Some respondents may have understood justified to mean that wife beating was condoned by the community at large, and respondents may have differed in

**Table 1.** Hierarchical Linear Model of Women's Opposition to Wife Beating.

Independent Variables	Time Period	
	1997–2009	2010–2015
National-level variables		
Gender Inequality Index	.179* (.09)	.095 (.08)
Percent of men opposing wife beating	.039*** (.01)	.057*** (.07)
Individual-level variables		
Age	.009*** (.00)	.008*** (.00)
Education	.315*** (.01)	.281*** (.00)
Household wealth	.259*** (.00)	.231*** (.00)
Constant	–2.797*** (.55)	–4.108*** (.47)
Number of country-years	22	43
Number of respondents	323,831	732,615

Survey data source: Demographic and Health Survey.

Note: Gender Inequality Index is inverted and standardized for consistency with other gender indices. Standard errors are listed in parentheses below coefficients.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

their interpretation of the scenarios (Shuler, Lenzi, and Yount 2011; Shuler, Yount, and Lenzi 2012; Yount et al. 2013). Notwithstanding these ambiguities, two clear findings emerge from these surveys. First, a large proportion of women in some countries considered some wife beating justified under some circumstances, including a majority of women in 43 of 120 country-years where these questions were asked. Second, there was a clear rise over the past two decades in responses treating wife beating as not justified in all of the scenarios presented in the survey (Pierotti 2013). (A similar pattern was visible for men as well in the smaller number of samples that included men.)

The turn against wife beating was not due to cohort replacement (younger women replacing the older generation in the survey sample): In fact, as shown in hierarchical linear models in Table 1, older women were slightly more likely to call wife beating unjustified than younger women (confirming findings in Pierotti 2013; Waltermauer 2012; contrary to findings in Hayes and Boyd 2017). The coefficient for age is also positive and statistically significant when education is removed from the models.

Over the same time period, index-equality also increased in these countries, but that does not appear to have driven the dramatic changes in survey responses. In early surveys (Table 1, Model 1), the Gender Inequality Index was significantly associated with women's likelihood to consider wife beating unjustified: Opposition to wife beating was more widespread in countries with higher index-equality. Beginning around

2010 (other cut-points worked equally well), this association was smaller and no longer statistically significant (Table 1, Model 2). Similar results emerged with other global indices of gender equality: In surveys since 2010, the association between index-equality and women's opposition to wife beating was smaller in magnitude and/or less statistically significant than in surveys prior to 2010 for all but one of eight indices (Tables S12–S18 in supplemental material). In recent years, opposition to wife beating seems to have diffused beyond the index-equal countries where it used to be concentrated.

## Conclusion

There has long been a mismatch between the priorities of universalist gender-equality activists and the priorities of many of the women on whose behalf they mobilize, dating back to the origins of feminism in the late eighteenth century. This mismatch highlights a fundamental tension between the universalist value of gender egalitarianism as reflected in global gender indices and the subjectivist value of empowering women to pursue their own priorities, which may or may not include gender egalitarianism.

This article documents four empirical aspects of this mismatch, comparing seven global indices of gender equality and women's responses to six cross-national surveys over the past two decades. We label these two contrasting approaches to gender equality as *index-equality*—global measures of egalitarian gender arrangements—and *subjective-equality*—how women experience and personally evaluate aspects of gender equality.

We find that index-equality was not consistently associated with women's experience of control over their lives or life satisfaction relative to men's experiences. In societies that were index-unequal—that is, societies where global advocates considered women worst off—women reported similar levels of life satisfaction as men and similar levels of control over their lives.

According to Gallup International Association surveys, women in index-unequal societies called their countries gender-equal as often as and sometimes more often than women in index-equal societies. In the World Values Survey, women's responses on eight gender equality questions were less likely in index-unequal societies than in index-equal societies to form a single latent construct, casting doubt on the presence of a single, underlying latent attitude toward gender equality.

Still, women's attitudes on gender equality may be shifting. Over the past two decades, women have become more likely to consider wife beating unjustified, according to data from the Demographic and Health Survey. Prior to 2010, women's responses on this subject were correlated with index-equality: Women in index-equal societies were more likely than women in index-unequal societies to consider wife beating unjustified. Since then, however, this correlation has

weakened, suggesting that opposition to wife beating may have spread from its origins in Western universalist feminism to index-unequal societies as well.

This article does not address possible causes of this shift or the normative implications, which we leave for future research. Instead, we offer these findings as descriptive documentation of tensions between two visions of gender equality.

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## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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