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Glass ceiling is a metaphor used to represent an invisible barrier that keeps a given demographic (typically applied to minorities) from rising beyond a certain level in a hierarchy.

The metaphor was first coined by feminists in reference to barriers in the careers of high-achieving women. In the US, the concept is sometimes extended to refer to obstacles hindering the advancement of minority women, as well as minority men. Minority women often find the most difficulty in "breaking the glass ceiling" because they lie at the intersection of two historically marginalized groups: women and people of color. East Asian and East Asian American news outlets have coined the term "bamboo ceiling" to refer to the obstacles that all East Asian Americans face in advancing their careers. Similarly, a set of invisible obstacles posed against refugees' efforts to workforce integration is coined "canvas ceiling".

There is a scarcity of women at the apex of political power, as well as a lack of methods to disentangle the potential sources of this under-representation. This article suggests a four-step method to test for whether women’s under-representation can be explained by the existence of a glass ceiling. We emphasize that this concept implies discrimination in promotions within the political organization, that the discriminatory promotions increase in severity at the top levels of power, and that they increase in severity during an individual’s career trajectory. The proposed method is applied to subnational politics in Sweden, a long-standing world leader in women’s descriptive representation. The results support the conjecture that a glass ceiling is hindering elected women’s rise to political power in this context.

Many existing tools that track gender equality use only one measure of women’s political leadership: the proportion of women in the lower house of a national parliament. This measure is useful to some extent as a signpost. It shows us where there are glaring problem spots (for example, that 27 countries around the world have less than 10 percent women in parliament) and where there are interesting stories of success. But looking at this measure alone gives only a narrow view of women’s ability to engage in the political system, hold different types of office, and attain powerful positions within political parties or government institutions.

The SDG Gender Index, launched by Equal Measures 2030 earlier this year, offers a new and more expansive look at the range of gaps in women’s political leadership around the world, across executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. The index examines not only the proportion of women in parliament, but also the proportion of women holding cabinet-level or equivalent positions and women’s representation on a country’s highest court.

Looking at this set of indicators together paints a fuller if more troubling picture of the current status of women’s political leadership. In the 129 countries included in the index, women hold only around 1 in 5 of all of these positions globally (22 percent of seats in parliament, 21 percent of cabinet posts, and 23 percent of seats on the highest courts in 2017-2018).

The index, which captures a wide range of issues critical to women and girls lives across 14 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals from maternal mortality to women’s access to internet, finds that no country in the world has yet achieved the promise of gender equality. And no one country scores consistently well across all measures. But this is particularly true when it comes to women’s participation in parliaments, cabinets or ministries, and the judiciary: digging into the data reveals that women are struggling to reach the highest ranks of political power all around the world. It turns out that women’s lack of access to leadership positions is a common problem area across nearly all countries, of all income levels and in all regions, and it does not track with countries GDP, or with high scores on women’s education, health, or legal equality.

Even countries that are top performers overall on the SDG Gender Index (including Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden) have poor or failing scores on at least one measure of women’s political leadership. There are just five countries (France, New Zealand, Norway, Rwanda, and Slovenia) out of the 129 that we studied that have more than 30 percent women in parliament, cabinets, and the judiciary.

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It is a striking finding that no country in the world is close to parity on these crucial indicators of women’s access to political leadership and it reinforces the importance of looking beyond the measure of women in parliaments alone when assessing how a country is doing in terms of women’s ability to hold office and lead. Many countries that do exceptionally well on one measure of women’s political leadership do quite poorly on another: Canada has recently reached full parity in its cabinet, but parliament is made up of only 26 percent women. Jamaica has more female justices than male on its highest court but has around 17 percent women in both its parliament and cabinet. And Namibia is one of the best scoring countries in the world, close to full parity, in terms of women parliament, but not a single woman sits on its highest court.