

**Democracy is in retreat worldwide. Does it matter for human well-being?**

Democracy in and of itself, cannot impact human well-being. It is the act of governing a democracy and those assigned with that act, that can affect the outcomes of a democracy and its subsequent impact on human well-being. I will examine the impact of democracy on human well-being from the perspective of two developing countries, namely India and Brazil, both classified as flawed democracies, with a 2021 democracy index of 6.6 and 6.9, respectively (*World Population Review*). I choose these two countries to underline that democracy, even if flawed, is evidence for human well-being. Universal suffrage and a pluralistic media environment are fundamental democratic institutions and I will evaluate whether the presence of these two democratic institutions improves human well-being in the respective countries (Hyde 2). It is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate the impact of democracy on all aspects of human well-being so I will focus on the well-being of women, and evaluate their well-being, on grounds of education and health outcomes.

First, I assess if universal suffrage improves women's well-being. Previous research has established that the opportunity to participate in a democratic electoral process can be a positive indicator of well-being as it allows for outcomes to be closer to citizen preferences (Dorn et al 505-26; Orviska et al 494). In 2018, surprisingly, in two-thirds of India's State elections, the turnout of women was higher than that of men (Vaishnav). Based on this, it can be argued that the right to vote in Indian elections, has had a positive impact on women's likelihood to be engaged in politics and political outcomes. A politically engaged female voter bank would invariably mean that those standing for elections would have to accommodate women-centric policies in their manifesto and implement *at least* some of those policies to win their support in subsequent re-elections. In the Indian State of Bihar,

women took collective action towards coalescing support for an anti-alcohol ban as “rampant alcoholism was devastating their families and communities” (Anand). In India, both the ruling and the opposition parties have become increasingly strategic in positioning themselves as pro-women and the current ruling party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has been focusing its efforts on improving access to toilets and clean fuel for cooking, in addition to extending welfare subsidies to encourage the education of girls. This clearly reflects that when women are politically mobilized, they can positively influence pro-women policies that can improve their well-being in education and health.

Second, I assess how a pluralistic media environment impacts women’s well-being. Women continue to be under-represented “in media content, both as sources and subjects” (“Trends in media pluralism”). At the fourth UN World Conference held in Beijing in 1995, media was categorized as “critical for the advancement of women” (Macharia and Montiel). To influence social and cultural attitudes towards gender equality and social justice, and to instigate behavioral change in society, women’s representation in the media must change. This sentiment was reiterated in 2005 at the second World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) where the urgent need for “the full participation of women in the Information Society” was widely acknowledged as essential to “women’s participation in decision-making processes” (“Gender Agenda for Communication Policy”). To illustrate the potential of media pluralism - a fundamental institution of democracy, and its role in promoting the well-being of women, the example of Brazil would be appropriate. Brazil stands 93<sup>rd</sup> globally on the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Index gap and has closed 69.5% of its overall gender gap (*Global Gender Gap Report* 35). Furthermore, on the sub index of health, Brazil has closed 98% of the gap, and has achieved parity at all levels of education. This improvement coincides with Brazil’s improved model of public communication, financed by

the Federal Government, promising institutional guarantees of freedom and promoting a broad segment of community media (“Freedom of Expression in Brazil”). In light of the Coronavirus pandemic in particular, Osorio asserts, “Awareness of the profound relationship between the health of the people and the right to information materialized the need to advocate for democracy” (“In Brazil”). The pandemic has reasserted the importance of local journalism to communities, and the significant role, access to information can play in their well-being (Borges).

It can be concluded that while “the long democratic recession is deepening” and 2021 marks “the 15<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of decline in global freedom”, the causality of democracy to human well-being, in particular on women’s well-being, cannot be ignored (*Freedom in the World* 1). Further research may be needed to investigate and establish the role, universal suffrage has continued to play in improving education and health outcomes for women in India – keeping all other factors constant. It may also be prudent to assess through further research how a pluralistic media environment and community journalism helped close the education and health gap in Brazil.

It is important to recognize that “a country does not have to be deemed fit *for* democracy; rather, it has to become fit *through* democracy” and that even if democracy is in decline, it is still worth pursuing for human well-being (Sen 4).

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