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# Women's Professional Leadership in Law and Economics

Summary of an Evidence Review of Effective Interventions to  
Advance Women's Leadership

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Research, evaluation and learning are core components of Co-Impact's work. As we embark on a concerted effort to contribute to achieving gender equality at scale in the global south, we need to learn about and build on the existing evidence and knowledge. As part of our broader learning effort, we commissioned a series of rapid reviews of literature by area experts to help us understand major trends as well as new directions about what we know works - and doesn't work - to achieve gender-equitable outcomes at scale in the global south. While these reviews serve as a core component of our evolving thinking, they do not represent official opinions of Co-Impact.

Given that these reviews are focused on critical evidence of initiatives that have been evaluated at scale, we understand there are experiences and knowledge that may not be captured in these documents. We hope to invest in additional reviews in the future to cover other areas of inquiry, and also to build on a wider spectrum of evidence and perspectives.

This important work underpins the development of our own research and learning strategy, in which we will prioritize the questions and needs of practitioners working to achieve gender equitable outcomes, and also to amplify the voices and experiences of women, girls, and other marginalized groups. We hope that this evidence and knowledge, in turn, will contribute to building the global evidence base.

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## Background

Law and economics are both multi-faceted fields which traverse public and private sectors and academia and applied work. In addition to being highly influential, professional leadership positions in these fields also tend to be highly-remunerated and respected. Yet, the available evidence suggests that, globally, progress on women's leadership in law and economics has been uneven, and at times even regressive. Despite some notable improvements in women's representation in electoral politics, as well as steady increases in the numbers of women entering the legal profession and ascending to judgeships, there have been far fewer advancements (and even some notable regression) when it comes to women entering the field of economics, let alone ascending to leadership positions.

This stalled progress is highly concerning for a number of reasons, including the fact that women's right to meaningfully participate in governance, policymaking, and public life on equal terms to men is a basic human right. Articles 7 and 9 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) binds States parties to eliminate gender-based discrimination and to improve the accountability and gender-responsiveness of institutions by ensuring that women participate in governance and policymaking on equal terms to men. Additionally, the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) clearly establishes that women's equal participation in public life and decision-making is a key lever for realizing all other elements of gender equality. More recently, the United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development crystallized calls for gender equality in all spheres of public and private life (SDG 5), and underscored the importance of representative institutions (SDG 16).

Using a rights-based approach as its starting point, this review asks what is being done to increase women's representation in leadership, particularly within the domains of law and economics in the Global South. Our findings are developed from a rapid scoping review of academic and grey literature on (a) strategies for promoting women's professional leadership in the fields of law and economics across the Global South, and (b) evidence linking women's increased professional participation and leadership in law and economics, to institutional and normative outcomes in favour of gender equality.

In doing so, this scoping review finds that while the evidence base on effective interventions to advance women's leadership remains limited, the reviewed literature suggests that holistic, long-term, and locally-driven interventions are most effective for expanding women's professional leadership in law and economics. Furthermore, this review finds that while tracking clear trajectories of change between women's leadership and broader gender equality gains is a methodologically complex task, a triangulation of different literatures indicates a connection between women's leadership and the amplification of gender equality goals, women's increased access to services, and the transformation of broader gender norms.

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# Findings: Initiatives to Address Gender Disparity in Law and Economics in the Global South

## Voluntary & Mandatory Gender Parity Policies

- The available evidence is primarily limited to political quotas, which have existed longer and are now more widely prevalent throughout the world (half of the world's countries have implemented some form of a political gender quota), thus allowing for more comparative research. In contrast, there is less evidence but an emerging literature around corporate quotas, as well as some experimentation with judicial quotas and quotas on a variety of hiring or promotion committees.
- The growing evidence base on political quotas indicates that quotas advance women's descriptive as well as substantive representation, strengthen institutional accountability to gender equality, and increase investments in issues that disproportionately affect women's ability to fully participate in economic and social spheres, such as in health and poverty alleviation.
- However, research also indicates a potential for backlash, depending on a number of societal and institutional conditions, although systematic research on the conditions that prompt or prevent backlash is limited.
- While the evidence on corporate quotas remains nascent, it appears that while these can augment women's representation in boardrooms and potentially shape decision-making and innovation, there is no substantive evidence of their influence on company's gender norms nor of positive effects on women not directly impacted by the quota.
- Overall, the literature on gender parity policies is promising, but caution is needed. While gender parity policies are important for increasing institutional accountability, they are by no means a "silver bullet" for fast tracking gender equality and women's leadership.

## Networks & Trainings

- Network-building and training programs appear to be the most popular and widespread of interventions, although evidence on the impacts of these initiatives remains mostly anecdotal, especially within the literature from the Global South (and particularly in contrast with the literature on Global North interventions to increase women's representation in economics, which is substantial).
- In particular, there is a strong body of research on the positive impacts of mentoring programs, especially for young women economists (although this research primarily comes from the Global North) and women judges (where we do see more evidence from the Global South).
- The literature on network- and capacity-building interventions illustrates the prominent role that women's associations play in supporting women's access to and success in leadership positions, including in the fields of law and economics. However,

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there is limited evidence on the impact of initiatives by women's associations. Notably, limited evidence of impact does not imply lack of impact; as this review highlights, women's associations and local women's organizations perhaps are chronically underfunded.

- The available evidence suggests that there is an important role for network-building and training programs in supporting women in leadership. Still, the literature is also clear about the need for holistic approaches that simultaneously seek to catalyze institutional reform and accountability, rather than those which approach women's underrepresentation in leadership as a problem that can be resolved through individual capacity-building initiatives alone.

### **Institutional Reform**

- A strong body of evidence illustrates that gender-sensitive workplace policies (such as child care and parental leave) are crucial for women's political and economic equality, including their professional trajectories.
- There is also some evidence on the importance of transparent and fair selection processes for supporting women's advancement in law and economics, although this evidence remains somewhat anecdotal.
- Existing evidence indicates the promise of affirmative action policies that seek to expand women and other marginalized groups' access to education, although these have proven more effective when paired with financial assistance.
- Research around institutional reforms highlights the need to understand the specific barriers women face in entering and advancing in the fields of law and economics, and therefore where reforms are most needed. In most contexts though, the research suggests that various "leaks" throughout the professional pipeline will require ongoing, synchronous, and iterative attention before increases in women's leadership in law and economics are evident.

## **Findings: Evidence of Institutional and Normative Outcomes**

### **Do women leaders in law and economics amplify gender equality goals?**

- Although evidence gaps remain, research on women judges, economists, and policymakers indicates that women's presence in professional leadership is associated with the amplification of gender equality initiatives. In particular, while women's substantive representation does not follow "automatically" from their descriptive representation, evidence suggests that women in leadership tend to bolster attention paid to, and investment in, issues that women tend to prioritize, particularly under certain enabling conditions.

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- The grey literature indicates that women's professional associations are critical sites for not only advancing women's professional leadership, but also leveraging women's leadership to advocate for broader gender equality goals and issue areas relevant to the given profession.
  - While the literature is clear that women in leadership are associated with the amplification of gender equality goals, it is also clear that researchers and donors must move beyond uni-dimensional understandings of gender. Intersectional analysis is needed to understand women leaders' complex identities, incentives, and priorities, which often but do not always, result in advocacy around gender equality goals.
  - The likelihood and ability for women leaders to amplify gender equality goals depends on a variety of enabling social and institutional conditions. However, the evidence base on what specific conditions most matter remains relatively nascent and context-specific.

### **Do women leaders in law and economics expand women's access to services?**

- Overall, there is strong evidence that women in law and economics support women's expanded access to services, including legal and financial assistance. This is most evident in research around women judges and paralegals, which finds that women may feel more comfortable seeking services from fellow women on sensitive topics, such as gender-based violence, or feel empowered by witnessing women's leadership, as is often the case with women paralegals working on women's land rights.
- However, research on women loan officers for microfinance programs indicates that women leaders' ability to augment women's access to services depends on cultural contexts and public perceptions concerning the profession's authority (e.g, some contexts do not respect paralegals as an authoritative leadership position) and women's authority (e.g., women loan officers who are viewed as 'motherly' may lack the authority to induce loan repayments).

### **Do women leaders in law and economics improve perceptions around institutions' legitimacy?**

- There is a substantial although contested body of mostly theoretical literature questioning the relationship between leadership diversity, representation, and legitimacy. While some argue that the more representative an institution is of the public, the more likely the public will trust in the legitimacy of said institution, others caution that empirical evidence proving this relationship remains sparse.
- Some research on the diversity of judiciaries does indicate a positive relationship between representativeness and legitimacy, however this relationship remains dependent on complex social, cultural, and economic conditions, including for example a widespread perception that women are capable leaders.

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- With that said, this evidence base is significantly biased towards experiences in the global north, and primarily focuses on trust in judiciaries and policymakers. More evidence is needed elucidating experiences in the Global South, and the conditions that allow women's leadership to positively impact perceptions of institutions' legitimacy.

### **Do women leaders in law and economics contribute to the transformation of broader institutional gender norms?**

- Although tracking clear trajectories of change between women's leadership and broader gender equality gains is a methodologically complex task, available evidence indicates that women's leadership can have a significant impact on gender norms transformation.
- In particular, the evidence suggests that (a) exposure to women colleagues as well as women in leadership helps colleagues and the broader public to shift biases and adopt more egalitarian attitudes, (b) women in leadership positions in male dominated industries, especially more publicly visible positions, help inspire younger generations to pursue similar careers, and (c) compensation for promotions to leadership positions may reduce household economic inequality, thus challenging discriminatory gender norms at the household level.
- What is most evident in the literature is that norms change largely relies on the work of local and national women's movements. Instead of an instrumentalist approach to women's leadership, more coalition-based funding is needed, for example, to support women's associations.
- Furthermore, while leadership programs must be cautious about potential negative unintended consequences, more research is needed on the particular conditions that provoke or prevent backlash.

## **Conclusion**

Women continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles across diverse cultural and geographic contexts. This has become especially clear—and consequential—in the influential fields of law and economics. This review sought to ask what is being done to address this stalled or uneven progress, particularly in the Global South. In doing so, this review traces the opportunities and limitations of three key types of interventions: voluntary and mandatory gender parity policies; networks and trainings; and institutional reforms. While the evidence base connecting these interventions to measurable progress in women's representation remains patchy, it is clear that each is central to developing a more holistic, multi-level response to women's professional leadership.

Taking a rights-based approach to women's leadership as its starting point, this review also explored the existing evidence base connecting women's leadership to institutional

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and normative outcomes. While tracking clear trajectories of change between women's representation in law and economics with broader institutional and normative outcomes is a methodologically complex task, a triangulation of different literatures indicates a connection between women's leadership and gender equality advocacy, women's increased access to services, and the transformation of broader gender norms.

Rather than investing time and energy trying to "prove" that women's leadership produces knock-on benefits for others and for the wider society, it is pertinent to recall, again, that women's ability to meaningfully participate in governance, policymaking, and public life on equal terms to men is a basic human right—one that is inscribed in foundational conventions and increasingly reflected in a host of other international agreements and development platforms. And while further research is needed to address the evidence gaps highlighted in this review, there is sufficient evidence that investments in this space would do well to bolster the work of local women's organizations, including women's professional associations in law and economics, and support them in sharing learning around effective, localized, and long-term strategies for improving women's access to leadership in these domains.

## Key Messages:

### Considerations for Advancing Women's Professional Leadership in Law and Economics

- **Efforts to expand women's professional leadership and create institutional change in the field of law and economics should be driven by local women's organizations**—especially where such efforts are perceived by the wider population as uprooting gender norms. Specifically, in order to limit the risk of gender backlash and ensure desired institutional changes endure, programs should be designed in close coordination with local professional associations, as well as other local women's organizations. Women's professional networks and associations are key partners and sites for intervention, given that they serve the dual purposes of accelerating women's leadership, as well as raising awareness around issues that disproportionately affect women's abilities to fully participate in economic and social spheres. But while ample data shows that the most effective way to advance gender equality and women's empowerment is to invest directly in women's organizations, they remain chronically underfunded—often only provided with short-term funding—particularly in the Global South.
- **Effective initiatives require a thorough context analysis** in order to identify where women are facing disadvantages in their professional trajectories, and the extent to which barriers to women's entry, retention, and advancement to professional leadership positions are grounded in dynamics specific to the particular region, country, institution, and/ or professional context. Shedding light on these dynamics is key to elucidating entry points for action and pathways for change.



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- **Evidence of any particular intervention's successful impact is often accompanied by a large caveat: other interventions were also at play, indicating the importance of multi-level approaches.** These approaches include: targets from the public and private sector via gender parity policies to promote accountability to gender equality; networking and training opportunities to prepare women for the challenges they will likely face in seeking leadership in male-dominated professional fields; and systems reforms to tackle institutionalized sexism and thus ensure that women have equal opportunities in practice, not just in theory.
  - Given the often overlapping nature of women's leadership interventions, and the diversity of factors that influence the professional leadership pipeline, **tracking clear trajectories of any single interventions' impact is a methodologically complex task.** While this scoping review highlights the need to address significant evidence gaps around women's professional leadership in law and economics, the literature also highlights the importance of more flexible measurement approaches so as to better capture the impact of different strategies for advancing women's leadership.

### Tracking Institutional and Normative Outcomes from Women's Professional Leadership

- **The reviewed literature indicates growing consensus around a rights-based, rather than instrumentalist, approach to women's leadership.** From a feminist perspective, this growing consensus is welcome; however, between the latter and the methodological complexities of connecting women's leadership to broader gender equality gains, there remain significant evidence gaps connecting women's leadership in law and economics with clear institutional and normative outcomes.
- Yet, while inconclusive and somewhat patchy, **the available evidence does indicate a broad connection between women's professional leadership and gender equality advocacy, women's increased access to services, and the transformation of broader gender norms.**
- On the other hand, evidence around women's professional leadership and the legitimacy of institutions is more mixed and requires further research. Some research on the diversity of judiciaries, for example, indicates a positive relationship between representativeness and trust in the judiciary. Yet, this evidence base is significantly biased towards experiences in the Global North. **More evidence is needed elucidating experiences in the Global South, and the conditions that allow women's leadership to positively impact perceptions of institutional trust and legitimacy.**