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## World Leaders Don't Understand Women – And That's Hurting Gender Equality, Study Finds

[Newsweek](#)

Abigail Jones

For years, late night host Jay Leno conducted impromptu interviews with random people on the street, asking simple trivia questions in hopes of embarrassing them on national television. “What country did we fight in the Revolutionary War?” (One answer: “France!”) “What are people from Denmark called?” (One answer: “Denmartians?”) “What is bipartisanship?” (One answer: “It’s like, bisexual.”)

The joke stops being funny when the interview subjects are leaders in developing countries and the questions are about gender equality and women’s issues.

A new study released late Tuesday at the United Nations General Assembly questions whether policymakers in five countries are equipped with the basic information they need to advance gender equality. [Equal Measures 2030](#), a global partnership of nine organizations, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, conducted a survey of 109 policymakers in Colombia, India, Indonesia, Kenya and Senegal. Half were men, half were women, and they worked at every level of power—in central government and parliament, at the state and local levels, and as senior civil servants or in other influential fields. The results revealed that, when it came to key issues affecting girls and women, those in charge were “largely not confident in their knowledge of the facts.”



A woman takes part in a rally to protest against discrimination and violence against women on International Women's Day in Bogota, Colombia, March 8, 2016. (Reuters).

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Only about one-quarter believed they knew the maternal mortality rate in their country (the number of women who die from pregnancy or childbirth) or the percent of women in the labor force. One in eight believed they knew how many girls got married before 18. And over half were so shaky on the subject of early marriage that they weren't comfortable wagering a guess about rates in their own country. (Equal Measures 2030 was unable to provide a breakdown of these statistics by age, gender or position of power, but said those insights would be available soon.)

When policymakers did venture guesses about the challenges girls and women face, their answers revealed just how shaky they were on the facts. In Colombia, policymakers estimated that 4 to 80 percent of girls marry before 18 (correct answer: 23 percent). When Kenyan leaders were asked to ballpark the proportion of women in parliament, their replies ranged from 6 to 90 percent (correct answer: 21 percent). And in India, decision-makers believed that women represented anywhere from 20 to 70 percent of the labor force (correct answer: 27 percent).

"It's hard to cite a statistic cold, but I think policymakers would be able to make a more educated guess on other issues, like economic growth last year or your biggest export industry in your country," says Alison Holder, director of Equal Measures 2030. "You might not get it exactly right, but you'd get it in the bounds... Instead, [their answers were] consistently inconsistent."

"Even the best intentioned decision-makers can't make the best decisions if they're operating in the dark," Katja Iversen, CEO of Women Deliver, one of the Equal Measures 2030 partners, said in a statement.



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Demonstrators hold banners in protest against U.S. President Donald Trump during the Women's March inside Karura forest in Kenya's capital Nairobi, January 21, 2017. (Reuters).

The study comes two years after 193 countries adopted the [Sustainable Development Goals](#), a set of 17 goals—from ending hunger to tackling climate change to providing quality education for everyone, everywhere—that global leaders are striving to meet by 2030. The Paris Agreement, for example, aims to mitigate global warming. Another goal focuses entirely on gender equality. “These are really game-changing promises for girls and women,” says Holder of Equal Measures 2030, which works to provide decision-makers and advocates with the evidence and data they need to reach this goal. “Many policymakers [in the study] were aware of it, but we have a big job to prepare them to act.”

The study also showed that men and women have vastly different views on how gender equality has changed in the last five years. While 78 percent of men thought women in their country had achieved more equality, only 55 percent of women agreed. And more than twice as many women as men said equality had either stayed the same or gotten worse (44 percent to 19 percent).

But there is a silver lining: most leaders interviewed said that they would know where to go to access data and information on key issues if they needed to. “If we believe them on that question, that’s somewhat positive,” Holder says. “But the message is, they’re not readily equipped with it—it’s not a part of their vocabulary around policy-making, which reflects a lack of interest on these issues.”