

## Federalism and Gender Equality

with Professor Christine Forster on 13 April 2021

There is an ongoing debate both within academia and also amongst policy-makers about the relationship of federalism and gender equality. Some argue that federalism is a tool to promote gender equality, especially as it can incentivise the inclusion of women as there are more governmental levels (and posts) and different territorial units can compete with each other for different and better models of inclusion. Others have argued that in countries such as Sudan and Nigeria, territorial units have used their autonomy given to them through federal structures to discriminate and disadvantage women – so to promote equality and inclusion, strong central human rights, and non-discrimination provisions are needed.

Professor Forster highlighted the advantages federalism might offer for an increase of female voices in decision-making. Federalism allows for decisions to be taken closer to the people, therefore giving more spaces to women to make their voice heard and take up roles at local and regional level (rather than having to compete at national level). Federalism also allows for states and regions to become champions of inclusion and use inclusion mechanisms such as quotas to enable political participation at regional level – a policy that might then be picked up by other regions and at national level.

Yet, this does not mean that federalism is the only answer to inclusion. In Switzerland, federalism was used by some cantons to delay the rights of women to vote in elections, while in Nigeria and Sudan it has been used to implement discriminatory inheritance laws, which disadvantage female family members.

The discussion highlighted that federalism can be an important tool to promote gender equality and inclusion. However, it alone is unlikely to lead to deep-rooted changes, and additional measures such as quotas, a strong anti-discrimination law at central level and a functional rule of law that enforces equality legislation are also needed to ensure that women have a say in local, regional and national affairs in federal states.

*Soeren Keil, 50 Shades of Federalism*