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DOI

[10.4324/9781003306900-32](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003306900-32)

Publication date

2024

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

The Routledge Handbook of Autocratization

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Citation for published version (APA):

Roggeband, C., & Krizsán, A. (2024). Autocratization and gender politics. In A. Croissant, & L. Tomini (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Autocratization* (pp. 397-412). (Routledge International Handbooks). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003306900-32>

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AUTOCRATIZATION AND GENDER POLITICS

Conny Roggeband and Andrea Krizsán

Introduction

Opposition to gender equality and a crackdown on women's rights and gender equality are constituent parts of the current wave of autocratization happening across many parts of the world (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020; Kaul, 2021; Chenoweth & Marks, 2022). We witness a rollback on gender equality and sexual rights and an upsurge of misogynist politics both in more recently established democracies as well as in electoral autocracies. As Chenoweth and Marks note, "misogyny and authoritarianism are not just common comorbidities but mutually reinforcing ills" (2022).

Autocratic leaders like Erdogan, Putin, Bolsonaro, Duterte, and Trump have openly used misogynist language (Kaul, 2021) and challenged previously gained gender equality and sexual rights. We witness a strengthening of attacks on reproductive rights, sexual freedom, and diversity (Graff, Kapur, & Walters, 2019). However, next to these fields that were to some extent always controversial, less contested domains where important progress was made over the past decades, like gender equality-sensitive education and policies combating gender-based violence, also come under attack (Signs special issue on backlash 2020 Winter; Signs special issue on gender and the rise of the global right 2019). Opposition to gender equality brings notable gender policy backsliding as well as increasing challenges to the political representation of women and sexual minorities (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2020) including attacks on and violence against civil society and political actors representing women's rights and gender equality (ibid., Bishop, 2017). Patriarchal values and sexism are now elevated to the level of state policies in several autocratic states.

At the same time, autocracies often also boast about genuine political representation of women, more generous support for families, and therefore mothers. Prominent women politicians are frequently part of autocratic structures. Autocracies often exploit women's rights to boost their power and further their authoritarian goals (Donno & Kreft, 2019; Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022).

In this chapter we discuss the relationship between autocratization and gender equality. Building on earlier research on gender and autocracies, we explore how this relationship evolves in the context of the current autocratic surge, how we can make sense of the

duality and paradox of autocrats attacking gender equality (gender-bashing) and supporting women’s rights (gender-washing) (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022). In our contribution we explore three interrelated aspects of the relationship between gender and different processes of autocratization. First, we look at how and why autocracies contribute to women’s protection and rights. Second, we assess how and why autocracies and autocratization concur with curtailing women’s rights and gender equality, despite the appearance of progress in some aspects of gender equality. Finally, we explore the role of women, women’s and gender equality organizations in resisting and overthrowing authoritarian regimes.

How do autocrats support women’s rights?

Gender equality progress and democracy are often seen as associated. Different studies (Welzel et al., 2002; Beer, 2009; Htun & Weldon, 2018; Tripp, 2013) support Chenoweth and Marks’ claim that “women’s rights and democracy go hand in hand, and women’s rights is a precondition for democracy” (2022, p. 105). Yet, research on gender and autocracy discusses extensively the paradoxical advancement of women’s rights under several autocratic regimes. Many autocratic regimes promote women’s political representation by introducing quotas, reserved seats, or appointing women in key leadership positions. As Tripp (2019, p. 4) shows, “in Africa, democratic countries are as likely as nondemocratic countries to adopt gender quotas, and they are as likely to have higher rates of women in parliament”. In her analysis of MENA autocracies Tripp finds that “various women’s rights have been adopted in some authoritarian countries and less so in others”. Donno and Kreft show that 25% of autocracies perform well or better on women’s rights than developing democracies in terms of women’s political representation (2019, p. 721). Autocracies also enact more gender

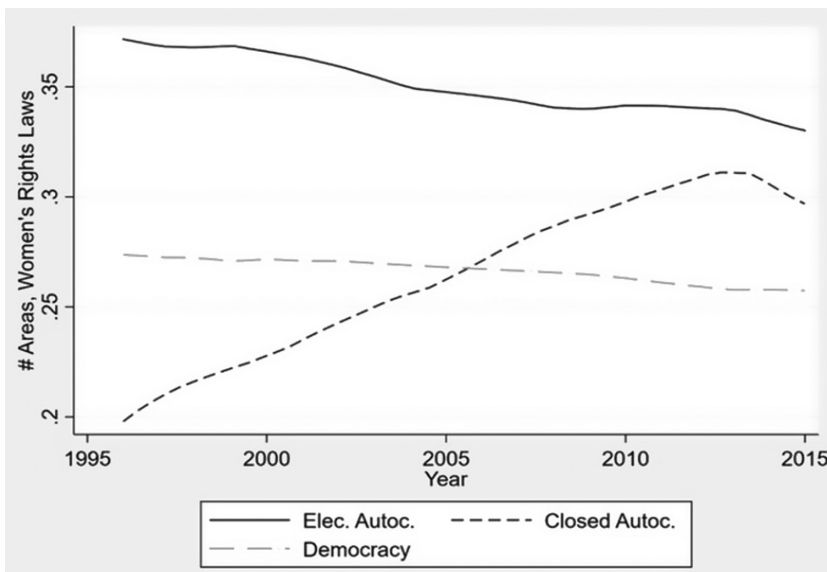


Figure 28.1 Number of women’s rights laws enacted over time: democracy, electoral authoritarian, and closed authoritarian regimes.

Source: Based on Donno, Fox and Kaasik (2022), with permission from publisher Sage Publications

reforms than democracies (Donno, Fox, & Kaasik, 2022). Remarkably it is closed authoritarian regimes that show a sharp increase in enacting new women's rights over the past 25 years and even outperform both electoral autocracies and democracies (p. 458). Donno and Kreft argue that introducing multiparty elections in electoral autocracies generally does not enhance performance on women's rights. The policy issues that are mostly addressed by autocratic regimes are violence against women, women's employment rights, marital rights, and women's political representation (p. 465), whereas sexual and reproductive rights are not at all addressed (Donno, Fox, & Kaasik, 2022, p. 458, Table 1).

Women's civil rights are another controversial aspect of gender equality for autocracies. Rather than outright banning them, autocratic regimes frequently co-opt (McBride & Mazur, 2010) the sphere of women's organizations, by appropriating some selected objectives and disallowing organizations to raise a critical voice (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022). Celebi talks about government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs): conservative women's organizations supported and sponsored by autocratic governments that articulate and legitimize governmental policy objectives related to women's rights (2022). She shows how in the Turkish context, the GONGO KADEM operates to influence gendered labor market policies that promote a conservative, essentialist "gender justice" model aligned with the ideology of the autocratic Erdogan government (Celebi, 2022). We see similar government-sponsored conservative women's groups in Hungary and Poland as well (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021).

Closed autocracies organized around institutionalized ruling parties are particularly prone to co-opt and mobilize women (Donno & Kreft, 2019). They do so by establishing party-sponsored women's organizations, such as official women's wings or by using quota systems that are particularly efficient in keeping elected women conforming to the official party lines (ibid., p. 726).

To acknowledge the role of women and obtain their support, autocrats may also appoint women to prominent (though often symbolic) leadership positions. Conservative women representing traditionalist patriarchal values and supporting pro-family conservative discourses figure prominently among top political positions in autocratizing contexts. These conservative female representatives claim to represent women's issues better than feminists do (Schreiber, 2018). Female conservative leaders appeal to the "emancipation fatigue" of many women with small children (Dietze, 2020). Maternity issues, family and child benefits, but also sexual exceptionalism and selective maternalism are other platforms on which women political leaders appeal to women and contribute to the legitimacy of the regime. Spouses and daughters of autocrats often take up important positions in autocratic regimes. One can think of First Lady Suzanne Mubarak's leadership of the National Council for Women (NCW) in Egypt, Rwanda's first lady Jeannette Kagame's gender equality activism addressing, for instance, the Global Gender Summit hosted by Rwanda in 2019, or Trump's daughter Ivanka leading the US government program Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative. Such initiatives, Kaul (2021) states, are often highly visible but lack sufficient resources to be effective. Also, the scope is often limited. For example, the initiative led by Ivanka Trump does not include health and education issues, nor does it address gender-based violence and women's unequal share of unpaid care work (Kaul, 2021, p. 1633).

Next to the promotion of women's political representation, autocracies can contribute to women's equality by improving women's work conditions, by improving care facilities, providing parental leave or training opportunities, ultimately aiming at a more expanded workforce, where the employment of women "taps into the talent of a useful and educated

workforce and helps curb social exclusion and poverty” (Tripp, 2019, pp. 6–7). Autocracies also contribute to women’s rights by the use of welfare measures that directly support women, particularly mothers and families. Measures may include cash transfers for reproductive roles, family support schemes rewarding in various ways childbearing, prioritizing family care arrangements over institutional support. Such measures undoubtedly contribute to reducing gendered poverty patterns, and to reducing the weight the gendered division of labor put on the shoulder of women. Based on a comparative analysis of autocratic Hungary and Turkey, Szikra and Oktem (2022) show how autocratization does not necessarily mean the retrenchment of the welfare state. Instead, they show how in Hungary, for example, family policy is turned to the service of increasing “fertility rates of ‘responsible’, that is, ‘working’ families” (p. 208). The language of gender equality disappears and is now replaced by a “celebration of traditional gender roles”. At the same time adopted family and labor market policy reforms can be seen as favorable to working mothers and to encourage their return to the labor market. Fodor (2021) also discusses pronatalist policies and the extensive paths of short-term compensation women and families receive for childcare within the framework of what she calls Hungary’s carefare regime. However, she warns that “Carefare policies, like workfare or prisonfare, are designed to discipline vulnerable workers into doing vastly undervalued work in exchange for claiming their social citizenship rights” (Fodor, 2022, pp. 107–108). And carefare is

built on the backs of women, especially on the backs of hard-working, ambitious, lower-class women. Women’s work burden is likely to increase if families are to access the tax credits, the baby loans, the cheap mortgage and other subsidies. The funding is available on condition that they have more children, and – given the typical division of labor within households – take on more care responsibilities, dedicate more time to care work.

(p. 107)

Fodor sees carefare as a key component of maintaining popular support for the autocracy, particularly from economically dependent strata of the society.

Overall, autocracies support women’s rights in a variety of ways; however, the support given is ambivalent to gender equality. Support is primarily in terms of political rights (vote and be elected, join or lead political parties, run for office), economic rights (right to seek employment, and support for care arrangements, freedom from discrimination in the labor market) aspects that support regime stability and legitimacy mainly by securing women’s loyalty (Donno & Kreft, 2019; Donno, Fox, & Kaasik, 2022), but with limited potential to undermine regimes. Legislation on violence against women is also adopted by most autocracies, though the protection such policies give to victims is limited both because of the limited implementation of such laws (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021; Bjarnegård & Donno, 2023) and because of their framing that often does not address the gendered aspect of the problem (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021). The question remains: does the advancement of women’s rights in autocratic contexts represent genuine change or is or does it serve as a legitimization of autocratic rule? As Donno and Kreft (2019) point out, women’s rights can be promoted without empowering women’s organizations and giving civil rights to women. Protection given often stays within a protective patriarchal frame based on equality as difference. Women are given a political role in their different, traditional, subordinated position, to either voice such a difference vision or as a symbolic reward for their support. Support

for women's labor market participation is utilitarian and burdened by the attribution of exclusive responsibility for caring roles. The forms of support we see are in opposition to securing an understanding of gender equality that gives genuine voice and autonomy to women. "Civil conflict and a more autonomous women's movement are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for the prioritization of gender equality by the state" argue Donno and Kreft (2019, p. 722). The control, appropriation, and co-optation of women's civil space (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2021) contribute to keeping this support disrupted from women's political mobilization potential.

Gendered repertoires of autocratic repression

While measures supporting women's rights are not infrequent in autocratic regimes, overall autocratic regimes oppose gender equality and promote state projects to enforce heteronormative and patriarchal family models (Brown, 2019; Chenoweth & Marks, 2022). Authoritarian leaders particularly focus on exerting control over women, limiting their autonomy, controlling their bodies, confining them to spaces of motherhood, family and care and rolling back their claims to public power. As Chenoweth and Marks point out (2022, p. 112) "female bodies become targets of social control for male lawmakers, who invoke the ideal of feminine purity and call on mothers, daughters, and wives to reproduce an idealized version of the nation". While access to formal politics may be secured it is mostly in controlled formats. Welfare and employment support may be in place, but principally to support traditional gender roles. Employment support is sometimes introduced, but the burden of care work remains on women. Laws on violence against women that are adopted fail to tackle gender inequality as a root cause of the problem. Overall, while measures adopted by autocracies may indicate support for women, such measures are mainly crafted in ways that support the regime's objectives and block any transformation of gender and sexual relations or changes in established gender hierarchies. Autocrats oppose women's self-determination and control of their lives, bodies, and sexuality. Limiting the (bodily) autonomy of women and sexual minorities is a prime field of intervention which allows to control women's bodies and reproduce the status quo of unequal power relations. Curtailing sexual and reproductive rights and self-determination, restrictive family laws, or perpetuating or condoning gender-based violence against women or those who transgress traditional understandings of gender, either by the state or by private actors, are some of the main instruments autocracies use to mitigate the risk of disrupting the status quo.

The identification of gender theory as a "dangerous ideology" that denies the reality of sexual difference and challenges the "natural" patriarchal order leads autocrats and autocratizing governments to *control critical gender knowledge and knowledge production*. On the one hand, controlling or prohibiting gender and other critical social research, banning programs and courses that teach such knowledge, cleansing school and even kindergarten curricula, taking away the autonomy, license, and funding of institutions connected to such critical knowledge is one pattern we see (Butler, 2019). On the other hand, we see threatening, persecuting, or blacklisting scholars, experts, and students active in the field, pushing them into exile or silencing them (Patternote & Verloo, 2021). While critical knowledge and its production are undermined, alternative, ideologically resonant knowledge supporting a traditional familialist understanding of gender roles is actively produced, circulated, and institutionalized (Korolczuk, 2020)

In order to maintain the power hierarchy and block social transformation, autocratic leaders either *use or condone violence* (including hate and discriminatory speech) as instruments

to sanction crossing gender hierarchy lines. Gender-based violence emerges as a particularly powerful instrument that produces and reproduces gender inequality and is extensively used by autocrats to preserve their regimes. Autocracies frequently adopt *de jure* laws to combat gender-based violence (Donno, Fox, & Kasik, 2022); however, *de facto* in the political arena and beyond, these very states are frequent users of gender-based violence to uphold their power. Violence is used to sanction those who do not conform to gendered expectations in society, and those who are critical of such gendered hierarchies and their entanglement with the regime. While violence in the family, communities, and workplace works to regulate women at the micro level, violence against women in politics curtails their rights to equal participation and voice in the public sphere. Research shows that as democracy stumbles in the last decade, the rates of violence against women politicians, civil society activists, and media workers – those who best give voice and representation to women – are increasingly exposed to physical, sexual, psychological, and semiotic violence (Krook, 2020). State violence also takes the form of “failure to investigate, prosecute, and punish violence against women, which is the kind of omission that exacerbates rather than mitigates violence, placing women beyond the protection of the law even in regimes that profess equal citizenship” (Hawkesworth, 2020, p. 314).

Along these lines autocracies will particularly aim to block or reverse certain types of laws and policies. Policies concerning sexuality and reproduction, or policies that directly challenge religious doctrines or codified cultural traditions (Htun & Weldon, 2018) become main targets along with policies combating gender-based violence as a manifestation of gender inequality and an ambition to transform rather than just treat symptoms (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021). Another particularly controversial policy field is education, media, and knowledge production with critical content aimed to challenge the natural/traditional order, to deconstruct a binary and essentializing understanding of gender and other ideas that underpin patriarchal hierarchies (Rawlusko, 2021, 2019; Kuhar, 2015; Rohde & Takacs, 2022).

Efforts to roll back rights are often subtle and incremental, which is in line with how current autocratization processes are developing (Waldner & Lust, 2018; Bermeo, 2016). Studies assessing the consequences of democratic backsliding for gender equality rights, policies, and institutional arrangements (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018; Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020) indicate that gender policy arrangements are affected in multiple ways: not just by direct blocking or removal of rights, but also by using more elusive and indirect mechanisms to reverse or block gender equality progress. (Re)framing policies to serve objectives contrary to gender equality rather than removing them altogether is an intervention that is used frequently in policies combating violence or family policies (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2018). Another way is to undermine implementation capacities such as institutions, planning, or budgets that make laws and policies operational in practice. Dismantling institutional and resource capacities for implementation contributes to sustaining facade democracies in which laws and policies remain “dead letters” (Falkner, Treib, & Holzleithner, 2008). Dismantling of implementation arrangements or obstructing them in the first place is a relatively easy and low-key form of rolling back rights. It is also an “under the carpet” way of eliminating rights as these remain formally still existing but ineffective due to a lack of implementation resources. Moreover, autocrats eliminate accountability mechanisms by changing or closing altogether consultation platforms, thus blocking out the voice of women’s rights advocates from policy processes including implementation and policy review (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2018, 2021; Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021). The functioning of civil society organizations and their participation in consultation can also be undermined by cutting resources, cre-

ating alternative voices for consultation processes, or even persecution, making participation of women's rights organizations in consultation processes difficult if not impossible (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2021). The absence of meaningful civil society participation in these processes makes gender policies, especially those with transformative potential, particularly vulnerable to co-optation. Finally, gender policies can also be made obsolete by a political discursive context in which autocratic leaders and high-level political actors openly question the legitimacy of gender equality as a goal and discredit existing policies, thus undermining them and giving permission to lower-level state officials to circumvent legislation and commitments. Overall, autocracies may keep laws and policies protecting women's rights in place but undermine them in various ways.

Controlling the lives and bodies of women and rolling back their rights is also a crucial instrument to limit and undermine the collective power of women and block avenues of resistance to traditional gender hierarchies. Autonomous and critical organizing, mainly at the level of civil society, is an important risk autocracies aim to mitigate. They do so by curtailing civil and political rights, limiting the powers and voice of autonomous civil society and their mobilization and awareness raising capacity (Donno, Fox, & Kaasik, 2022), by closing institutions and other channels of communication between women's rights advocates and public policy-making (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2021). Limiting the collective voice and power of women is fundamental to block challengers of the gender status quo and to maintain autocratic regimes.

Finally, we see how autocrats attempt to *reduce women's participation in the public sphere*, in particular in politics and the labor market (Chenoweth & Marks, 2022, p. 111), unless their participation is crucial for upholding the regime and its economy. The fear of civil society and collective organizing as a democratic, anti-autocratic force is visible in the increasing political constraints that civil society organizations are facing all over the world over the past decade (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014; Rutzen, 2015), and which scholars associate with a broader trend of autocratization (Glasius, Schalk, & De Lange, 2020; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Luhmann et al., 2019). State hostility not only entails threats to the rights of civil society, but also repressive or even violent actions ranging from disproportionate auditing as a means of control to policing and physical attacks on activists (Baker et al., 2017; Human Rights First, 2017). Closure of civic space is a selective mechanism affecting most prominently those organizations identified as critical of or even an enemy of the state (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2021). This makes organizations working on gender and sexual rights a prominent target of state and civil society hostility and aggression. Women's rights advocates also face particular forms of repression and harassment like gender-based violence. In turn, the space and state support for organizations identified as supportive of the regime are expanded (ibid.). Autocratizing leaders instrumentalize certain civil society organizations to their own benefit: they are sponsored and used to influence the realm of civil society in ways that directly legitimize state power and build social foundations. By reconfiguring civic and institutional spaces, rather than closing them altogether, autocratic-leaning leaders may try to uphold an appearance of democracy (Lewis, 2013; Roggeband & Krizsán, 2021). Also, they may use (government-orchestrated) civil society to fight critical and unwelcome organizations in the public sphere.

The rationale for gendered autocratic repertoires

What role does gender play in autocratic regimes? What explains the duality of autocratic support versus oppression of women's rights and gender equality? Much of the research

speaks about the utilitarian logic of autocracies when adopting policies supportive of women's rights. Bjarnegård and Zetterberg (2022) introduce the concept of gender-washing to argue that autocracies "adopt gender-equality reforms to boost regime legitimacy while shifting attention away from violations of electoral integrity and human rights" (p. 61). They discuss three types of legitimation strategies: procedure-based, prestige-based, and performance-based strategies.

Procedure-based strategies apply primarily to electoral procedures, quotas, or reserved seats for women, where the better descriptive representation of women can be seen as a low-risk strategy to demonstrate democratic standards in electoral procedures (*ibid.*).

Securing certain women's rights can also serve prestige-based legitimation. Securing women's rights can signal modernity without the risk of empowering women's organizations (Donno & Kreft, 2019), as such they can enhance international reputation and therefore be instrumental in securing foreign support. Since democracy and women's rights are "bundled together" by the international community, *de jure* progress on women's rights is seen as imminently signaling adherence to international norms, which often happens at the expense of progress on politically more costly human rights reforms (Donno, Fox, & Kaasik, 2022). International economic and social pressure is significantly correlated with the enactment of *de jure* women's rights reforms, but not with reforms related to political pluralism, elections or repression (Donno, Fox, & Kaasik, 2022). Donno, Fox, and Kaasik (2022, p. 459) argue that "advancing women's rights is an attractive strategy for closed regimes seeking to bur-nish an image of progress without having to increase political openness". In such contexts progress of women's rights takes place without improvement in political competition, particularly if next to international pressure civil society openness to promoting women's rights is also present. However, competition and political cleavages, which may be more present in electoral autocracies, can push women's rights issues down on the agenda (Donno & Kreft, 2019).

Finally, securing women's rights may also secure performance-based legitimation when used to appease threats from citizens. Co-optation of civil society projects and objectives, collaborating with women in formal politics and women's organizations while exerting control are instruments which on the one hand give legitimacy to autocratic governments, on the other hand prevent protest and mobilization (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022, p. 71).

Donno and Kreft (2019) point to the strategic support of autocracies for women's rights. They argue that promoting women's rights is politically not as costly as the provision of what they call "coordination goods" (civil liberties, speech rights, or clean elections) (2019, p. 721). The promotion of women's rights by autocracies, they argue, somewhat similarly to Bjarnegård and Zetterberg (2022), may serve the purpose of signaling modernity and compliance with international standards, economic growth, or boosting popular support. Whereas coordination goods may undermine the regime, women's rights can contribute to coalition building and as such have a stabilizing effect (Donno Kreft, 2019, p. 724). This also resonates with the argument made by Chenoweth and Marks (2022) who see press freedom and more freedom for civil society as factors that put autocratic regimes at risk of exposure and resistance, whereas higher gender equality decreases the risk of internal (armed) conflict, therefore contributing to stabilizing the system. Electoral autocracies with multiparty elections are less favorable to women's rights than closed autocracies built around institutionalized single parties (Donno & Kreft, 2019, p. 744). Overall, support for women's rights "... relates to domestic institutional configurations determining the type and breadth

of support that is needed to sustain the regime, and to the availability of mechanisms for co-opting women into the regime's support coalition" (Donno & Kreft, 2019, p. 725).

However, as Tripp argues (2019, p. 4), not all women's rights-related policy reforms emerge for cynical utilitarian reasons. Such policies often constitute the subject of fierce political debates in which women's rights advocates play an important role. Autocracies may adopt genuinely beneficial policies to gain women's votes, or to serve nationalist ideological purposes.

Even if utilitarian risk calculations driven by political and economic interests cannot be dismissed, research also points to the fundamental role misogynist ideological components play in gendered autocratic repertoires. Many current authoritarian-leaning leaders and governments, whether still functioning within the framework of liberal democracy or not, *use misogyny as an ideological tool and political strategy against anyone attempting to transform gender relations and challenge the patriarchal order* (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018; Kaul, 2021; Chenoweth & Marks, 2022). This pattern of misogynic leadership trespasses geographical and geopolitical differences (Global North/South, Western/non-Western), political orientation (predominantly right wing, but left-wing examples can be found too), or majority religion (Christian, Muslim, Hindu, secular, etc.) (Kaul, 2021). While misogyny and opposition to gender transformation are present in many societies, autocratic regimes elevate these to the level of state policies. We see inroads into state power and sometimes state capture by far-right populist (sometimes left-wing as well) parties and leaders with anti-gender equality ideologies.

These leaders strategically operationalize misogyny in their political projects (including, but not only, during elections) in similar manners. Sexist and dismissive statements about women do not prevent the election of misogynic candidates, and even bolstered the support for leaders like Bolsonaro or Trump (Prandini Assis & Ogando, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Other leaders use opposition to gender equality and LGBTQI rights and attract new alliances or shift the attention away from internal political or economic problems. Putin's depiction of homosexuals and promoters of gender equality as a threat to traditional values was employed to strengthen popular support for his regime (Gessen, 2017; Edenborg, 2020). Attacks on gender equality and LGBT rights are not the unique domain of male leaders, but female right-wing leaders like Italy's prime minister Meloni equally used a patriarchal and heterosexist discourse to win the elections (Collela, 2021; Feo & Lavizzari, 2021).

This misogyny is not just an expression of hatred or disgust toward women, but it serves as a reinforcement mechanism to maintain the patriarchal order and unequal gender relations (Kaul, 2021). This is done by controlling and punishing women who challenge male dominance and rewarding women who instead uphold and reinforce male domination and patriarchal rule (Kaul, 2021, p. 1623). This strategy not only affects women but extends to other groups seen as inferior, disgusting, or dangerous (for instance, ethnic, sexual or religious minorities, migrants, human rights or environmental activists, but also men who challenge traditional gender roles) and who are consequently seen or constructed as "feminine". This feminization serves to legitimately subdue and dominate such groups and legitimates discrimination, hateful speech, or violence against them. Townsend-Bell (2020) links misogyny to backlash against gender equality, arguing that "backlash is concerned with impeding the exchange of power from those who 'should' have it – the 'natural' power holders at the top of the hierarchy – to the remaining groups below, those who 'should not'" (p. 287). She makes a distinction between remedial backlash, which is corrective: "proactively seeking to

return power to those who should have it” and preemptive backlash, which is a preventive measure “to forestall power loss” (p. 290) and particularly targets “those who should not even consider having a claim to power” (p. 288). In her view all nonnormative groups face such backlash when they attempt to change the existing power hierarchy, but some groups face backlash much earlier than others. The backlash reveals that a do-not-cross line has been breached for a particular (gendered, racialized) group, depending on their position of power and privilege in a certain context (p. 292). So, even though gender is the primary focus of misogyny, it should be seen as an intersectional mechanism affecting all groups that are seen as a threat to a supremacist hegemonic masculinity and the patriarchal system (Townsend-Bell, 2020; Kaul, 2021).

Misogyny as an enforcement tool can function in multiple forms ranging from everyday, subtle, unmarked disciplinary modes, actions, or behaviors to more explicit and overt modes of punishment and violence (Townsend-Bell, 2020; Kaul, 2021). Rather than being a characteristic of individual (deviant) autocratic leaders, it is a structural element of most autocratic regimes, but – as Townsend-Bell points out – is not limited to autocratic regimes.

So rather than a (populist) style or rhetoric, misogyny is a political strategy that serves to gain and maintain power, an instrument consciously used by autocrats to garner support (Graff & Korolczuk, 2018; Kaul, 2021) and to maintain the patriarchal and racial order (Townsend-Bell, 2020). Graff, Kapur and Walters (2019) speak about “gender conservatism” and “antagonism toward feminism”, which they identify as a transnational right-wing strategy, both localized and coordinated across borders. They point to the connection of authoritarian leaders and parties to global right-wing and conservative civil society organizations, which include so-called “anti-gender” organizations and manifestations. While conservative and radical right organizations have older roots, the opposition to the concept of “gender” and what is labeled “gender ideology” is a more recent phenomenon. Scholars trace this discourse about “gender ideology” which is seen as a threat to the natural order by denying and erasing biological difference, back to the mid-1990s (Butler, 2019). Since then a plethora of actors including religious, conservative, right-wing, and men’s rights groups (Graff, Kapur, & Walters, 2019) have mobilized this discourse as the “ideological matrix” (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018, p. 8) to oppose gender equality and sexual rights and defend “traditional family values” and more broadly “the natural order”. These gender-conservative and anti-gender movements are seen to be connected to right-wing populism and authoritarian-leaning leaders and parties. Graff and Korolczuk (2022) speak of an *opportunistic synergy*, “a dynamic that includes political alliances, ideological affinities, and organizational ties that enable wide-scale elite change in governmental bodies, academia, cultural institutions, and civil society” (p. 7). Right-wing populists and autocrats use opposition to gender equality to garner public support, particularly among ultraconservatives during electoral campaigns. By arguing that left-wing liberals or corrupt elites are imposing a “gender agenda” on “the people”, the populist right has been able to join forces with religious fundamentalists (Graff, Kapur, & Walters, 2019, p. 544). In turn, ultraconservatives gain political influence when these right-wing and autocratic parties and leaders ascend to power (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

Misogyny thus functions as an effective political strategy for a variety of autocratic/autocratizing leaders and regimes to gain and maintain political power, positioning feminists and others who challenge the patriarchal, heteronormative “natural” order as “threats” to the nation that require a strong masculine leader to protect and restore the nation’s glory (Kaul, 2021).

Feminist resilience to autocratization

While misogyny is a fundamental component of autocratic repression, women's organizing plays a vital role in challenging autocracies in several countries. As Chenoweth and Marks (2022) argue autocrats have good reasons to curtail women's rights, and in particular civil rights, and keep women confined in traditional roles and in the private sphere. While authoritarian regimes tend to make use of hierarchical gender relations in order to strengthen their "national top-down, male dominated rule", feminist movements often attempt to redistribute power from the few into the hands of many (Chenoweth & Marks, 2022, p. 2). Case studies have long shown that women's civil liberties were crucial for enabling women to organize and protest and play a vital role in overthrowing authoritarian regimes (Baldez, 2003; Moghadam, 2012; Tripp, 2004; Waylen, 1994, 2007). Democratic transitions in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and to a lesser extent in Eastern Europe during the 1980s and 1990s were driven in part by mass popular movements in which women played key roles. Recent years again are marked by prominent women's protests such as the Polish black protests (Korolczuk, 2016), the Women's March in the United States (Berry & Chenoweth, 2018), or women's protests in Iran (Hooman, 2022).

Case study evidence on the role of women in challenging autocracies has further been confirmed by a number of longitudinal cross-national studies. In a global sequence analysis Wang and colleagues (2017) show that to gain electoral democracy a country first needs to give liberal rights to both women and men. Women's civil liberties are critical for successful transitions to democracy. By granting civil rights to half the population, citizens are more likely to organize politically and challenge the regime, making the costs of repression increase and consequently strengthening the possibility of democratic transition. The same finding is confirmed by Chenoweth and Marks (2022) whose study shows that women's participation in violent and nonviolent resistance makes these more likely to succeed. All major pro-democracy or independence movements that emerged after the Second World War featured women in support roles but differed in the degree to which they had women as frontline participants. Protests where women played an active role in demonstrations, confrontations with authorities, strikes, boycotts, or other forms of resistance had a significant advantage, both in terms of a movement's immediate success and in terms of securing longer-term democratic change. The participation of women does not only expand the basis for mobilization with 50%, but also helps to increase perceived legitimacy (p. 108). Women frequently draw on their role as (grand)mothers to make certain moral appeals to the regime and the public. "Significant participation by women and other diverse actors increases the social, moral, and financial capital that a movement can use to erode its opponent's support system" (Chenoweth & Marks, 2022, p. 108). Women's participation may also help to de-escalate a conflict, moderating the behavior of other protesters and the police. As Wang et al. argue "even when females do not lead movements, the breaking of traditional norms of gender inequality empowers male leaders of democratization movements to lead more effective movements, recognizing that females can play a crucial role in agitating for political change" (2017, p. 738). In such situations, they argue, the rights given to women may strengthen political opposition as a whole. This resonates with O'Donnell and Schmitter's (1986, p. 27) argument about how "the diversification and extension of opposition throughout society ... increases the perceived costs of repression".

Finally, research also shows that the role played by women and women's organizations in the transition from autocracy to democracy contributes significantly to how gender equal

and inclusive the emergent democracy will be. It will influence the political representation of women and the gender sensitivity of democratization master frames, as well as gender equality institutions and policies that emerge after transition (Waylen, 2007; Viterna & Fallon, 2008; Tripp, 2013).

Gendered autocratic repertoires have consequences for feminist civil society. Research indicates how state hostilities and repression have diverse consequences: on the one hand, they generate fear and may drive feminist actors into abeyance (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021), but other instances show strong resilience of feminist activism (Korolczuk, 2016; Berry & Chenoweth, 2018). Resilience of organizing will depend on path dependencies such as movement capacities to organize wide constituencies, feasibility and desirability of coalition work with other groups, but also windows of opportunity that favor gender equality-based organizing amidst hostile autocratizing circumstances.

Conclusions

The chapter showed how gender inequality dynamics are not a side effect of autocratization processes only affecting part of the population, but instead a fundamental part of repertoires of oppression used by autocracies. It showed the paradoxical nature of gender-based autocratic measures, which combine gendered suppressive mechanisms, such as practices of direct or indirect gender-based violence, curtailing of critical knowledge feeding into dismantling inequalities, and restraining critical, autonomous civic space that challenges the hierarchical gender status quo, with controlled goods (political and economic) for women.

As reviewed, the core controversy in the literature circles around the ambiguous relationship between autocracies and gender equality rights. A number of studies indicate that autocrats may promote certain gender equality policies like quotas, equal pay or other labor market and family policies that benefit women, whereas other studies point to efforts to curtail gender equality rights. A closer examination of the type of rights that are adopted by autocratic regimes reveals that these are “low risk, high gain” investments. An extension of women’s political rights or the adoption of policies that support their labor market participation presents a limited risk to challenge gender hierarchies but may help to increase the support of women and to boost the (inter)national reputation of the regime. Instead, projects and policies aimed at transforming gender and sexual relations and structures of inequality are deemed a threat and as such opposed or rolled back. The core focus of most autocratic regimes is on reducing the (bodily) autonomy of women by curtailing sexual and reproductive rights and condoning violence. Controlling women’s lives and bodies, keeping them in confined spaces, and limiting their participation in public life are effective instruments for autocrats to preserve the patriarchal order and to gain or maintain power.

What are the ways forward to gain a deeper understanding of this ambiguous relationship between autocratization and gender politics? First and foremost we need more systematic comparisons revealing how autocratizing states and autocratic leaders target gender and sexual equality rights and activists, beyond the case study evidence we have. Current processes of autocratization and democratic backsliding are notably different compared to previous episodes and use different tools and mechanisms. We need to better understand the gendered character and implications of these, which requires cross-national and cross-regional comparison.

Next, understanding the implications for gender equality requires a thorough analysis of policies, policy processes, and mechanisms. It is not sufficient to check whether a policy

is formally adopted or in place, but we need to analyze if such rights and policies actually contribute to the advancement of gender equality, which means examining both the content of policies, but also if and how these are implemented. So beyond a quantitative analysis of adopted rights or policy measures, we need qualitative studies that examine the framing of policies and implementation processes.

Another underexplored topic is the difference in left-leaning and right-leaning autocrats and how opposition to gender equality versus the adoption of measures supporting women depends on the ideological direction of autocracies.

Finally, we need a more thorough analysis of the role of social movements and civil society – which is found to be both a motor of democratic progress and for advancing gender and sexual equality (under democracies and stable institutions) – to identify the conditions under which activism can either contribute successfully to challenging autocracies, or the factors and repressive tools that force them to retract and push them toward abeyance. Also, what factors determine what capacity movements have to mobilize and sustain their activism against autocratizing regimes: why do we see strong mobilization in one context and not in another?

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