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### The gendered face of democratic backsliding

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# The gendered face of democratic backsliding

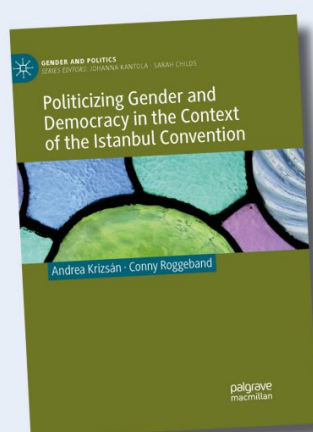


Opposition to gender equality, and a crackdown on women's rights, characterise the wave of autocratisation across many parts of the world. We often regard such misogyny against women as a deviant trait of individual political leaders. But this is a misunderstanding, write **Conny Roggeband** and **Andrea Krizsán**

## Opposition to gender equality

Autocratic-leaning leaders around the world are **rolling back advances in gender equality and sexual rights**. They make **violent and sexist** public statements, yet still manage to attract broad public support, and get elected in more-or-less democratic elections.

It's tempting to see misogyny merely as a deviant trait of individual leaders. However, misogyny is a more general phenomenon in autocratising regimes. Autocratic leaders strategise misogyny to win elections and sustain their regimes. More than that, misogyny – and the opposition to gender equality it fuels – don't just form part of these regimes' dominant ideology; they are also a core mechanism of democratic erosion.



Andrea Krizsán and Conny Roggeband's **Politicizing Gender and Democracy in the Context of the Istanbul Convention** was published in 2021 by Palgrave

## A vote-winning strategy

Autocratisation and misogyny, then, are closely intertwined. To bolster their regimes, authoritarian-leaning leaders and governments incite polarisation, deepening societal inequalities, and fuelling hostility towards women, sexual and gender minorities.

Some see this as a method for regimes to create **opportunistic synergies** between a variety of actors for political gain. In recent years, sexist, dismissive statements about women and sexual minorities have boosted support for leaders like **Bolsonaro** and Trump. But female right-wing leaders, too, are guilty of attacks on gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights.

Yet, misogyny permeates these political projects, undermining democracy beyond the utility of electoral agendas. Controlling and punishing people who challenge male dominance upholds and reinforces patriarchal rule.

And this strategy doesn't affect only women. It extends to other groups that autocrats regard as dangerous, inferior or nonconformist. These groups include ethnic and sexual minorities, migrants, and activists, but also men who challenge traditional gender roles. **Depending on their power or privilege in the gendered and racialised order**, some groups are more of a target than others.

The gendered dynamics faced by people living under such governments are not merely a by-product or collateral damage. Such dynamics do not affect one particular segment of society alone; they are not confined to specific corners of the world. Nor can you easily swap misogyny for a different rationale when a better opportunity emerges. Instead, opposition to gender equality is a core mechanism of de-democratisation.

*Opposition to gender equality inspires a gendered repertoire of measures autocratic-leaning leaders use to bolster regime legitimacy*

Hostile rhetoric undergirds a gendered repertoire of measures which autocratic-leaning leaders use to bolster the legitimacy and sustainability of their regimes. Below, we identify four gendered mechanisms of repression.

## 1. Exerting control

Autocratising leaders want to limit women's autonomy, control their bodies, and roll back their claims to public power. Limiting the (bodily) autonomy of women and sexual minorities is a common strategy through which would-be autocrats maintain the patriarchal order and block the transformation of gender and sexual relations. Autocratic regimes introduce policies that **appear beneficial for women**, but in fact reinforce the gendered division of labour. Thus, such governments effectively keep women away from public life.

## 2. Using gender-based violence

To block social transformation, autocratic leaders either use or condone gender-based violence, including hate and discriminatory speech.

Gender-based violence produces – and reproduces – gender inequality. States inflict violence in the form of harmful policies and discourses, direct (institutional) violence, or juridical harm on those who do not conform to society's gendered expectations or who criticise such hierarchies. Violence in the family, communities and workplace regulates women at the micro level. In the public sphere, violence against women in politics curtails women's rights to equal participation.

*Around the world, democratic decline correlates with increasing violence against women in public life*

Around the world, democratic decline correlates with increasing violence against women **politicians, activists** and **journalists** who give voice to women and sexual minorities.

### **3. Undermining women's collective power**

Controlling and rolling back the rights of women limits and undermines their collective power. Authoritarian leaning leaders fear the **power of autonomous and critical organising**, particularly at civil-society level. To mitigate the risk, they constrain civil society organisations critical of the regime. Scholars associate this with **a broader trend of autocratisation**.

State hostility tactics include repression or violence, ranging from disproportionate auditing, to over-policing and harassment of activists. **Selective closure of civic spaces** affects most acutely those organisations identified as critical of the state. This renders organisations working on gender and sexual rights prominent targets.

In turn, autocratic governments expand support for organisations they identify as supportive of the regime. Autocratising leaders instrumentalise civil society organisations to serve their own ends. They sponsor such organisations to influence the civil-society realm in ways that legitimise state power, and strengthen social foundations. By reconfiguring civic and institutional spaces, rather than closing them altogether, autocratic-leaning leaders thus maintain the outward appearance of democracy.

### **4. Preventing the production of critical gender knowledge**

Autocrats work to block the production and spread of *critical gender knowledge* that questions patriarchy as a natural order, and essentialist understandings of sex, gender and sexuality. This explains certain countries' **ban on gender studies**, and attempts to erase sexual education from school curricula.

*Governments that ban 'gender studies' attempt to establish*

| *alternative academic systems concurrent with their own ideologies*

Blocking such study also takes away the autonomy and funding of institutions connected to production of this critical knowledge. Autocratising governments **harass or blacklist gender and sexuality experts**. Alongside their attacks on academic freedom, such governments attempt to establish alternative academic systems to produce knowledge that resonates with their own conservative ideologies.

## Examining democracy through a gendered lens

So far, scholarship on democratic erosion has largely ignored the gendered aspects of these processes. This, we argue, limits our understanding of what is happening in countries around the world.

For many autocrats and would-be autocrats, patriarchal rule is part and parcel of their brave new world. It is therefore high time that democracy scholars began examining their subject through a gendered lens. By doing so, they could grasp more accurately the current trends in democratic decline and their implications – which exist, too, in established democracies.

Feminist scholarship and activism offer critical tools to resist democratic backsliding and erosion of the rights of women and gendered minorities. Ultimately, such tools could empower us to rethink democracy altogether.

*First in a Loop thread on 'Gendering democracy'. Look out for the 🌈 to read more in this series* 

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autocracy

autocratic regimes

Bolsonaro

democratic backsliding

gender

gender and politics

gender studies

Gendering Democracy

LGBTI

LGBTQ rights

Trump



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