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## Topic Paper

# Gender and Rising Authoritarianism: Implications for Women's Political Empowerment and Participation

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# Contents

<b>Abbreviations</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1 Background and rationale</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1 SDC’s learning journey on Working in Authoritarian Contexts and women’s political empowerment	5
1.2 Understanding backlash against women’s rights in contexts of democratic backsliding and long-standing authoritarian regimes	5
1.3 Key concepts and objectives	6
<b>2 Democratic backsliding and the backlash against women’s rights: understanding current challenges</b>	<b>7</b>
2.1 Concise comparative review of different manifestations of backlash	7
2.2 Articulated opposition to gender equality in official political discourses	8
2.3 Implications of gender equality policies and laws: patterns of delegitimisation	9
2.4 Implications for women’s political participation	10
2.5 Shrinking space for women’s mobilisation in civil society: backlash in accountability and inclusion mechanisms	10
2.6 Gender-targeted silencing of politically active women	11
2.7 The dangers of co-optation	12
<b>3 Relevance for SDC: addressing new challenges to women’s political empowerment and participation</b>	<b>14</b>
3.1 Implications of rising authoritarianism and gender equality backlash on SDC’s strategies for women’s political empowerment and participation	14
3.2 Possible entry points for identifying spaces and opportunities to enhance women’s political empowerment and participation	15
<b>References</b>	<b>18</b>

# Abbreviations

**CEDAW** Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women

**CSO** civil society organisation

**FDFA** Federal Department of Foreign Affairs

**GONGO** government-organised NGO

**MENA** Middle East and North Africa

**NGO** non-governmental organisation

**PGE** Peace, Governance and Equality

**SDC** Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

**WHRD** women human rights defender

# 1 Background and rationale

## 1.1 SDC's learning journey on Working in Authoritarian Contexts and women's political empowerment

Building on earlier work on governance in fragile settings and shrinking spaces for civil society, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), with the Peace, Governance and Equality (PGE) cluster in the lead, has engaged in a learning journey on Working in Authoritarian Contexts. The joint learning journey is looking at challenges in contexts of democratic reversals and in long-standing authoritarian contexts, with the question of how cooperation in an authoritarian context can nevertheless be transformative and effective in advancing human rights.

The SDC Policy Note on Governance in Authoritarian Contexts provides an extensive analysis and conceptual approach to understanding different types of authoritarian regimes and trends as well as possible entry points for how and when cooperation offices can stay engaged (SDC 2020). The Policy Note served as the basis for regional consultations to understand the context-specific implications. Three Issue Papers have been commissioned to highlight specific aspects of engagement in authoritarian contexts and this paper on gender and authoritarianism is the third topic-specific research.<sup>1</sup>

Among others, SDC's learning journey unearthed women's political empowerment and participation as a particularly vulnerable area to focus on when engaging in an authoritarian context. Strengthening women's political empowerment and participation

has indeed been at the forefront at SDC, not only in its Gender Equality Unit and Network, but also in the Governance Network as laid out in a thematic working aid (SDC 2017). SDC's engagement with this question is centred around the concern that numerical representation alone will not automatically lead to gender-responsive policies or to a genuine impact on enhancing gender equality.

The consensus within SDC is that it is women's voice, leadership and influence that need to be increased. As laid out in the SDC working aid, women's voice and political empowerment are key to ensuring women's status as full and equal citizens and this, in turn, is at the core of processes of democratisation (*ibid.*). Between 2021 and early 2022, the Gender Equality Unit and Network engaged in an experience capitalisation in this regard, analysing SDC's approaches in diverse contexts, its proven practice, challenges and lessons learned. This paper complements the experience capitalisation.

Women's political participation and leadership is a strategic priority for SDC, anchored in the following key frameworks: CEDAW, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Switzerland's International Cooperation Strategy 2021–2024 (Objective 9), the FDFA Strategy on Gender Equality and Women's Rights 2017 (Objective 2) and Switzerland's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2018–2022).

## 1.2 Understanding backlash against women's rights in contexts of democratic backsliding and long-standing authoritarian regimes

Across the world, we are witnessing an escalating tendency to push back or reverse the many gains made for women's rights both in international policy and national contexts. Such developments pose big concerns for SDC, and donors broadly, and affects their work. Hence, an understanding of an increasing worldwide tendency of societal and political backlashes against gender equality and its manifestations for women is primordial.

**The overarching traits of this backlash are a discursive tendency based on a conservative**

**and stereotypical worldview of supposedly natural gender roles in family and public life, combined with homophobia and transphobia.**

It is important to understand that the backlash is systematic as there are transnational alliances and financial flows that support it – in authoritarian settings, but also in European countries.<sup>2</sup> This is combined with similarities in arguments and strategy. States and movements implicated in the backlash both brandish gender equality policies as external, mostly Western, and hence alien, if not harmful, to the society in question. Furthermore, they co-opt

<sup>1</sup> The first two are: *Examining Authoritarian Developmental States* and *Do Autocracy and Fragility Connect?*.

<sup>2</sup> An investigation by openDemocracy and the Forum for European Parliaments tracked the money flows from Christian fundamentalist organisations in the US. The biggest share goes to Europe: since 2008, over US\$700m was invested in anti-gender campaigns in Europe. The most potent donors are located in the US, the Russian Federation and Europe. For further information, see Brough *et al.* (2020) or Datta (2021).



existing policies and rights for gender equality in both national and multilateral contexts. This is manifested as attacks on access to reproductive health, rights for sexual and gender minorities, as well as an increased targeting of publicly active women and feminist civil society actors, coupled with coordinated campaigns against international policies, such as the Istanbul Convention<sup>3</sup> or the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.

Bans on abortion, bans on gender studies at universities or campaigns that suggest an alternative to the Istanbul Convention, as has happened in Brazil, India, Turkey, Poland, Indonesia and Azerbaijan, are only some of the recent examples of these efforts. The rise in authoritarian tendencies among other states – Pakistan, Nigeria, Cambodia

and Bangladesh, among others – leads to a shrinking civic space and curtails the ability of civil society actors to speak up on certain topics. Some of those topics relate to citizenship rights, minority groups, land rights and workers' rights. In the MENA region and also in Muslim-populated contexts such as Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Pakistan and Afghanistan, rising authoritarianism and gender equality backlash further complicates women's ability to advocate for amendments to some of the most discriminatory articles of 'personal status laws'. While in some contexts women have collectively organised against the backlash, this is not possible everywhere and the distinct anti-gender equality shift poses challenges for women's rights more broadly, and women's political empowerment in particular.<sup>4</sup>

### 1.3 Key concepts and objectives

This paper engages in discussions on how the dynamics of rising authoritarianism are linked to the ongoing gender equality backlash, and how this trend interferes with SDC's and other donors' cooperation efforts for democratic governance, gender equality and women's political empowerment. The paper is structured in two parts. Section 2 draws on existing literature and provides a concise comparative overview of diverse national gender-conveying discourses and policies and their implications for gender equality and women's political empowerment. It also examines the seemingly contradictory tendencies to label gender equality as 'foreign' or secondary amid 'more urgent priorities', while at the same time adopting co-optation strategies whereby political elites capitalise on women's rights to strengthen their position. It explores the possible implications of these narratives on women's opportunities for political engagement at various levels as well as on the changes in policies. It also discusses the rise of physical violence and online abuse and other forms of violence against women politicians, women civil society activists and women who speak out on women's rights.

Section 3 provides reflections on possible entry points for SDC on how to continue engaging in women's political empowerment and participation constructively and credibly in the context of rising authoritarianism and gender equality backlash.

Conceptually, the paper understands '**political participation**' in its broader sense, i.e. referring to participation not only in formal political institutions but also including women's engagement in civil

society organisations (CSOs) and the media, including online mobilisation. Following Eyben, this paper adopts the definition of political empowerment and participation as 'people's capacity to influence policy, make demands, and call to account the state institutions that impact upon their lives' (2010: 12). Thus, this definition not only includes political representation but it also implies an ability to act. When considering women's participation in public and political life, empowerment must also take into account women's access to and mobilisation within formal and informal political spaces. New public and political spaces, including online spaces, must also be considered in order to capture the diverse platforms enabling women's voices and influence, the power of coalitions that span from local to transnational levels, and new forms of accountability. Furthermore, the paper adopts a multi-level perspective, whereby it considers local to national political arenas.

The entry of women into political spaces can be shaped by a variety of enabling or disabling factors; for example, the availability of money/cash, the prevailing culture, care responsibilities and women's confidence (also known as the 4Cs). Further, the preferences and behaviour of the political elite (e.g. political parties, leaders) and measures that enable women's presence can be decisive (e.g. electoral systems, affirmative action measures, supportive rules, etc.). For their meaningful participation in decision making, more factors come into play, such as cross-party coalitions and networks with critical male actors and the executive, or relationship building with women's movements, the media and other allies in

3 Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Turkey withdrew from it in March 2021, while Poland drafted an alternative Warsaw declaration, which would make abortion and same sex marriage illegal, and circulated it among other post-communist countries. For further information, see Bias (2021).

4 See, for example, Ziemer (2020).

civil society. Violence against women in politics is another decisive factor influencing their agency.<sup>5</sup>

The **concept of 'backlash'** is used throughout this paper to describe 'a rise in exclusionary politics, characterised by misogyny, xenophobia, transphobia and the resulting erosion of women's rights in the name of a "return to traditional values"' (Birchall 2020: 2). Although the term 'backlash' received critique in academic literature for referring to some sort of turning point, instead of a continuous opposition to gender equality, the concept is nevertheless a useful tool for interpreting regional or global tendencies of deterioration in the field of gender relations (Korolczuk 2014). Even though it happens as much on the national as the global level and the global alliances<sup>6</sup> are crucial for understanding the mechanisms and financial potency of the phenomenon, this paper explicitly focuses on national settings in authoritarian regimes.

The paper draws on the **typology of regimes** outlined in the SDC Policy Note; namely, autocracy, liberal autocracy, limited political democracy and political democracy (SDC 2020). Autocracy is understood as a regime that offers no possibility for political competition and few rights of citizenship or civil liberties; liberal autocracy implies that civil liberties are offered to some population groups without opening the system up to greater competition (*ibid.*: 3). When working with this categorisation, it is important to recognise that the reversals or transitions to authoritarianism do not follow a linear trajectory

and, as the Policy Note states, 'can combine different configurations of the two dimensions of liberalisation and democratisation' (*ibid.*: 4).

Furthermore, it is important to distinguish between countries that have never experienced a robust democracy to begin with and those where a reversal of democratic progress can be observed. As indicated in the SDC Policy Note, many countries experience 'incomplete transitions to democracy' and many of them 'have always experienced varying degrees of authoritarianism' (*ibid.*: 2). Most scholars and practitioners today back away from describing a linear logic of democratisation and, rather, support the notion of different paths to how democratisation can happen. Similarly, there is no linear way of how 'backlash' happens, or how rulers might restrict or broaden the boundaries of participation in response to the perceived current challenges they are faced with. As noted in the Policy Note, it is often the 'gradual weakening of democratic aspects that is problematic' and that observation of a clear-cut change is rare (*ibid.*: 4).<sup>7</sup>

The methodology for this paper is based on desk research and a literature review. The information is derived primarily from a synthesis of regional reports that compile key themes and trends from across all regions. Academic resources were also important components of the research as was the feedback received from SDC throughout the process and, in particular, when preliminary findings were presented to staff during a webinar.

## 2 Democratic backsliding and the backlash against women's rights: understanding current challenges

### 2.1 A concise comparative review of different manifestations of backlash

During the past two decades, much local and Western scholarship has emerged analysing the rise in authoritarian, anti-human rights, nationalist and conservative tendencies, and trends around the world that have a direct impact on gender (in)equality.<sup>8</sup> Existing scholarship reports that anti-gender equality campaigns, as well as homophobic, transphobic

and misogynistic political rhetoric, are on the rise in numerous regions of the world ranging from Latin America and North America to Africa, Western and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Articulated opposition to gender equality and a wave of deterioration in pursuit of policies for

<sup>5</sup> 'Literature Review on Women's Political Participation and Empowerment', commissioned by the SDC to the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) (2021, draft).

<sup>6</sup> Most research has so far unearthed a vast network of global, financial, ideological and strategic ties between far-right parties and ultra-conservative religious groups tied to various Christian denominations; for further information see: Paternotte and Kuhar (2019). There is still an important research gap on other conservative, religious actors equally implicated in this network.

<sup>7</sup> However, recent political turmoil in a number of countries has proved this to be wrong (e.g. Myanmar, Afghanistan, Burkina Faso).

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Hovhannisyan (2019).

gender equality promoted by populist, conservative religious, civil society and state actors jeopardise the earlier gains in gender equality.<sup>9</sup> Those hard-fought gains that women have achieved, particularly following the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, in fields as diverse as political participation, the labour market, care, and violence against women are at risk. Furthermore, the very concept of 'gender equality', which for more than 25 years has been a useful tool in combating discrimination against women, is currently being contested.

The areas of gender equality backlash that appear to be common across diverse regions include the opposition to institutional and policy framework in the realm of gender equality (such as education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and preventing and combating violence against women) as well as the operating space for women's CSOs. The consequence of this is that gender equality in general, as well as the actors promoting it, are currently facing serious challenges.

At the same time, and despite commonalities, the penetration, intensity and effects of a gender equality backlash have varied among countries and areas. In some contexts, we see that the rise in authoritarian tendencies and the backlash against women's rights have taken the form of erosion of specific policy gains or capacity of state gender machineries, as well as attacks on sexual education, and reproductive rights (Nicaragua, Serbia). The negative developments in other contexts, such as

Pakistan, Nigeria, Egypt and Jordan among others, are particularly affected by an escalated backlash against women's activism and the ability of civil society to speak out on specific issues, as well as by a spike in gender-based violence. Moreover, in some contexts, the backlash has up to now mostly remained at the level of rhetoric, while in others it has already manifested itself via concrete measures and initiatives. Scholars document that in some cases we can even identify a '**lashless backlash**' when, as Juhász and Pap put it, 'steps have been taken backwards in the absence of any meaningful progress' (2018: 9).

Broadly speaking, the backlash in gender equality and women's rights can be observed in the following patterns:

- a Articulated opposition to gender equality in political discourses and a gradual erosion of rights-based discourses and legitimacy of women's rights, which have an impact on the public agenda, policies, and their implementation, and on the private sphere.
- b Shrinking space for women's mobilisation in civil society.
- c The rise of physical and online abuse and other forms of violence against politically active women, including prosecution of women's rights activists who challenge or dissent on issues propagated by the state (ICJ 2015).

## 2.2 Articulated opposition to gender equality in official political discourses

Scholars and practitioners have widely noted that a gender equality backlash is related to changes in official political discourses. But what discursive means and ideological foundations are inherent to the national and international narratives against gender equality?

A common pattern of gender equality backlash is for political narratives to change from largely supportive or silent positions on gender equality, to statements that openly challenge and oppose gender equality objectives (Roggeband and Krizsan 2018: 2–3). Such political narratives often go in opposition to a country's formally adopted and accepted policy provisions. And while there are significant differences between the regional contexts, there are also striking parallels in the drift towards increasing opposition to gender equality. The comparative inquiry reveals both the peculiarities, as well as

ideological commonalities of anti-gender equality arguments across diverse contexts.

Statements that challenge gender equality are issued regularly by government officials. The fight against a so-called '**gender ideology**' has gained particular political legitimacy and support in contexts as diverse as Azerbaijan, Turkey, Brazil, Palestine and Colombia. Fighting against 'gender ideology' has become a popular mobilising tool. Pro-gender equality initiatives are often accused of serving a 'Western agenda', as ideas promoted by global capitalism which threaten to subvert traditional, social and religious values. Political leaders frequently lean on nationalist narratives that stress the cultural authenticity of the nation, and in turn, create a certain image of an 'external enemy' associated with the West and/or pro-Western agencies. Some common narratives stress that the

<sup>9</sup> Although it is difficult to name the precise starting point of anti-gender equality backlash, various scholarship suggests that the impact of the economic crisis in 2008, and the uncertainty that followed, triggered changes in gender equality narratives, institutions and policies.



so-called 'gender ideology' has been developed to shatter the 'traditional family' and to 'propagate homosexuality'. In some contexts, 'gender ideology' is also framed as an ideology imposed by the world's rich on the poor, which is an impactful rhetorical tool given its anti-colonial message (this is particularly inherent to post-socialist countries and post-colonial Africa) (Korolczuk and Graff 2018).

Political rhetoric on gender equality in the context of rising authoritarianism particularly challenges the morality and sexuality aspects of gender equality. That is why narratives aimed at restricting **women's reproductive rights** are also often framed in opposition to 'gender ideology', which is supposedly threatening the nation's conservative or religious values. In contexts as diverse as the Caucasus, Eastern Europe and Latin America, the appeals to 'fight against gender ideology' are undertaken by a broad range of conservative, nationalist and religious actors in the name of '**protecting children**' from paedophilia, prohibiting the 'propaganda of homosexuality' or spreading of 'debauchery' in the context of the MENA region. Such narratives predominately target LGBTQ+ people, as well as civil society representatives and all groups and individuals promoting gender equality. Such rhetoric is halting democratisation and constructing barriers to much-awaited rights-based institutional and legal reforms in these countries.

## 2.3 Implications of gender equality policies and laws: patterns of delegitimisation

Based on a review of available research, the discursive delegitimisation of women's rights and gender equality-related policies is an ongoing concern around the world. Rising authoritarianism and backlash against gender equality made it possible for governments to transform the policy frameworks on gender equality. As discussed above, the discursive delegitimisation of 'gender equality' as a concept is a key step in this process because **in the realm of gender policy, the concepts are vital for policy design**. Anchored in the belief that gender equality, misrepresented as 'gender ideology', betrays or threatens what is supposed to be a 'natural order', these narratives jeopardise women's rights and gender equality-related policies. A vivid example in this regard is the **attack on the Istanbul Convention** – the main international legal instrument on gender-based violence that holds the member states responsible to ensure the protection of women against domestic and intimate violence. The notion of 'gender equality', as contained in the Istanbul Convention, became a target of opponents of 'gender ideology', and as a result, its ratification or implementation has been

In fact, as scholars suggest, the concept of 'gender' has become a 'symbolic glue', i.e. an **umbrella term** that morphs different aspects of life and geopolitical issues together (Kováts and Põim 2015: 127). In Armenia, the anti-gender equality rhetoric propagated by a range of conservative actors calls to oppose the 'warped Western values', and to 'maintain family values' (Grigoryan 2013). This rhetoric brought a backlash over the law 'On Ensuring Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Women and Men', approved in 2013. According to Grigoryan (2013), many Armenians believe the law is designed to 'promote' homosexuality as a 'European value'. Furthermore, the author argues that the backlash against the law has been so intense that it prompted some political observers to believe 'it is being artificially stoked in order to build popular support for Yerevan's decision to seek membership in the Russia-led Eurasian Customs Union at the expense of closer ties with the European Union' (*ibid.*). According to Nikoghosyan (2016), conservative groups insisted that 'were Armenia to join the Russian-led Customs Union, the country would save itself from Western perversions, such as "gender"' (*ibid.*). This illustrates how the opposition to gender equality through the prism of hostile attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people has been morphed with geopolitical issues.

hindered in various contexts. In Turkey, it resulted in a complete withdrawal from the Convention.

**Active policy dismantling** is the most evident way for politicians to express their open opposition to a policy and take action to end the policy. However, research suggests that active policy dismantling happens significantly less frequently than **symbolic dismantling**, i.e. the discursive delegitimisation of a policy and threats to dismantle it.<sup>10</sup> This is when declarations are made but are not acted upon. Symbolic policy dismantling may, for example, discredit arguments about gender equality or the gendered nature of violence. One pattern that has been widely witnessed is where the governments redefine institutions and policies from a focus on women (or gender) to a focus on 'the family' (Ayhan 2019). As mentioned above, such narratives have already brought a backlash over a law on gender equality in Armenia. A similar wave of deterioration in the pursuit of policies for gender equality has passed through Egypt, where state-sponsored changes to the personal status code fell under attack by the National Council for Women. Four important reforms

<sup>10</sup> On the multilateral level, further examples would include efforts to include 'pro life' (i.e. anti-abortion) language in established agreements and treaties. See Sanders (2018).

related to women's rights to divorce, child custody, citizenship and electoral quotas were discursively discredited, when the opponents of these reforms labelled them as 'Suzanne's laws' by association with the ex-first lady Suzanne Mubarak and framing them as 'elitist' 'Western' values (Mohamed 2018).

Apart from symbolic dismantling, the subtlest strategy of policy dismantling is **backsliding in policy implementation**, i.e. when change happens in the absence of formal decisions. Governments might simply not execute policies, thus leading to gradual policy extinction. Such a

strategy is not easily visible to the public, making it difficult to respond to. Policy dismantling literature suggests that dismantling strategies depends on the one hand on the political ideology and preference of politicians and on the other, on available opportunities and constraints, and public and political support or opposition.<sup>11</sup> There is a lack of research, however, that would offer an insight on how these diverse policy dismantling and policy delegitimising strategies affect the possibility of women to organise and oppose these developments (for instance, does it make it more difficult to respond when dismantling is symbolic?).

## 2.4 Implications for women's political participation

Since 1995, when the Beijing Declaration committed to advance women's full and equal participation in politics in most countries and regions, the share of women represented in political roles (descriptive representation) has improved substantially. Despite such progress, women still account for just 25 per cent of female parliamentarians and 10 per cent of leaders worldwide – thus, gender parity is still far from reach. Furthermore, the increased descriptive representation is not always indicative of changed societal attitudes (because the historically reproduced gender norms are powerful and persistent institutions) and in most countries, the political space predominately continues to be regarded as masculine.

Marginalisation of women in politics is a result of a variety of factors, including political structures and institutions, and sociocultural and functional constraints that limit women's individual and collective agency. Social and political discourses around gender norms are another significant factor in shaping women's political opportunities. Strengthening normative constraints around traditional families and rolling back on conceptualising gender equality by governments is particularly disempowering for women and girls given the already prevalent perception in many contexts about the woman's role as a wife and mother and the consequent high burden of unpaid

care work. Such narratives further impact how women perceive their opportunities in politics and how they are perceived and treated by voters, by political actors and by their families.

**Tightening gender norms impact every stage of a woman's political career**, such as the ability to access necessary resources (including financial resources, education, reproductive health and rights, formal employment), and the formal and informal social networks and connections that are needed to finance and sustain political roles as well as family support. Given that presumptions about gender shape the way political institutions function, backlash on gender equality makes it even more difficult for women to join and maintain their positions in politics, as well as to exercise their voice and leadership. Additionally, in a climate that is unfriendly towards gender equality, it becomes increasingly more difficult for women to lobby for the interests of women. Alliance and coalition building (with women and women-led CSOs) is also complicated. And most concerning is, as Vogelstein and Bro (2021) rightly note, that as the number of women pursuing a career in politics rises, 'so too does the hostility and violence: politically motivated attacks on women are growing around the world'. (For more on violence against politically active women, see Section 2.6).

## 2.5 Shrinking space for women's mobilisation in civil society: backlash in accountability and inclusion mechanisms

Misrepresentations of gender equality as a tool of 'ideological colonisation' also led to heightened restrictions on women's mobilising in civil society. **In fact, scholars highlight that an intensified discourse on fighting the 'gender agenda' and preserving family values is one of the three main factors, along with the war against terrorism and governments' fears of another Arab Spring or Orange Revolution, that shrink**

**the civic space** (Wassholm 2018). While the space for independent civil society is shrinking under restrictive measures, CSOs are also being pushed out of the space for dialogue with the state. If earlier authoritarian states at least to some extent relied on collaboration with civil society actors to provide information for central policymaking, at present states rely more and more on government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) and

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Krizsan and Roggeband (2019).

pro-government NGOs to promote government agendas. Hence, even if authoritarian regimes do not completely forbid CSOs, constraints are increasingly applied (EuroMed Rights 2021).

The Swedish women's rights foundation Kvinna till Kvinna documented women's experiences with civil society engagement in recent years, based on interviews with women human rights defenders (WHRDs) from 32 countries (including Democratic Republic of Congo, Azerbaijan, Egypt and Serbia) (Wassholm 2018). More than 60 per cent of respondents said their space to act as an activist has shrunk. Many of them linked it with their government's fears of CSOs affecting political change and presenting a threat to regimes that fear criticism. One activist quoted in the report said: 'Those regimes hit back by accusing civil society of being controlled by foreign agents and working against the interests of the nation' (*ibid.*: 27). It is justified to argue that this hesitancy is also connected to anti-gender campaigns which have specifically targeted women NGOs and abortion clinics with defamation (Hildebrand, Mensing and Mordi 2021). Azerbaijan and Egypt are vivid examples of these negative developments. Foreign agent laws have left CSOs with no option but to get in tune with the regime; otherwise, they will cease to exist due to an inability to fulfil administrative requirements.

The operating space for women's CSOs has been strongly restricted via increasing criminalisation and bureaucratisation of their activities, making it more and more difficult for them to carry out their work. A decrease in domestic funding for women's CSOs together with regulations that prevent CSOs from receiving international funding have been a major factor in the shrinking space for women's activism. Women's CSOs have been heavily moderated, and incidents of arrests, harassment and intimidation of WHRDs are also widely reported.<sup>12</sup> This creates an atmosphere of fear and discouragement for women engaged in CSOs and advocating for women's

rights. Particularly vulnerable are women working in the area of human rights, especially those focusing on issues such as sexual and reproductive and LGBTQ+ rights. Regional variations, for example within the MENA region, are also significant. For instance, to quote Sara Abou Ghazal, the regional coordinator for Women Human Rights Defenders, Middle East and North Africa Coalition in Kvinna till Kvinna's report, Egypt 'is the peak of shrinking space. It's completely closed. They cannot do anything' (Wassholm 2018: 10). Meanwhile, Tunisia could serve as a better example of state interaction with women's human rights CSOs (Wassholm 2018).

The decreased space for civic organising and protest is a serious obstacle to women's political empowerment and participation, as they have traditionally been excluded from male-dominated political institutions and thus rely on civil society organising to effect political change (Filep 2012). In many autocracies and liberalised autocracies, securing voice through co-operation with state actors used to be an effective strategy employed by women's organisations in achieving gender policy progress. **A decrease in civic space leads to a weakening of a key channel for the advancement of women's issues.** Given the heightened restrictions on civil society mobilisation, increased numbers of CSOs and human rights defenders have resorted to new digital communication platforms. However, freedom in these new spaces has been tightly regulated with government-imposed tedious laws and harsh restrictions to govern the online space (UN Women 2021).

Consequences of the shrinking civic space have a significant impact not only on activists and their organisations, but also on other women, who are discouraged from getting involved. Shrinking civic space also has implications on women in political institutions and their scope of action through losing possible allies. Overall, the arena where women can voice their concerns, advocate for their rights and support each other to reach political decision making is getting smaller.

## 2.6 Gender-targeted silencing of politically active women

Despite numerous difficulties, women in many contexts around the world have managed to collectively organise against these distinct anti-gender equality shifts.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, such phenomena as sexist hate speech, open misogyny, and physical and online violence pose a real threat to women activists (EU FRA 2017: 3). Multiple reports and media coverage document increased levels of physical and verbal attacks as well as cyber-attacks against women activists (women CSOs, WHRDs,

politicians, journalists) in diverse contexts. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians reported in its 2020 report an increase in acts of violence and intimidation against women (IPU 2020).<sup>14</sup> According to the report, the threats, acts of intimidation and violence against women MPs were most frequently reported in the Americas, with the Middle East and North Africa region recording the second highest proportion of cases (*ibid.*). In Egypt, multiple cases of

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, reports on East Africa (UNHCR n.d.) and Central Asia (Filep 2012).

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Ziemer (2020).

<sup>14</sup> Annual IPU figures reveal increasing violence against parliamentarians, especially women MPs.

mob sexual assault and gang rape in Tahrir Square, as well as forced virginity tests on female detainees were documented during the 2011–14 protests (Marroush 2015). In Kenya, cases were reported of women being beaten and stripped naked while participating in a public protest in defence of women's right to wear what they choose. Verbal and physical attacks, as well as blackmailing, have also been reported in Serbia (Wassholm 2018: 33). Various other reports document multiple instances of sexualised threats, often undertaken by state security services or the police (Thornton 2021).<sup>15</sup>

Leaking compromising information about politically active women is another common intimidation

technique to scare politically active women. Reports document multiple instances of intimidation attempts against politically active women, such as exposing their private life. The release of compromising recordings of female leaders' and activists' personal lives can be a highly effective tactic for forcing women out of the public sphere. Reputational risk is another factor that discourages women from running for elections or engaging in other forms of political activism. Gender-based violence against politically active women creates a vicious circle, where women are deprived of opportunities to participate and, in turn, also of the possibility to change the conditions that perpetuate violence and discrimination.

## 2.7 The dangers of co-optation

Considering the developments outlined in Sections 2.2–2.6, one may wonder what to think of autocracies that have prioritised the advancement of women's rights. According to Donno and Kreft, around 25 per cent of present-day autocracies 'perform as well or better on respect for women's rights than the average developing democracy' (2019: 721). The mean share of female legislators, the authors argue, is now 'equal across democracies and dictatorships in the developing world' (*ibid.*). For example, the Rwandan government introduced gender quotas (2003), reformed the property rights and inheritance regime (1999), and strengthened criminal penalties for sexual/domestic violence (2009–11), among other measures. The 'Islamic State feminism' of Morocco is another example.<sup>16</sup> In 2003–04, Morocco reformed family law to expand women's rights to seek divorce and retain guardianship of children, thus putting in practice the 'decades of discussion between political leaders, liberal feminists and Islamists' (Eddouada and Pepicelli 2010). Many other non-democratic regimes have adopted legislation on violence against women (e.g. Tanzania's 1998 Sexual Offences Bill) or sexual harassment (Uganda's 2006 Employment Act) (*ibid.*).

Since the end of the third wave of democratisation, comparative research has increasingly focused on the factors that enhance the resilience of authoritarian regimes. Scholarship suggests that looking at the **empowerment of women as a mechanism of legitimation** can provide clues to this large (and growing) number of high-performing dictatorships (Adams 2007). Existing research shows that authoritarian regimes frequently establish women-friendly policies and institutions 'for purposes other than those of gender equality', such as consolidating and expanding the electoral base and maintaining power (Tripp 2013: 530). Or, as noted in the SDC Policy Note, autocrats

may use 'façade democratic institutions... to deal with uncertainty and for their own survival' (SDC 2020: 2). A good case in point is **Nicaragua**, where in late 2018 the state launched its biggest campaign against female-led groups, cancelling the legal status of NGOs that had defended human rights since 1990. At the same time, to compensate internationally for the repressive actions against female organisations, the government established participation quotas corresponding to the number of women required to serve public positions, hence securing positive rankings in international gender statistics, and arguing for its supposed promotion of women's rights.

Such state-led promotion of women's rights might be often considered as 'better than nothing', yet this is usually imposed through a top-down approach and it is not supported by initiatives aimed at challenging harmful social norms and traditional gender roles, or in genuinely liberalising women's sexual and reproductive rights. Rather, as Tripp argues, such state programmes leave 'women precariously dependent on the state' (2013: 530). Therefore, while some autocracies and liberalised autocracies may display efforts to advance women's rights, such efforts rarely result in the actual change of male-dominated political culture or more civic liberties. It is therefore recommended to take a closer look at the implementation of such policies, in consultation with local women CSOs.

**Despite considerable geographical and social differences, the literature on state feminism in diverse contexts comes to similar conclusions: many autocracies and liberalised autocracies seek to achieve legitimation by displaying efforts in the advancement of women's rights as a step towards democratisation.** Capitalising on women's empowerment is a way for autocracies

<sup>15</sup> See also findings within OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, 'Safety of Female Journalists Online'.

<sup>16</sup> 'State feminism' could be defined as a government's strategy to promote top-down women's rights and gender equality.

to signal modernity, boost economic growth, gain popular support and brighten up the image of the state (Lorch and Bunk 2016). Paying lip service to women's rights is less risky for authoritarian states than actually allowing civil liberties or fair elections. For example, policies that advance women's political representation can be promulgated in a fully 'regime-compatible' manner. So, promoting women's economic rights does not directly pose a threat to authoritarian resilience. In fact, in some liberalised autocracies (such as the Gulf countries), provision of economic wealth comes at the expense of women's political participation. Economic and reputational benefits from the international community may be an additional incentive for authoritarian states to advance women's human rights agenda. Overall, as Donno and Kreft conclude, 'the extent to which autocracies prioritise 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' (2019: 724–25).

Scholarship shows that autocratic regimes may co-opt women's empowerment:

- Through the strategic use of gender quotas
- Through co-opting women's organisations or women's wings and preventing the emergence of more autonomous women's mobilisation (*ibid.*).

Research also shows that authoritarian rulers may instrumentalise women's rights to respond to secular groups' fears of Islamic empowerment. As such, several authoritarian regimes in the MENA region use the promotion of women's rights 'to delegitimise the Islamist political opposition' (Errazzouki and al-Khawaja 2013). This pattern can, for instance, be observed in Morocco, Algeria and Jordan, where the partial introduction of progressive gender policies sought to sustain the dominance of the ruling elite and to deny legitimate political participation to Islamist opponents. Furthermore, promoting women's empowerment and advancing

women's political participation is also a promising avenue for a ruling party seeking to co-opt women into its support base.

**Rwanda** – the world champion regarding the share of women in the national legislature – is often cited as a model of gender inclusiveness (Warner 2016). Women hold over 60 per cent of seats in the lower house of Rwanda's national legislature, the largest share of any country (Amour-Levar 2018). Yet, research shows that despite remarkable achievements in terms of women's political representation, women's lives in Rwanda continue to be characterised by marginalisation and exclusion (Reinl 2019). The reason behind such discrepancy, according to some scholars, is rooted in the history of a rapid introduction of gender equality in Rwandan politics which was introduced not via women's mobilisation or gradual liberation of gender relations, but was initiated by the state (Wallace, Haerpfer and Abbott 2008). Currently, women are appointed to various political positions and yet, the structures of the authoritarian state which 'exclude any form of political dissent' and the dominance of patriarchal ideology in Rwanda, make it increasingly difficult for women to mobilise around women's issues or advocate for women-friendly policies (*ibid.*). Some scholars, such as Burnet (2008) argue that an increased representation of women in Rwandan politics has to date not translated into women's increased ability to influence policymaking.

The duality of women's status in authoritarian regimes promoting liberalisation of women's rights can often be traced to contradictions in the respective regimes' nationalist discourses, on the one hand portraying gender equality as an essential part of national modernisation and democratisation while on the other, depicting women as the guardians of tradition and the main agents of reproduction of cultural and traditional values. Furthermore, moving towards greater gender equality is difficult in contexts where organisations that usually hold influence and oversight over government policy, such as women's policy agencies and commissions, are co-opted by the state.



# 3 Relevance for SDC: addressing new challenges to women's political empowerment and participation

## 3.1 Implications of rising authoritarianism and gender equality backlash on SDC's strategies for women's political empowerment and participation

Rising authoritarianism and a political discourse opposing gender equality prevents women politicians from being politically vocal and effectively engaged, and hinders coalition-building. The extent of direct hostility or repression of gender equality negatively impacts many of the factors that are decisive for women's political participation. We also see that civil society, which in many countries is the major area of women's political mobilisation, is shrinking due to restrictive laws, blocked funding, travel bans, surveillance and arrests. Backlash in gender equality is also a contributing factor to growing rates of violence against women, including physical, verbal and cyber-attacks on politically active women.

In light of these negative developments, **it is important not to retreat from working towards advancing women's political empowerment and participation**, but to find new and adapted ways to support it. How can development cooperation in contexts of authoritarianism and democratic backsliding nevertheless remain gender transformative? What strategies could best be employed to redefine the gendered power dynamics marginalising women on the political scene and to strengthen women's participation and voice?

To assess the constraints, risks and windows of opportunity for engagement that might arise in each specific context, a broad analytical framework needs to be adopted. As discussed throughout this paper, at present women face new challenges.

These new and emerging structural and systemic barriers need to be examined to unpack why women's political inclusion/exclusion takes place in specific ways and what factors influence women's political voice and agency. This requires a broader understanding of the changing interaction between formal rules (electoral systems, political party selection processes) and informal norms that operate in a political system and beyond, including how women collectively organise and negotiate with political elites and other social-political actors.

Furthermore, as discussed in Section 2.2, gender equality in the political discourse of authoritarian and backsliding states can be viewed as a 'symbolic glue'. This means that by tackling the issues pertaining to gender equality, the ruling elites bargain power over a plethora of other issues. For example, anti-gender equality rhetoric can be used to mobilise voters and gain support for conservative parties and policies. Thus, a **gender equality backlash needs to be assessed in relation to the broader political agenda**. Some states might resist advancing gender equality to signal political opposition to the West and strengthen nationalist rhetoric. However, others tend to advance women's rights to gain other benefits in return. Understanding these dynamics can highlight possible entry points and unique opportunities for engagement in promoting women's political empowerment and participation and help mitigate the risk of strengthening or legitimising authoritarian regimes.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Two research projects which focus on how women civil society activists can be strengthened in the face of backlash are of particular interest and practical relevance: *Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice* at the Institute of Development Studies focuses on Brazil, Uganda, Kenya, Lebanon, India and Bangladesh, while *Sustaining Power: Women's Struggles against contemporary backlash in South Asia* (SuPWR) investigates Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan in particular. These projects offer a useful resource for practical examples of strengthening women's political empowerment and participation.

## 3.2 Possible entry points for identifying spaces and opportunities to enhance women's political empowerment and participation

### SENSITIVITY TO TERMINOLOGY IN CONSULTATION WITH ADVOCATES ON THE GROUND

As discussed, gender equality has been often discredited as a form of Western propaganda, advocating homosexuality and paedophilia and the destruction of traditional values. In contexts where these narratives are predominant, political messages related to gender equality, women's rights and women's political empowerment and women's political participation, as well as women's sexual and reproductive rights, need to be carefully considered. This is also important when supporting civil society groups and networks or engaging at the local level. When a strong opposition is seen towards such terminology as 'gender equality' or 'feminism', new formulations should be adopted. This requires dialogue with and listening to the local experts, i.e. to the women advocating gender rights.

### SUPPORT HISTORICAL MEMORY INITIATIVES

The discreditation of gender equality as a Western-led ruse works better the less the local history of the women's movement is known. In fact, many of the international women's rights were fought for by women from the Global South and in each context, there is usually a community of women who have advocated and fought for certain rights. Their erasure from collective memory is done on purpose, so support for initiatives to raise the population's awareness about their own feminist heritage can have an important impact while bringing less exposure.

### ENGAGE WITH THE STATE AFTER CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF COMMITMENTS TO GENDER EQUALITY

Wherever possible, engaging directly with the state could prove useful. However, due to the risk of co-optation, it is critical to closely examine the implementation of normative commitments to gender equality before engaging, let alone commend a government for them. These commitments should then be used to push for accountability and empower local civil society to advocate for their full implementation. Although these commitments represent a mimicked practice of liberal democratic societies, consolidating support and sustainability of these legal commitments is important to prevent reversal to the old system. Often, CSOs (including women-led or women's rights CSOs) challenge their respective states through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Human Rights Council (HRC) reviews, etc. It is important to foster the participation of

CSOs in preparation of these reviews (via physical presence, shadow reports, etc.).

Depending on the context, conducting gender awareness workshops with politicians, as duty-bearers, could be a way to get them engaged and assume responsibility for creating favourable conditions for women's increased involvement in political and public life. However, it is important to assess the risks of engaging directly with the state and adapt the interventions to avoid the risk of co-optation, i.e. becoming complicit or being perceived as closely associated with an authoritarian regime.

When direct engagement with the state on gender equality is severely compromised, SDC needs to continue integrating gender equality as a transversal theme in all interventions until favourable opportunities are identified; for instance, via continued engagement with the government in fields that are politically less sensitive and by focusing on concrete benefits related to women's empowerment in other areas.

### EMPOWERING WOMEN'S CSOs AND COOPERATING WITH OTHER NON-STATE ACTORS

Given that at present the civic space is in general terms increasingly shrinking, it is important to be aware that CSOs are confronted with heightened financial surveillance, increasingly complicated financial acquisition procedures, and even a complete loss of funding for some. In some contexts (such as Egypt), the anti-terrorism legislation contains provisions that are so vaguely defined that it puts at risk individuals and CSOs whose activities may fall under this definition. To make sure CSOs engage effectively with the state and strengthen local and international collaboration for more effective advocacy, the needs of these organisations and the tools required to support them should be (anonymously) assessed. Rather than assuming what tools and solutions are useful to civil society actors in each specific context and across contexts, it might be reasonable to conduct a needs assessment to address the specificities of each national context and to assess the pressing local issues and agendas.

The following questions are important to consider from the perspective of CSOs:

- What is their vision of SDC's engagement on the issue of women's political empowerment and participation?
- What are their expectations and concerns?

- How do they want SDC to communicate over women's political empowerment?

Additionally, an overall understanding is required on:

- How are state–CSO relations reconfigured in the current climate of gender equality backlash and how does this affect the inclusion and participation of civil society groups into policy processes?
- What strategies do CSO activists employ in response to the gender equality backlash (if any)?
- If it is possible, how can support be provided in places where foreign agent laws/anti-terrorism legislations are in place?

In liberalised autocracies, measures to open/strengthen spaces for **dialogue and social accountability** could be devised. Social accountability could be improved by strengthening the links between official women's bodies, such as state women's machineries or women's councils, with women's rights CSOs. Political parties need to engage in a sustained manner with women via, for example, institutionalised joint sessions of parliamentary groups and municipal councils. Efforts could be made to help re(establish) the communications channel between the government and women's rights CSOs, enabling women to place gender issues on the political agenda and establish themselves as potential political candidates. Civil society groups and networks could also be engaged in monitoring the implementation of existing policies and provisions. Although gender quotas, gender mainstreaming and women's policy bodies have not to date been sufficient to break male dominance in politics, they nonetheless remain necessary. Consequently, they require protection from and monitoring of the signs of attack by stakeholders who oppose gender equality and who seek to abolish, co-opt or pre-empt existing gender-equality provision.

Mapping CSO landscapes and helping them sustain their work and growth via cooperation with (legally permitted) umbrella partners that have established regional experience, could be another measure to strengthen women's civic mobilisation. However, it is important to remember that so-called GONGOS advocate for issues in line with government policies and against critical voices, can put outspoken women activists at risk and may have a different agenda. **Furthermore, it is important to consider the potential disempowering effect of international donor involvement by placing additional demands on civil society via agenda setting** (Wassholm 2018: 31). Once again, language and agenda setting need to be carefully assessed in collaboration with the CSOs.

## TARGETING POTENTIAL PARTNERS AND GATEKEEPERS AND INVESTING IN BREAKING GENDER STEREOTYPES

The actors and factors contributing to supporting women's political empowerment and representation need to be identified **beyond the formal political institutions** (such as parliaments and parties) at different levels of society including the private sector, the media, the judiciary and the administration. Engaging these actors in transforming discriminatory gender attitudes, such as the stereotypical division of women's and men's roles and spaces, is crucial. The goal is to convey strong arguments that show the gains if women were to be fully included.

As noted in the SDC Policy Note, switching from national to local level might not necessarily make engagement easier in authoritarian contexts because 'the "control apparatus" stretches from the national level down to the municipalities and there might be as little room for change at the local as at the national level' (SDC 2020: 6). Nevertheless, interventions could be devised for local levels to **target potential gatekeepers**, i.e. those who constrain women's participation in politics at different levels of society, including the domestic space. These measures apply to the **local/micro** levels of family, community and local politics and aim to foster citizen engagement **and work on behaviour/cultural change**, specifically on issues concerning the labour partition between women and men, women's mobility outside the home, the value of work, as well as on stopping the justification of violence against women. Such measures can include consciousness raising and dialogue with the men on the above-mentioned issues.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, it is important to continue engaging directly with women and girls on building their competencies through leadership programmes and skills, as well as through raising women's rights awareness. Such initiatives need to be conducted with the considerations of safety, timing and childcare arrangements. Promoting women's engagement in entrepreneurship is another important step in facilitating gender equality.

## ADDRESSING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Violence prevention should be a key area of engagement when promoting women's political empowerment and participation. It is essential to take measures to address gender-based violence both in public and private spaces, as well as online via **strengthening institutional responses** and engaging at different levels of society.

As many authoritarian states still predominantly fail to provide women with legal assistance or protection,

<sup>18</sup> To understand the subtle processes that socialise women into non-political roles see work Cheema *et al.* (2019).

it is important to implement efforts in establishing/securing women's refuge for protection from violence and provision of legal and psychological support. Helping women's organisations in conducting risk analysis/devising security plans is another measure to consider. When thinking about the measures aimed at ensuring the protection of WHRDs, who are at risk due to their work, such documents as the *Swiss Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders* should be consulted (FDFA 2019).

Additionally, initiatives addressing communities' response to violence could be undertaken:

- Raise awareness of violence against women, and specifically violence against **visible women** (not only politicians, but also human rights defenders, journalists, public intellectuals, civil society activists) needs to be of the highest priority.
- Work on enhancing the knowledge of law enforcement and legal professionals, as well as journalists and other stakeholders, on the issues.
- Engage both the traditional media and social media in campaigns to stop violence against women, as well as in overall reconstructing of the harmful gendered roles in society.
- Engage with violence perpetrators on a sustained and long-term basis.

Addressing cyberviolence against women is another important measure to strengthen women's political voices. It is important to engage states in discussions on how to prevent cyberviolence against women and how not to let cyberviolence remain unpunished.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, raising awareness of online violence is an important tool of prevention.

### SUPPORT FOR NEW AND EMERGING POSSIBILITIES FOR WOMEN'S ORGANISING

Beyond traditional institutionalised forms of political organising, new forms of political participation for women need to be considered. As new technologies for access to public and political life emerge, our current conceptualisation of political space needs to include an understanding of these new and expanding spaces in the digital sphere. We see multiple examples of how new forms of communication are creating new modes of political practice. In authoritarian contexts, where space for political mobilisation is effectively restricted, the

digital sphere may offer opportunities for women to build and expand networks, to disseminate knowledge and expertise, and exercise voice. In countries where women's space for action is limited, mobilising online allows women to promote gender equality goals more effectively (Freedom House 2021). Such alternative ways of mobilising can provide the means to bypass traditional gatekeepers, thus allowing women to make their voice heard.

At the same time, **authoritarian regimes** also **rely on new technologies** to conduct surveillance and collect and analyse information. Hence, it is important to understand a state's practice regarding cyberspace to assess how much sovereignty the virtual realm has in a particular context and to what extent it can remain independent from the state. Should independence not be ensured, there is a need to work on liberalising cyberspace and advocating for the effective implementation of fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression and opinion, including in cyberspace.

### AMPLIFYING ACTION BASED ON COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Initiate experience sharing within the cooperation office as well as with national and international partners and encouraging staff to share their experiences in terms of situations, challenges and good practices. Sharing experience would also help with formulating realistic goals and expectations related to advancing women's political empowerment and participation in authoritarian and backsliding contexts.

### POLITICAL ECONOMY ANALYSIS TO UNDERSTAND FUNDING STREAMS AND INCREASE FUNDING

Given the vast networks which help fund the gender backlash and the big gaps in knowledge about them, it is recommended to support action-based research in this area. It is important to follow investigative research about these networks as can be found in *Tracking the Backlash*,<sup>20</sup> *Countering Backlash*<sup>21</sup> or *SuPWR*<sup>22</sup> to better understand what type of local organisations and actors they fund. This may empower SDC staff to identify potentially harmful activity and to avoid collaborating with them. In light of the financial potency these international networks have, it is also primordial to significantly **increase flexible, long-term, financial support for women civil society actors**.

<sup>19</sup> See also Due Diligence Project (n.d.).

<sup>20</sup> openDemocracy: *Tracking the Backlash*

<sup>21</sup> *Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice*

<sup>22</sup> *Sustaining Power: Women's Struggles against contemporary backlash in South Asia (SuPWR)*

## ENGAGING CRITICALLY WITH THE MEDIA

A critical engagement with the media includes understanding the local media landscape and the predominant narratives on gender. It requires collaborating with certain media and supporting local journalists of all genders by providing financial, psycho-social and technical support to encourage and enable the creation and dissemination of counter-narratives. Independent media could be an important ally when trying to increase awareness for the history of the local women's movement.

## ADVOCATING AND SENSITISING AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

In multilateral spaces, it is essential to work with allies and adopt different strategies to put the issue of gender backlash and related challenges on the agenda. This might include being outspoken either publicly or behind closed doors and using quiet diplomatic channels to engage in a discussion, sensitise and advocate for measures to support gender equality and women's political empowerment in these contexts.

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