

Gender and Rising Authoritarianism



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Gender equality backlash in contexts of democratic backsliding and rising authoritarianism

During the past two decades, much local and Western scholarship has emerged analysing the rise in authoritarian, anti-human rights, nationalist and conservative trends around the world that have a direct impact on gender (in)equality.¹ They jeopardise earlier hard-fought gains in gender equality, particularly policies that followed the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, in fields as diverse as political participation, labour market, care, and violence against women.²

1 See, for instance, Hovhannisyan (2019).

2 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.

Furthermore, the concept of 'gender equality', which for more than 25 years has been a useful tool in combating the discrimination against women, is being contested. This global trend to reverse established women's rights both in international and national contexts is systematic and embedded in a financial and strategic network.

This Synthesis Note³ discusses how democratic backsliding and rising authoritarianism are linked to gender equality backlash, and how this interferes with international development cooperation efforts for democratic governance, gender equality and women's political empowerment.

3 This Synthesis Note summarises the key findings of: SDC and swisspeace (2022) *Gender and Rising Authoritarianism: Implications for Women's Political Empowerment and Participation*, SDC Topic Paper, Bern: SDC.

Key points

- **As political authoritarianism rises across the globe, the opportunities for advancing women's rights are narrowing.** The precarious situation of women in authoritarian contexts is of particular concern. At the same time, women's rights are currently challenged in most continents and regions, including (limited) political democracies (Vida 2019).
- **Despite context-specific differences, there are commonalities in the anti-gender equality campaigns** across all regime types. An overarching trait is the brandishing of gender equality as a 'Western' ideology, which is alien, if not harmful, to the society in question. This trend is systematic and embedded in a financial and strategic network.
- **A backlash against gender equality results in reversing or opposing policy frameworks in the realm of gender equality** (e.g. on sexual and reproductive health and rights or preventing and combating violence against women), as well as

restricting the operating space for women's mobilising. Most concerning is that as the number of women pursuing a career in politics rises, so does the violence and the politically motivated attacks against women (Vogelstein and Bro 2021).

- **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. Yet some autocratic regimes may co-opt the women's rights agenda and capitalise on women's empowerment as a way to signal modernity, boost economic growth and gain international recognition in return.
- **It is important not to retreat from working towards advancing women's political empowerment and participation**, but to find context-specific, new and adapted ways to do so in settings of democratic backsliding and authoritarianism. This requires a good understanding of possible dilemmas as well as entry points for engagement.

Challenges posed by the backlash against gender equality and women's political empowerment

The overarching trait of the 'gender equality backlash' is a **discursive tendency based on a conservative and stereotypical worldview of supposedly natural gender roles, combined with homophobia and transphobia**. This discourse brandishes gender equality policies as 'Western' and hence alien, if not harmful, to the society in question. The backlash most tangibly manifests in efforts to undermine reproductive rights as well as in targeting publicly active women. Broadly speaking, the backlash can be observed in the following patterns:

- **Articulated opposition to gender equality in political discourses**, i.e. a gradual erosion of rights-based discourses and legitimacy of women's rights, which have an impact on the public agenda and on the private sphere.
- **Erosion of specific policy gains** (e.g. in sexual and reproductive health and rights) and capacity of state gender machineries.
- **Shrinking space for women's mobilisation in civil society**.
- **The rise of physical and online abuse and other forms of violence** against politically active women, including prosecution of women's rights activists.

Despite commonalities, backlash varies across contexts: it may remain at the level of rhetoric or be manifested via concrete measures and initiatives. While in some contexts women have collectively organised against backlash, this is not possible everywhere.

Articulated opposition to gender equality in political rhetoric

A common pattern is for political narratives to change from largely supportive or silent positions to statements that openly challenge and oppose gender equality objectives. These narratives often run against a country's normative commitments and policies.

The concept of gender equality is attacked, and with it gender studies at universities, often by terming it an **'ideology'**, thus undermining its scientific basis. Pro-gender equality initiatives are often accused of serving an external, mostly 'Western agenda'. The ideas are said to be promoted by global capitalism, imperialism and sometimes communism, depending on the setting. At any rate, they are represented as alien and threatening to subvert traditional, social and religious values. 'Gender ideology' is represented as a ruse that is introduced to shatter the 'traditional family', 'propagate homosexuality' and ultimately destroy the whole nation. That is why opposition to 'gender ideology' is brought up when there is discussion on restricting women's reproductive rights.

The concept of gender is considered to work as a shortcut or a 'symbolic glue' whereby people use it as an **umbrella term, through which they convey other political messages**. For instance, in Armenia, a law 'On Ensuring Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Women and Men', approved in 2013, was defamed as 'promoting' homosexuality and standing for 'European values'. This fear was stoked to the point where supporting or rejecting the law became synonymous with being in favour of closer ties to the European Union or the Russian-led Eurasian Customs Union.

Key concepts

- **Backlash** is used 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).
- **Political participation** refers to participation not only in formal political institutions but also women's engagement in civil society organisations (CSOs), the media and in online mobilisation.
- **Political empowerment** is defined as 'people's capacity to influence policy, make demands, and call to account the state institutions that impact upon their lives. This includes political

representation and collective action' (Eyben 2010: 12). Political empowerment must hence consider women's access to and mobilisation within formal and informal political spaces to capture the diverse platforms enabling women's voices and influence.

- The **typology of regimes** is based on the SDC Policy Note on *Governance in Authoritarian Contexts*: autocracy, liberal autocracy, limited political democracy and political democracy. When working with this categorisation, it is important to recognise that the reversals or transitions to authoritarianism do not follow a linear trajectory. Most scholars and practitioners today support the notion of different paths to how democratisation can happen. Similarly, there is no linear way of how 'backlash' happens.

Gender equality policies and laws: patterns of delegitimisation

The discursive delegitimisation of 'gender equality' is a key step in transforming policy frameworks, which follows three patterns:

- **Active policy dismantling** is the most evident way of opposition. A vivid example in this regard is **the attack on the Istanbul Convention**, the main international legal instrument on gender-based violence. The Convention's notion of gender equality was targeted by opponents to 'gender ideology', and as a result, its ratification or implementation has been hindered in various contexts. In Turkey, it resulted in a complete withdrawal from the Convention.
- **Symbolic dismantling** happens more frequently, i.e. discursive delegitimisation of a policy and threats to dismantle it. One pattern widely witnessed is where governments **redefine institutions and policies from a focus on women (or gender) to a focus on 'the family'**.
- **Quiet dismantling** is the subtlest strategy and entails 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.

Limiting the space for women's mobilising in civil society

An intensified discourse on fighting the 'gender ideology' 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. As the space for independent civil society shrinks under restrictive measures, CSOs are being pushed out of the space for dialogue with the state. Authoritarian states increasingly rely on government-organised NGOs (GONGOs) and pro-government NGOs to promote government agendas and policies.

The operating space for women's rights CSOs has been strongly restricted via:

- Increasing criminalisation and bureaucratisation of their activities, making it difficult for them to carry out their work.
- A decrease in domestic funding for women's rights CSOs and regulations, preventing them from receiving international funding.

- Heavy moderation of CSOs, as well as incidents of arrests, harassment and intimidation of women human rights defenders (HRDs) and activists.

This creates an atmosphere of fear and discouragement for women engaged in CSOs and advocating for women's rights. Particularly vulnerable are women working on human rights, especially those focusing on sexual and reproductive and LGBTQ+ rights. The decreased space for civic organising and protest is a serious obstacle to women's political empowerment and participation, as women often rely on civil society organising to effect political change and advance their issues. As a result, many CSOs and HRDs have resorted to digital communication platforms. However, freedom in these new spaces is limited, as governments restrict and monitor the online realm. All of this also discourages other women to get involved in the first place. Finally, it has implications on women in political institutions and their scope of action through losing possible allies.

The dangers of co-optation

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). The 'Islamic State feminism' of Morocco reformed family law (2003–04) 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 (e.g. Uganda's 2006 Employment Act).

Such policies, however, require a critical assessment because the **empowerment of women can be used as a legitimacy mechanism** and partly explains this large (and growing) number of high-performing dictatorships. Authoritarian regimes frequently establish women-friendly policies and institutions 'for purposes other than those of gender equality' (Tripp 2013: 530). Many autocracies and liberalised autocracies seek to achieve legitimation by displaying efforts in the advancement of women's rights as a step towards democratisation, consolidating and expanding the electoral base and maintaining power. **Capitalising on women's empowerment is a way for autocracies**

to signal modernity, boost economic growth, gain popular support and to brighten up the image of the state. Moreover, **promoting women's rights is often less risky** for authoritarian states than allowing civil liberties or fair elections. Such state-led promotion of women's rights is usually merely paying lip service and not aimed at transforming harmful gender norms. Therefore, while some autocracies and liberalised autocracies may display efforts to advance women's rights, these rarely result in an actual change of male-dominated political culture or more civic liberties.

Autocratic regimes may co-opt women's empowerment through:

- The strategic use of gender quotas.
- Co-opting women's organisations or women's political wings.
- Preventing the emergence of more autonomous women's mobilisation.

Co-optation can often be identified as contradictions in regimes' nationalist discourses. On the one hand, they portray gender equality as an essential part of national modernisation and democratisation; and on the other, they depict women as the guardians of tradition and the main agents of reproduction of cultural and traditional values, which is incompatible with genuine equality.

Implications for policy and programming on women's political empowerment and participation in contexts of gender equality backlash

Women's entry into politics and effective leadership constrained

Rising authoritarianism and opposition to gender equality prevents women from being politically vocal and effectively engaged, and hinders coalition-building. The marginalisation of women in politics is the result of a variety of political, institutional and socio-cultural factors. Social and political discourses on gender norms, for instance, impact how women in politics are perceived. Further, the repression of gender equality negatively impacts many of the factors that are decisive for women's political participation and empowerment, such as the ability to access necessary resources (including financial, education, reproductive health and rights and formal employment), as well as the formal and informal social networks that are needed to finance and sustain political roles. Normative constraints around traditional families and rolling back on gender equality policies by governments are particularly disempowering for women, given the already prevalent perception

about the woman's role as a wife and mother and the consequent high burden of unpaid care work. These presumptions also shape the way that political institutions function, making it not only difficult for women to join but also to exercise their voice and leadership in their position. We also see that civil society, which in many countries is the major area of women's political mobilisation, is shrinking. Finally, backlash in gender equality is contributing to growing rates of violence, including against politically active women.

Nuanced understanding and firm commitment

Considering 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 do so. In order to assess the constraints, risks and windows of opportunity for engagement that might arise in a specific context, existing and emerging structural 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 (e.g. electoral systems, political party selection processes) and informal norms that operate in a political system, including how women collectively organise and negotiate with political elites and other socio-political actors.

Furthermore, as discussed above, 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. 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 dilemmas and entry points for engagement in promoting women's political empowerment and participation, and will also help mitigate the risk of strengthening or legitimising authoritarian regimes.

Possible entry points to enhance women's political empowerment and participation

- **Sensitivity to terminology in consultation with advocates on the ground:** Gender equality is often discredited as a form of Western propaganda advocating for the destruction of traditional values. In contexts where these narratives are predominant, political messages related to women's

political empowerment and participation need to be carefully considered. This is particularly important when supporting civil society groups and networks. When there is strong opposition against the use of terminology related to 'gender equality' or 'feminism', new formulations should be adopted. This requires dialogue with, and listening to, the local experts.

■ **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. Support for initiatives that raise the population's awareness about their own feminist heritage can therefore have an important impact while bringing less exposure.

■ **Engaging with the state:** Wherever possible, engaging directly with the state and drawing on existing national and international commitments can be helpful to curb the backlash on women's rights. Although these commitments might represent a mimicked practice of liberal democratic societies, consolidating their support and sustainability is important to prevent reversal to the old system. CSOs should be supported in their efforts to challenge their respective states in Universal Periodic Reviews of the Human Rights Council and other reviews (via physical presence, shadow reports, etc.). Due to the risk of co-optation, it is critical, however, to closely examine the normative commitments to gender equality before engaging with the state to avoid complicity and manipulation (or perception thereof). When direct engagement with the state on gender equality is severely compromised, it is important to continue integrating gender equality as a transversal theme in all interventions (e.g. via continued engagement in fields that are politically less sensitive).

■ **Empowering women's rights CSOs and cooperating with other non-state actors:** It is important that CSOs can continue to engage with the state effectively and strengthen local, regional and international collaboration for more effective advocacy. A good understanding of the relations between state and the CSOs and the strategies employed by the latter in response to the gender equality backlash (if any) is key in this regard. Further, it is important to understand the CSOs' vision of engagement on women's political empowerment and participation, including their expectations and concerns, and how they want to communicate about the issue. To avoid the potentially disempowering effect of external agenda setting by donors, the needs of CSOs must be assessed, rather than assumed. When doing so, it is important to remember that GONGOs can put outspoken women at risk and may have a different

agenda. Finally, gender quotas, gender mainstreaming and women's policy bodies require protection from, and monitoring of, backlash signs.

■ **Target potential partners and gatekeepers and invest into breaking gender stereotypes:**

The actors and factors contributing to supporting women's political participation and empowerment need to be identified beyond the formal political institutions at different levels of society, including the private sector, the media, the judiciary, and the administration. Engaging potential gatekeepers is crucial. These measures should apply to the levels of family, community, and local and national politics, and aim to foster citizen engagement as well as behavioural and cultural change (e.g. consciousness raising and dialogue with men and boys). At the same time, it is important to continue engaging directly with women and girls to build their competencies through leadership programmes and skills and women's rights awareness. Such initiatives need to be conducted with considerations for safety, timing and care arrangements.

■ **Addressing gender-based violence:** Addressing gender-based violence online and offline, in public and private spaces, is a key area of engagement when promoting women's political empowerment and participation. As many authoritarian states fail to provide women with legal assistance or protection, it is important to establish and secure women's refuge for protection from violence and provision of legal and psychological support. Helping women's rights CSOs in conducting risk analysis and devising security plans is another measure to consider. Additionally, initiatives addressing communities' responses to violence could be undertaken. Raising awareness of violence against women needs to be of the highest priority and focus should be given to enhancing the knowledge of law enforcement and legal professionals, as well as journalists and other stakeholders. Sustained engagement with violence perpetrators is another strategy in prevention of violence.

■ **Support for new 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 are emerging, our current conceptualisation of political space needs to include the digital sphere. In authoritarian contexts, the digital sphere may offer opportunities for women to network and exercise voice. At the same time, authoritarian regimes also rely on new technologies to conduct surveillance and collect

information. Hence, it is important to understand the state practice regarding cyberspace. There is a need to work on liberalising cyberspace and advocating for the effective implementation of fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression but also protection from gender-based violence, in cyberspace.

■ **Amplifying action based on collaborative learning:** To formulate realistic goals and manage expectations related to advancing women's political empowerment and participation in authoritarian and backsliding contexts, experience sharing between individuals and departments of international development cooperation actors, as well as with national and international partners, is essential. This includes talking about dilemmas, challenges and good practices. The Learning Journeys of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), with the Peace, Governance and Equality (PGE) cluster in the lead, on shrinking spaces for civil society, and governance in fragile settings as well as authoritarian contexts are a good example.

■ **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](#), [Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice](#) or [Sustaining Power: Women's Struggles](#)

[against contemporary backlash in South Asia \(SuPWR\)](#) to better understand what type of local organisations and actors these networks 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.

■ **Engage 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. It also might include engaging both traditional and social media in campaigns to stop violence against women, as well as in overall reconstructing of the harmful gendered roles in society.

■ **Advocate and sensitise at the international level:** In multilateral spaces, it is essential to work with allies and adopt different strategies to bring the issue of gender backlash and related challenges on the agenda. This might include being outspoken or using 'behind closed doors' and quiet diplomatic channels to engage in discussion, sensitise and advocate for measures to support gender equality and women's political empowerment in these contexts and to oppose policy dilution and reversal at the multilateral level.

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