

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE INTRODUCTION

Gender Equality and Authoritarian Regimes: New Directions for Research

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There are competing global trends in terms of gender equality. International concern with gender inequality is significant. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2000), and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (2015), among other instruments, pushed countries to increase women's access to decision-making and basic rights such as education, paid labor, and health care. Yet more recently, there has been a “backlash” against progress in gender equality (Berry, Bouka, and Kamuru 2021; Chenoweth and Marks 2022; Piscopo and Walsh 2020; Roggeband and Krizsán 2018).

Authoritarianism is key to both trends. Autocrats in Russia, Poland, and Nicaragua have attacked women's reproductive rights, for example, while the Taliban erased Afghanistan's progress in women's education. However, autocracies have also made strides in improving gender equality through mechanisms such as electoral quotas (Zetterberg et al. 2022). In the Global South, autocracies are more likely than democracies to adopt certain gender-equality reforms such as laws related to economic rights (Donno, Fox, and Kaasik 2022).

To understand both progress and backlash, we consider the causes and consequences of autocracies' pursuit of gender equality. Doing so sheds light on how autocracy works in the twenty-first century.

Earlier research has laid the essential theoretical groundwork on which we build. Yet prior studies on this topic—such as work on gender-equality policy adoption in military dictatorships in Latin America (Htun 2003), (post)communist Eastern Europe (Gal and Kligman 2000), and North Africa (Charrad 2001)—largely precede several relevant trends. These developments include the growth in transnational women's organizing, women's political inclusion in postconflict societies, and international pressure on states to make progress on gender equality that began at the end of the twentieth century (e.g., Bush 2011; Towns

2010; Tripp 2015). Meanwhile, the post-Cold War period is more broadly characterized by the growth of “spin dictators” who hold power by faking democracy (Guriev and Treisman 2022). A favorite strategy of these autocrats is “autocratic genderwashing” (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2023), that is, adopting gender-equality reforms to distract from persistent authoritarian practices (see also Farris 2017).¹ Therefore, it is time for a fresh assessment.

This Critical Perspectives section aims to set the agenda for future studies in this area. Its contributions explain why autocracies advance gender equality through international and national law and whether legal changes meaningfully challenge patriarchy. We highlight five questions on which the essays shed light and demand future research.

1. *Why do autocracies adopt gender-equality policies?* Virtually all the essays touch upon the topic that has received the most attention in research on authoritarian regimes and gender equality: why autocracies adopt such policies. As a complement to research that has focused on pressures from women’s movements (e.g., Kang and Tripp 2018), most of the essays in this section build on research emphasizing nondemocratic leaders’ strategic motives (e.g., Valdini 2019, ch. 6). As Aili Mari Tripp (2023) notes in her contribution, the motives vary across countries: in some, gender-equality reforms marginalize political opponents (e.g., Islamists in North Africa), whereas in others, they expand clientelist networks (e.g., some sub-Saharan countries).

A question that emerges from the essays is whether the strategic motives vary with the *level* of government involved. Audrey L. Comstock and Andrea Vilán (2023) analyze autocracies’ engagement with international law. In this case, the audiences for a particular gender-equality reform are often international. Autocrats may ratify gender-equality treaties to signal modernity to overseas policy makers and diplomats (Towns 2010). By contrast, at the national and subnational levels, autocratic leaders may want to speak to progressive segments of the citizenry and thereby broaden their support base. This is a theme in contributions focused on both African (Tripp 2023) and other regimes (Barnett and Shalaby 2023; Noh 2023).

2. *Which gender-equality reforms do autocracies adopt?* Htun and Weldon (2010, 213) define gender equality as “an ideal condition in which all men and all women have similar opportunities to participate in politics, the economy and society.” Using that definition, we note that research on gender-equality reforms in autocracies has mainly focused on elections, emphasizing policies such as quotas. Part of the reason is the relative ease in accessing comparative data on quota laws (e.g., Hughes et al. 2019). However, building on previous studies of gender equality and autocracies (e.g., Charrad 2001; Gal and Kligman 2000), recent work has also examined issues such as reproductive rights, laws on violence against women, and rights related to employment, inheritance, and property (Donno, Fox, and Kaasik 2022). Elin Bjarnegård and Daniela Donno (2023) draw on this broader set of policies to theorize the implementation of gender-equality reforms. They find significant variation across policy areas related to how centralized implementation processes are and the domestic compliance environment.

These Critical Perspectives essays also prompt us to compare gender-equality and other policy reforms. In their analysis of autocracies' support for gender equality in international law and organizations, Comstock and Vilán (2023) ask whether there is something distinctive about women's rights versus other human rights issues when it comes to ratification and its aftermath. For instance, do autocracies behave differently with respect to human rights institutions that are related to ethnic minorities, indigenous people, and LGBTQIA+ rights? How does gender intersect with other identities in international law?

3. *Which (parts of) authoritarian countries adopt gender-equality reforms?* Recent cases of backlash against gender equality prompt consideration of the types of autocracies that are most likely to adopt gender-equality reforms in the first place. Since authoritarian regimes may be negatively defined as regimes that do not meet specific democratic criteria, they clearly vary (e.g., Wahman, Teorell, and Hadenius 2013). Electoral autocracies—the most common type of autocracy today (Lührmann, Tannenberg, and Lindberg 2018, 8)—have adopted more gender-equality reforms than other regime types (Donno, Fox, and Kaasik 2022).

The essays in this section qualify and problematize previous work on regime type in important ways. First, Tripp (2023) suggests that countries characterized by ruling party longevity and regime institutionalization are more likely to adopt gender-equality policies in Africa. Interestingly, these factors are important regardless of regime type. Second, Carolyn Barnett and Marwa Shalaby (2023) shift focus to subnational governance, arguing that there may be substantial within-country variation, with progress in gender equality in some parts of a country but not others.

4. *How should women's rights activists relate to, and interact with, authoritarian governments?* Activists in autocracies face a dilemma: advancing policy goals may require working with the government, but doing so risks granting the regime legitimacy and losing independence. For instance, Tripp (2023) highlights that some activists who have pressed for gender reforms are aligned with authoritarian regimes. This phenomenon creates what she calls a “conundrum”: feminist activism can be compatible with and even supportive of authoritarian regimes' survival (Bush 2015), even though such regimes are definitionally unsupportive of human rights and liberal democracy overall.

As Yuree Noh (2023) notes, this dilemma exists also among citizens. Focusing on public opinion, Noh highlights (progressive) citizens' conflicting interests in autocracies: they may support a gender-equality reform, but such support is likely to grant the regime legitimacy and thus increase its prospects for survival. Alternatively, citizens who oppose an authoritarian regime may oppose a gender-equality reform that they would support in the abstract due to its association with the regime. These decisions are consequential since public attitudes are often key for the implementation of laws such as those on violence against women (as highlighted by Bjarnegård and Donno [2023]) as well as for regime survival.

5. *What are the consequences of gender-equality reforms in autocracies?* If activists are successful in pushing through gender-equality reforms, do the reforms challenge patriarchal structures and empower women? Bjarnegård and Donno (2023) draw attention to implementation. Unless gender-equality policies are

enforced, there is a risk that the main outcome of the reform process is that an authoritarian regime has co-opted women and enhanced its legitimacy without giving something in return.

This risk draws attention to the elite incentives of adopting gender-equality reforms. Autocrats can indeed reap rewards from such policies: they enhance autocracies' reputations and increase overseas audiences' support for giving autocracies foreign aid (Bush and Zetterberg 2021). Noh (2023) cautions that the top-down nature of authoritarian politics may have negative consequences for gender-equality reforms. Patriarchal norms may generate backlash against women (or other marginalized groups or identities). Moreover, after a democratic transition, the public may associate gender-equality reforms with autocracy, which decreases public support for them.

Taken together, the essays in this Critical Perspectives section raise, and begin to answer, crucial questions for future research on gender equality in authoritarian regimes. This research agenda is important also from a societal perspective. During the last 15 years, we have arguably entered a "third wave of autocratization" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). We need theoretical tools and rigorous empirical research on how modern autocracies behave in relation to human rights such as gender equality to help us understand this broader trend as well as the prospects for a more egalitarian world.

Note

1. For other discussions of "genderwashing" in world politics, see, for example, Allan (2019) and Mason (2013).

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