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## Women's Rights Are Democratic Rights

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to Gender Equality

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## The Global Authoritarian Backlash to Gender Equality

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**A**utocracies now outnumber democracies, and nearly three-quarters of the world's population lives under authoritarian rule. Over the past decade, dictators in China and Russia consolidated their control. Hungary, Turkey, and other fragile democracies tipped further into illiberalism. A wave of coups in Africa toppled legitimately elected leaders. Even in the United States, a democracy since its founding, the rule of law weakened and the threat of authoritarianism surged. This trend has crushed hopes that blossomed after the end of the Cold War about the permanent triumph of liberal democracy and has spurred much debate about what went wrong.

These developments can't be understood, let alone reversed, without grasping a crucial element at the heart of the authoritarian

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*Illustration by Michaela Staton*

wave: the persecution of women. Across cultures and continents, women champion democracy, and tyrants target them as part of their playbook for amassing power. Failing to treat the repression of women as the crisis it is all but guarantees that democratic erosion will continue unchecked.

More than 30 years ago, I declared at the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing that "human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights." It was a controversial statement at the time but reflected the reality that women were on the frontlines of the "third wave" of democratization that brought down the Iron Curtain and liberated millions of people around the world in the 1980s and 1990s. Across the Soviet bloc, women-led activism, from labor

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## Women's rights are still human rights.

strikes in Poland to grassroots environmental and civic movements in East Germany and Hungary, helped erode communist control. In Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, women's movements emerged from the shadows of dictatorships to reshape politics. Argentina was the first to enact a national electoral quota for female candidates, in 1991. Guatemalan women helped bring peace in 1996 after decades of civil war. The women of the African National Congress in South Africa helped end apartheid.

Today, with democracy in retreat, it's clear that women's rights have been a canary in the coal mine. Around the world, attacks on women's rights, opportunities, and full participation in society have seemingly been ignored. What follows is rapid democratic decay: institutions hollowed out, dissent criminalized, and power concentrated beyond accountability. This is not by accident, but by design.

Authoritarian regimes systematically chip away at women's rights because they recognize that women's participation is both a catalyst for democracy and a bulwark against tyranny. This repression is both ideological and tactical—silencing women's contributions that underpin democratic strength and enforcing patriarchal appeals that legitimize authoritarian power. As the scholar Saskia Brechenmacher observed in *Foreign Affairs* earlier this year: "Given the importance of civic freedoms and political space to meaningful progress for women, strengthening democratic institutions will be an important element. . . . Yet focusing only on democracy while

neglecting specific initiatives to improve gender equality would be misguided.” This deep connection between women’s rights and democracy must be understood in order to combat and ultimately reverse the trends unfolding today. Women’s rights are still human rights, and autocrats know it.

The most extreme example of totalitarian misogyny today may be in Afghanistan. When the Taliban retook control in 2021, one of their first moves was to exclude women from all visible roles in society. Overnight, girls were banned from secondary schools and women from universities, public office, and jobs outside the home. The regime claims these measures protect Islamic values and national identity, but there are many places around the world where Islam and democracy thrive together. Instead, the goal of repression is unmistakable: to strip women of access to information, income, and political influence and cement control by cutting half the population out of public life.

The extreme brutality of the Taliban makes it tempting to view them as an outlier that explains little beyond Afghanistan’s borders. Yet their misogyny is not exceptional; it’s a textbook example. Other authoritarian leaders are watching closely and learning how greater control can be achieved by repressing women. Consider how Iran’s religious authorities have assaulted, imprisoned, and killed young women for removing headscarfs, or the calls from governments in China, Hungary, and Russia for women to retreat from public life and return to the home to produce more children. Around the world, authoritarian regimes that have little else in common share a hostility to women’s rights. Secular and theocratic, Western and Eastern, developed and developing, dictators of all stripes target women.

#### TRADITION TURNED TRUNCHEON

Misogyny is an ideological cornerstone and political tool of authoritarianism. Autocrats often promote a zero-sum vision of gender, insisting that any gain for women comes at men’s expense. This offers an easy, soothing answer to men (and many women) frustrated by economic stagnation and unsettling cultural change. Behavioral research shows that a scarcity mindset is a potent way to erode empathy and harden social divisions. Many autocrats justify the repression of women as a way to defend “family values,” cultural tradition,

religion, and national identity. This approach resonates socially and morally, reinforcing the legitimacy of authoritarian power.

By stoking anxieties about women's independence, sexuality, and public authority, autocrats tap into beliefs that feel familiar to many and are thus harder to challenge. And because women who dissent defy both political and gender hierarchies, they are targeted twice over, as the UN high commissioner for human rights explained in 2023, first for threatening the regime and second for violating expectations of docility and deference. Patriarchy becomes both an ideological glue and a mechanism for policing who gets to participate in public life and who must be pushed back into private submission.

The most prominent practitioner and propagandist of this patriarchal approach to authoritarianism is Russian President Vladimir Putin. He is the leader of an illiberal, misogynist, xenophobic international movement that wants to roll back women's rights, expel migrants, disrupt democratic alliances, and undermine the rules-based international order. He portrays women primarily as mothers and caregivers, not equal citizens, while undermining gender equality initiatives and fostering a culture of impunity by decriminalizing domestic violence. He frames these moves as protecting the "traditional values" of family, religion, and masculine authority, in contrast to the liberalism of the West. Media stunts reinforce the image of a manly, moral, and powerful nationalist; photographs of Putin riding shirtless on horseback, winning judo matches, and racing Formula One cars are all meant to cast him as the hero protecting traditionalism from an increasingly open, diverse, and liberal world.

I can say from personal experience that Putin is threatened by strong women. He is also adept at exploiting men's fears about losing social status, in part because he himself is deeply afraid. While one could view the Russian leader as motivated primarily by what he seeks to gain from his power grabs at home and wars abroad, he may be driven more by the fear of loss. He is obsessed with Russia's lost empire and its perceived humiliations, and he is terrified of losing what he has—not just his power but even his life. The "color revolutions" of the first decade of the 2000s in other former Soviet republics made him intensely paranoid. According to the former CIA Director William Burns, Putin frequently rewatched a bloody video recording of the deposed Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi being pulled from a drainage pipe and beaten in 2011.

Putin has cracked down on dissent at home and invaded Ukraine not because he feels strong but because he feels scared. Building up a patriarchal ideology with himself at the top is a way to secure his rule and his ego.

Putin's stooge in neighboring Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, has similarly leveraged sexist norms to maintain control and sideline women from positions of political influence. Lukashenko has rejected the notion of women's capacity to lead, claiming the constitution "is not for women," and dismissed the opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya as a "housewife." (That Tsikhanouskaya ran for president while juggling the demands of parenting her two young children alone while her husband was a political prisoner would suggest deep reservoirs of resilience and competence.) When she joined with two other Belarusian women leaders, Veronika Tsepikalo and Maria Kolesnikova, to mobilize a unified opposition movement, Lukashenko panicked. He rigged the election and forced Tsikhanouskaya into exile in Lithuania.

In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban, a Putin ally and unapologetic proponent of "illiberal democracy," embraced a report warning that women's rising college graduation rates threaten marriage and fertility. Meanwhile, he has imposed restrictive measures on abortion access, framing it as a threat to "family values" and national identity.

Similar dynamics appear in other regimes. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has cemented his grip through a combination of policy, rhetoric, and social pressure. As early as 2011, when Turkey dissolved its Ministry of Women and Family Affairs and replaced it with the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, Erdogan signaled a shift away from women's rights. His government has promoted pronatalist policies, including financial incentives, to encourage families to have three or more children, while publicly criticizing women who prioritize careers over motherhood as "half persons." In 2021, he withdrew his country from the Istanbul Convention, a landmark international accord to address violence against women, because it was "incompatible with Turkey's family values." Erdogan frames these measures as defending the "traditional family" and Turkey's national strength, celebrates hypermasculinity, and has explicitly stated that women are not equal to men. The result is a society in which women's labor, political engagement, and personal autonomy are constantly subordinated to state-defined family ideals.

In China under Xi Jinping, consolidation of power has come hand in hand with an aggressive retrenchment of patriarchal control framed as “family values.” Since Xi took power in 2012, the regime has rolled back even the modest liberalization of earlier eras, silencing feminist voices and reasserting the state’s authority over women’s bodies, choices, and political expression. Online censors have shut down women’s rights publications and erased feminist social media accounts, while Xi himself has repeatedly urged women to return to “traditional” roles. In 2023, he called on officials to promote a “marriage and childbearing culture” that steered young people toward “love and marriage, fertility and family.”

Facing a demographic crisis, China’s solution has been to push women back into the home by tightening divorce rules, discouraging independence, and treating women primarily as reproducers and caretakers. Human Rights Watch has documented court denials of divorce petitions from trafficked women who endured years of violence, mirroring the broader exploitation generated by decades of a one-child policy and a resulting gender imbalance that has fueled a massive bride-trafficking industry. Outrage over a 2022 video of a woman found chained by the neck (who was later revealed to have been trafficked and sold three times) underscored how entrenched this abuse has become. In the Xinjiang region, the repression takes its most brutal form: placing Uyghur women in mass detention camps where they are forced to use birth control or undergo sterilization surgery. Under Xi, China’s authoritarian turn is inseparable from a systematic effort to repatriarchalize society: restricting women’s autonomy becomes a tool for fortifying state power.

Even in democracies, patriarchal ideology can be weaponized to roll back rights and restrict women’s autonomy. In Argentina, President Javier Milei has vowed to remove femicide from the penal code, dismissing it as an unfair concession to women and deriding “radical feminism” as a “distortion of the concept of equality.”

In the United States, the hard-right supermajority on the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, eliminating nearly 50 years of legal precedent protecting the right to abortion. This was not

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a neutral legal shift, but a deliberate ideological intervention that curtailed women's bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom—fundamental tools for equal participation in public, economic, and political life. The rollback of abortion rights has been paired with pronatalist policies and political rhetoric designed to pressure women into traditional roles. U.S. President Donald Trump is considering financial incentives and symbolic awards such as the “National Medal of Motherhood” for mothers with multiple children, framing reproductive labor as a civic duty. Vice President JD Vance has amplified this approach. In 2021, as he positioned himself to run for a Senate seat, he derided Vice President Kamala Harris and other Democratic leaders as “a bunch of childless cat ladies who are miserable at their own lives,” arguing that the United States is largely governed by people without children who have no direct stake in the country's future. He even suggested penalizing childless people with higher taxes and fewer voting rights.

These measures illustrate a core principle: coercion disguised as policy can be as damaging as overt repression. By defining women's value primarily through their reproductive capacity, such policies restrict economic independence, limit civic engagement, and reinforce patriarchal hierarchies. As the scholar Nitasha Kaul has observed, such strategies are part of “anxious and insecure nationalisms” that vilify feminists under the guise of “family values” to consolidate power and suppress challenges to authority. It's alarming but not surprising that the United States withdrew this year from key forums focused on women's rights, peace, and democracy, including the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

The U.S. example underscores a crucial point: ideological attacks on women's autonomy are not confined to autocracies abroad. When women's rights are made conditional, even in long-standing democracies, democratic norms erode faster than many expect. The lesson is urgent and uncomfortable: treating women's autonomy as negotiable weakens democracy itself. And the damage does not stop at a single court ruling or election cycle.

#### CAUGHT IN THE CROSS HAIRS

Repression of women is not just an ideological move to shore up authoritarian legitimacy; it's also a practical playbook to weaken

political opposition, undercut civil society, and extend control. Regimes target female leaders and activists as part of a calculated strategy. They know, as the scholars Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks explained in these pages in 2022, that “when women participate in mass movements, those movements are both more likely to succeed and more likely to lead to more egalitarian democracy.” As the political scientist Mona Lena Krook has written: “Traditional definitions of political violence focus on the use of force and intimidation against political opponents. Violence against women in politics is distinct—and also troubling—because it aims to exclude and [dis]empower women as political actors.” She emphasizes that this exclusion doesn’t just harm the individual victim. It has systemic effects by discouraging women from running for office or participating in politics—a concern reflected in global election results in 2024, when the share of women in national parliaments rose by only 0.3 percentage points. It was the smallest increase in decades.

Sometimes this targeted persecution unfolds behind a veneer of democratic institutions. In Uganda, President Yoweri Museveni consolidated power over decades through legal manipulation, patronage, and political repression, systematically marginalizing women in the process. Female politicians who challenged the ruling party were sidelined, women’s rights organizations harassed, and political quotas manipulated to ensure loyalty rather than genuine representation. Excluding women from independent political influence became a central tactic to weaken democratic checks and entrench control.

In other instances, there is no attempt to hide the brutality. During Charles Taylor’s dictatorship from 1997 to 2003 in Liberia, his regime used sexual violence to intimidate women, suppress their political participation, and divide communities. Although the world has belatedly turned its attention to the scourge of rape as a weapon of war, including in conflict zones such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, rape is also a weapon of dictatorship in peacetime. Liberia’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established in 2005, documented how sexual violence was used to reinforce patriarchal hierarchies and lock in their power, silencing women and deterring political participation.

Female leaders and activists faced intimidation, treason charges, prison, and exile. Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first

woman to be freely elected president in an African nation, was forced into exile twice: first in 1986 by the regime of Samuel Doe, and then in 1997 by Taylor. Despite the threats, Liberian women were unbroken: they helped organize coalitions across ethnic and political lines, including the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, which played a crucial role in pressuring Taylor to end the second Liberian civil war in 2003. Led by Leymah Gbowee, this organization mobilized thousands through sex strikes, sit-ins, and mass vigils to challenge the legitimacy of the warring factions. When the parties finally came to the negotiating table, women literally barred the doors and roads until a peace agreement was reached and democracy was restored.

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**Attacks on women's autonomy are not confined to autocracies.**

In recent years, authoritarians have co-opted technology to further the targeted repression of women. The Filipino journalist Maria Ressa, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021, has spent years raising the alarm about the dangerous ways the online landscape is being weaponized to silence and intimidate women, particularly journalists, youth organizers, and democratic leaders. Ressa bravely reported on the extrajudicial killings and corruption that were hallmarks of Rodrigo Duterte's six-year presidency in the Philippines. As a result, she faced relentless harassment, including racist and sexist online abuse, doxxing, death and rape threats, and a slew of unfounded legal charges.

In her Nobel lecture in 2021, Ressa noted that "what happens on social media doesn't stay on social media," and that "women journalists are at the epicenter of risk." Social media, surveillance enabled by artificial intelligence, and algorithmic echo chambers now amplify misogynistic ideology, allowing authoritarian regimes to target female leaders with ever more precision. Threats that women could once escape through physical exile can now be carried out virtually, spreading disinformation, intimidation, and harassment across borders.

After her husband, Alexei Navalny, died in a Russian prison, Yulia Navalnaya was the victim of an online smear campaign questioning her morality as a wife, mother, and woman as she continued his advocacy for democracy. Fake videos and photos insinuated

that she was having affairs and secret abortions and didn't care about her husband's death. In Iran, the Woman, Life, Freedom protests, ignited in 2022 by the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini while in police custody for a supposed violation of the country's hijab law, were met with a brutal crackdown on women's dress. The regime deployed AI surveillance, drones, and citizen-reporting tools, turning women's bodies into objects of state control. And in Serbia, dissidents such as Nikolina Sindjelic, a university student who helped lead protests against government corruption, have been targeted with police violence and image-based sexual abuse, part of a broader pattern of state-sponsored digital harassment to spread fear and silence critics.

#### LADY LIBERTY

When women are silenced, democracy itself is weakened. Authoritarian regimes do not merely target women as individuals; they attack the very institutions, movements, and norms that sustain democratic governance. Every delay in treating these attacks as an urgent crisis strengthens authoritarian power and narrows the space for resistance. The question is no longer whether women's rights matter to democracy, but whether democracies will act before the erosion becomes irreversible.

There is no quick fix for halting the global rise of authoritarianism, but decades of research and experience suggest clear strategies for strengthening democracies. Central among them is the full and equal participation of women and girls. A March 2025 report titled *Beijing+30: A Roadmap for Women's Rights for the Next 30 Years* outlines a comprehensive set of policy priorities to advance women's leadership, protect reproductive rights, eliminate gender-based violence, and ensure access to education and economic opportunity. Each is a critical lever for democratic resilience: for example, the report's plea for coalition building among like-minded governments, international organizations, civil society, the private sector, and philanthropic organizations.

Too often, democracy movements treat women's rights as secondary. But history and evidence show that protecting women's ability to participate in the public sphere is central to sustaining democracy. Coordinated alliances have proved essential for both advancing women's rights and strengthening democratic norms:

last year, they secured pledges to expand investment in the care economy, promote women's entrepreneurship, and uphold commitments to eliminate gender-based violence during the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in Seville and defended reproductive rights at the UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York. Addressing the repression of women in Afghanistan and similar contexts is both a moral and strategic imperative: autocratic systems persist when women are excluded

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from the fight for democratic change. Likewise, funders of democracy initiatives must support women's full participation because democracy without women is a contradiction. Coalitions that link women's rights to protecting democracy are essential to holding the line, advancing progress, and preventing backsliding.

A crucial driver of women's democratic resistance has been the fight for reproductive rights. In Latin America, Argentina's 2018 "Green Wave" mobilized more than a million women of all ages and classes in defense of abortion rights and support of democratic participation. Through mass protests and legal action, the movement succeeded in extending abortion protections in other Latin American countries, including Colombia and Mexico, and elevating women's rights in the democratic debate.

Similarly, the Tunisian activist Aya Chebbi has connected women's rights with broader democracy movements in the region, emphasizing that democratization will fail unless women and young people enjoy full and equal participation. In Slovenia, the sociologist Nika Kovac founded the 8th of March Institute, which played an important role in unseating the country's populist prime minister, Janez Jansa. The women-led nonprofit institute framed the 2022 election as a choice about the future of democracy and helped increase voter turnout by nearly 20 percent. In South Korea, young women were central to the mass protests that led to the impeachment of President Yoon Suk-yeol after his autocratic declaration of martial law in December 2024. Protesters saw the demonstrations as a stand against both authoritarianism and systemic misogyny. In Poland, a 2020 ruling by the Constitutional

Tribunal effectively outlawing abortion sparked nationwide strikes that quickly grew into the largest democratic mobilization in the country since the fall of communism.

Defending women's rights is defending democracy. Three decades after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, people must still be reminded that democracy and gender equality are not separate issues. The UN Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda provides a clear framework for understanding why. Decades of evidence show that when women participate meaningfully in peace processes and political transitions, democracies are more stable and agreements last longer. Women broaden negotiations to include community security, human rights, and accountability—the very foundations authoritarian regimes seek to erode.

This dynamic has played out most clearly in situations in which women's leadership has been embraced rather than sidelined. Across Africa, women have reshaped political institutions in ways that challenge authoritarian consolidation. In Rwanda, women have held a majority in the lower house of parliament for more than two decades (the current figure is around 60 percent, the highest representation in the world) and have reshaped legislative priorities around health, education, and postconflict reconstruction. And in 2000, Namibia made history by presiding over the UN Security Council meeting that established the WPS agenda, affirming that women must not only be protected from conflict but also empowered to prevent and resolve it. Today, the country continues to reflect that legacy: in 2024, Namibian voters elected Africa's second female president, Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah. She has appointed women to the highest levels of government, including vice president and speaker of parliament, and they make up 60 percent of her cabinet, reinforcing a political culture grounded in inclusion and democratic resilience.

From Northern Ireland, where women helped engineer key provisions of the 1998 Good Friday agreement, to Colombia, where they secured historic protections against gender-based violence in a 2016 peace accord, the WPS agenda demonstrates that women's inclusion is imperative. Such actions do not immunize any country against authoritarian drift, but they demonstrate a core principle: democracy is stronger and repression becomes harder to justify when women's power is institutionalized. 🌍