13. Authoritarian regimes and women's rights
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13.1 INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have seen a rise in reforms advancing women's rights and equality in autocracies. Rwanda is often touted as a key example. In concert with increased female representation in the legislature, local government and civil service, Rwanda has adopted laws reforming women's access to property and inheritance; strengthening penalties for domestic violence; and enhancing girls' access to education. Similar, if perhaps less pronounced, trends have occurred in other East African countries, including Tanzania, Uganda and Ethiopia. In North Africa, an alignment between moderate regimes and women's movements have ushered in reforms to family codes in Morocco and Algeria, in an effort to sideline more religiously conservative opposition parties. These reforms, while admittedly facing implementation problems, are important steps for women in societies with a long tradition of Shari'a law, whose application has sharply limited access to divorce, inheritance, citizenship rights and child custody. In Asia, autocratic regimes like Malaysia, Cambodia and Vietnam have enacted legislation expanding penalties for domestic violence and sexual harassment, and enhancing women's equality in family and property law.

This progress contrasts with the idea that women's rights are dangerous for autocrats (Chenoweth and Marks 2022), or that it is necessarily the suppression, rather than the advancement, of women's rights that enables autocratic survival (Fish 2002). This progress does resonate, however, with other bodies of research that have recognized the compatibility between women's rights and autocracy, either for ideological reasons or because advancing gender equality is politically beneficial to the regime (Charrad 2001; Gal and Kligman 2000; Htun 2003; Tripp 2019; Valdini 2019). This chapter synthesizes insights from theoretical and empirical research to elucidate the conditions under which (and the reasons why) autocracies advance women's rights. I draw a distinction between those who argue that women's rights threaten autocracy and those researching state feminism and modernizing dictatorships who note the long tradition of autocrats making political use of women's rights. Using cross-national data, I show that, on average, autocracies lag somewhat behind democracies on *de jure* respect for women's rights, but this gap is greatly influenced by the poor performance of regimes in the Middle East. In other regions, differences between democracies and autocracies are less pronounced, and many autocracies exceed democracies in their enactment of reforms related to women's rights. Interestingly, these patterns are not driven solely by political institutions or geographic location. Rather, a combination of more contingent political factors – including the ideological commitments and power base of the regime – as well as the country's international position – namely, the degree to which it relies on Western aid and approval – help explain why some autocracies have embraced gender equality as a policy priority.

I conclude by considering contemporary challenges to women's rights embodied by the transnational anti-gender movement. In a cohort of right-wing populist and conservative regimes, previously hard-fought gains for women's equality are eroding. Although this trend

is not specific to authoritarian regimes, it has taken hold in a number of large and prominent autocracies, including Russia and Turkey.

13.2   TWO PERSPECTIVES

It is often assumed that women's rights and democracy go hand in hand. Intuitively, as a system of government that fosters political equality, democracy should create greater space for women to claim rights not only in the political sphere, but in the social, economic and private spheres as well (Beer 2009). Democracy enhances women's ability to lobby for policy changes that may not otherwise be in the interest of the political elite. Research on 20th-century democratic transitions, particularly in Latin America, notes that women's movements played an important role in mobilizing for political change (Bermeo 1999; Waylen 1994). This is still true today, as women have been at the vanguard of mobilization during the Arab Spring (Moghadam 2018) and more recently in Iran (2022–23). Historically, the extension of suffrage to women is a hallmark of democratic deepening. And improvements in women's rights have been found to be a precursor of democratic change globally (Wang et al. 2017).

Conversely, the suppression of women's rights has been shown to be an important factor contributing to the enduring longevity of authoritarianism in the Middle East (Fish 2002). Authoritarianism is typically associated with patriarchal social systems; and even at the micro-level, research has demonstrated a link between misogynistic (patriarchal) world views and authoritarian attitudes (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Inglehart, Norris and Welzel 2003). It's no wonder that analysts continue to view feminist movements as a threat to autocrats (Chenoweth and Marks 2022).

Yet, the empirical track record is far more complex – and scholarly consensus far more elusive – than the simple idea that authoritarianism is antithetical to women's empowerment. Many autocracies have advanced women's rights and equality in the political, economic and social spheres (Donno and Kreft 2019). And while this trend has increased in recent decades – due to post-Cold War international dynamics to be further elaborated below – there are historical roots as well. Roughly speaking, two autocratic profiles have embraced progressive policies on gender. First, communist and socialist regimes advanced gender equality in the economic sphere, as women's participation in the workforce was central to the ideological model (Gal and Kligman 2000; Zheng 2005). A host of social services and reproductive health care accompanied this focus on women's economic participation, though *de facto* inequalities and hierarchies remained, including in the political sphere which continued to be male-dominated (Waylen 1994).

Second, women's rights have been advanced by a diverse set of authoritarian states that can be loosely categorized as "modernizing." These regimes have embraced policies that seek to reform society and the economy, jump start economic development, and bring their countries closer to the West. There is no single institutional profile that matches this description. It includes a range of military dictatorships, monarchies, and even some personalist autocracies. In Latin America, modernizing military regimes in the 1960s and 1970s enacted reforms to women's civil status and property rights (Htun 2003). In the Muslim world, the mantle of modernization has been assumed by various regimes in different eras: Kemal Ataturk's reforms in post-Ottoman Turkey; secular-nationalist regimes in the 1960s, including Egypt, Tunisia and Iraq; and modernizing monarchies in the 1990s and 2000s, including Morocco, Qatar and

Jordan. The common thread among these cases is that women's empowerment has come to be associated with modernity and its attendant benefits, including international prestige (Towns 2010) and economic development (Coleman 2004).

13.2.1   Political Institutions and State Feminist Policies

A diverse literature on "state feminism" encapsulates several of these examples. Stetson and Mazur (1995) define state feminism as the creation and activities of government structures that are formally charged with advancing women's equality and empowerment. This includes the adoption of legislative gender quotas – a by now nearly ubiquitous policy among authoritarian regimes – but also the creation of ministries and agencies dedicated to female empowerment. Consider, for example, Vietnam's Law on Gender Equality (2006) which sets a number of national gender equality goals and mandates the creation of a state agency for implementation and monitoring of these goals.

An important thread running through research on state feminism is that, in autocracies, the impetus for these policies may be as much political as they are normative. The creation of state feminist machinery does not necessarily translate to effective policy implementation (Adams 2007). As Lorch and Bunk (2016, 7) explain, "the main motivation behind such measures may not be the advancement of women's rights per se, but the desire of non-democratic regimes to realise other political objectives, such as remaining in power." Discussing Rwanda, Berry and Lake (2021) note that the regime's highly touted gender-progressive policies have boosted international and domestic legitimacy while "masking the regime's otherwise authoritarian consolidation of the power of a small Anglophone Tutsi elite" (p. 469). Research on legislative gender quotas in authoritarian contexts highlights various ways that regimes can orient these policies toward their own political advantage (Muriaas and Wang 2012). In Tanzania, Bjarnegård and Zetterberg (2016) show how the ruling party benefits politically from quotas, because it has a reserve of strong and loyal female candidates tied to the party women's wing; in contrast, opposition parties are too weak to use quota seats as a way to advance competitive candidates with a women-focused agenda. More generally, quota seats in authoritarian legislatures tend to be populated by loyal supporters of the regime, commonly with family or economic ties to the ruling elite (Bush and Gao 2017; David and Nanes 2011; Sater 2007). In short, women's rights can be employed by autocrats to enhance their legitimacy, popular support and political hegemony.

Donno and Kreft (2019) further probe this idea by examining how variation in the institutionalization of authoritarian regimes shapes the extent to which governments benefit politically from advancing women's rights. In particular, autocracies governed by institutionalized ruling parties – more so than personalist regimes – have the ability to use feminist reforms to coopt women's support, thereby shoring up and expanding their coalition; and they find accordingly that party-based authoritarian regimes are more active in advancing women's political, economic and social rights than other types of dictatorships.

Another ancillary reason why well-institutionalized parties may be associated with a women-focused agenda is that strong parties often seek to transcend ethnic divisions. Research in Africa shows that women's representation in positions of political power is systematically lower in countries whose politics are dominated by ethnicity (Arriola and Johnson 2014). Ethnic-based systems tend to have weak party structures, and politics is organized around (co-ethnic) patronage; women rarely occupy prominent positions in these

ethnic clientelist networks (Benstead 2016). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that many of the autocratic ruling parties active in prioritizing women's rights and representation are those which espouse ideologies that transcend ethnicity and seek to build a national (non-ethnic) identity. Tanzania's Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) is a national movement with socialist origins; Rwanda's ruling party (Rwanda Patriotic Front, RPF) seeks to erase ethnicity altogether. Tripp's (2001) research on Uganda reveals that women leaders view the ruling party's 'anti-sectarianism' as a key positive factor which warrants their support.

13.2.2   Women's Movements in Autocracies

Politically, the process of top-down state-driven reform often involves some accommodation of the women's movement. This is an important point, because it belies the notion that women's movements are necessarily a threat to autocrats. To be sure, there is an element of cooptation in these relationships, and feminist movement leaders are well aware of the compromises they must make in order to achieve policy goals in autocracies. In a study of contemporary state feminism in Cameroon, Adams (2007, 185–6) describes the mechanics of patronage and cooptation in detail:

> At state-sponsored celebrations … MINCOF [Ministry of Women's Affairs] distributes goods such as farm tools, fertilizer and small machinery to women's groups. Only registered groups are eligible for this assistance … [W]omen's associations that seek to eliminate discriminatory legislation, to develop new laws that protect women's rights and to advocate for other gender equity policies must work through the ministry.

In Uganda, Tripp (2001) identifies a more balanced relationship, whereby the women's movement has retained an important degree of autonomy that has allowed it to choose when to cooperate with the regime on particular issues. The women's movement in Uganda is composed of a varied network of issue-based organizations, most of which are not dependent on the state for resources. This has allowed them to "challenge patterns of clientelist politics" and "pursue an agenda that goes far beyond what was permitted by mass women's organizations tied to the ruling party or state" (Tripp 2001, 108). At the same time, women leaders must sometimes choose between loyalty to the ruling party – which ensures their political survival – and loyalty to the movement, and different individuals navigate these compromises in different ways. Notwithstanding these challenges, the experience of Uganda and elsewhere demonstrates that women activists can have a real policy impact in authoritarian regimes (Bauer and Burnet 2013; Moghadam 2017). Landmark reforms to family, civil and criminal law in Morocco and Algeria were the product of sustained interaction, compromise and cooperation between the regime and women's movements (Tripp 2019, chapters 4–5).

On the other hand, there are counterexamples like Saudi Arabia where advances in women's rights have been accompanied by harsh repression of the women's movement. Since taking power in 2017, Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) has ushered in a range of changes to Saudi Arabia's guardianship system, limited the power of the religious police (the main body enforcing restrictions on women), and perhaps most famously has allowed women to drive. Yet, for MBS it is essential that these changes be perceived as "top-down" and flowing from above. Reforms are an instrument to enhance the personalist nature of the regime. Scores of female activists have been imprisoned. A similar dynamic was evident in Tunisia under Ben Ali

(1987–2011) during which autonomous organizations had little influence and Islamist women activists in particular faced harsh repression (Tripp 2019, chapter 6).

The question of why autocratic leaders sometimes forge cooperative versus combative relationships with feminist activists is an area ripe for future research. It is likely that the nature of women's demands matter, namely, whether they would upset social hierarchies, particularly those upon which the regime also depends (Ritter, Barnes and Lynn 2022). Institutions matter as well. In autocracies where legislatures play some role in crafting policy, members of the women's movement may gain representation and use this to insert themselves in the policy-making process.[1] In Uganda, for example, an increase in female members of parliament has brought an increase in legislative attention to women's issues (Clayton, Josefsson and Wang 2016). Though women representatives in autocratic legislatures tend to be relegated to less influential committee positions, their influence may increase over time (Shalaby and Elimam 2019), and in certain issue domains such as family and education, they are more likely to hold positions of leadership (Shalaby and Elimam 2020).

13.3   EMPIRICAL PATTERNS

As the previous discussion outlined, advances in women's rights in authoritarian contexts are common. To give shape to this insight, this section examines cross-national patterns using data on the *de jure* status of women over time. I categorize countries as authoritarian or democratic using the classification scheme of Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2014). They define authoritarian regimes, minimally, as those which lack the key feature of democracy, namely, competitive elections that are reasonably free and fair.

The first data source on women's status comes from the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law (WBL) project (World Bank Group 2022). This project measures women's *de jure* rights along eight indicators: mobility, workplace, pay, marriage, parenthood, entrepreneurship, assets and pensions. As a summary measure of women's *de jure* status across these issue areas, I employ the variable WBL Index, which averages across these eight indicators. Higher values equate to better legal status for women. It is important to note that this index is based only on *de jure* status; whether legal protections and rights are effectively enforced is a different question, which I discuss further below. It is therefore possible for countries to score well on the WBL Index, but for women to nevertheless experience persistent *de facto* economic and social subordination.

Figure 13.1 shows average values of the WBL Index since 1971, by regime type. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries are excluded from the analysis in order to provide a more focused comparison among developing countries. Clearly, women's *de jure* status has been improving over time, but there is a persistent gap between democracies and authoritarian regimes in the developing world. Yet, if we look just below the surface, we see that there is wide variation among authoritarian regimes. Breaking up the autocracies by region (Figure 13.2) reveals that the average is greatly influenced by the low performance of countries in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region. Dictatorships in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas cluster more closely to the democratic average, and communist/post-communist dictatorships of Eurasia (including those in East and Central Europe and the former Soviet Union) perform even better than democracies for much of the time period under consideration.
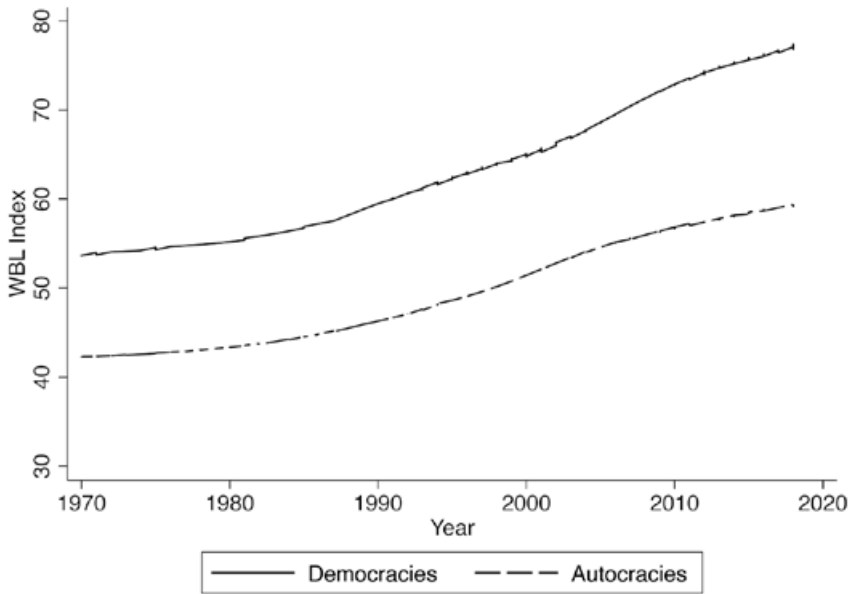
Figure 13.1 *Women, Business and the Law Index: average values for democracies and dictatorships*
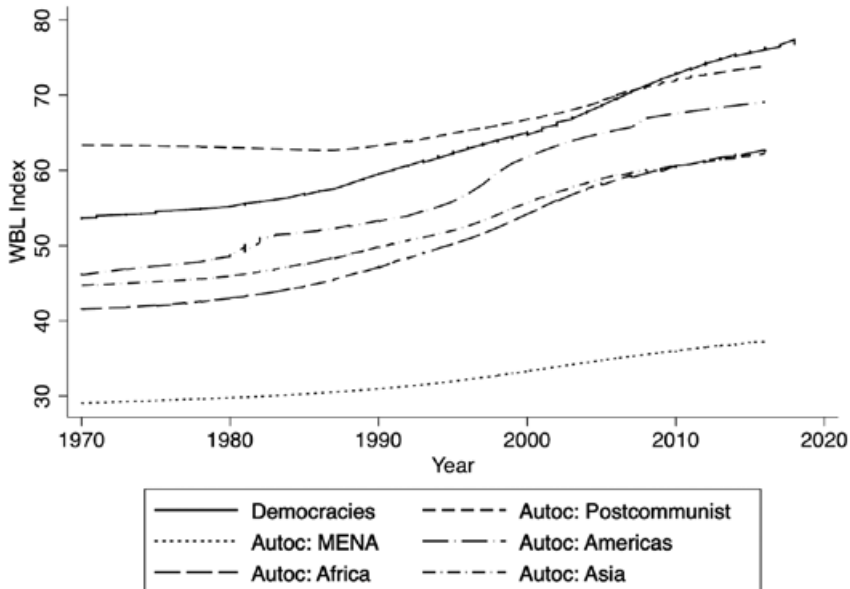

Figure 13.2 *Women, Business and the Law Index: average values for dictatorships by region*

The persistently low legal status of women in the Middle East is the product of a complex mix of social, cultural and political factors. It is, in other words, an over-determined outcome. The enmeshment of religious with political authority, including in constitutions (Htun and Weldon 2018), and the ceding of social and family matters to Shari'a courts are features of many MENA countries. Yet, among a number of countries in the region, change is brewing.

A second measure of interest, then, has to do with the intensity of legal *change*. In a recent article with co-authors Sara Fox and Joshua Kaasik, we collected data on the number of legal reforms advancing women's rights in a range of social, economic and political issue areas (Donno, Fox and Kaasik 2021). Whereas the WBL data provides a comparative measure of women's status, these data measure the intensity of reforms, and are therefore capturing the extent of the regime's commitment to making *de jure* advances on women's rights.

Figure 13.3 presents the average number of legal reforms for women's rights over time (the data begin in 1996), comparing democracies and authoritarian regimes. As before, the analysis is limited to developing (non-OECD) countries. The key variable is a count of the number of legal reforms per country-year (averaged across regime type). Strikingly, there is little difference between democracies and non-democracies on this measure, and the gap seems to have closed somewhat over time. In other words, authoritarian regimes are, on average, enacting gender reforms at a rate quite similar to democracies. In seeking to explain these patterns, Donno, Fox and Kaasik (2021) show that this is not driven simply by the fact that many dictatorships begin at a lower starting point of women's empowerment (and therefore have more room for reform). In fact, it tends to be the regimes with middle to higher performance on women's empowerment that continue to enact further reforms, in a kind of virtuous cycle.
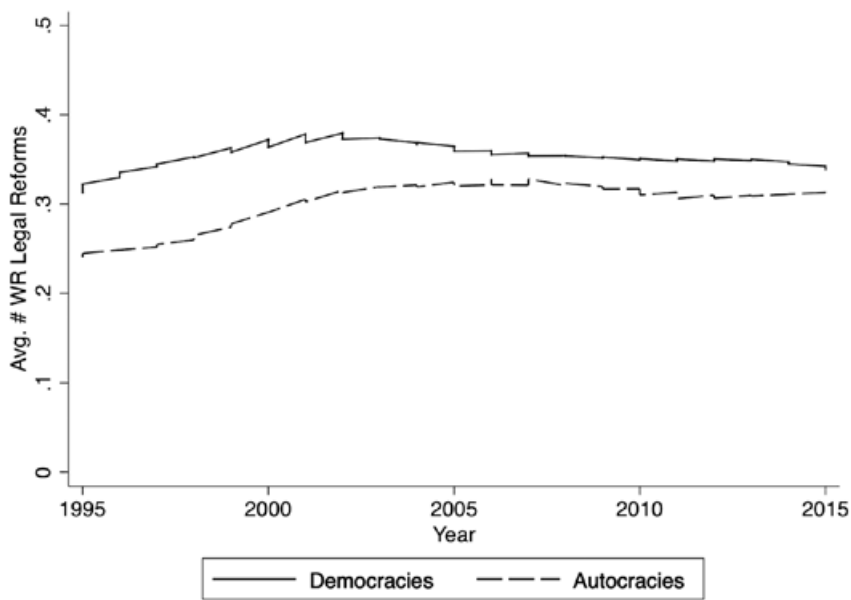

Figure 13.3   Average number of women's rights (WR) reforms per year, by regime type

Table 13.1   *Autocracies with highest rate of women's rights (WR) legal reforms,*
1996–2015

Country	Avg. No. of WR Reforms Per Year
1. UAE	0.33
2. Mozambique	0.32
3. Zimbabwe	0.31
4. Ethiopia	0.27
5. Morocco	0.23
6. Uganda	0.23
7. Jordan	0.23
8. Bangladesh	0.23
9. Saudi Arabia	0.21
10. Egypt	0.19
11. Algeria	0.17
12. Democratic Republic of Congo	0.16
13. Namibia	0.15
14. Mauritania	0.15
15. Venezuela	0.14

Which countries are most active in advancing gender reforms? There is not a simple answer to this question. Table 13.1 lists the 15 highest performing authoritarian countries, in terms of the average number of legal reforms enacted per year, considered over a 20-year period from 1996 to 2015. (For countries that transitioned to or away from authoritarianism during this time period, only authoritarian regime-years are included in the calculation of this average.) The list includes countries from MENA, Africa, Latin America and Asia, characterized by a range of institutional configurations: monarchies, republics, revolutionary party-based regimes (Zimbabwe), military regimes (Egypt) and personalist regimes (DRC, Venezuela). In short, patterns of variation among autocracies in terms of legislative activity for women's rights defies simple explanation in terms of region, religion or constitutional system. Several studies have highlighted the role of international (Western) pressure and linkage in encouraging reforms – a point discussed further below.

13.3.1   Implementation Challenges in Autocracies

The question of how meaningful these legal reforms are is an important one. Particularly in authoritarian contexts, where rule of law is often weak, laws may be enacted just for show. Whereas in democracies citizens and social movements can mobilize around issues of compliance and enforcement – and can use the legal system to press for implementation of laws – in authoritarian contexts these bottom-up compliance strategies are more difficult. On the issue of implementation of women's rights reforms, Bjarnegård and Donno (2023) distinguish between issue areas where implementation is centralized versus decentralized. Gender quotas – particularly the reserved seat variety common in autocracies – are implemented in a one-shot, centralized manner that simply involves the creation of new legislative seats and the addition of these contests to the electoral ballot. In contrast, laws related to violence against women, family law or women's economic rights are implemented in a far more decentralized manner, involving the interaction of state prosecutors, the police, firms and citizens on a case-by-case basis.

Effective implementation is therefore complex and can be inhibited by patriarchal social norms that make it difficult for women to come forward to claim their rights in courts of law. These problems are likely to be especially pronounced in autocratic contexts that lack judicial independence and robust civil society organizations to assist women in bringing cases forward. In Jordan, for example, despite reforms that raised the legal age of marriage to 18, Shari'a courts in charge of family law regularly grant exceptions to this rule (Prettitore 2015). The persistent authority of customary and religious courts governing issues of family and personal status remains a major impediment to the effective realization of women's legal rights in many countries (Nyamu-Musembi 2006). Moreover, this institutional authority is entwined with ideas about social norms: when patriarchal, conservative norms are believed to be pervasive in a society, this can inhibit state actors from applying or enforcing laws that would empower women (Barnett 2022).

13.4   INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCES

To understand why women's rights reforms in autocracies have increased particularly in recent decades, we must consider the importance of international norms and incentives. Since the end of the Cold War, advancing women's rights has proved to be a way for dictatorships to align with (Western) democratic norms without necessarily having to engage in more politically costly liberalization of the political-electoral spheres. In other words, as pressure for democracy increased, autocrats sought ways to signal adherence with Western values without introducing fully competitive elections.

In support of this idea, Donno, Fox and Kaasik (2021) show that autocracies that are highly dependent on international (Western) aid and that are subject to high levels of human rights shaming are enacting more women's rights reforms. This is true for a range of reforms related to violence against women, access to education, equal work laws and family law: dictatorships under international pressure are more active in the sphere of gender reform. Interestingly, this is not true of reforms related to electoral competition, which are more immediately threatening to the autocrat's grip on power. There is also evidence, on the other side of this relationship, that international policymakers reward women's rights. In an experimental study on a unique sample of international development professionals, Bush, Donno and Zetterberg (2023) find that they value when autocrats make women's rights reforms, that they are willing to reward them with greater foreign aid, and perhaps most interestingly that they interpret these reforms as a sign of democratic progress.

In a complementary vein, a substantial body of research on legislative gender quotas documents the role of international norms, assistance and pressure in promoting this particular policy. Quotas are now nearly ubiquitous in autocratic legislatures – a remarkable outcome which would be difficult to envision in the absence of international incentives. The push and pull factors range from concerns about international status (Towns 2010), to the specific demands of international organizations and foreign aid donors (Bush 2011; Edgell 2017; Okundaye and Breuning 2021), to pressure from transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Hughes, Krook and Paxton 2015; Hughes et al. 2019). Enhanced female representation in autocracies has surely shaped societal conceptions about women's role in politics for the better, and has given women a formal place in the political process. As discussed above, in the more open authoritarian contexts – and particularly when combined with

an active women's movement – this has afforded women representatives a real role in crafting legislation. This being said, it is worth noting again some of the limits of gender quotas in autocratic contexts, such as where legislatures play a limited policymaking role and where loyalty to the regime is often the key criterion for career advancement.

To sum up, international influences have certainly helped advance women's *de jure* rights in authoritarian regimes. Yet, a cautionary point is that these incentives for reform stem rather specifically from Western actors and international organizations associated with the liberal international order. In recent years, autocratic great powers – most importantly Russia and China – have assumed more assertive global roles, and women's rights do not feature as one of their foreign policy priorities. We should be mindful, then, of the growing limitations of Western influence. Countries that receive substantial aid and support from China and Russia are now less likely to feel obliged to enact policy changes in line with the Western democracy and rights-based agenda (Hyde 2020).

There is also a strategic dynamic underpinning the interactions between autocrats and their international partners (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022). Women's rights are preferred by so many autocrats precisely because they are less politically costly than other democratic reforms. And the challenges of effectively implementing gender reforms – especially those related to women's social and economic rights – are real. Reforms may therefore be introduced for show, as a kind of "lip service" to international norms. This is the cynical interpretation that focuses on the instrumentalization of women's rights. A more balanced interpretation would acknowledge the substantive limits of legal reforms in autocratic contexts, but would point out that changes in laws are often the starting point for longer-term processes of deeper societal mobilization and change (Bauer and Burnet 2013; Htun and Jensenius 2022). Additionally, in the absence of international engagement, the outcome in many authoritarian states might have been no change at all.

13.5   ANTI-GENDER BACKLASH

Advances in women's rights in authoritarian regimes face a growing threat in the form of the transnational "anti-gender" movement. It is hard to pinpoint exactly when this movement crystallized, but its momentum has picked up in the past decade as a response to the legal and normative gains of the LGBT and transgender movements. In response, a global network of political parties, governments, religious leaders, and influencers – mostly of the right-wing conservative populist variety – have placed the idea of the traditional family at the center of their political agendas, using it as a rallying cry to mobilize socially conservative voters. While primarily motivated by the LGBT and transgender movements, this sweeping anti-gender backlash has also brought serious policy setbacks for the women's movement in many countries. Legal access to abortion is under sustained threat; domestic violence laws are eroding; women's educational gains are at risk; conservative religious authority over family law is increasing. These trends are certainly not limited to authoritarian regimes: right-wing populist parties in Brazil, Poland, the US and other democracies are at the forefront of this movement. But it has also taken hold in a number of large and prominent autocracies, in a manner all the more alarming because gains for women previously implemented under secular modernizing regimes are at risk.

Turkey is a prime example. From Turkey's democratization in the 1980s until roughly 2010, a series of progressive gender reforms were introduced, encouraged by a vibrant women's movement and by the promise of progress toward membership in the European Union. Yet, in the past decade, as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President of Turkey and the AKP (Justice and Development party) have consolidated their authoritarian grip, women's rights are facing threats unprecedented in the modern era. The government has leveraged its control over the courts to reinterpret family law in a way that allows for greater religious authority – and fewer civil protections for women (Arat 2022). Autonomous women's movements have been side-lined and suppressed in favor of state-affiliated institutions whose purpose is to support the regime rather than advocate for feminist goals.

Similarly, in recent years the Russian state has forged a close alliance with the Orthodox church and increasingly turned its rhetoric toward the idea that the traditional family is under attack (Dogangun 2020). Putin portrays Russia globally as the last bastion and defender of conservative values. This has been accompanied by an erosion of domestic violence protections for women. In Hungary, anti-LGBT positions have long been a staple of the ruling party (Fidesz) repertoire. This has edged over most recently in a tightening of abortion laws, and a suggestion that a source of Hungary's demographic and social problems is the existence of too many educated women.

All three of these autocracies – working in concert with others, including democracies like Bulgaria and Poland – were at the forefront of opposition to the Council of Europe's (CoE) Istanbul Convention on violence against women. This landmark document, forged after years of negotiations among CoE member states, would commit states to strengthen legal penalties for all forms of violence against women, including domestic violence, forced marriage and workplace sexual harassment. Despite being the first country to ratify the treaty, in 2021 Turkey did an about face and withdrew, citing concerns that it "normalizes homosexuality" and undermines Turkey's "family values." Hungary and Bulgaria have not ratified the treaty, for similar reasons, while Poland is threatening to withdraw, in a coordinated effort to undermine the Convention. Russia and Azerbaijan never signed in the first place. Nevertheless, the treaty has entered into force, and nothing prevents willing states from fulfilling their commitment to strengthen laws and enforcement capacity with the goal of combating violence against women. Yet the symbolic implications of opposition to the Convention are substantial, a sign of the growing size and coordination of this global "anti-gender" coalition with links to the broader surge in right-wing populism.

13.6   CONCLUSION

Autocracies do not always suppress women's rights. In fact, the landscape of women's empowerment across countries and regimes is far more varied – and positive – than is often assumed. As outlined in this chapter, advancing women's political, economic and social rights can be in autocrats' political interest. There is in fact little difference across developing democracies and autocracies in terms of the scope and pace of legal gender reform. Pro-women policies can grow the autocrat's base of societal support, can undermine socially conservative opposition and can buy precious goodwill from the international community. Women's empowerment can also be in autocrats' economic interest, part of a wider effort to modernize and grow the economy.

We should also bear in mind that the track record of democracies in the developing world is far from rosy, particularly when weak states, corruption and patriarchal social norms hamper efforts to empower women (Brulé 2020). Another problem in many developing democracies is the politicization of ethnicity, which creates high hurdles to bringing women into the ranks of political leaders, because ethnic horse-trading tends to center around traditional male-dominated power structures. Consider how countries like Nigeria and Kenya – where party competition and governance revolves around ethnicity – compare with more authoritarian countries like Uganda and Rwanda. Although politics is quite open in the former, women's empowerment rarely breaks through as a policy priority. Consequently, Kenya and Nigeria lag behind many of their neighbors in women's political representation and in the scope and intensity of efforts to enact gender-equality reforms. In Rwanda and Uganda, in contrast, the regime's prioritization of women's rights coincides with a focus on de-politicizing ethnic divisions and instead building a national identity. This is no accident, and it is an important aspect of authoritarian state-building in the developing world.

To be sure, authoritarian regimes often use women's rights instrumentally, raising important questions about the intention behind reforms, how meaningful they are, and whether they are effectively implemented. Writing about the phenomenon of autocratic "gender washing," Bjarnegård and Zetterberg (2022, 62) note that women's rights reforms are often enacted by autocrats "with ulterior motives. The idea behind it is to help a regime appear progressive, liberal and democratic, while diverting attention from its persistent authoritarian practices." This suggests the troubling possibility that progress on women's rights may enable the persistence of rights violations in other areas. Yet, before drawing too cynical a conclusion, it is important to consider the value of gender reforms in autocracies. Even if new policies are enacted for instrumental reasons, they have, at minimum, symbolic value and may eventually enable real progress for women. They may represent a shift in the leader's calculation such that women are viewed as an element of the regime's coalition of supporters, and therefore merit policy concessions.

In closing, this attempt to synthesize research on gender and authoritarianism suggests a few particularly fruitful avenues for future research. One is to develop a more general comparative theory of legislative gender quotas. Quotas are by far the most studied policy for women's empowerment, but most research focuses on democracies. We lack a systematic understanding of how they function differently in autocracies. How meaningful are quotas (and enhanced female representation more generally) for policymaking and coalition-building across different types of authoritarian regimes? Factors such as ruling party hegemony, personalism, the strength of legislatures, and the role of ethnicity in politics should be explored in a more unified way. Second, as discussed, we need a better understanding of the barriers to the implementation of gender reforms in authoritarian regimes. Under what conditions are laws likely to have teeth, and how does this vary across different categories of women's economic, social and political rights? A third area for further research relates to how autocrats engage with today's changing international environment, as newly assertive autocratic powers and the transnational "anti-gender" movement provide alternative models that either de-emphasize or actively challenge the feminist agenda.

NOTE

1.   On the role of the legislature in Jordan, for example, see Shalaby and Elimam (2020, 241–2).

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