CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

Public Opinion and Women's Rights in Autocracies

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Authoritarian regimes around the world have increasingly implemented policies and reforms to strengthen women's rights, ranging from adopting gender quotas to penalizing gender-based violence. Recent literature highlights that authoritarian leaders are at the forefront of these initiatives, often aiming to strengthen their rule rather than advance women's rights (e.g., Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2016; Bush and Zetterberg 2021; Donno, Fox, and Kaasik 2021). While we cannot ignore the contributions of grassroots activism in advancing gender equality (e.g., Kang and Tripp 2018; Krook 2009), authoritarian regimes, by nature, have less incentive to pay attention to popular demands. Thus, women's rights reforms in autocracies tend to be top-down: initiated by the leadership, with a lack of citizen involvement in the design process. This essay considers how top-down gender reforms may be viewed by the public, and as a consequence, how the public's perceptions of them may affect women's status in the broader society.

Support for Women's Rights in Autocracies

Public opinion surveys in autocracies suggest that there is wide variation across regions, countries, and issues in terms of support for women's rights. According to the fifth wave of the Arab Barometer conducted in 2018–19, an overwhelming majority (78%) of the respondents in Arab autocracies[1] disagreed with the statement that "university education for males is more important than university education for females." However, the respondents were less gender egalitarian regarding inheritance. When asked whether "women's share of inheritance should be equal to that of men," 79% disagreed with the statement. Similarly, Round 7 of the Afrobarometer, conducted in 2016–18, reported that 90% of the respondents in autocracies[2] agreed with the statement that "girls and boys have equal opportunities to get education." However, fewer respondents (62%) agreed that "women and men have equal opportunities to own and inherit land."

Despite valuable efforts to uncover the public's opinion on women's rights issues, there are challenges associated with studying it in conservative, authoritarian environments. First, the social desirability bias may operate in multiple directions. On the one hand, respondents may present more gender-egalitarian views in order to please female enumerators (Benstead 2014). On the other hand, men may misrepresent their views to conform to conservative expectations (Barnett 2022). Second, it may be insufficient to use these measures to understand attitudes toward gender-based *policies*, which may be linked to attitudes toward the regime.

Let us take advantage of an Arab Barometer question that investigates the public opinion on a women's rights policy: gender quotas. The survey asks, "Some people think in order to achieve fairer representation a certain percentage of elected positions should be set aside for women. To what extent do you agree with this statement?" The majority (66%) in Arab autocracies agreed with the statement. However, disaggregating responses by country reveals an interesting variation. Whereas 79% of the respondents agreed with the statement in Sudan, only 50% did so in Algeria, where the 2012 quota adoption dramatically increased female political representation. The findings imply that in some places, gender reforms may lack popular support even years after their adoption. So far, however, little attention has been paid to citizens' gender-related policy preferences in autocracies. Filling this gap in the literature is also important as many scholars have argued that autocrats co-opt women in politics and adopt gender reforms to win over the domestic audience (Tripp 2019; Valdini 2019) without the support of public opinion data.

Vast research has shown that in democracies, citizens frequently rely on "elite cues" in forming policy preferences. Scholars of American politics have extensively studied how elites' policy positions influence the opinion of their constituents (e.g., Bullock 2011; Lenz 2012; Zaller 1992). Recent research suggests that regardless of their policy views, Donald Trump's opponents may have opposed his policies "even in the face of an action [they] might otherwise support" (McDonald, Croco, and Turitto 2019, 759). This implies that just as citizens follow copartisan elite cues, they may reject those from the rival party. Similarly, citizens rely on their evaluation of the government's previous performance to lend support for its gender policies (Barnes and Córdova 2016).

Citizens in authoritarian regimes may also follow elite cues (Brader and Tucker 2009) or use their evaluation of the regime to form opinions on public policy. In one of the few studies of public opinion on gender reforms in autocracies, Bush and Jamal (2015) argue that disposition toward the regime shapes attitudes about gender reforms. They find that among Jordanians who oppose the regime, elite endorsement of women in politics may actually dampen support for those women. Thus, people's policy preferences in autocracies may be conditional on their views of the regime.

For regime opponents in autocracies, their dislike for the leadership is likely to be more acute because of the prevalence of human rights abuses and the suppression of civil liberties in autocracies. The dislike may be intensified as a result of the prolonged tenure of authoritarian incumbents, who cannot be replaced through elections. In this context, people's dispositions toward the

regime must interact with their (dis)approval of regime-mandated policies that likely benefit the incumbents. For example, regime opponents' attitudes toward gender reforms may be shaped by conflicting interests: inclination to improve gender equality and reluctance to grant the regime legitimacy (Noh, Grewal, and Kilavuz 2022).

In addition to their disposition toward the regime, social norms and contexts play an important role in forming women's rights policy preferences. In autocracies, where these issues are more pronounced, there may be a stronger public aversion against women's advancements for two reasons. First, authoritarian societies tend to be more closely associated with entrenched patriarchal values and barriers to gender equality (Htun and Weldon 2010; Lindberg 2004). In these places, women have traditionally been absent from most domains outside the home, especially prior to recent improvements in gender equality. Thus, negative reactions may be inevitable when women suddenly become visible as political and economic players. For instance, in Kenya, "women's entry into previously male-dominated spaces" may be linked to an increase in violence against women in politics (Berry, Bouka, and Kamuru 2020, 3). Second, men may see women's advancement as a threat because as a result, they have to start competing with women as political, economic, and social challengers. Status discontent theories suggest that this may be especially true for men who are lower in status (Morgan and Buice 2013); the aversion is likely to be even more pronounced for men in autocracies where average citizens have long been status discontent, oppressed and deprived of many basic rights and freedoms.

New Research Agenda: Studying Public Opinion to Advance Women's Rights

Gender and politics scholars must take a step back from drawing conclusions about any long-term consequences of authoritarian gender reforms without taking public attitudes into analysis. Otherwise, we may miss how these seemingly positive reforms often harm women's interests. While there is large research highlighting the positive effects of gender reforms on women's empowerment, studies have also shown how the reforms may harm women in the form of further political/economic barriers or even physical violence even in democracies (e.g., Batista Pareira and Porto 2020; Brulé 2020; Clayton 2015; Meier 2008). Women's rights issues have also been exploited by anti-Islam, xenophobic campaigns in European democracies, in fact harming women's rights, especially for immigrant women (Farris 2017). This essay has suggested that in autocracies, there is more reason to worry because the top-down nature of authoritarian reforms, paired with dislike of the regime and existing patriarchal norms, may generate negative reactions against women and even support for reform rollbacks. Dissecting public opinion is crucial to help minimize this potential backlash and implement the reforms successfully.

This new research agenda also carries important implications for democratization as women's participation in mass popular movements is seen as key to

their success (Chenoweth and Marks 2022). Moreover, studying public opinion is important for ensuring women's rights following regime transition. If women's rights policies were initially implemented by the dictator without popular demands, they may be viewed as a remnant of the authoritarian period. As illustrated in Tripp's (2019, 245) example of postdemocratization Tunisia, women's rights activism had become "tainted" by its affiliation with the previous authoritarian regime. Similarly, Nechemias (1994) discusses how gender quotas were discredited in newly independent countries of the former Soviet Union as the publics associated them with the communist past. Scholars have also illustrated how democratization and regime transitions have led to declines in women's voices and political representation in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s (Yoon 2001) and in North Africa following the 2011 Arab uprisings (Johansson-Nogués 2013). Only when we better understand the public opinion on gender-based reforms, we will be able to accurately assess their consequences to produce more appropriate policy implications for women's empowerment that endure regime changes.

Notes

1. Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, and Yemen. Autocracy is defined as a Polity score of 5 or lower at the time of the survey.
2. Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Eswatini (formerly Swaziland), Gabon, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Morocco, Mozambique, Niger, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

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