

POLICY SUPPORTING PROGRAM (PSP)

FRAGILITY AND RESILIENCE

Gender backlash and rising authoritarianism in fragile contexts

**Maria Martin de Almagro Iniesta
& Maddy Benson**

REFRACT RESEARCH PAPER 2 /// March 2025



Partners



With the support of



Research commissioned by: Directorate-General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (DGD).

Opinions from the organising entity do not automatically reflect those either of the Belgian government or ARES or VLIR-UOS, and can never bind either the Belgian government or ARES or VLIR-UOS.

Published by
María Martín de Almagro Iniesta
maria.martindealmagroiniesta@ugent.be
and Maddy Benson

Ghent University
Conflict Research Group
Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 41 (T1)
B-9000 Gent
Belgium
www.crg-ghent.be

Citation: Martín de Almagro, María and Benson, Maddy. 2025. Gender backlash and rising authoritarianism in fragile contexts. REFRACT Research Paper Series.

POLICY SUPPORTING PROGRAM (PSP)

FRAGILITY AND RESILIENCE

Gender backlash and rising authoritarianism in fragile contexts

**Maria Martin de Almagro Iniesta
& Maddy Benson**

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	5
1 INTRODUCTION	6
2 KEY CONCEPTS AND AIMS	9
2.1. Authoritarianism	10
2.2. Fragility	10
2.3. Gender backlash	11
2.4. Women’s meaningful participation	12
3 GENDER BACKLASH IN FRAGILE AND AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS	13
3.1. Discursive opposition to gender equality	14
3.2. Post-conflict gender rights reform and genderwashing	18
3.3. Targeting of women leaders and cooptation of civil society organisations	26
4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS	31
4.1. Strategic policy engagement	32
4.2. Supporting broader coalitions, independent women and LGBTQIA+ movements	33
4.3. Adopt an intersectional and multi-level approach to addressing gender inequality	34
4.4. Addressing misinformation/disinformation and stay engaged with autocratic and/or politically constrained contexts	35
5 REFERENCES	36
ABOUT PSP REFRACT	40

Abstract

Gender backlash is a function and facilitator of authoritarian politics, emerging from and exacerbated by perceived or actual crises. Reflecting context-specific social and political dynamics, gender backlash takes a myriad of forms, from overt oppression of women and LGBTQIA+ communities, to strategic genderwashing and cooptation. Understanding how the precarity of gender rights can be exploited towards autocratic ends is essential for effective intervention planning and risk management in fragile settings. The research paper identifies three trends of concerns of gender backlash: (1) discursive opposition to gender equality, (2) social and political oppression of women and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and gender minorities (LGBTQIA+), and (3) genderwashing and cooptation. This research paper attends to the fact that where this dynamic coincides with authoritarian leadership and systemic fragility, the implications for development cooperation outcomes are significant. The document provides a preliminary exploration of these key trends, drawing from a desk review of pertinent academic research and grey literature on gender backlash, fragility, and authoritarianism.

Introduction

Nowadays, 71% of the world's population – 5.7 billion people – live under autocracy, a 48% increase from 10 years ago (Nord et. al., 2024). While an international concern, the rise in authoritarianism poses an acute challenge for those living in fragile settings. For policymakers and practitioners, fragile settings under autocracy raise complex questions around how to uphold the 'leave no one behind' principle (United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG), 2024) and 'stay engaged' without endorsing or normalising autocratic regimes. Especially in contexts where relations between donors and national authorities become 'politically estranged' (Cliffe et al., 2023), political and reputational risks must be carefully considered against humanitarian and development needs.

Over the past decade, researchers have tracked the worrisome rising trend of gender backlash worldwide, manifested most clearly in wide-ranging attacks against reproductive rights, women rights and LGBTQIA+ rights, and heightened political activism in support of conventional and heteronormative gender roles. An increasing body of research indicates that patriarchy and authoritarianism are not merely interconnected but frequently function as mutually reinforcing political strategies. In contexts where democratic erosion is driven by far-right populist movements and leaders, opposition to women's and LGBTQIA+ rights, along with rhetoric promoting traditional gender hierarchies, plays a significant—yet often underestimated—role in illiberal discourse, mobilization efforts, coalition-building, and ideological frameworks. Where analysis manages to escape siloed thinking, conclusions are often highly Eurocentric, observing gender backlash according to the experience of authoritarian politics in Europe and North America.

While conventional wisdom regards gender rights and democracy as mutually reinforcing (United Nations Development Program, 2024), this research report draws on evidence from fragile and conflict affected settings to paint a more complex picture. In addition to exploring how these contexts shape and are shaped by global trends of gender backlash, our analysis disentangles the more complex politics of cooptation. In particular, this paper draws attention to the varied ways in which liberal gender rights discourse and policy can be manipulated to legitimise authoritarian regimes.

Despite general awareness among policymakers regarding the ways in which authoritarian politics and gender (in)equality inform fragility, these issues tend to be considered in isolation. This research paper addresses how gender (in)equality takes shape in the face of rising authoritarianism in fragile settings. The mobilisation of gender politics with regime legitimacy in mind manifests to varying degrees across both politically open and constrained contexts. However, it is essential to understand that there are strong transnational alliances and financial flows that support it in authoritarian, but also in Western countries (Brough et al. 2020; Datta 2021). Across the globe, populist leaders—including Jair Bolsonaro, Rodrigo Duterte, Andrzej Duda, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Narendra Modi, Yoweri Museveni, Viktor Orbán, and Vladimir Putin—capitalize on masculinist and ethnonationalist anxieties. Their rhetoric and policies position them as defenders against perceived threats to both individual masculinity and the broader national identity. These threats, ranging from immigration and feminism to progressive movements advocating for LGBTQIA+ rights and social justice, are framed as forces of emasculation. In response, such leaders frequently invoke narratives of restored strength, power, and virility, embedding these themes deeply within their political discourse.

Gender backlash is a function and facilitator of authoritarian politics, emerging from and exacerbated by perceived or actual crises. Reflecting context-specific social and political dynamics, gender backlash takes a myriad of forms, from overt oppression of women and LGBTQIA+ communities, to strategic genderwashing and cooptation. Understanding how the precarity of gender rights can be exploited towards autocratic ends is essential for effective intervention planning and risk management in fragile settings. The

research paper identifies three trends of concerns of gender backlash: (1) discursive opposition to gender equality, (2) social and political oppression of women and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and gender minorities (LGBTQIA+), and (3) genderwashing and cooptation. The scope of this research paper has been tailored to inform development cooperation in fragile settings. It is important to stress that these trends are global and therefore, not exclusive to fragile contexts. This research paper attends to the fact that where this dynamic coincides with authoritarian leadership and systemic fragility, the implications for development cooperation outcomes are significant. To this end, policymakers and practitioners must seek to identify settings at risk of gender backlash and work with communities to develop strategies that mitigate against and manage the impacts.

Key concepts and aims

This paper engages with the question of how rising authoritarianism is related to the current gender equality backlash, and how these trends harm DGD's and other donors' cooperation policies for gender equality and women's empowerment in fragile contexts. The paper is divided in two main parts. First, in section 2, we build on existing research on gender backlash and rising authoritarianism to present a brief analysis of various gender equality discourses and policies. Here, we also investigate the paradoxical tendencies of authoritarian contexts to frame gender equality as either as a Western imposition or as a low priority, while simultaneously examining how political elites strategically appropriate women's rights and gender equality to reinforce their own power. The analysis considers the potential effects of these narratives on women's meaningful political participation and influence. We examine the increasing prevalence of different types of violence, from physical, to online harassment, targeting women politicians, civil society activists and community leaders. Section 3 delves into recommendations and strategies for DGD for effectively and credibly staging engaged in advancing women's empowerment and gender equality in fragile contexts of rising authoritarianism. This analysis relies on desk-based analysis and extensive literature review. Feedback from our colleagues at the Policy-Support Program on Fragility and Resilience (REFRACT) and from the Belgian General Directorate for Development was also integral to the process.

2.1. Authoritarianism

The concept of **authoritarianism** refers to the concentration of power and resources in an individual or elite group (Day et. al., 2021). An authoritarian regime is one in which the legislative and executive branches come to power through means other than free and fair elections (Svolik, 2012: 220). Furthermore, civil conflict is more prone to emerge in authoritarian regimes, which also foster conditions that increase the likelihood of its recurrence (Toft 2010:24). Conflict often undermines key foundations of democracy, such as trust between communities, economic growth, and the development of a strong middle class (Bermeo 2003; Jarstad and Sisk 2008; Reynolds 2010). Rather than fostering democracy, conflict often creates an environment that favors authoritarianism, as moderate voices are sidelined and power shifts to violent groups (Lyons 2016).

2.2. Fragility

In this document, we use the OECD's definition of **fragility** as 'the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacities of the state, system, and/or communities to manage, absorb, and mitigate those risks. Fragility can lead to negative outcomes including violence, the breakdown of institutions, displacement, humanitarian crises or other emergencies' (OECD, 2016, p. 21). While fragility is often linked to war and conflict, the OECD's fragility framework acknowledges that risks stem from a variety of sources. To address these complexities, it employs a multidimensional approach that examines the underlying factors shaping people's livelihoods. The framework considers economic, environmental, political, social, and human capital dimensions to assess how different forms of violence, poverty, inequality, and environmental disruptions interact, influencing communities' capacity to manage and respond to risks. Using 57 quantitative indicators, the framework categorizes countries into three groups: extremely fragile, fragile, and all other contexts. This classification recognizes that not all fragile situations are characterized by conflict or severe poverty and that, while all contexts exhibit some degree of fragility, not all meet the threshold to be officially classified as fragile (OECD, 2022). Particularly when assessing authoritarianism in fragile contexts, defined by exposure to risk and insufficient capacity to manage, absorb or

mitigate those risks, the relative volatility with which systems evolve needs accounting for. While fragility is not necessarily a direct cause or product of authoritarianism, the two phenomena are closely linked (Goemans et. al., 2021). Of the 60 states characterised as fragile in States of Fragility report (OECD, 2022), 38 were classified as authoritarian, 3 as flawed democracies and 16 as hybrid regimes. This same report stressed that across all dimensions – economic, environmental, human, political, security and societal – gender inequality is highly correlated with fragility.

2.3. Gender backlash

While evidently widespread, the confluence of authoritarianism, fragility and gender inequality remains poorly integrated in development policy and practice. The gendered consequences of authoritarianism are, however, well-established and are often conceptualised as gender backlash. **Gender backlash** describes counter-mobilisations triggered by advances in women's rights, and in the rights of LGBTQIA+ people. This framing has been criticised due its limited explanatory value in settings where gains in gender rights have been marginal and in cases where power can accommodate and co-opt struggles for gender and sexual equality (Paternotte 2019). Addressing this, scholars have theorised a pre-emptive mode of gender backlash, wherein gender rights are targeted as part of a regime's longer-term survival strategy (Rowley, 2020). An alternative framing still, Edström et. al. (2024) refers to "patriarchal backlash" as a strategy of crisis management, implemented through "...a set of material mechanisms and discursive strategies for maintaining, asserting, or re-building hierarchies" (p.298).

Gender backlash is invariably understood as a function and facilitator of authoritarian politics, imbricated with hierarchies of race, ethnicity and (dis)ability. Historically, gender backlash has emerged in response to perceived or actual threat(s) to empire, nation and/or capital (Edström et. al., 2024; McGee et. al., 2024). This in mind, the forthcoming analysis examines the current rise in authoritarianism and gender backlash and co-optation across fragile settings as a response to converging economic, ecological and political risks. While a global trend of concern, by virtue of acute exposure to and insufficient capacity to manage the risks that drive and are exacerbated

by authoritarianism and gender backlash, fragile contexts require close attention.

2.4. Women's meaningful participation

Women's meaningful participation refers to the equitable involvement of women in all facets of political life, encompassing not only their presence but also their active and influential engagement in decision-making processes. This concept emphasizes that women's participation should be substantive, allowing them to effectively contribute to and shape political agendas and policies. In essence, meaningful political participation involves not just the numerical representation of women but also their empowerment to influence political outcomes, ensuring that governance systems are inclusive, diverse, and responsive to the needs of all citizens.

Gender backlash in fragile and authoritarian contexts

Current scholarship highlights the increasing prevalence of anti-gender equality campaigns, alongside homophobic, transphobic, and misogynistic political rhetoric, across various regions worldwide, including Latin America, North America, West and Central Africa, Europe and Central Asia (see, for example, Hovhannisyan 2019). The rise in authoritarian tendencies in fragile states, such as Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, and the DRC, among others, has led to a shrinking of the civic space, in particular with regards to minority groups, women's rights and gender equality. In certain contexts, women have mobilized collectively to resist the backlash; however, this is not always feasible in fragile settings. The broader anti-gender equality shift presents significant obstacles to women's rights in general, in fragile contexts there are exacerbated challenges with regards to physical and cyber violence and political engagement. The convergence of authoritarian politics and gender backlash in fragile settings manifests across a series of overlapping patterns: a discursive opposition to gender equality, manifested in a conservative and stereotypical view of the heteronormative family; overt oppression of women and LGBTQIA+ persons; genderwashing; and cooptation of civil society.

Depending on the regime and political context at hand, these trends evolve through active, symbolic and/or quiet policy dismantling, and often occur simultaneously. For example, there are attacks on access to reproductive health, bans on abortions, increased targeting of LGBTQIA+ and women's rights activists, as well as transnational campaigns against international

frameworks such as the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence¹ and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda.²

3.1. Discursive opposition to gender equality

A typical pattern in gender equality backlash involves a shift in political rhetoric from either supportive or neutral stances to explicit opposition and resistance against gender equality goals (Roggeband and Krizsan 2018: 2-3). These political narratives frequently contradict a country's officially adopted policies on gender equality. While regional contexts differ significantly, there are notable similarities in the growing resistance to gender equality across various settings. The discourse opposition to what is labelled as '**gender ideology**' has gained substantial political legitimacy and support in a range of countries, including Azerbaijan, Turkey, Hungary, and Uganda.

The most direct way for politicians to demonstrate opposition to a policy is through active dismantling, where concrete actions are taken to revoke

¹ Over the past few years, several countries have expressed opposition or reluctance towards the Istanbul Convention. For example, the Czech Senate rejected the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2024, the Hungary National Assembly and the Slovak National Council voted against ratifying the Convention in 2020 arguing that it promoted 'gender ideology', in 2018 Bulgaria's Constitutional Court ruled that the Istanbul Convention was incompatible with the Bulgarian Constitution, effectively blocking its ratification. In 2021, Turkey, who had ratified the Convention, withdrew from it.

² In recent years, several countries and political entities have expressed opposition or taken actions that challenge the Women, Peace, and Security agenda. For example, during negotiations on a press statement concerning Afghanistan in August 2024, which criticized the release of the "Law on the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice", Russia and China opposed the inclusion of WPS-related language, leading to the statement being issued by only 12 Council members instead of unanimously. Also in 2024, during negotiations on Resolution 2746, which authorized the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) to support the Southern African Development Community Mission in the DRC (SAMIDRC), references emphasizing the need to integrate a gender perspective into all aspects of SAMIDRC's strategic operations were removed at Russia's request. This language would have highlighted the importance of incorporating gender analysis and ensuring women's participation in assessments, planning, and operations. Instead, the final text included provisions stating that MONUSCO's technical and civilian protection support to SAMIDRC should encompass safeguarding women and girls and preventing conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). See Security Council Report. 2024. October 2024 Monthly Forecast. Thematic Issues: Women, Peace and Security. Available online: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2024-10/women-peace-and-security-16.php>

or eliminate it. However, symbolic dismantling—where policies are undermined through discourse, delegitimization, or threats of repeal—is even more common. This form of dismantling can involve discrediting arguments related to gender equality or denying the gendered dimensions of violence. A striking example of this trend is the opposition to the Istanbul Convention, the primary international legal framework addressing gender-based violence, which obligates member states to protect women from domestic and intimate partner violence. The convention’s reference to ‘gender equality’ has been targeted by critics of so-called ‘gender ideology,’ leading to obstacles in its ratification and implementation in various regions.

The framing of gender equality as an ideology that would shatter the ‘traditional family’, ‘propagate homosexuality’ and ultimately destroy the nation (SDC, 2022, p.2), is not exclusive to fragile settings in the Global South (Corredor, 2019; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Kováts, 2017). Efforts to challenge the advancement of women’s rights and LGBTQIA+ rights at the United Nations (UN) have been led by a diverse and powerful coalition since the 1990s (Cupać and Ebetürk, 2020). This transnational pushback is commonly referred to as the ‘anti-gender movement’. Encompassing post-Soviet, Catholic and Islamic states, the United States, the Vatican, conservative nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation, the League of Arab States, the UN Africa Group and the G77, these ultra-conservative actors collaborate with local actors in Global South settings, such as in Uganda, Ghana, Kenya and South Africa, to organise campaigns to roll back sexual and reproductive health and rights, and gender equality.

In fragile contexts, discursive opposition to gender equality is often grounded in narratives that denounce gender rights as a Western attack on national sovereignty (Bleck & de Walle, 2018; Gloppen et. al., 2023; SDC, 2022; Mama, 2020). Building on this legacy, contemporary autocrats, in particular in post-socialist countries and post-colonial Africa (Korolczuk and Graff 2018), manipulate postcolonial tensions by framing ‘gender ideology’ and the rights of sexual minorities as forms of colonization, imperialism, and cultural imposition. While this anti-colonial framing is not new, an important shift in its use has occurred in the last decade. Despite contextual nuances, resistance to the so-called ‘gender ideology’ is a logic that holds the ‘natural’

– heteronormative – family as intrinsic to the security of the nation (Cupać & Ebetürk, 2020; Edström, et. al, 2024; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Otieno and Makabira, 2024).

Box 1

Gender ideology used to oppose reproductive rights in development cooperation

In September 2022, during a United Nations General Assembly session, the Nigerian delegation—backed by around 30 other delegations, primarily from Africa and the Middle East—proposed amendments to modify the language used in the resolution “*International Cooperation for Access to Justice, Remedies, and Assistance for Survivors of Sexual Violence*.” This resolution acknowledges “access to safe abortion” as a “human right” and includes references to gender (Heipel 2022).

The Nigerian delegation opposed these terms, arguing that they promote what it called “gender ideology.” Similarly, the Senegalese representative denounced the inclusion of abortion as a “family planning method” and insisted that the term “gender” should be strictly defined as “social relations between men and women.” Critics of the resolution viewed it as a tool for “promoting the social acceptance of homosexuality and transgenderism.”

Although these proposed amendments were ultimately rejected, their introduction reflects a coordinated and public opposition by African actors—both at the continental level and within international forums—against gender discourse and sexual rights (Broqua, Fillieule and Roca I Scoda 2016).

At the core of nationalist discourse is the concept of the family—more specifically, the ‘natural family,’ which is upheld as the fundamental reference point and ultimate solution to the various challenges facing African societies. This notion of the ‘natural family’ is strategically employed to resist efforts aimed at advancing sexual and reproductive rights, as well as the rights of sexual minorities in Africa. For instance, pro-family activists argue that LGBTQIA+ and feminist advocacy for more inclusive African societies is orchestrated by Western liberal elites, who allegedly seek to impose their ideology and introduce the moral corruption of a decadent foreign influence. It is in the intrinsic fluidity of gender and sexual identity that autocratic leaders find an ideal enemy to the “...the fixity of tradition, the sovereignty of the nation, common understandings of ‘nature’” (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024: 60; Arriola et al., 2023). Moreover, these activists perceive gender equality advocacy as a new form of population control and political domination over African nations, claiming that homosexuality is being used as a tool to regulate African demographics (Lere, Saka and Odekeye Muinat 2019). This is why discourses seeking to limit women’s reproductive rights are frequently positioned against ‘gender ideology,’ which is portrayed as a threat to the nation’s traditional or religious values. This anti-colonial framing is a discursive motif in contexts where gender backlash is unfolding. In Kenya, interpretations of religion to protect African mores from Western decadence (Otieno & Makabira, 2024, p.122) have been used to justify the erosion of gender rights. Crucially, the politicisation of LGBTQIA+ rights serves to bolster claims to sovereignty while undercutting sections of domestic civil society (Rankner & De Walle, 2023).

Discursive backlash against gender equality substantiates the material repression of women and LGBTQIA+ communities. Beyond an end itself, gender backlash is strategically mobilised by autocrats to consolidate control, particularly when faced with domestic and/or international scrutiny. Even in autocratic contexts where women’s rights appear to be advancing, LGBTQIA+ persons face severe oppression. Aided by international backlash against the so-called ‘gender ideology,’ the preclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons from conceptions of gender equality not only materialises existential harm for women and LGBTQIA+ people, but serves to entrench authoritarian regimes.

Critical questions for donors:

- Is there a dismantling of existing equality policies, adoption of regressive reforms or new policies?
- Is the current political environment showing signs of authoritarianism or shrinking civic space, particularly for women and LGBTQIA+ groups?
- Are there laws, speeches, or media campaigns promoting anti-gender or anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric?
- Are gender rights being framed as threats to national identity, religion, or sovereignty?
- Is there messaging equating gender equality with foreign interference or “Western ideology”?
- Is the state promoting a narrow vision of the “traditional” or “natural” family?
- What are the local community’s views on gender roles and practices?
- Does this vision exclude LGBTQIA+ persons, single parents, or women seeking reproductive rights?
- Do we risk reinforcing discursive or symbolic attacks on gender equality by funding development programs that avoid sexual and reproductive rights or LGBTQIA+ inclusion?

3.2. Post-conflict gender rights reform and genderwashing

The expansion of women’s rights in the wake of violent conflict is a well-established trend (Anderson, 2016; Berry, 2015; 2017; Berry et. al, 2021; Berry & Lake, 2021; Freedman, 2015; Gouws, 2021; Hughes, 2009; Hughes & Tripp, 2015; Mageza-Barthel, 2015; Tripp 2015). Evidence suggests that by rupturing and reordering social relations, conflict can leave openings for gendered norms and values to be reconfigured. Approximately a quarter of today’s autocratic regimes demonstrate equal or even stronger records on women’s rights compared to the average developing democracy and the average proportion of women in legislatures is now comparable between democracies and

autocracies in the developing world (Donno and Kreft 2019). For instance, Rwanda has implemented several key reforms, including the introduction of gender quotas in 2003, revisions to property and inheritance laws in 1999, and tougher penalties for sexual and domestic violence between 2009 and 2011. Morocco offers another notable case, where family law reforms in 2003–04 expanded women’s rights to divorce and child custody, reflecting years of dialogue among political leaders, liberal feminists, and Islamist actors (Eddouada and Pepicelli, 2010). Other non-democratic governments have also enacted legislation addressing gender-based violence, such as Tanzania’s Sexual Offenses Bill (1998) and Uganda’s Employment Act (2006), which includes provisions on sexual harassment. However, under authoritarian conditions where regime survival takes priority over all else, these openings rarely lead to substantive change.

As gender equality has become more closely associated with democratic principles, autocratic regimes aiming to project a democratic image have been incentivized to enhance women’s representation in government institutions (Bush 2011; Edgell 2017). For example, state-sponsored women’s organizations and initiatives led by first ladies have been interpreted as strategic efforts by African autocrats to align with international gender equality norms (Adams, 2007; Ibrahim, 2004; Kah, 2014; Mba, 1989; Okeke, 1998). Additionally, existing research indicates that autocrats often use gender quotas and women’s political representation as strategic tools within legislatures (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2016; Bush & Gao, 2017; Donno & Kreft, 2019; Edgell, 2017; Tripp, 2019; Valdini, 2019).

Although gender parity in cabinet positions remains a distant goal, the proportion of women holding such roles in authoritarian regimes increased from 0.84% in 1970 to 10.6% in 2018. This trend is particularly pronounced in Africa, where autocratic governments have increasingly appointed women to ministerial positions (Kroeger and Kang 2024). Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of women’s representation in cabinets within African autocracies between 1966 and 2016 (Kroeger and Kang 2024, based on data from WhoGov, in Nyrup and Bramwell, 2020). While the overall percentage of female ministers reached approximately 20% by 2016, growth patterns have varied significantly across different autocratic regimes, as indicated by the light grey areas in Figure 1.

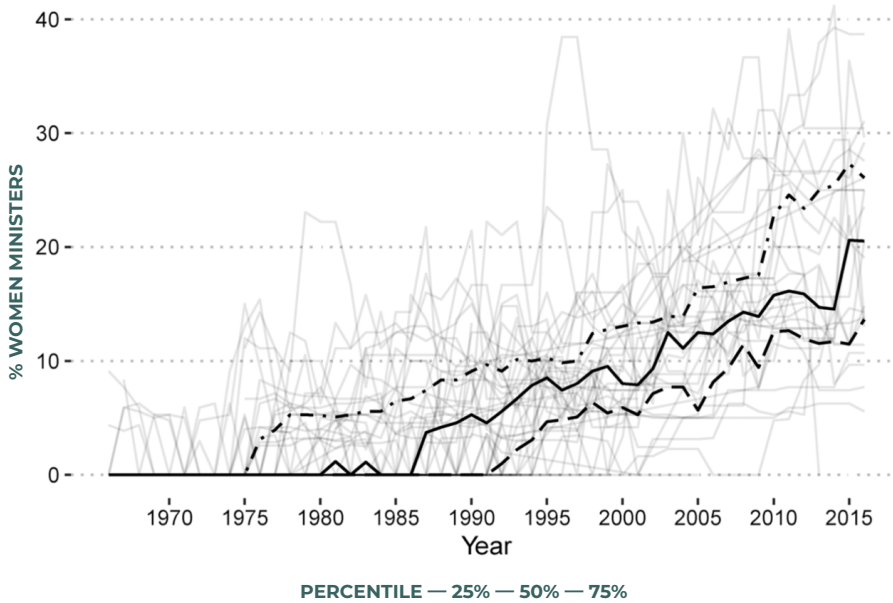


Figure 1. Percentage of Women Cabinet Ministers in African Autocracies, 1966-2016.

Source: Kroeger and Kang 2024, based on data from WhoGov, in Nyrup and Bramwell, 2020

In contexts of dependence to development aid, electoral autocrats appoint more women to cabinet positions to signal adherence to democratic and gender-equality norms (Kroeger and Kang 2024). Crucially, electoral autocrats who are shifting away from democratic principles (i.e., undergoing auto-cratization) will strategically increase the appointment of women ministers to mitigate the negative impact on their domestic and international reputation (Valdini 2019). Autocrats may deliberately facilitate the appointment of women to prominent positions, such as prime minister, vice president, or foreign affairs minister, as a strategy to enhance their country's reputation. For instance, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's decision to appoint Jessica Alupo as vice president and Robinah Nabbanja as prime minister in 2021 may reflect an effort to use visible governmental changes for strategic purposes (Tripp, 2021). DRC President Felix Tshisekedi appointed in 2024 the country's first ever female prime minister, Judith Suminwa Tuluka and Therese Kayiwamba as Minister of Foreign Affairs. Cross-national research

also indicates that women are often appointed to high-profile government roles, such as finance minister, following major crises (Armstrong et al., 2022).

While this has resulted in the nominal expansion of women's political representation, substantive gains on meaningful participation have often been marginal, poorly distributed or have in some cases, have generated new modes of inequality. This is because an increase in descriptive representation does not necessarily reflect a shift in societal attitudes, as political arenas in many countries are still largely perceived as male-dominated spaces. The underrepresentation of women in politics stems from multiple factors, including institutional and structural barriers, as well as sociocultural and practical limitations that restrict both individual and collective agency. Additionally, prevailing social and political narratives surrounding gender roles play a crucial role in shaping the scope of women's political participation. For example, despite the introduction of electoral quotas in Kenya, political participation for Maasai women, especially in rural areas, is constrained by the sustained dominance of elite men within informal institutions (Menusi, 2021). Kenya's quota system has also served to sow division between women in politics. This is due to the greater political influence reserved to women appointed via general elections compared to their nominated counterparts, appointed by the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) as a compliance mechanism (Berry et. al., 2021).

In Burundi, the 2005 Constitution introduced a minimum quota, stipulating that at least 30% of parliamentary seats be occupied by women. However, when election outcomes do not meet this threshold, the Electoral Administration has the authority to appoint additional female members to fulfil the quota. This practice, while enhancing numerical representation, has raised concerns about the genuine empowerment of women leaders and the potential for their co-optation by the ruling party.

Rwanda is frequently highlighted as a global leader in gender representation, with women holding over 60% of seats in the lower house of parliament—the highest proportion worldwide (Amour-Levar, 2018; Warner, 2016). While this level of representation is often praised as a model of gender inclusivity, studies suggest that these political gains have not translated into broader

social empowerment for Rwandan women. Despite visible achievements in the public sphere, many women in Rwanda continue to face gender-based violence at a rate of around 35% (Spence 2020), as well as marginalisation and exclusion in their daily lives (Reinl, 2019), as the quota system has disproportionately favoured women of the Anglophone Tutsi elite (Berry & Lake, 2021). Rather than emerging from grassroots activism or a gradual shift in gender norms, gender reforms were implemented top-down by the state following the 1994 genocide (Wallace, Haerpfer, & Abbott, 2008). While women have since been appointed to various political roles, the authoritarian nature of the Rwandan regime—marked by restrictions on dissent and the persistence of patriarchal structures—limits their ability to independently mobilize or advocate for gender-responsive policies.

In both Mozambique and Algeria, reforms have enforced a duality of women's status, in that women's rights have advanced publicly while being undermined privately (Lorch and Bunk, 2016). Furthermore, gender quotas have also been associated with violent backlash against women in politics, as seen in Lesotho (Clayton, 2015), Rwanda (Burnet, 2011), Malawi (Clayton et. al. 2020) and Kenya (Berry et. al., 2021; 2022). Pointing to the multiple layers of gender inequality, these findings stress the need to look beyond national-level reforms of formal institutions. Failure to do so not only bolsters men's social and political hegemony, but risks exacerbating inequalities between women along lines of ethnicity, race, class and (dis)ability (Berry & Lake, 2021).

Advances in women's political representation have also been used to cover attacks on the LGBTQIA+ community. In Malawi, despite the Gender Equality Act of 2013 and CSO campaigns to expand women's political participation, the state continues to criminalise homosexuality (Gloppen et. al., 2023). The LGBTQIA+ community is targeted at the highest level of government, from public morality campaigns that portray same-sex relations "as an alien pollutant" (Gloppen et. al., 2023, p.179), to the incarceration of queer people for the crime of sodomy. In June 2024, despite pressure from CSOs and queer activists, the Malawi Constitutional Court upheld its ban on same-sex sexual conduct between consenting adults (Amnesty International, 28 June 2024). Similar anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation is also Uganda adopted its Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023, whereby same-sex couples can face up

to 10 years in prison or in some cases, the death penalty. Additionally, the bill mandates that individuals report suspected cases of same-sex activity, even among their own family members. The international community's response Meanwhile, President Yoweri Museveni's government has consistently positioned itself as a champion for women's rights, most notably by expanding women's political participation through parliamentary quotas (Mama, 2020; Tripp, 2022). being considered in other parts of the region. In Kenya, for instance, some politicians have put forward a bill that would not only raise the penalty for same-sex activities to life imprisonment but also restrict any media discourse on homosexuality.

Box 2

Suspension of development aid for Anti- LGBTQIA+ laws.

Uganda adopted its Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023, whereby same-sex couples can face up to 10 years in prison or in some cases, the death penalty. Additionally, the bill mandates that individuals report suspected cases of same-sex activity, even among their own family members. The international community's response was to cut Uganda's development aid. Local activists issued serious concerns to the international community's response indicating that sanctions could intensify animosity toward sexual minorities, reinforce the perception that homosexuality is a concept imposed by the West, and, most critically, bolster public backing for state-endorsed homophobia and anti-LGBTQIA+ political leaders in Africa. The critical implication is that any intervention bears the risk of contributing to the very same ills it seeks to address.

The substantive shortcomings of reforms to advance women's meaningful political participation is perhaps explained by the underlying motivations of autocratic leaders. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the proportion of leadership positions held by women across Africa is far more pronounced in autocracies than in democracies (Bjarnegård & Donno, 2022; Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022; Donno and Kreft, 2019; Donno et. al., 2023; Donno, 2024; Lorch and Bunk, 2016; Tripp, 2019; 2022; 2024). The rapid increase of women in African legislatures between 1990 and 2010 can in part be attributed to the introduction of multipartyism (Tripp, 2024). More specifically, gender quotas sought to counter the risk of opposition, as ruling parties looked to consolidate their share of votes by reserving seats for women. As Elin Bjarnegård and Pär Zetterberg's (2022) findings in Uganda, Cameroon and Rwanda suggest, the instrumentalisation of gender quotas by autocrats amounts to **genderwashing**.

Box 3

Genderwashing

Gender washing refers to the practice of superficially promoting gender equality or feminist values while failing to implement meaningful structural changes. Similar to “greenwashing” in environmental discourse, gender washing is often used by governments, corporations, or organizations to present themselves as progressive on gender issues while continuing discriminatory practices or reinforcing inequalities behind the scenes. Referring to the use of gender equality reforms to facilitate and obscure human rights violations or to compromise electoral integrity, genderwashing allows authoritarian regimes to build legitimacy, evade scrutiny and quash dissent.

Genderwashing appears relatively effective, with evidence suggesting that the international community rewards commitments to women's rights. This in part related to the dominant assumption that women's rights and democracy are inextricably linked (Bush et. al., 2023). The tendency to lump women's rights in with other civil liberties overlooks the fact that in contexts of rising authoritarianism, various types of rights protections fulfil distinct political purposes (for a study on how this plays out in Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya, see Donno and Kreft 2019). The promotion of women's rights in autocratic settings is thus best understood as a matter of relative costs and incentives. While the provision of 'coordination goods' such as free speech and fair elections may threaten regime survival, concessions on women's rights not only carries less risk, but can be stabilising in effect. Crucially, superficial women's rights reforms are a regime-compatible means of balancing international pressures to democratise, with the demands of political survival (Bush et. al, 2023). This suggests that autocratic regimes may use genderwashing as a strategy to create the illusion of democratic progress, without genuinely committing to democratic principles (see Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022).

Critical questions for donors:

- Is there a shrinking space for women's and LGBTQIA+ mobilisation in civil society?
- Do we see a rise of physical and online abuse and other forms of violence against women politicians?
- Are gender reforms being used to distract from or justify human rights abuses elsewhere—such as crackdowns on LGBTQIA+ communities or political opposition?
- Is increased representation leading to broader social or legal changes for women and marginalized groups?
- Are women being appointed to meaningful decision-making roles, or are they largely symbolic figures? And what are the narratives on gender that these women use once appointed?

3.3. Targeting of women leaders and cooptation of civil society organisations

Beneath the surface of measures to advance women's rights, repression of women who pose a threat to the regime continues across autocracies. This affirms that 'women-friendly' reforms are popular among authoritarian regimes not in the interest of meaningful gender inequality but regime survival. The reality remains that access to rights is conditional on one's loyalty to the regime. Measures to advance women's rights tend to materialise as a strategy of cooptation of women in politics and civil society organisations. While earlier authoritarian regimes sometimes collaborated with civil society to inform policymaking, many now increasingly rely on government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) to advance state agendas. Civil society organizations (CSOs) may not be outright banned, but their activities are increasingly restricted (EuroMed Rights, 2021). By institutionalising women leaders and CSO, authoritarian regimes seek to suppress independent women's movements and thereby counter the threat of dissent en masse. This results in a situation where women's involvement in governance is often superficial, with limited access to meaningful decision-making. While the state makes formal commitments to gender parity, the mechanisms to enforce those commitments are weak or entirely absent, allowing patriarchal norms and informal power structures to continue unchallenged.

TARGETING OF WOMEN LEADERS

Numerous reports and media sources have highlighted a rise in physical, verbal, and online attacks targeting women activists—including members of women's CSOs, human rights defenders, politicians, and journalists—across various contexts. The Swedish foundation Kvinna till Kvinna gathered testimonies from women human rights defenders in 32 countries, including the DRC, Azerbaijan, Egypt, and Serbia. Over 60% reported a shrinking civic space, often attributing it to government fears that CSOs could drive political change or challenge state authority (Wassholm, 2018). The space for women's civil society organizations (CSOs) has been significantly restricted through increased criminalization, heavy bureaucratic controls, and reduced access to funding—particularly restrictions on international support. These constraints make it increasingly difficult for women's CSOs

to operate effectively. Activists working on human rights, especially in areas like sexual and reproductive health or LGBTQIA+ rights, face heightened risks of harassment, arrest, and intimidation. Shrinking civic space poses a major barrier to women's political participation, particularly as civil society has traditionally served as a critical avenue for women excluded from formal political institutions. In many autocratic or semi-authoritarian regimes, collaboration with the state once allowed women's organizations to push gender policy forward, such as in the case of Burundi and the DRC (Interview sources). The narrowing of civic space also affects women within political institutions by limiting their potential support networks and reducing opportunities for alliance-building.

With regards to women politicians, the Inter-Parliamentary Union's Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians noted in its 2020 report a growing number of cases involving violence and intimidation directed at women (IPU, 2020). The report indicates that threats, intimidation, and violence targeting women parliamentarians were reported most often in the Americas, followed by the Middle East and North Africa. Leaking private or compromising information is a common tactic used to intimidate politically active women and push them out of public life.

In Uganda, affirmative measures to expand women's political participation has been a mainstay of National Resistance Movement's (NRM) strategy, including during the guerrilla war which culminated in President Museveni's victory in 1986 (Tripp, 2022). Museveni has cultivated a pro-women image from the outset of his presidency. Yet, the provision of women's rights under Museveni has been highly conditional. The NRM has targeted women in opposition by manipulating the gender quota system to favour its preferred candidates, issuing bribes, undercutting access to job opportunities and credit, and by exploiting the fragmentation of opposition parties to co-opt high-profile women (Tripp, 2022). Far from unique to the NRM, such strategies of divide and conquer have emerged elsewhere, as in Algeria, Mozambique (Lorch & Bunk, 2016) and Tanzania (Donno and Kreft, 2019). A mode of preemptive backlash, the co-optation of women leaders works to undermine the mobilisation of effective political opposition.

In Kenya, incidents were reported in which women were physically assaulted and stripped during public demonstrations advocating for their right to dress freely. In Serbia, women activists have faced verbal and physical abuse, as well as instances of blackmail (Wassholm, 2018: 33). Other reports highlight a broader pattern of gendered threats and harassment, often perpetrated by police or state security forces (Thornton, 2021). In the DRC, recruitment into public service is characterized by a combination of clientelism, favouritism, and informal networks. Although legal recruitment procedures exist, they are often circumvented. Approximately 29% of institutional appointments are based on personal networks or informal peer connections, and at least 11% of women were brought into public roles through co-optation rather than open competition (Kahenga et al. 2023). In this context, co-optation functions as a mechanism of political control and symbolic inclusion, giving the appearance of gender inclusivity while reinforcing existing power hierarchies dominated by men.

CO-OPTATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

In addition to individual leaders and opposition party members, co-optation of gender rights CSOs is a well-documented tactic employed by autocratic regimes across Africa (Donno & Kreft, 2019; Lorch & Bunk, 2016; Tripp,) and elsewhere (Sahli, 2010). This often takes the form of party sponsored organisations or specific units within the regime that act as transmission belts for the regime's mandate, while preventing the emergence of more autonomous women's groups (Lorch & Bunk, 2016). For example, after the ICC launched its investigation into Sudan's President Omar Al-Bashir in 2005 for crimes committed in Darfur, the regime established the Violence Against Women Unit. This was a time of escalating state surveillance and repression against CSOs, particularly those working on sexual and reproductive justice issues. Demonised as ICC conspirators and enemies of the state, thirteen international and three domestic organisations were forcibly closed. Inflicting a significant blow to Sudan's independent women's movement, these crack-downs not only meant that the implementation of reforms could not be effectively monitored, but imperilled long-term progress across gender issues (Tønnessen, 2017). Against this backdrop, the unit was thus regarded by service providers and activists as part of the regime's wider goal of stifling the emergent independent women's movement (Tønnessen, 2017).

In settings where repression of civil society is less overt, co-optation may occur through more insidious means like patronage networks, through which the regime dictates the nature and scope of CSO agendas (Lorch and Bunk, 2016). For example, the National Women's Forum (Forum National des Femmes, FNF), established in 2013, serves as a platform for women's organizations across Burundi. While its creation aimed to unify and amplify women's voices, there are discussions about the extent to which such state-sanctioned bodies maintain autonomy versus aligning with governmental agendas.

In sum, the contradictory status of women in authoritarian regimes that promote liberal reforms is often rooted in tensions within nationalist narratives. On one hand, these regimes frame gender equality as a key element of national progress and democratization; on the other, they position women as protectors of cultural heritage and tradition, reinforcing their role in upholding conventional values. Advancing gender equality in such settings is particularly challenging when institutions that would typically advocate for women's rights—such as women's policy agencies or commissions—are absorbed or controlled by the state, limiting their independence and influence over policy. Evidently, for women's movements and gender rights organisations, operating under autocratic conditions often means conceding autonomy for policy gains (Donno, 2023). This is not to say that undemocratic regimes are immune to the influence of civil society. Navigating a volatile terrain of co-optation and repression, CSOs continue, albeit with varying degrees of success, to leverage the anxieties of autocratic regimes to pursue democratic ends.

Critical questions for donors:

- Do women's CSOs have the freedom to set their own priorities, or are they pressured—formally or informally—to align with government narratives?
- Is the CSO landscape fragmented or weakened by co-optation, and if so, how does this affect the sustainability of women's movements?
- Are women activists and leaders at risk of harassment, violence, or surveillance due to their work?
- Have we consulted local women human rights defenders about the political and security risks they face—and are we responsive to those concerns?
- Are we amplifying or exposing women to risk by partnering with or funding them without adequate safeguards or political awareness?
- Do we have the tools to assess whether our gender equality efforts are enabling lasting structural change or simply reinforcing existing power dynamics?
- How do we support women's rights and political participation in environments where civil society is co-opted or under surveillance?
- Are we supporting alternative forms of organizing—such as digital activism or informal networks—especially where traditional civic space has closed?
- What mechanisms do we have to reassess our partnerships or funding strategies if a CSO or political figure becomes co-opted or compromised?

Recommendations for donors

Rising authoritarianism in fragile settings comes hand in hand with anti-gender equality discourses and practices. The backlash fuels growing violence against politically active women, including physical, verbal, and online attacks. LGBTQIA+ communities face similar repression, often targeted alongside women's rights defenders as part of broader efforts to silence dissent. Crucially, backlash against gender equality should be understood within the context of a state's **broader political agenda**. In some cases, governments may reject gender equality reforms to assert resistance against Western influence and reinforce nationalist narratives. In contrast, other regimes may promote women's rights strategically, aiming to secure political or economic gains. Recognizing these underlying motivations can help identify effective entry points for advancing women's political empowerment, while also minimizing the risk of inadvertently reinforcing or legitimizing authoritarian rule.

Strengthening institutional support to strategic policy engagement, fostering alliances, addressing disinformation/misinformation/polarisation and hate speech, use of gender transformative approaches and integrating intersectionality into development policymaking are crucial for safeguarding and advancing gender equality policies. This calls for a more comprehensive analysis of how formal institutions—such as electoral systems and party selection processes—interact with informal norms and practices within and beyond the political sphere. It also involves examining how women organize collectively and engage with political elites and other social and political actors to influence change. A bold feminist and intersectional approach is vital to upholding democratic principles and sustaining commitments to equality.

4.1. Strategic policy engagement

- A key consequence of anti-gender politics is the increasing resistance to the term “gender” and a resurgence of essentialist language, including references to “sex,” “women,” and “mothers.” Effective policy strategies should actively counter disinformation and remain vigilant to subtle shifts in policy language, such as the removal of “gender” from official documents, which signal the influence of anti-gender agendas.
- Beyond encouraging the ratification of international treaties such as Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and domestic legislative reforms that favour gender equality, long term material support for implementation processes is essential. In doing so, donors can help to address the disparities between symbolic and substantive progress, and counter gender-washing. This is particularly important for criminal laws addressing violence against women. Subject to decentralised enforcement by multiple actors (e.g. state police and prosecutors), implementation tends to be particularly difficult to monitor in this respect (Bjarnegård & Donno, 2022). As such, donors should seek to support local legal aid organisations to initiate cases, provide counsel, educate communities on their rights and monitor implementation processes. Where relevant, donors should also look to engage with and support informal legal providers, including customary authorities.
- Global indicators used to measure fragility, governance and gender (in)equality must be complemented with context-specific analysis. Donors must recognise and challenge the tendency to evaluate fragile settings according to Western models of governance and gender equality. This does not mean ‘lowering standards,’ but calls for interventions that are locally-owned and facilitated, with priorities set according to the expertise and lived experiences of local actors.

4.2. Supporting broader coalitions, independent women and LGBTQIA+ movements

- Given the financial influence of transnational anti-gender networks, it is essential to substantially expand flexible and long-term funding for women-led civil society organizations.
- Build partnerships with pro-equality advocates, engage with experienced experts from civil society organizations (CSOs) to strengthen advocacy efforts and policy influence. Resourcing independent civil society organizations (CSOs) is crucial to resisting authoritarian co-optation. Direct funding, capacity-building, and flexible grant mechanisms can empower grassroots movements to advocate for gender rights without state interference.
- Supporting the mapping of civil society landscapes and helping organizations sustain and expand their work through collaboration with legally recognized umbrella groups that have established regional expertise can be an effective way to bolster women's civic engagement.
- Seek allies in diverse and unexpected spaces, forming strategic coalitions around common goals. Engaging with moderate conservatives can be key to achieving majority support for gender-equality initiatives in the development sector.
- It is also crucial to acknowledge that international donor involvement can have unintended disempowering effects when it imposes external priorities on civil society. To avoid this, both language and agenda setting should be developed in close partnership with CSOs to ensure alignment with their needs and contexts, and safeguarding their involvement in policy-making processes.

4.3. Adopt an intersectional and multi-level approach to addressing gender inequality

- Just as the material consequences of gender inequality and backlash are distributed unevenly, so too are the relative gains from progressive reforms. As elsewhere, gender inequality in fragile settings intersects with hierarchies of race, ethnicity, class, age, religion and (dis)ability. Reforms seeking to counter gender inequality must be receptive to the intersectional dimensions that dictate one's experience of social, political economic and health disadvantage. This requires looking to reforms and changing (or transforming) gender norms beyond formal institutions. Evidence suggests that even when formal institutions enact laws and legislation to expand women's access to socioeconomic and political rights, the prevailing order within informal, local institutions can render these gains practically obsolete.
- Local-level interventions could focus on engaging key gatekeepers—those who limit women's political participation across various spheres, including within the household. These efforts should target the micro-levels of family, school teachers, religious and traditional leaders, health workers, community, and local governance to promote citizen involvement and encourage shifts in cultural attitudes and behaviours. Key areas of focus may include challenging traditional divisions of labour, increasing women's freedom of movement, facilitating access for girls to education, valuing women's work, and addressing the normalization of violence against women and addressing the underlying gender norms and stereotypes. Strategies could involve awareness-raising, sensibilisation and open dialogue, particularly with men, to foster broader support for gender equality.
- Looking to support decentralisation processes is one way in which donors can encourage a more even distribution of policy gains. Increased access and proximity to state institutions at the local level can create opportunities for a broader cross-section of society to contribute to public life and decision-making. As a result, national level reforms are more likely to be tailored to the specific needs of local communities.

- Implement strategies to safeguard feminist policymaking from anti-gender resistance by reinforcing procedural protections against disruptive tactics and regressive agendas.

4.4. Addressing misinformation/disinformation and stay engaged with autocratic and/or politically constrained contexts

- Involve both traditional and social media in efforts to combat violence against women and to challenge and reshape harmful gender stereotypes within society. Independent media can play a key role in raising awareness about the history and contributions of local women's movements.
- Focus on building the capacity of backing civil society efforts that counter anti-gender rhetoric through public education and advocacy campaigns.
- Tackling cyberviolence against women is key to strengthening their political voice. States must be engaged in efforts to prevent online abuse and ensure that such acts do not go unpunished. In addition, raising public awareness about digital violence is a crucial step toward prevention.
- Allocate funding for research on disinformation/misinformation and the effects of hate speech on institutions and communities in fragile settings.
- Embed racial justice and intersectionality into all DGD strategies and policies.

- Amnesty International. (28 June 2024). *Malawi: Decision to uphold ban on consensual same-sex conduct is a bitter setback for human rights*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/06/malawi-decision-to-uphold-ban-on-consensual-same-sex-conduct-is-a-bitter-setback-for-human-rights/>
- Amour-Levar, Christine (2018) 'Rwanda, a Success Story of Women Empowerment', HuffPost, 5 January
- Anderson, Miriam J., (2016). Windows of Opportunity: How Women Seize Peace Negotiations for Political Change. *Oxford University Press*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190239534.003.0001>
- Arriola, L. R., Rakner, L., & Van De Walle, N. (Eds.). (2023). *Democratic Backsliding in Africa?: Autocratization, Resilience, and Contention* (1st ed.). *Oxford University Press*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192867322.001.0001>
- Ayoub, P., & Stoeckl, K. (2024). The Global Resistance to LGBTIQ Rights. *Journal of Democracy*, 35(1), 59–73. <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/h/article/915349>
- Bermeo, N. (2003). What the Democratization Literature Says – or doesn't say – about Postwar Democratization. *Global Governance* 9: 159-177.
- Berry, M. E. (2017). Barriers to Women's Progress After Atrocity: Evidence from Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina. *Gender and Society*, 31(6), 830–853. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26597028>
- Berry, M. E., Bouka, Y., & Kamuru, M. M. (2021). Implementing Inclusion: Gender Quotas, Inequality, and Backlash in Kenya. *Politics & Gender*, 17(4), 640–664. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X19000886>
- Berry, M. E., & Lake, M. (2021). Women's rights after war: On gender interventions and enduring hierarchies. *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 17(1), 459-481. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-113020-085456>
- Bjarnegård, E., & Donno, D. (2022). Window-Dressing or Window of Opportunity? Assessing the Advancement of Gender Equality in Autocracies. *Politics & Gender*, 20(1), 229–234. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X22000496>
- Bjarnegård, E., & Zetterberg, P. (2022). How Autocrats Weaponize Women's Rights. *Journal of Democracy*, 33(2), 60–75. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0018>
- Bleck, J. and N. van de Walle. (2018). *Electoral Politics in Africa since 1990: Continuity in Change*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/97813166676936>
- Boyd, R. E. (1989). Empowerment of Women in Uganda: Real or Symbolic. *Review of African Political Economy*, 45/46, 106–117. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4006015>
- Broqua, C., O. Fillieule, et M. Roca i Escoda (2016). « Sur le façonnement international des causes liées à la sexualité », *Critique Internationales*, 70: 9-19.
- Bush, S (2011) International Politics and the Spread of Quotas for Women in Legislatures. *International Organization* 65(1), 103-137. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818310000287>.
- Bush, S. S., Donno, D., & Zetterberg, P. (2023). International Rewards for Gender Equality Reforms in Autocracies. *American Political Science Review*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423001016>
- Clark, K.M. (2019) *Affective Justice: The International Criminal Court and the Pan-Africanist Pushback*. Duke: Duke University Press

- Clayton, A. (2015). Women's political engagement under quota-mandated female representation: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment. *Comparative Political Studies*, 48(3), 333-369. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140145481>
- Clayton, A., Robinson, A. L., Johnson, M. C., & Muriaas, R. (2020). (How) do voters discriminate against women candidates? Experimental and qualitative evidence from Malawi. *Comparative Political Studies*, 53(3-4), 601-630. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414019858960>
- Cliffe, S., Dwan, R., Wainaina, B., & Zamore, L. (March, 2023). Aid strategies in 'politically constrained settings.' [Policy Brief]. Chatham House International Security Programme.
- Coly, A. (2013). Introduction (ASR forum: Homophobic Africa?). *African Studies Review*, 56 (2), 21-30. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2013.39>
- Corredor, E. S. (2019). Unpacking "gender ideology" and the global right's antigender counter-movement. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 44(3), 613-638. <https://doi.org/10.1086/701171>
- Cupać, J., & Ebetürk, I. (2020). The personal is global political: The antifeminist backlash in the United Nations. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 22(4), 702-714. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148120948733>
- Day, A., Druet, D., & Quaritsch, L. (2020). *When Dictators Fall: Preventing Violent Conflict During Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*. United Nations University. <http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:7676/WhenDictatorsFall.pdf>
- Day, A., Von Billerbeck, S., Tansey, O., & Al Maleh, A. (2021). Peacebuilding and authoritarianism: the unintended consequences of UN engagement in post-conflict settings. United Nations University. http://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:8035/UNU_Peacebuilding_FINAL_WEB.pdf
- Donno, D. (2024). Authoritarian regimes and women's rights. In: Lindstaedt, N. & Van den Bosch, J.J.J., (Eds). *Research Handbook on Authoritarianism* (pp. 198-212). Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802204827_00022
- Donno, D. (2023, June 7). Autocratic backsliding in 'gender-washing' regimes. *The Loop*. <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/autocratic-backsliding-in-gender-washing-regimes/>
- Donno, D., & Kreft, A.-K. (2019). Authoritarian Institutions and Women's Rights. *Comparative Political Studies*, 52(5), 720-753. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414018797954>
- Eddouada, S., & Pepicelli, R. (2010). Morocco: Towards an "Islamic state feminism". *Critique internationale*, 46(1), 87-100.
- Edström, J., Greig, A., & Skinner, C. (2024). Patriarchal (Dis)orders: Backlash as Crisis Management. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 49(2), Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.1086/726744>
- Euromed Rights (2021) Challenges to Women's Human Rights in the EU – Gender Discrimination, Sexist Hate Speech and Gender-Based Violence Against Women and Girls – Contribution to the Third Annual Colloquium on Fundamental Rights – November 2017, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.
- Freedman, J. (2016). *Gender, violence and politics in the Democratic Republic of Congo*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315584164>
- Gloppen, S., Kanyongolo, F., Shen-Bayh, F., & Wang, V. Malawi. In: Arriola, L. R., Rakner, L., & Van De Walle, N. (Eds.). (2023). *Democratic Backsliding in Africa?: Autocratization, Resilience, and Contention* (1st ed.). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192867322.001.0001>
- Goemans, C., Koester, K. & Loudon, S. (2021). *Gender Equality and Fragility*. OECD Development Co-operation Working Papers, No. 98. OECD Publishing, Paris.
- Gouws, A. (2021). Introduction. In: Madsen, D., H., (Ed.). (2021). *Institutions and Women's Political Representation in Africa*. 1-19. Bloomsbury Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755637829>
- Heipel, E. (2022) « Les nations africaines font cavalier seul contre le droit à l'avortement et l'idéologie du genre à l'ONU » ACI Africa, Accessible here: <https://www.aciafrique.org/news/6333/les-nations-africaines-font-cavalier-seul-contre-le-droit-a-lavortement-et-ideologie-du-genre-a-lonu>.
- Hovhannisyan, S. (2019) *Anti-Genderism in the Non-West: Looking from the Other Side*, London School of Economics and Political Science blog post. Accessible here: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2019/01/03/anti-genderism-in-the-non-west-looking-from-the-other-side/>

- Hughes, M. M. (2009). Armed conflict, international linkages, and women's parliamentary representation in developing nations. *Social Problems*, 56(1), 174-204. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2009.56.1.174>
- Hughes, M. M., & Tripp, A. M. (2015). Civil war and trajectories of change in women's political representation in Africa, 1985-2010. *Social Forces*, 93(4), 1513-1540. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sovo03>
- International LGBTQI Association World (ILGA). (2023). Annual Report. <https://ilga.org/resources/annual-report-2023-resource/>
- IPU (2020) Violations of the Human Rights of MPs – 2020, Inter-Parliamentary Union
- Kahenga, F., Feron, E., Barumwete, S. and Kazviyo, G. (2023) Women's Cooptation in Institutions: Promoting Values of Equity and Equal Opportunity teste in the Democratic Republic of Congo, *Open Journal of Political Science*, 13 (4). [10.4236/ojps.2023.134031](https://doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2023.134031)
- Korolczuk, E., & Graff, A. (2018). Gender as "Ebola from Brussels": The anticolonial frame and the rise of illiberal populism. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 43(4), 797-821. <https://doi.org/10.1086/696691>
- Kováts, E. (2017). The Emergence of Powerful Anti-Gender Movements in Europe and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy. In: Köttig, M., Bitzan, R., Petö, A. (Eds.) *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe. Gender and Politics. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43533-6_12
- Kroeger, A. and A. Kang. (2024) The Appointment of Women to Authoritarian Cabinets in Africa. *Government and Opposition*. 59 (4): 1206-1229. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2022.32>
- Lere, A. L. Saka et O. Adekeye Muinat, « Gay Rights and the Politics of Anti-Homosexual Legislation in Africa : Insights from Uganda and Nigeria », *Journal of African Union Studies*, vol. 8, n° 2, 2019, p. 45-66.
- Lorch, J., & Bunk, B. (2016). Gender Politics, Authoritarian Regime Resilience, and the Role of Civil Society in Algeria and Mozambique. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2863764>
- Lyons, T. (2016). The Importance of Winning: Victorious Insurgent Groups and Authoritarian Politics. *Comparative Politics* 48 (2): 167-184. <https://doi.org/10.5129/001041516817037745>
- Mageza-Barthel, R. (2015). *Mobilizing transnational gender politics in post-genocide Rwanda*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315595801>
- Mama, A. (2020). 'We will not be pacified': From freedom fighters to feminists. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 27(4), 362-380.
- McGee, R., Edwards, J., Nazneen, S., Skinner, C., Lewin, T., & Edstrom, J. (2024). Understanding Gender Backlash: Southern Perspectives. *Institute of Development Studies*, 55(1), 1-165.
- Memusi, S., S. (2021). Experiences of gender equality legislation in Kenya: The role of institutions and actors. In: Madsen, D., H., (Ed.). (2021). *Institutions and Women's Political Representation in Africa*. 163-192. Bloomsbury Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755637829>
- Nord, M., Lundstedt, M., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Borella, C., Fernandes, T., Gastaldi, L., Good God, A., Natsika, N., & Lindberg, S. I. (2024). Democracy Report 2024: Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot. University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute. https://v-dem.net/documents/43/v-dem_dr2024_lowres.pdf
- Otieno, P., E. & Makabira, A. M. (2024). Gender Equality vs 'Morality': The Erosion Gender Agendas in Kenya. In: McGee, R., Edwards, J., Nazneen, S., Skinner, C., Lewin, T., & Edstrom, J. (2024). *Understanding Gender Backlash: Southern Perspectives*. Institute of Development Studies, 55(1), 117-129.
- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). (2016). States of Fragility 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264267213-en>
- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). (19 September 2022). States of Fragility 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1787/c7fedf5e-en>
- Puar, J. (2013a). Homonationalism as assemblage: Viral travels, affective sexualities. *Jindal Global Law Review*, 4(2), 23-43.
- Puar, J. (2013b). Rethinking Homonationalism. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 45(2), 336-339. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43302999>
- Puar, J. (2007). Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Reinl, H. (2019) 'Feminist Utopia' in Post-Genocide Rwanda? – Dismantling the Narrative Around Women's Political Representation, Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (CFFP), 26 January
- Roggeband, C. and A. Krizsan (2018). 'Reversing Gender Policy Progress: Patterns of Backsliding in Central and Eastern European New Democracies', *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 1 (3): 367-385.
- Rowley, M. V. (2020). Anything but Reactionary: Exploring the Mechanics of Backlash. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 45(2), 278-287. <https://doi.org/10.1086/704951>
- Salhi, Z.S. (2010) (ed). *Gender and Diversity in the Middle East and North Africa*. London: Routledge.
- Spense, I. (2020) The cost of violence: Assessing the economic cost of gender-based violence in Rwanda. *European Journal of Public Health*, 30 (5)
- Svolik, M. (2012) *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). (March, 2022). *Gender and Rising Authoritarianism* [Synthesis Note]. https://www.swisspeace.ch/assets/publications/downloads/Gender-and-Rising-Authoritarianism_SDC.pdf
- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). (January, 2023). *Staying Engaged in Authoritarian Contexts: Learnings from SDC Experiences*. [Policy Note]. <https://backend.sdc-pge.ch/fileservice/sdweb-docs-prod-sdcpgech-files/files/2024/01/09/aa7eaba2-4a26-4b86-ad42-01463f811d69.pdf>
- Thornton, Laura (2021) 'How Authoritarians Use Gender as a Weapon', *Washington Post*, 7 June
- Tønnessen, L. (2017). Enemies of the State: Curbing Women Activists Advocating Rape Reform in Sudan. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 18(2), 143-155. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol8/iss2/10>
- Toft, MD. (2010). Ending Civil Wars: A Case for Rebel Victory? *International Security* 34 (4): 7-36.
- Tripp, A. M. (2024). How African Autocracies Instrumentalize Women Leaders. *Politics & Gender*, 20(1), 217-222. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X22000484>
- Tripp, A. M. (2015) *Women and power in post-conflict Africa*. Cambridge University Press/
- Tripp, A. M. (2019). *Seeking legitimacy: Why Arab autocracies adopt women's rights*. Cambridge University Press.
- United Nations Development Program (UNDP). (2024). Gender Equality and Democratic Governance. <https://www.undp.org/eurasia/our-focus/gender-equality/gender-equality-and-democratic-governance>
- United Nations Sustainable Development Group. (2024). Leave No One Behind. <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/leave-no-one-behind>
- Valdini, M (2019) *The Inclusion Calculation: Why Men appropriate Women's Representation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Wahab, A. (2016). "Homosexuality/Homophobia Is Un-African": Un-Mapping Transnational Discourses in the Context of Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Bill/Act. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 63(5), 685-718. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2015.1111105>
- Wallace, C., Haerper, C., & Abbott, P. (2008). Women in Rwandan politics and society. *International journal of sociology*, 38(4), 111-125.
- Warner, Gregory (2016) 'It's the No. 1 Country for Women in Politics – But Not in Daily Life', *NPR*, 29 July
- Wassholm, C. (2018) Suffocating the Movement – Shrinking Space for Women's Rights, *Kvinna till Kvinna*.
- World Bank. 2024. Classification of Fragility and Conflict Situations (FCS) for World Bank Group Engagement. Available here: <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/fb0f93e8e-3375803bce211ab1218ef2a-0090082023/original/Classification-of-Fragility-and-Conflict-Situations-FY24.pdf>

About PSP REFRACT

REFRACT – Resilience and Fragility in Action is a Policy Supporting Programme (PSP) funded by the ‘Flemish Interuniversity Council’ (VLIRUOS) and the ‘Academie de Recherche et d’Enseignement Supérieur’ (ARES). This project is carried out on behalf of the Belgian Directorate for Development cooperation and humanitarian Aid (DGD) and implemented by a consortium of researchers from Belgian and African Universities.

Our Ambition

We critically examine the evolving dynamics of fragility and resilience amid escalating crises. By engaging with policymakers and exploring the causes, lived experiences, and impacts of these crises, we want to inform policy responses. Through rigorous analysis and collaborative dialogue, we propose innovative and inclusive strategies that are firmly grounded in the daily realities of affected by these crises, and that strengthen resilience while addressing systemic drivers of fragility.

Our approach

We advance knowledge and inform policy through research conducted within a structured framework comprising four thematic work packages and two cross-cutting work packages:

- 1 Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus:** This work package examines the challenges of implementing the HDP triple nexus in local contexts. It offers actionable recommendations to address these challenges and enhance the integration of humanitarian, development, and peace efforts.

- 2 Localisation of Aid:** Focusing on empowering local actors in development interventions and humanitarian responses, this package seeks to clarify the concept of localisation and tackle barriers hindering its effective implementation in fragile contexts, thereby promoting a more inclusive aid agenda.
- 3 Civic Space and the “Leave No One Behind” Principle:** This work package explores the difficulties faced by civil society actors operating in fragile, conflict-affected, and increasingly authoritarian environments. It aims to identify approaches that foster resilience and inclusion in shrinking civic spaces.
- 4 Political Economy of Conflict and Civil War:** Addressing the evolving dynamics of conflict and fragility, this package investigates the political and economic dimensions of conflicts, civil wars and authoritarian contexts, with the aim to suggest new approaches and adapt existing policy frameworks
- 5 Methodological and Epistemological Challenges:** This cross-cutting package focuses on research methodologies suited to fragile contexts, emphasizing ethical and collaborative practices that respect and incorporate local knowledge and perspectives.
- 6 Gender Lab:** Integrated across the thematic packages, the Gender Lab prioritizes women’s rights and participation in resilience-building efforts, ensuring gender considerations are central to the research agenda.

Where do we work?

Our geographic focus includes the Sahel and the Great Lakes region of Africa, with a particular focus on Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi.

