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WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT

Why Authoritarians Target Women and How We Can Help



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WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT:

WHY AUTHORITARIANS TARGET WOMEN AND HOW WE CAN HELP

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Women living under authoritarian regimes bear a double burden of repression. In a top-down system in which the authorities seek every available lever to maintain control over society, gender frequently becomes weaponized. The lack of accountability in authoritarian systems typically renders underrepresented and disadvantaged populations, such as women, more vulnerable to abuses of power. When women resist authoritarian control, they can expect targeted repercussions.

At the same time, women who demand a better future for themselves, their families, and their societies are an integral force for democratic change in closed systems where power belongs to an exclusionary few. Recognizing this, the United States and the international community should support women's full participation within the international arena, apply punitive measures against regimes that deny women their inalienable human rights, and calibrate their tools for assessing women's well-being.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The Biden Administration and international allies must increase pressure on regimes and nonstate actors that strategically leverage the oppression and abuse of women and girls
- The U.S. Congress, foreign legislatures, and U.N. institutions should push for greater representation of women's rights defenders in decision-making forums and increase investments in capacity-building opportunities
- Governments, corporations, and nongovernmental organizations should prioritize gender disaggregated data collection, especially in the context of conflict and humanitarian crisis

Autocratic regimes are built on patriarchy. In the zero-sum mentality of the authoritarian worldview, the consolidation of power by the strongman comes at the expense of women's basic human rights. While repression under authoritarianism generally affects the whole of society, women are often targeted in specific ways. From antiquated gender norms and state-imposed inequity to the deliberate use of violence against women and children, autocrats worldwide tactically use the subjugation of female members of society in their unwavering pursuit of control.

There's a sadistic rationality at play when rogue actors methodically demean the well-being of women and deny them access to opportunity. Women are a vital force in the expansion of peaceful and prosperous societies.

Ironically, every authoritarian recognizes this connection to some degree, capitalizing on both the [weaponization of gender](#) as well as the impact of society's indifference to the suffering of

women and children. A free and fair society becomes impossible to achieve when half a population is unprotected and regularly undermined.

It's why sexual violence and other forms of abuse are eagerly employed by autocrats and illiberal actors including the [Russian military](#), the [North Korean regime](#), the [Islamic State](#), and government troops and armed militias in regions like [South Sudan](#) and the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#).

It's why the Taliban and the Islamic Republic of Iran, among others, leverage extreme forms of gender-based exclusion and egregious violations of women's basic human rights.

It's why the Chinese Communist Party strategically attempts to dictate the role of women in society, censoring and punishing those who speak out against abuse, exerting control over the birth rate, and forcibly sterilizing women from the [Uyghur](#) and [Tibetan](#) ethnic minorities.

Not surprisingly, repressive governments generally perform poorly in providing for women's health. All but three countries in the bottom quarter of the [Hologic Global Women's Health Index's](#) rankings of 122 nations are rated "not free" or "partly free" in [Freedom House's](#) rankings. Afghanistan, the Republic of Congo, Venezuela, and Turkey are the bottom four for women's health.

Moreover, state-imposed inequity creates a perpetuating cycle for poverty and violence, further reinforcing other nefarious practices including corruption, kleptocracy, and extremism.

Sadly, the full impact of conflict and oppression on women's well-being is still overlooked by global stakeholders focused on more traditional security concerns. This must change. When women succeed, peace and prosperity more frequently prevail.

When women are educated, their families are more likely to be educated, their children healthier, and their communities stronger. Each additional year of school completed, especially at secondary levels, [increases economic productivity](#) and [reduces early and forced marriage](#) and [maternal and infant mortality](#). [Children born to literate mothers](#) are 50% more likely to survive beyond the age of five than those born to mothers who cannot read, according to UNESCO. Women invest significantly in their families and communities, creating a transformative ripple effect that improves outcomes and strengthens democracy and opportunity for all.

The moral and economic imperatives speak for themselves. But these proof points often fail to put words into action. The [Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017](#) and the creation of the [White House Gender Policy Council](#) in 2021 were important steps toward equally incorporating the perspectives and concerns of men and women through gender mainstreaming in U.S. policy, but significant work remains.

Following [16 years of democratic backsliding](#) worldwide, according to Freedom House, U.S. and international influencers must more meaningfully respond to the security implications of gender inequity. Despite hard facts, peace and security agendas still mostly exclude comprehensive action in support of gender equity.

Women-led movements are [more often peaceful and inclusive](#). They are also [more likely](#) to secure lasting democratic change, proving a vital influence in improving accountable governance, security, and social welfare.

Globally, greater gender diversity in government [correlates](#) with decreased corruption. And [governments](#) and [companies](#) that include more women in leadership roles yield greater levels of transparency, inclusivity, and success. In terms of human rights, specifically, women's political engagement and leadership further [cut the risk of state-perpetrated rights abuses](#) and increase prioritization of key social welfare infrastructure and access including [education](#), [health](#), and [well-being](#).

Within the context of the struggle between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes, gender equity is one of the most potent antidotes that exists to counter growing threats to freedom worldwide.

The Biden Administration and international allies must increase pressure on regimes and nonstate actors that strategically leverage the oppression and abuse of women and girls

Targeted pressure is one of the most untapped resources available in response to violations of the rights of women and girls around the world. Broad sanctions and statements of condemnation matter, but they often have limited impact in deterring autocratic actions. This is where the United States and the international community can do more.

One underutilized leverage point is the implementation of legal tools to restrict access to financial assets by individual perpetrators of women's rights abuses. These assets are often acquired through corruption and stashed abroad. Collaborative use of new and existing mechanisms – like the Global Magnitsky Act – by stakeholders around the world can directly impede the freedom and resources of rogue actors. Equally crucial is the application of increased pressure on countries and financial systems that enable the corrupt acquisition and safekeeping of authoritarian assets.

Within international forums, the United States and global allies must stand up for the rights and well-being of women and girls. This includes multilateral solidarity at the U.N. to ensure that gross women's rights abusers aren't rewarded with high-profile opportunities and other forms of misplaced recognition. But global decision-makers must do more to ensure international bodies protect the rights and agency of women around the world.

The [advocacy of leaders like Mrs. Laura Bush](#) and subsequent [U.S. efforts](#) to remove Iran from the Commission on the Status of Women are a good start. Fifty-four percent of registered voters believe the United States should support activists in Iran, according to a [November 2022 survey](#) by global research consultancy HarrisX in collaboration with the George W. Bush Institute and Freedom House.

Finally, the global community must explicitly follow through on its commitments to confront crimes against women and children, especially sexual violence. In emergency situations, "[one in five](#) displaced or refugee women have experienced sexual violence," according to data from the U.N., which also documented grave forms of sexual violence against [at least 14,200 children](#) that were committed by parties to conflict between 2005 and 2020. Despite international resolutions and country-specific legislation, accountability is still significantly lacking, perpetuating a vicious cycle of victimization and abuse.

The U.S. Congress, foreign legislatures, and U.N. institutions should push for greater representation of women's rights defenders in decision-making forums and increase investments in capacity-building opportunities

Female human rights defenders are still excluded from meaningful opportunities to scale

their impact and ensure their voices are heard. The extension of gender-based disinformation and harassment to the online [sphere](#) has further [limited](#) women's access to a key space for amplifying communication and expression.

As frontline advocates, women's perspectives provide a pivotal gender lens on their experiences and those of children and other vulnerable populations living under oppression and brutality. Greater inclusion in congressional and U.N. hearings and other data-gathering and testimony opportunities, like the Afghan War Commission, is imperative. So is increased funding for programs that enhance the capacity of women leaders and promote partnerships with women-led organization.

Especially critical is diversity and inclusion in these opportunities. Too often, only the most prominent influencers or high-profile women's rights advocates are offered a seat at the table. Their perspectives have value, but the voices of those fighting for change beyond traditional leadership and policy spheres are equally important.

Governments, corporations, and nongovernmental organizations should prioritize support for gender disaggregated data collection, especially in the context of conflict and humanitarian crisis

Women's experiences matter. Yet despite increased emphasis on the importance of varied perspectives in data and storytelling, many existing data platforms still don't offer robust insight into the lived experiences of female and youth populations.

This issue is further exacerbated in situations of conflict, oppression, and humanitarian crisis – not surprisingly, circumstances where women and children also endure the majority burden.

Comprehensive analysis informs the most impactful policies. But even among the U.N.'s sustainable development goals, [80%](#) of the indicators needed to track gender-equality progress lack adequate data sets, and [only 13%](#) of countries have earmarked resources for gender-focused data collection.

And women's experiences remain woefully missing from global media coverage and reporting. For example, [women's voices comprised](#) only 23% of perspectives, quotes, and expert commentary on [the war](#) in Ukraine in the early weeks of Russia's invasion, according to [research](#) by Luba Kassova and Xanthe Scharff on international digital media outlets. Globally, men are quoted at [significantly higher rates](#) than women across news media worldwide. International media outlets and nongovernmental organizations could do even more to gather facts about the experiences of women and other vulnerable groups living under autocratic regimes in their coverage of conflict and humanitarian crisis. Not only should they report on the repression of women, but also highlight women's agency, participation, and leadership in resisting authoritarianism and advocating for reforms.

Women's empowerment is integral to strengthening democracy and international security, and societies benefit enormously when women can fully participate and enjoy the same freedoms and access to opportunity as men. Authoritarian and illiberal actors recognize that women can be a powerful force for accountability when they organize and are full participants in society. Therefore, they seek to undermine women's autonomy. But they cannot be allowed to continue consolidating power at the expense of women in their societies. The international community can help reverse the vicious cycle of authoritarian repression via greater support for one of the most underutilized resources that exist: women.



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