

Autocratic Genderwashing: Where Are the Women?

Han Na Jun

Seoul National University, South Korea

Abstract

Unlike other human rights issues, autocratic states have shown extraordinary advancements in gender reform, in some cases at rates exceeding those of democratic states. A key concept arising from this field of research is autocratic genderwashing, or the promotion of gender equality without substantial developments in women's empowerment in autocracies. In response to the growing concern about the state-centric analysis of gender policies in autocracies, this research attempts to find the intersection of top-down and bottom-up approaches to autocratic genderwashing. By considering state-level gender policies and women's activism as key variables, this study identifies the conditions under which autocratic states are most prone to genderwashing. Furthermore, by contextualizing autocratic genderwashing in four different countries, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how gender is a highly contested site of power dynamics between the state and women's movements. Emphasizing the significance of women's movements in shaping gender discourses in autocracies, I argue that autocratic genderwashing is a dynamic process of interaction between the state and women activists. Moreover, I contend that autocratic genderwashing is most likely under the conditions of high-level gender policies by the state and weak, grassroots women's activism. My findings suggest that grassroots efforts to pressure the regime are the key to inducing meaningful changes in gender equality in authoritarian states.

Key words

Autocratic genderwashing, women's movements, gender equality, autocracy, gender mainstreaming

Introduction

With the increased emphasis on gender equality as a priority on the international agenda, democratic and non-democratic states alike have confirmed their commitment to the enhancement of women's status through numerous treaties and

conventions. Unlike other human rights issues, autocratic states have shown extraordinary advancements in gender reform, in some cases at rates exceeding those of democracies. Scholars have attempted to resolve this puzzling phenomenon by observing the incentives of non-democratic states to absorb shared norms of gender equality. (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2022; Comstock & Vilán, 2023; Donno, Fox, & Kaasik, 2022; Donno & Kreft, 2019; Tripp, 2019; Tripp, 2023) Accordingly, a rising key concept is autocratic genderwashing, or the promotion of gender equality without substantial developments in women's empowerment in autocracies.

In response to the growing concern about the state-centric analysis of gender policies in autocracies, this research attempts to find the intersection of top-down and bottom-up approaches to autocratic genderwashing. By considering state-level gender policies and women's activism as key variables, this study identified the conditions under which autocratic states are most prone to genderwashing. Furthermore, by contextualizing autocratic genderwashing in four different countries, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how gender is a highly contested site for power dynamics between the state and women's movements. Cross-cultural comparisons offer a broader framework for understanding gender dynamics within autocracies.

Building on the existing framework of autocratic genderwashing as a top-down action by the state, I argue that women's movements are equally significant in shaping gender discourse in autocracies. I further perceive autocratic genderwashing as a dynamic process of interaction between the state and women activists. Moreover, I contend that autocratic genderwashing is most likely under conditions of high-level gender policies by the state and weak, grassroots women's activism. My findings suggest that grassroots efforts to pressure the regime are the key to inducing meaningful changes in gender equality in authoritarian states.

Methodologically, I first define the concepts of genderwashing and autocratic genderwashing, and then provide a review of the relevant literature. Next, as an analytical framework, I establish a two-by-two typology that considers state-level gender policies and women's activism as key variables. Furthermore, the framework is applied to four context-specific cases: Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, and China. Finally, I conclude by reiterating the key findings, identifying the main contributions and limitations, and elaborating on prospects for future research on autocratic genderwashing.

Conceptualizing “Autocratic Genderwashing”

To precisely understand the adoption of gender policies in autocratic states, it is crucial to define the concept of genderwashing. First, *genderwashing* describes the process by which gender equality is promoted; however, there is a lack of actual improvement in women’s empowerment. Originating from the environmentalist concept of greenwashing, a process by which companies employ deceptive green marketing tactics, the term was initially coined by Corinne L. Mason (2013) to identify the co-optation of feminist and liberal concerns of gender equality for U.S. imperialist military interventions. Allan (2019) extended this concept to any context in which the state abuses women’s rights while actively promoting women’s empowerment through other means such as attracting foreign investment, increasing legitimacy, and diverting international attention from women’s resistance. Alternatively, the concept of genderwashing has been explored in organizational and corporate settings to address the appropriation of gender equality for economic and reputational gains. (Fox-Kirk, Gardiner, Finn, & Chisholm, 2020; Walters, 2021) Expanding upon such existing notions, I broadly define genderwashing as the active promotion of gender equality which is not followed by efforts for tangible advances in women’s rights.

Finally, the concept of *autocratic genderwashing* attempts to apply the processes of genderwashing in autocratic contexts, including the exploitation of gender policies within autocracies as a strategic means to achieve the political goals of the regime. Bjarnegård and Zetterberg (2022) first abstracted the term as specific to processes in which an autocratic regime takes credit for gender equality reforms and diverts attention from non-democratic practices and violations of human rights. Specifically, autocracies commonly exploit a higher representation of women in politics to alleviate criticism or draw attention from their repressive rule (Bardall, 2019). Whether to “wash” their reputation as non-democratic or achieve economic gains, autocracies seek to enhance legitimacy and stability through gender policies, while neglecting the practical implementation and enhancement of women’s rights.

Literature Review

Incentives of Autocratic Genderwashing

The literature on autocratic genderwashing provides insights into two major in-

centives for autocratic states to employ gender policies. First, autocratic states advocate and implement gender-policy reforms to gain legitimacy and political stability. Bjarnegård and Zetterberg (2022) identify three legitimization strategies used by autocrats: procedure-based targeting of political opposition, prestige-based targeting of the international community, and performance-based targeting of citizens. Likewise, Tripp (2019), in her book addressing the implementation of gender reforms in the Middle East and North Africa region, suggests that autocrats embrace gender policies for political contestation and legitimize their power. Similarly, Donno and Kreft (2019) assert that institutionalized ruling parties that govern through party-based rules readily use mechanisms for women's representation, consultation, and mobilization because of their extensive linkages to society. Noh (2023) specifically examines Arab autocracies to establish that autocrats implement women's rights domestically to gain popular support and distinguish themselves from conservative Islamists. Thus, promoting women's rights becomes an effective tool by which authoritarian regimes can gain legitimacy and maintain political stability and power.

Moreover, autocracies have strong incentives to implement gender policies in response to international community pressure. Donno et al. (2022) claim that growth in gender-related legislation in authoritarian regimes is influenced by international pressure and shaming, especially when there is high dependency on foreign aid. Furthermore, Comstock and Vilán (2023) argue that autocratic states engage in international legal regimes on women's rights, such as through participation in the creation, ratification, and post-commitment actions of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Noh (2023) adds that this international engagement allows autocratic leaders to modernize and liberalize for Western donors and audiences. These findings suggest that international pressure plays a significant role in the adoption of gender-related legislation in authoritarian regimes.

Legal Reforms and Quotas

Another branch of literature focuses on the adoption and effectiveness of gender quotas as the most prominent form of autocratic genderwashing. First, some recognize the effectiveness of gender quotas in enhancing women's representation. In a comparative analysis of Botswana and Rwanda, Bauer and Burnet (2013) discover that autocratic regimes may be more successful in achieving quotas than democratic states. Additionally, Bush and Zetterberg (2021) suggest that gender

quotas for increased descriptive representation of women in autocratic regimes allow such states to be perceived as more democratic, thereby increasing the likelihood of foreign aid support from developed democratic countries. Thus, gender quotas may bring about positive changes in women's status under authoritarian regimes.

Despite the emancipatory potential of gender quotas, many have expressed concerns about their practicality and significance in the substantive representation of women in autocratic states. In the Sudanese context, Abbas (2010) asserts that the introduction of a gender quota in 2008 had a limited impact on challenging political parties to nominate women candidates in core geographic constituencies, as it primarily confined them to separate women's lists. Similarly, Bjarnegård and Zetterberg (2016) examine the case of Tanzania and contend that gender quotas could become a means to entrench the ruling party's power while hindering competing parties from prioritizing women's rights. Additionally, through a study of Kenya's gender quota system, Berry, Bouka, and Kamuru (2021) highlight that the design of quotas can inadvertently create new inequalities among women in government, asserting the cruciality of a complementary bottom-up process for transforming gendered power dynamics. These studies shed light on the complexities and challenges associated with the implementation and impact of gender quotas.

A Multidimensional Approach to Autocratic Genderwashing

The last category of literature employs a multidimensional approach considering various elements, such as women's movements and their interaction with autocratic regimes, as well as societal norms and public sentiments on gender. First, the literature portrays the interaction between grassroots-level women's movements and the state as crucial to understanding the complexities of gender-policy reforms in authoritarian states. Chenoweth and Marks (2022) assert that women's large-scale mobilization with feminist ideals to dismantle gender hierarchies is a powerful tool to challenge autocratic regimes. Similarly, Noh (2023) emphasizes the significance of bottom-up pressures from women's rights movements in initiating gender-based reforms, even within autocratic regimes, by considering the public perceptions of top-down gender reforms that may alter women's status in society. By considering both bottom-up and top-down dynamics, the literature provides a comprehensive understanding of autocratic genderwashing.

Another key element of the multidimensional approach is the role of the societal norms and ideals of the state, gender, religion, and citizenship in autocratic

contexts. Htun and Weldon (2010) argue that gender policies call for fundamental social change that challenges traditional state-society interaction and recognizes the diverse actors involved in the promotion of gender equality by considering factors such as state capacity, policy legacies, and the level of democracy. Similarly, Barnett (2022), who finds that an overestimation of the perspective on the embrace of conservatism has encouraged rapid advances in women's rights in the case of Morocco, suggests that rapid advancements in women's rights, often driven by feminist activism, international pressure, or autocrats' instrumental motivations, must be analyzed alongside the public's embrace of patriarchal norms. Alternatively, Drumond and Rebelo (2024) discuss the interplay of pushbacks against gender norms and genderwashing to maintain a conservative yet legitimate international reputation, using the example of Brazilian foreign policy under Jair Bolsonaro. As such, autocratic genderwashing can be analyzed as a complex series of interactions between the state and civil-level women's activism.

Framework: Autocratic Genderwashing and the “Conundrum”

Extending the existing literature, autocratic genderwashing requires exploration through the juxtaposition of state-initiated policies and women's activism. I specifically draw from Tripp's work that addresses how the implementation of gender policies in autocracies leads to “a conundrum... (in which) pressures from women's movements and women politicians themselves has resulted in the strengthening and further legitimizing the country's autocratic leadership” (Tripp, 2023, p. 5). Tripp aptly addresses the perplexity confronted by women's activists in an autocracy, in which support for the regime's gender reforms may result in the co-optation of the autocrat's legitimacy and strengthening of their non-democratic rule. The “conundrum” of women activists under authoritarian regimes discloses the complex relationship between the state and grassroots-level actors, dismantling the assumption that autocratic genderwashing is a state-initiated process.

As such, the concept of autocratic genderwashing requires consideration of the intersection between state actions and women's advocacy movements. Accordingly, I propose a two-by-two comparative framework using two variables: the level of gender policies implemented by the state and the visibility and impact of women's activism (Table 1). First, state-level changes were categorized into high- and low-level gender policies. I identify high-level policies as legal reforms that address the advancement of women's empowerment in more than six categories among the 12 drawn from the Beijing Platform for Action of 1995. By contrast, I identify

low-level policies as legal reforms that offer minimal support for advancing gender equality, addressing less than half of the 12 categories. In particular, I examine gender quotas in comparison to women's economic and social rights under autocratic states to distinguish cases in which women's descriptive representations are unsuccessfully connected to their substantive representations.

Furthermore, I categorized grassroots-level movements as strong or weak women's activism. Specifically, I identify three crucial elements that constitute strong women's activism: 1) the ability to criticize government actions or systems, 2) a grassroots orientation, and 3) visibility to domestic and international audiences. Accordingly, I classify the three characteristics of weak women's activism as follows: 1) co-optation to the regime, 2) lack of grassroots efforts, and 3) lack of visibility to domestic and international audiences.

By analyzing the intersecting areas of each variable, I observe the conditions under which authoritarian states are most prone to genderwashing. First, autocratic states with high levels of state-initiated gender reforms, alongside strong women's activism, are likely to experience minimal autocratic genderwashing and substantial advancement of women's status and rights. I examine Rwanda as an appropriate example of the first intersection. Second, countries with minimal gender policies and strong women's activism result in ineffective autocratic genderwashing and oppression of women's movements. To demonstrate this, I elaborate on the case of Saudi Arabia. Third, contexts with high levels of gender policies but weak women's activism are most prone to autocratic genderwashing, as shown in the case of Venezuela. Finally, I discovered that the contexts of both low-level gender policies and weak women's activism lead to absent or minimal autocratic genderwashing, as in the case of China.

Table 1
Autocratic Genderwashing Matrix

	<i>High level of gender policies</i>	<i>Low level of gender policies</i>
<i>Strong women's activism</i>	⇒ Minimal autocratic genderwashing Ex. Rwanda	⇒ Ineffective autocratic genderwashing Ex. Saudi Arabia
<i>Weak women's activism</i>	⇒ Effective autocratic genderwashing Ex. Venezuela	⇒ Minimal autocratic genderwashing Ex. China

Case Studies

Rwanda

Contextualizing gender in Rwanda.

Rwanda is an electoral autocracy that has displayed impressive advancements in women's empowerment. Rwanda's historical civil war context is vital to understanding the current mechanisms of its socio-political structure. The nation was devastated by the 1994 genocide, which was marked by a severe gender-based infection targeting Tutsi women (Powley, 2005). In the aftermath of the civil conflict, Rwandan women exhibited great resilience, leading the reconstruction of society as heads of households, builders, and workers (Parmar, 2013). Although feminists in Rwanda face the challenge of bridging the gap between feminist elites and the majority of women at the grassroots level, Rwandan women's determination and resilience are an inspiration for women's advocacy movements globally.

High-level gender policy.

The Rwandan government has implemented a variety of gender policies as reflected in legal frameworks, legislative quotas, and the establishment of women's councils. First, according to UN Women, Rwanda has successfully included gender indicators in 81.8% of its overarching legal frameworks concerning public life: 90% in violence against women, 91.7% in employment and economic benefits, and 81.8% in marriage and family. These legal provisions provide a solid foundation for promoting gender equality in the socioeconomic sectors.

Second, the Rwandan political system has legislated quotas at various levels to increase women's political representation. Specifically, Article 10 of the country's constitution allocates 30% of the reserved seats in decision-making organs to women, although it lacks legal sanctions for non-compliance (IDEA, 2023). Rwanda also mandates reserved seats at the subnational level, with a minimum of 30% of all district council members reserved for women (IDEA, 2023). In such ways, Rwanda's legal system mandates quotas to enhance women's political representation at various levels of government.

Finally, the Ministry of Gender and Women in Development, the main women's policy apparatus in Rwanda, established women's councils to address concerns at the grassroots level. These councils are operated only by women from the smallest administrative units to larger sectors, districts, and provinces (Powley,

2005). As such, Rwanda displays high levels of gender policies in the political, economic, and social spheres, even institutionalizing women's participation at the grassroots level.

Strong women's activism.

The long history of women's activism has contributed significantly to Rwanda's extraordinary advances in gender policy reforms. After the genocide, women's movements motivated the nation's reconstruction process. Specifically, a collective of 35 women's organizations named Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe (Pro-Women All Together) has worked toward the structural transformation of Rwandan society to establish social justice, equal opportunities, and sustainable peace (Parmar, 2013). The group collaborated with women legislators and the Ministry of Gender and Women in Development to pressure for transformation in the drafting of Rwanda's new constitution in 2003 (Powley, 2005). As a result, women activists in Rwanda were able to voice criticisms of existing patriarchal structures and generate change in the legal system.

Second, women's activism in Rwanda is highly inclusive of civil society, as grassroots efforts drive most movements toward gender equality. The threatening conditions created by the genocide and civil war prompted grassroots mobilization among women, leading to the establishment of community organizations, increased engagement with state institutions, and female candidates for government positions (Berry, 2015). Moreover, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and feminist activists in civil society continuously engage and communicate with legal apparatus such as the Ministry of Gender and Women in Development to reflect the interests and needs of women at the grassroots level. Thus, women's activism in Rwanda is motivated by the efforts of local women.

Finally, women's activism in Rwanda is highly active and visible both domestically and internationally. Women's rights NGOs have played a vital role in post-conflict efforts to organize women's activities, advise the government, and advocate for women's political participation. Furthermore, women's activists in Rwanda have gained the international spotlight by collaborating with international organizations, such as the UN, for advocacy campaigns on gender equality and gender-based violence (Karungi, 2023). Women's activism in Rwanda has been driven by a determination to create a more equitable society by pressuring the state, reflecting the interests of women at the grassroots level, and gaining visibility to domestic and international audiences.

Table 2
Classification of Rwanda's Gender Policies and Women's Activism

RWANDA	CATEGORY	APPLICABILITY	CLASSIFICATION
LEGAL PROVISIONS	Poverty	✓	<i>High-level Gender Policy</i>
	Education and Training	✓	
	Health	✓	
	Violence	✓	
	Armed Conflict	✓	
	Economy	✓	
	Power and Decision-making	✓	
	Institutional Mechanisms	✓	
	Human Rights	✓	
	Media		
	Environment		
	The Girl Child		
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM	Critical	✓	<i>Strong Women's Activism</i>
	Grassroots-oriented	✓	
	Visibility	✓	

Minimal autocratic genderwashing in Rwanda.

Within this typology, Rwanda is situated at the intersection of high-level state policies and strong women's activism. Given the government's focus on gender reforms in conjunction with the critical efforts of women's movements that pressure the government at the grassroots level, Rwanda displays gender mainstreaming under autocracy with minimal autocratic genderwashing. Indeed, gender mainstreaming has been a key agenda of the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front as it seeks to address the historical exclusion of women and promote their inclusion in post-genocide recovery and reconstruction (Powley, 2005). Rwanda's embrace of a gender-sensitive approach in the political, economic, and social sectors suggests a comparative integration of women's perspectives in decision-making processes, policy formulation, and program implementation.

While Rwanda's robust political will for gender-sensitive policies and the vibrancy of women's advocacy movements contribute to gender mainstreaming, it is important to note the various factors that jeopardize such accomplishments. In particular, Rwanda may experience autocratic genderwashing through the formalistic implementation of gender policies, an emphasis on quantitative rather than

substantial results, and a decrease in communication between civil society and policymakers (Debusscher & Ansoms, 2013). Thus, while the Rwandan case exemplifies a trend toward gender mainstreaming with minimal autocratic gender-washing, it is important to recognize that the two are not mutually exclusive, especially considering the low transparency and entrenchment of power in non-democratic states.

Saudi Arabia

Contextualizing gender in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia is a closed autocracy governed by an absolute monarchy with a strongly patriarchal structure that discriminates against women in the political, economic, and social spheres. The country upholds a societal structure based on tribal patriarchal values and strict interpretations of Wahhabi Islam, through which men maintain domination over women in the public and private spheres (Alkhaled, 2021). While Saudi Arabia has ratified international human rights conventions, including the CEDAW, discriminatory legal restrictions on women's rights persist upon justifications provided by Sharia law. Women are strictly prohibited from calling for feminist values and gender equality as the ruling regime heavily controls social media content.

Low-level gender policy.

Saudi Arabia has discouraging levels of gender parity within its legal framework. Legislated quotas in the form of reserved seats address women's representation in the unicameral parliament. Specifically, in accordance with the January 2011 Royal Order, 30 of the 151 seats (20%) of the Consultative Council (*Majlis Ash-Shura*) were designated for women (IDEA, 2023). However, such quotas are not conjoined with legal sanctions for non-compliance or rank placement regulations. Furthermore, the legislature lacks provisions for direct public funding to political parties related to gender equality among candidates. In 2015, women gained the right to contest seats and participated as voters in the municipal elections for the first time (IDEA, 2023). However, the decree prohibited female candidates from publishing their pictures in campaign materials based on Saudi Arabia's societal principles. Saudi Arabia has also implemented minimal legal frameworks to address gender equality in the economic and social sectors.

Strong women's activism.

Despite the harsh conditions that women face in Saudi Arabia, women's activism continues to bring about slow but steady transformations toward gender equality. First, Saudi women differ in their degree of criticism toward the regime, depending on their political orientations. Specifically, liberal (*librallīyya*) and rights-based (*buquqiyya*) groups advocate for the increased participation of women in public life and explicitly address women's rights issues in reference to international human rights norms (Dabbagh, 2015). While some groups may cooperate with the government to bring about change from within, many liberal and rights-based advocacy networks strive to exert pressure on the regime for gender reforms.

Additionally, the purposeful disuse of an explicitly feminist agenda is a key characteristic of women's activism. Instead of the term 'feminist' (*nasawīyya*), alternative descriptors such as women or female (*nisa'iyya*) are preferred by women's organizations (Dabbagh, 2015). The strategic employment of language allows women activists to maintain independence from state control and foreign influences. Women's organizations are also critical of the dominant Western representation of Saudi Arabian women as oppressed or victims, as such misconceptions hinder the legitimacy of Saudi women's groups seeking authentic liberation projects (Dabbagh, 2015). In such ways, women's activism in Saudi Arabia engages in critical discussions that challenge the regime and the existing system.

Second, women's activism in Saudi Arabia is motivated by grassroots efforts that are largely established through online platforms and petitions. To navigate the restrictions imposed by the government, women's rights organizations operate primarily through digital channels such as blogs, reports, and campaigns. While the Basic Law of Governance enables citizens to petition the king, Saudi women's rights activists leverage technology, such as WhatsApp and Telegram groups, to connect like-minded individuals and form advocacy networks at the civil level (Tønnessen, 2016). Moreover, Saudi women skillfully utilize their entrepreneurial space as legitimate platforms for social transformation. Such practices of activism evolved from the local level, instigated by female entrepreneurs who sought to empower women within their respective organizations, provided a foundation for the development of feminist consciousness, and encouraged political activists (Alkhaled, 2021). In this sense, women's activism in Saudi Arabia is deeply rooted in grassroots efforts, mobilized through online platforms, petitions, and the entrepreneurial space.

Finally, women's activism in Saudi Arabia has increasingly gained visibility both domestically and internationally through bold acts of defiance and strategic use of social media platforms. For example, a network of activists established the "Women2Drive" movement in 2011, an online campaign to challenge the regime's ban on women's right to drive (Alkhaled, 2021). The participants were arrested and detained, but the protest succeeded in generating a powerful statement and international awareness for Saudi women's rights. The visibility and impact of this protest eventually led to the establishment of women's right to drive in 2017. The efforts of the women's movements have resonated with a growing number of women's rights activists opposing the male guardianship system and various discriminatory practices in the country's political and social systems.

Table 3
Classification of Saudi Arabia's Gender Policies and Women's Activism

SAUDI ARABIA	CATEGORY	APPLICABILITY	CLASSIFICATION
LEGAL PROVISIONS	Poverty		<i>Low-level Gender Policy</i>
	Education and Training	✓	
	Health		
	Violence		
	Armed Conflict		
	Economy		
	Power and Decision-Making	✓	
	Institutional Mechanisms		
	Human Rights		
	Media		
	Environment		
The Girl Child			
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM	Critical	✓	<i>Strong Women's Activism</i>
	Grassroots-Oriented	✓	
	Visibility	✓	

Ineffective autocratic genderwashing in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia contextualizes gender within the complex relationship between a repressive regime and active women's mobilization. The Saudi Arabian state takes minimal action on institutionalizing gender-sensitive issues, responding to the most impactful petitions and protests by female activists. This indicates that an autocratic state's active interest is a precondition for autocratic genderwashing. Hence, autocratic genderwashing is generally absent or ineffective in Saudi Arabia, as its ruling power does not employ gender policies as a strategy. Rather, the state reinforces the structures of oppression targeted at women.

However, Saudi Arabia's leadership may have prospective incentives to implement gender policies. Under Saudi Vision 2030 and Saudi First Nationalism, the government must secure women's support and contributions to maintain the monarch's leadership (Eum, 2019). The emergence of women as visible participants in both the public and private sphere may prompt the regime to redefine and reconstruct women's roles in society. If grassroots-level women's movements choose to cooperate with the government under such changes, Saudi Arabia will not be exempt from autocratic genderwashing.

Venezuela

Contextualizing gender in Venezuela.

Venezuela is an electoral autocracy with a complex political landscape that has undergone several transitions to democracy. When Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías took over in 1998, a key aspect of his political campaign was the inclusion and mobilization of women (Rakowski & Espina, 2010). Despite progress on gender issues under the rule of Hugo Chávez, Venezuela's severe economic crisis and political repression under President Nicholas Maduro has caused a deterioration in social rights, which encompass women's rights (Cheatham, Roy, & Labrador, 2023). In particular, Venezuela's migration issue has raised concerns of sexual violence against women, such as trafficking (UN OHCHR, 2023). As such, gender dynamics in Venezuela have been shaped by the interplay of political transitions and legislative reforms.

High-level gender policy.

Venezuela has implemented various gender policies to promote women's politi-

cal representation at both national and subnational levels. In the National Assembly, 37 out of 167 seats in the National Assembly are held by women, accounting for 22% of the total seats (IDEA, 2023). Particularly, Venezuela's legislative candidate system employs the zebra system, which alternates between men and women to ensure a gender balance (IDEA, 2023). Similarly, at the subnational level, gender quotas ensure women's participation in regional legislative, metropolitan, and district councils, as candidacies must achieve gender parity of 50% (IDEA, 2023). Such gender policies demonstrate the Venezuelan government's commitment to promoting women's political representation and prioritizing gender balance in political candidate elections.

Moreover, the integration of women into the economic and social infrastructure has been a key component of Venezuela's policy reforms, beginning with Chávez's rule. Particularly, the institutionalization of Venezuela's National Institute of Women (*Inamujer*) and Women's Development Bank (*Banmujer*) to service rural women's credit issues were important components of "Chavista populism," or "Chavismo" (Deere, 2017). As such, Venezuela exhibits a legacy of promoting women's involvement in the economic and social sectors, as well as the political realm.

Weak women's activism.

Women activism in Venezuela has faced significant challenges in recent years. One contributory factor is co-optation, as the beginnings of women's activism in Venezuela were primarily under President Hugo Chávez's guidance (Fernandes, 2007). While women's activism has successfully diverted gender roles and collectivized private tasks, movements coexist with more vertical and populist forms of politics within official sectors of Chavismo, limiting the autonomy and impact of women's advocates (Fernandes, 2007). In this way, women's activism in Venezuela has had a relatively close association with the workings of the state, particularly under Chávez's populist politics.

Second, grassroots advocacy movements for women's rights have been declining rapidly under the current repressive regime. Indeed, Venezuela has had a long history since 1936 of grassroots-oriented activism led by educated, politically active women, which has continued to form coalitions among women in civil society and elite politicians throughout the mid-1970s and 1980s (Rakowski & Espina, 2010). However, the local women's movement in rural areas is relatively lacking in autonomy and impact, unable to yield tangible outcomes even under the progressive

land rights for women that the Venezuelan government implemented (Deere, 2017). Moreover, the nationwide economic crisis and transition in political power have hampered the once robust women's movements at the grassroots level.

Finally, visibility poses difficulties for women's activism in Venezuela. While the Chávez presidency initially offered new political opportunities and mobilization for women's rights, such efforts gradually resulted in new class divisions and politicization of the national women's agency, which hindered the formation of broad coalitions across classes and political parties. The rupture and growing hostility between the National Institute of Women (*Inamujer*) and non-Chavista civil society groups further exacerbated the decline in mobilization (Rakowski & Espina, 2010). Such factors indicate that the previously strong women's activism in Venezuela has deteriorated over the past decade, with weak grassroots efforts, and a lack of visibility.

Table 4
Classification of Venezuela's Gender Policies and Women's Activism

VENEZUELA	CATEGORY	APPLICABILITY	CLASSIFICATION
LEGAL PROVISIONS	Poverty	✓	<i>High-level Gender Policy</i>
	Education and Training	✓	
	Health	✓	
	Violence		
	Armed Conflict		
	Economy	✓	
	Power and Decision-Making	✓	
	Institutional Mechanisms	✓	
	Human Rights		
	Media		
	Environment		
	The Girl Child		
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM	Critical	X (Co-opt)	<i>Weak Women's Activism</i>
	Grassroots-Oriented	X	
	Visibility	X	

Autocratic Genderwashing in Venezuela

Within this analytical typology, Venezuela is located at the junction of relatively high-level gender policies and weak women activism. Under such conditions, autocratic states are most prone to autocratic genderwashing, in which the regime strategically employs gender policies to legitimize power. In the case of Venezuela, Chavismo politics and the ruler's constructed image as the 'liberator of women' seemingly induced progressive change toward gender equality, when in actuality, militaristic and masculine discourse dominated the political sphere. Specifically, despite the increased engagement of ordinary women in grassroots politics, many community leaders are men, and the social programs initiated by Chávez remain largely facilitated by male-dominated bureaucracies (Fernandes, 2007). Through the strategic use of gender policies, Chávez successfully gained popularity and political support among women. This populist trend positioned Venezuelan women in a "conundrum," which further entrenched the autocratic regime.

Although Venezuelan women's advocacy efforts were key to transitions throughout the country's political history, the change in authority, economic crisis, and conflicts among women's organizations have severed grassroots activism from meaningful gender equality. The current absence of visible grassroots networks leaves Venezuela even more vulnerable to autocratic genderwashing, as women activists are unable to raise criticism and exert pressure on the state to consider women's rights and interests. As the Venezuelan case exemplifies, autocratic genderwashing is most likely in contexts with high levels of state initiative toward gender policies and relatively weak grassroots movements.

China

Contextualizing gender in China.

Gender within the context of socialist China, a closed autocracy, is shaped by diverse factors affecting the discourse and realities of women's rights. The official discourse of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on women's liberation, which advocates gender equality in education and economic opportunities, draws on the May Fourth Feminist Movement, Marxist theories of revolution and early twentieth-century nationalism (Zheng, 1997). Additionally, the All-China Women's Federation is the main apparatus that motivates women's rights policies and procedures in conjunction with the CCP. While advances have been made in recognizing gender as a social category, challenges remain in reconciling traditional and

modern notions of femininity and ensuring meaningful empowerment for Chinese women.

Low-level gender policy.

China's gender policy is characterized by a relatively low representation of women in political positions and limited implementation of legislated quotas. The National People's Congress (NPC), or the *Quanguo Renmin Daibiao Dabui* has a legislated quota system comprising 27% of reserved seats for women (IDEA, 2023). Specifically, according to a decision made by the 10th NPC in 2007, a proportion of not less than 22% of the deputies should be women (IDEA, 2023). However, only 3.23% in ministerial positions are women (World Economic Forum, 2022). Finally, China lacks legal frameworks to support equal rights in education and health for women (World Economic Forum, 2022). As such, a low level of gender policy is observed in the case of China.

Weak women's activism.

Women's activism in China faces significant challenges and limitations related to co-optation, weak grassroots activities, and poor visibility. First, most women's organizations in China are managed in collaboration with the political agenda of the CCP. The numerous women's NGOs in China that have evolved since the 1990s have emerged from the state body of the All-China Women's Federation and face constraints that prevent them from effectively criticizing existing gender power hierarchies within the political structure. Similarly, women's organizations in China are subject to strict control by the Chinese government and are unable to voice direct criticism of the CCP's decisions. For example, while preparing for the Fourth World Conference on Women of 1995 in Beijing, Chinese government officials directed Chinese female panelists and experts to avoid politically sensitive issues and emphasize the accomplishments of Chinese women under the CCP (Zheng, 1996). As such, women's activism employs co-optation strategies, having to follow the CCP's set narratives on gender.

Second, grassroots feminist movements in China are restricted by strict censorship and state surveillance. Activists have turned to digital platforms and have engaged in "digital masquerading" to circumvent censorship and represent women's bodies in public spaces (Tan, 2017). However, grassroots efforts on online platforms also face limitations because of the social stigmatization of feminism (Mao,

2020). Lastly, the issue of strict censorship directly links to the minimal visibility of women's activism in the domestic and international context. While online platforms such as Weibo have provided space for politicizing women's private matters, much of women's activism in China still lacks visibility significant enough to induce substantial advances of local women's interests (Hou, 2020). As such, women's activism in China has yet to gain momentum for significant political and social impact.

Table 5
Classification of China's Gender Policies and Women's Activism

CHINA	CATEGORY	APPLICABILITY	CLASSIFICATION
LEGAL PROVISIONS	Poverty		<i>Low-level Gender Policy</i>
	Education And Training		
	Health		
	Violence		
	Armed Conflict		
	Economy	✓	
	Power And Decision-Making		
	Institutional Mechanisms	✓	
	Human Rights		
	Media		
	Environment		
	The Girl Child		
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM	Critical	× (Co-Opt)	<i>Weak Women's Activism</i>
	Grassroots-Oriented	×	
	Visibility	×	

Minimal autocratic genderwashing in China.

Within the proposed framework, China posits the joint effect of comparatively low-level gender policies and weak women's activism. Under such conditions, China shows minimal inclination toward either gender mainstreaming or

genderwashing. Under its socialist ideology, the CCP emphasizes women's equal rights to labor and economic participation. However, the Chinese government's discourse on gender does not address the patriarchal structures that cause the subordination and marginalization of women. Moreover, the state does not offer legal systems that reflect women's rights to political participation, domestic care work, education, and health. As the Chinese state dictates the gender narrative according to socialist values rather than international standards, it is difficult to determine whether autocratic genderwashing applies to China's case as in other autocracies, especially as a legitimization strategy to gain international prestige.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the underlying logic of autocratic genderwashing by highlighting the interplay between state initiatives and women's activism. Through a comparative analysis of Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, and China, this study demonstrates that the process of autocratic genderwashing is context-specific. In Rwanda, where high-level gender policies are coupled with strong women's activism, mainstream gender mainstreaming has been successful. Conversely, in Saudi Arabia, where gender policies remain at low levels with robust women's activism, genderwashing efforts are either absent or ineffective. Venezuela, with high-level gender policies but weak women's activism, exhibits autocratic genderwashing, whereas China, characterized by low-level gender policies and weak women's activism, demonstrates minimal genderwashing or gender mainstreaming.

This study is an initial attempt to conceptualize autocratic genderwashing as a dynamic interaction between autocratic states and women's movements. This typology offers a framework for analyzing and comparing cross-cultural contexts. However, limitations exist, as the two-by-two categorization may not reflect all cases of gender policies in autocratic states. This conceptual limitation highlights the need for a more relevant and effective standard, perhaps using a continuous scale. Additionally, this study focuses solely on gender policies and women's activism as key variables, neglecting other elements that may influence the process of autocratic genderwashing.

In future research, I propose the application of an analytical framework be adopted for additional case studies to further comprehend the conditions of autocratic genderwashing. Examining where more cases fall within this framework would enhance the typology's validity and applicability. Moreover, exploring the intersection of variables beyond gender policy and women's activism, such as pub-

lic opinion, will provide a holistic view of autocratic genderwashing dynamics. Understanding autocratic genderwashing is crucial for advancing gender equality and women's rights in authoritarian contexts. By unpacking the complexities and factors at play, policymakers and activists may effectively strategize to counteract autocratic genderwashing and promote meaningful changes toward gender equality.

References

- Abbas, S. (2010). The Sudanese women's movement and mobilisation for the 2008 legislative quota and its aftermath. *IDS Bulletin*, 41(5), 100–108. doi:10.1111/j.1759-5436.2010.00171.x
- Alkhaleel, S. (2021). Women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia: Feminist solidarity and political activism in disguise? *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28(3), 950–972. doi:10.1111/gwao.12626
- Allan, J. (2019). *Silenced resistance: Women, dictatorships, and genderwashing in Western Sabara and Equatorial Guinea*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Anon (2023). "Gender Quotas Database | International IDEA." International IDEA. Retrieved April 27, 2023, from <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/database>
- Bardall, G. (2019). "Autocrats Use Feminism to Undermine Democracy." Policy Options. Retrieved January 19, 2024, from <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/october-2019/autocrats-use-feminism-to-undermine-democracy/>
- Barnett, C. L. (2022). Perceived norms and the politics of women's rights in Morocco. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University. <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/dsp01z603r1647>
- Bauer, G., & Burnet, J. E. (2013). Gender quotas, democracy, and women's representation in Africa: Some insights from democratic Botswana and autocratic Rwanda. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 41, 103–112. doi:10.1016/j.wsisf.2013.05.012
- Berry, M. E. (2015). From violence to mobilization: Women, war, and threat in Rwanda*. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 20(2), 135–156. doi:10.17813/1086-671X-20-2-135
- Berry, M. E., Bouka, Y., & Kamuru, M. M. (2021). Implementing inclusion: Gender quotas, inequality, and backlash in Kenya. *Politics & Gender*, 17(4), 640–664. doi:10.1017/S1743923X19000886
- Bjarnegård, E., & Zetterberg, P. (2016). Gender equality reforms on an uneven playing field: Candidate selection and quota implementation in electoral authoritarian Tanzania. *Government and Opposition*, 51(3), 464–486. doi:10.1017/gov.2016.10
- Bjarnegård, E., & Zetterberg, P. (2022). How autocrats weaponize women's rights. *Journal of Democracy*, 33(2), 60–75. doi:10.1353/jod.2022.0018
- Bush, S. S., & Zetterberg, P. (2021). Gender quotas and international reputation. *American Journal of Political Science*, 65(2), 326–341. doi:10.1111/ajps.12557
- Cheatham, A., Roy, D. & Rocio Cara Labrador (2023). "Venezuela: The Rise and Fall of a Petrostate." Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved May 18, 2023, from <https://www.cfr.org/background/venezuela-crisis>
- Chenoweth, E., & Marks, Z. (2022, April). Revenge of the patriarchs: Why autocrats fear

women. *Foreign Affairs*, 101(2), 103–116.

- Comstock, A. L., & Vilán, A. (2023). Looking beyond ratification: Autocrats' international engagement with women's rights. *Politics & Gender*, 1–6. doi:10.1017/S1743923X22000472
- Dabbagh, M. A. (2015). Saudi Arabian women and group activism. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 11(2), 235–237. doi:10.1215/15525864-2886613
- Debusscher, P., & Ansoms, A. (2013). Gender equality policies in Rwanda: Public relations or real transformations? Gender equality policies in Rwanda. *Development and Change*, 44(5), 1111–1134. doi:10.1111/dech.12052
- Deere, C. D. (2017). Women's land rights, rural social movements, and the state in the 21st-century Latin American agrarian reforms. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 17(2), 258–278. doi:10.1111/joac.12208
- Donno, D., Fox, S., & Kaasik, J. (2022). International incentives for women's rights in dictatorships. *Comparative Political Studies*, 55(3), 451–492. doi:10.1177/00104140211024306
- Donno, D., & Kreft, A.-K. (2019). Authoritarian institutions and women's rights. *Comparative Political Studies*, 52(5), 720–753. doi:10.1177/0010414018797954
- Drumond, P., & Rebelo, T. (2024). Norm spoiling, genderwashing and the pushback against women's rights in Brazilian foreign policy. *Globalizations*, 21(1), 20–38. doi:10.1080/14747731.2023.2202106
- Eum, I. (2019). “New women for a new Saudi Arabia?” Gendered analysis of Saudi Vision 2030 and women's reform policies. *Asian Women*, 35(3), 115–133. doi:10.14431/aw.2019.09.35.3.115
- United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2023). “Experts of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Commend Venezuela on High Number of Girls Studying Science Subjects, Ask Questions about Trafficking and Health Issues Affecting Women.” Retrieved February 3, 2024, from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/05/experts-committee-elimination-discrimination-against-women-commend-venezuela-high>
- Fernandes, S. (2007). Barrio women and popular politics in Chávez's Venezuela. *Latin American Politics and Society*, 49(03), 97–127. doi:10.1111/j.1548-2456.2007.tb00384.x
- Fox-Kirk, W., Gardiner, R. A., Finn, H., & Chisholm, J. (2020). Genderwashing: The myth of equality. *Human Resource Development International*, 23(5), 586–597. doi:10.1080/13678868.2020.1801065
- Hou, L. (2020). Rewriting “the personal is political”: Young women's digital activism and new feminist politics in China. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 21(3), 337–355. doi:10.1080/14649373.2020.1796352
- Htun, M., & Weldon, S. L. (2010). When do governments promote women's rights? A frame-

- work for the comparative analysis of sex equality policy. *Perspectives on Politics*, 8(1), 207–216. doi:10.1017/S1537592709992787
- Karungi, P. A. (2023). “16 Days of Activism: A Call to Tackle GBV From the Root Causes.” United Nations in Rwanda. Retrieved May 2, 2023, from <https://rwanda.un.org/en/216456-16-days-activism-call-tackle-gbv-root-causes>
- Mao, C. (2020). Feminist activism via social media in China. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 26(2), 245–258. doi:10.1080/12259276.2020.1767844
- Mason, C. L. (2013). Global violence against women as a national security “emergency.” *Feminist Formations*, 25(2), 55–80.
- Noh, Y. (2023). Public opinion and women’s rights in autocracies. *Politics & Gender*, 1–5. doi:10.1017/S1743923X22000514
- Parmar, S. (2013). Feminist awakening in Rwanda. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 74(4), 687–698.
- Powley, E. 2005. Rwanda: Women hold up half the parliament. In J. Ballington & A. Karam (Eds.), *Women in parliament: Beyond numbers* (pp.154–163). Stockholm, Sweden: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.
- Rakowski, C. A. & Espina, G. (2010). “Women’s Struggles for Rights in Venezuela: Opportunities and Challenges.” in *Women’s Activism in Latin America and the Caribbean : Engendering Social Justice, Democratizing Citizenship*. Rutgers University Press.
- Tan, J. (2017). Digital masquerading: Feminist media activism in China. *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal*, 13(2), 171–186. doi:10.1177/1741659017710063
- Tønnessen, L. (2016). *Women’s Activism in Saudi Arabia: Male Guardianship and Sexual Violence*. Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute.
- Tripp, A. M. (2019). *Seeking legitimacy: Why Arab autocracies adopt women’s rights*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Tripp, A. M. (2023). How African autocracies instrumentalize women leaders. *Politics & Gender*, 1–6. doi:10.1017/S1743923X22000484
- Walters, R. (2022). Varieties of gender wash: Towards a framework for critiquing corporate social responsibility in feminist IPE. *Review of International Political Economy*, 29(5), 1577–1600. doi:10.1080/09692290.2021.1935295
- World Economic Forum. (2022). Global gender gap report 2022. Retrieved May 6, 2023, from https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2022.pdf
- Zheng, W. (1996). A historic turning point for the women’s movement in China. *Signs*, 22(1), 192–199.
- Zheng, W. (1997). Maoism, feminism, and the UN Conference on Women: Women’s Studies research in contemporary China. *Journal of Women’s History*, 8(4), 126–152. doi:10.1353/jowh.2010.0239

Biographical Note: **Han Na Jun** conducted this research in affiliation with the Graduate School of International Studies at Seoul National University. Her main research interests involve East Asian regional security, inter-Korean relations, and gender studies. Particularly, she seeks to apply gendered perspectives on conflict resolution and sustainable peace in East Asia. Han Na is currently a student of the A.M. in Regional Studies East Asia program at Harvard University. Prior to this, she received her B.A. in International Commerce from Yonsei University. Email: hjun@g.harvard.edu

Received: July 4, 2023

Revised: January 20, 2024

Accepted: January 25, 2024
