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# Women's roles in anti-authoritarian resistance

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**Saskia Brechenmacher, Erin Jones, and Özge Zihnioğlu** write that gender is critical to understanding popular resistance against democratic erosion and autocratic hardening around the world

Illiberal leaders have made global headlines, not only for eroding democratic institutions but for **lashing out** against progressive gender norms and policies. These attacks have generated new waves of countermobilisation, with women often leading the charge. Our forthcoming study shows how this has happened in Belarus, Brazil, Hungary, India, Poland, Myanmar, Tunisia, Turkey, the United States, and Zimbabwe.

## Women expanding anti-authoritarian resistance

From Brazil to Belarus and Myanmar, women in recent years have led street protests against antidemocratic leaders and policies, often in more visible ways than men. Women have also spearheaded grassroots initiatives to defeat autocratic governments at the polls.

The women involved in contemporary anti-authoritarian action are not necessarily traditional democracy activists, opposition party members, or feminist advocates. In Myanmar, for instance, it was working-class women, rural women, and women civil servants who **took to the streets** to protest the 2021 military coup — a more diverse group than had been involved in political advocacy during the country's democratic opening.

*The women involved in contemporary anti-authoritarian action are not necessarily traditional democracy activists*

In Brazil, the United States, and other countries where illiberal leaders have openly embraced misogyny or pushed for conservative gender policies, women with no previous history of activism have **felt compelled to protect past political and social gains**. By making the risks of democratic erosion more palpable, these leaders' attacks on gender equality have propelled a wide range of women to engage in anti-government mobilisation. They have also pushed

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But even in countries where leaders have appealed superficially to women's rights, as President Modi has done in India, some women — particularly those from marginalised groups — have **mobilised against rising authoritarianism**, viewing it as a direct threat to women's safety, bodily autonomy, and inclusion.

These protests have not necessarily led to immediate changes in government policy. But they have often energised the broader democratic opposition and laid the groundwork for new civil society efforts. In more democratic contexts, they have also encouraged women's electoral participation. In **Brazil**, the **United States**, and **Poland**, for instance, intertwined attacks on democracy and women's rights spurred significant upticks in women political candidates and **increased turnout rates** among women voters, who have voted for pro-democratic opposition parties at higher rates than men.

## Broadening the democracy agenda

Women's mobilisation has also broadened the democracy agenda. In Belarus, Myanmar, and Zimbabwe, women's frontline participation in contentious action in and of itself has subverted traditional gender norms by challenging the idea that oppositional political activism is a male domain. In Turkey and Poland, women have become a more visible political constituency for opposition parties, who have taken steps to acknowledge gender-based violence and women's reproductive rights in their platforms.

*Women activists are not just making the case that democracy needs to be gender-inclusive. They are linking the struggle for democracy to broader movements for social and economic justice*

Across the multiple countries included in our report, however, women protestors and activists are not just making the case that democracy needs to be gender-inclusive. They are linking the struggle for democracy to broader movements for social and economic justice, and forging new cross-issue alliances. They are also mobilising for a more expansive vision of substantive equality.

This article presents the views of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the ECPR or the Editors of *The Loop*.



Black reproductive rights resistance Shaheen Bagh Tunisia Turkey is to deliver for poor United States Zimbabwe is. In India, Muslim women and women farmers have pushed back against President Modi's autocratic drift, as well as the ruling party's Hindutva ideology and neoliberal economic governance. The women-led Shaheen Bagh protests sought to model an **alternative political vision**, by creating protest sites where people of different backgrounds could come together and show care for one another.

## Divisions and pushback

Yet women are not a monolithic group, and socio-political cleavages shape which women mobilise for democracy in any given country. Those who benefit from or believe in the government's ideological project are less likely to denounce infringements on women's rights or democracy. Meanwhile, women who experience multiple forms of state discrimination have often been at the frontlines of political resistance.

In Turkey, many religious women have remained loyal to the ruling Justice and Development Party, even as it has become more authoritarian. Some, however, **have spoken up against** the government's regressive gender policies. Kurdish women in Turkey, on the other hand, view the struggle for women's rights as **closely linked** to their broader fight for democratic self-determination.



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The relationship between established women's rights organisations and anti-authoritarian movements also varies. In the United States and Turkey, some women's rights groups have joined pro-democracy campaigns because they recognise that they cannot advance their policy goals without functioning and inclusive political institutions. However, some US democracy groups remain wary of these alliances. They are reluctant to align themselves too closely with controversial policy struggles over abortion and LGBTQ rights, for fear of repelling centre-right political allies. In Zimbabwe, on the other hand, traditional women's rights organisations have been hesitant to associate themselves with women in the democratic opposition because they fear compromising their political neutrality.

*Across the board, women and women's rights organisations mobilising for democracy face pushback, threats, and even violence*

Across the board, women and women's rights organisations mobilising for democracy face pushback, threats, and even violence. In addition to general restrictions on political and civic space, they routinely confront hostility and discrimination from within their own political camps, as mainstream democracy movements and opposition parties tend to replicate existing social hierarchies. They also have to grapple with explicitly gendered and sexualised threats and violence from government forces or extremist non-state actors. This heightened political toxicity at times compels women to withdraw from politics entirely, even after the removal of illiberal leaders.

## Gender as crucial to democracy support

So far, much scholarship has focused on the nature of democratic backsliding, with some



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