

# Canary in the Coal Mine: Gender Equality in Democratic Backsliding

Gamze Çavdar



*Gamze Çavdar is a professor of Political Science at Colorado State University and one of the co-editors of MENA Politics. Her research interests include Islamist movements, social policy and gender in North Africa and the Middle East (MENA).*

*Email: [gamze.cavdar@colostate.edu](mailto:gamze.cavdar@colostate.edu).*

Scholarly attention on democratic backsliding has exploded over the last two decades (Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Some scholars have argued that democratic backsliding is taking place at least in some countries while others have claimed that the global democracy average has declined over the last decade (Mechkova and Lührmann 2017). No scholarly consensus exists around the definition of democratic backsliding, its indicators, explanations, or measurements. The term could refer to various processes in different regime types, including democracies, hybrid regimes and autocracies (Waldner and Lust 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019).

A significant characteristic of this general body of literature on democratic backsliding is its complete lack of attention to gender. And yet, both democratization and democratic backsliding are highly gendered processes: Decades of research have shown that the democratization process is male-dominated and—without intervention—will sideline women's rights and interests (Waylen 1994). Similarly, during democratic backsliding, women's rights tend to become *the canary in the coal mine*—one of the first things to be undermined by autocrats signaling an

early warning (Chenoweth and Marks 2022). Therefore, for Political Science, a discipline that claims to be concerned with the questions of who gets what, when and how, the disregard of gendered aspects of democratic backsliding is utterly mind-blowing.

The goal of this short essay is to argue that gender as an analytical tool goes into the heart of democratic backsliding and studying the process from a gender lens will significantly enhance our understanding.

There are at least two reasons behind this argument. Firstly, applying a gender lens is significant for establishing the conceptual relationship between democratic backsliding and gender. This shift requires reconceptualizing the process in a way that shifts our understanding of democracy from an exclusive focus on the electoral process and its institutions as the main domains of democracy, such as those concerning participation, competition and civil rights and liberties, to the question of equality and social justice. This is a much-needed conceptual shift that has previously been addressed by scholars (Fraser 2020). This means that we understand democracy not only as a system we observe and measure, but also as one we imagine and build. However, most standard measures of

democracy continue to focus primarily on elections, often treating gender as either completely irrelevant or merely as a component of civil rights and liberties necessary for “free, fair and competitive elections”.

Secondly, applying a gender lens is also significant for demonstrating the magnitude and complexity of political processes that take place at a given time. An extension of the *transitology* paradigm, democratic backsliding locates regimes on a continuum between full authoritarianism on the one side and consolidated democracies, on the other. This understanding, among others, reduces multiple processes to a single, aggregate variable used to calculate the democracy score. The problem is not only that a lot is “lost in translation” in the name of producing this parsimonious and seemingly objective democracy score, but also it requires ignoring many other dynamics that are taking place simultaneously, at a slower pace, and at times in opposite directions (Ahmed and Cappocia 2014; Çavdar and Yaşar 2014). These narrow analyses also require that “our analytical focus should be directed at those corporate actors (parties and other political organizations, the military, religious establishments) that actually fight the fights over institutional reforms, rather than the social classes or groups that are sometimes cast as directly driving regime change” (Ahmed and Cappocia 2014, 8). Non-quantifiable indicators, such as women’s movements that resist authoritarianism (Moghadam 2020), political history, institutional legacies, traditions, critical junctures, are inevitably ignored in such analyses.

Therefore, an ‘add women and stir’ approach, which keeps the current conceptualizing of democracy centered around elections and maybe add a new gender variable to the aggregate democracy score, is not the way to go.

It may be interesting to see the global trends of a single variable—like the reelection rates for incumbent parties—but, such an analysis would add little to no insight to our understanding of the process of democratic backsliding even with the new gender variable. Furthermore, the general score will remain not applicable to individual cases.

Instead, scholars should focus on the question of how to reconceptualize democracy in a fundamentally different way and identify new indicators of democratic backsliding that places gender equality at the center of the analysis through comparative or small-N studies. Scholars should also consider a time series analysis to test the hypothesis as to whether gender equality can be treated as *the canary in the coal mine* for democratic backsliding—whether it is the girl in the blue bra in Egypt (Allam 2018), the constitutional overhaul in Israel (Elad-Strenger 2024), or the cancellation of Istanbul Convention in Turkey (Çavdar 2024). In doing so, multiple indicators should be considered including—but not limited to—*if, when, how, why*, as well as *the degree* of changes concerning women’s socio-economic status, discourses against gender equality, criticism of and repression towards women’s organizations, the mockery of feminism, religious/nationalist references of idealized women and family, and the erosion of universal references for gender equality. ♦

## References

Allam, Nermin. 2018. “Activism Amid Disappointment: Women’s Groups and the Politics of Egypt” *Middle East Law and Governance* 10(3): 291-316.

- Ahmed, Amel and Giovanni Capoccia. 2014. "The Study of Democratization and the Arab Spring," *Middle East and Law and Governance* 6: 1-31.
- Çavdar, Gamze. 2024. "Why Autocracies Undermine Gender Equality? Instrumentalism or Social Engineering?" A paper presented to the Annual Meeting of American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, PA.
- Çavdar, Gamze and Yavuz Yaşar. 2014. "Political Unrest and Women in the Middle East: Moving Beyond Culturalism and Formalism" *Feminist Economics* 20(3): 33-57.
- Bermeo, Nancy. 2016. "On Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 27 (1): 5–19.
- Chenoweth, Erica and Zoe Marks. 2022. "Revenge of the Patriarchs: Why Autocrats Fear Women Essays." *Foreign Affairs* 101(2): 103-116.
- Elad-Strenger, Julia, Lihi Ben-Shitrit, and Sivan H Hoefler. 2024. "Mainstreaming Democratic Backsliding: A New Perspective on Gender and the Radical Right." *OSF*. April 20. [osf.io/apk6r](https://osf.io/apk6r).
- Fraser, Nancy. 2020. "Can Liberal Democracy Right the Wrongs of Racial and Gender Injustices?" *Democracy in Question* Podcast, available at <https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/communications/news/can-liberal-democracy-right-wrongs-racial-and-gender-injustices> (accessed on September 28, 2024).
- Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. Crown Publishing: New York.
- Lührmann, Anna, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2019. "A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here: What Is New About It?" *Democratization* 26 (7): 1095–113.
- Mechkova, V., Lührmann, A., & Lindberg, S.I. 2017. "How Much Democratic Backsliding?" *Journal of Democracy* 28(4): 162-169.
- Moghadam, Valentine M. 2020. "Gender Regimes in the Middle East and North Africa: The Power of Feminist Movements," *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 27(3): 467–485.
- Waldner, David, and Ellen Lust. 2018 "Unwelcome Change: Coming to Terms with Democratic Backsliding." *Annual Review of Political Science* 21(1): 93–113.
- Waylen, Goergina. 1994. "Women and Democratization Conceptualizing Gender Relations in Transition Politics." *World Politics*. 46(3):3 27-354.