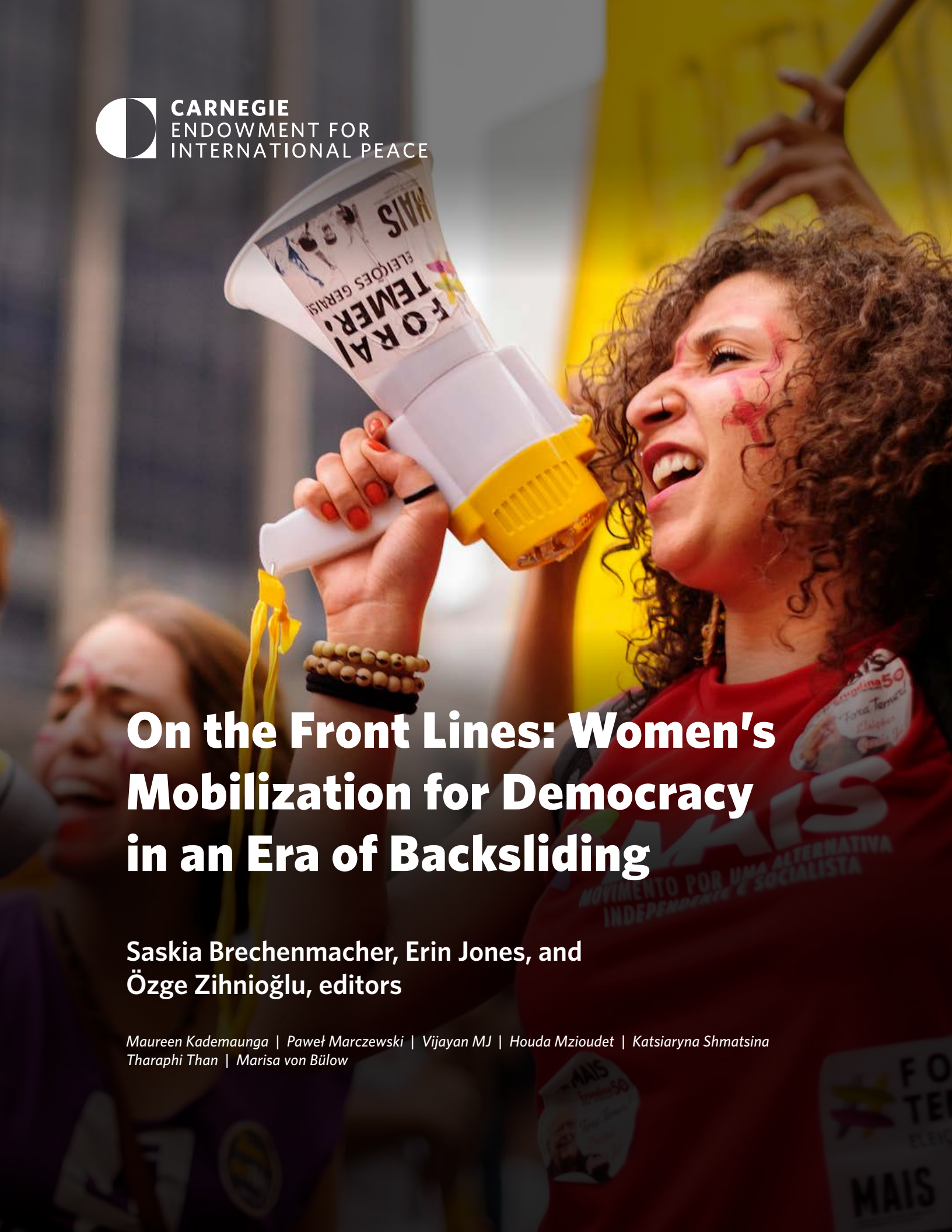

On the Front Lines: Women's Mobilization for Democracy in an Era of Backsliding

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Introduction

Saskia Brechenmacher, Erin Jones, and Özge Zihnioğlu

The world is beset by what analysts frequently call a democratic recession, marked by democratic erosion in old and new democracies in every region of the world. Yet against this troubling backdrop, people all over are pushing back against authoritarian practices. Their resistance often has taken the form of large-scale, sustained protests against stolen elections, repression by security forces, and moves by incumbent leaders to undermine democratic institutions—whether in Belarus, Brazil, Iran, Myanmar, Poland, or elsewhere. New civil society initiatives have formed to defeat autocratic leaders at the polls and prevent illiberal restrictions on citizens' basic rights.

Women have been at the forefront of these prodemocratic movements in many countries. Millions of women mobilized against President Donald Trump in the United States in 2017 and against President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil in 2018, viewing these leaders as dual threats to both women's rights and their countries' democracy. In Poland, women took to the streets during the COVID-19 pandemic to protest the ruling Law and Justice Party, their activism catalyzed by the government's aggressive rollback of reproductive rights. In Belarus and Myanmar, women have spearheaded nonviolent civil resistance movements against authoritarian power grabs, mobilizing at great risk to their safety. Women in India, Iran, and Sudan similarly have fronted mass protests against antidemocratic and exclusionary regimes.

This pattern is striking, particularly given women's global underrepresentation in electoral politics and leadership. Yet so far, women's prodemocratic movements have received limited analytic and policy attention. The bulk of existing analysis on democratic erosion has focused on diagnosing the problem and illuminating its varied symptoms and causes. Less common have been efforts to chart responses, whether by citizens within backsliding countries or by interested international actors. And within that domain, cross-country analysis of women's agency and roles in mobilizing against democratic erosion has been noticeably

absent. Although scholars have documented women's involvement in past movements against military and communist dictatorships, studies of the current moment of democratic decline and resistance often have been gender-blind.[1]

Yet the power of women's political mobilization has not gone unnoticed by autocratic and illiberal leaders. In recent years, several autocratic and far-right populist governments have cracked down ferociously on women's activism and doubled down on conservative gender hierarchies. These leaders have framed progressive gender norms as a radical ideology that destroys traditional families and cultural traditions.[2] Others have sought to co-opt women's movements by bringing them into state-controlled channels and implementing top-down women's rights reforms.[3]

To help address the lack of analysis on this topic, this compilation examines women's diverse roles in and influence on popular movements against democratic erosion around the world. It asks why women mobilize for democracy and how they do so, and assesses whether their participation—as individual activists and leaders or as part of organizations—shapes the goals, tactics, and coalitions of democratic resistance. It further analyzes how autocratic and backsliding regimes and their allies in civil society have responded to women's mobilization for democracy.

The compilation does not assume that women are a homogenous group. Nor does it seek to portray them as inherently democratic actors. Instead, it aims to shed light on the various factors driving women to mobilize for democracy and the diverse priorities and perspectives they bring into broader antiauthoritarian movements. Several case studies also emphasize women's roles in illiberal or antidemocratic regimes and networks; all of them highlight how women's cross-cutting political, ethnic, and religious identities structure their political engagement. This diversity underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of women's political roles during periods of democratic erosion.

Mobilization for Democracy vs. Gender Equality

Our focus on women's agency raises the question of how we conceptualize the relationship between women's prodemocratic mobilization and their activism for gender equality. In this compilation, we define prodemocracy movements or prodemocracy mobilization as citizen action to resist—or remove from office—leaders and parties that seek to entrench themselves in power, weaken checks and balances on the executive, and shut down avenues for political participation and dissent. This form of activism typically is aimed at defending civil rights and liberties, free and fair elections, and the rule of law.

Mobilization for gender equality, by contrast, encompasses a broader set of objectives that extend far beyond the political realm. For more than a century, women around the world have advocated for equal rights and against gender-based violence and discrimination, in both democratic and nondemocratic nations. They have challenged and, in some cases, dismantled the barriers that impede their full participation in society, in areas including education, religious institutions, family law, employment, and politics.

These two forms of mobilization often intersect. The struggle for women's suffrage in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, for instance, sought to advance gender equality while also deepening democracy. Women's push for political representation similarly seeks to realize democratic principles of equal rights and participation. Yet in some cases, women's rights activists have distanced themselves purposefully from struggles for democracy to maintain space for action and reform even in restrictive political settings. Some movements for democratic change, moreover, have not prioritized women's rights and inclusion or have treated gender equality issues as discrete policy struggles. We therefore argue that it is useful to keep women's mobilization for gender equality and their activism for democracy analytically separate and examine how they are related in different countries.

Overview of the Compilation

Within the wide and growing domain of women's prodemocracy mobilization, this compilation focuses on nine case studies that span multiple regions. It covers countries at various stages of democratic backsliding.

Within the realm of troubled but still politically competitive democracies, Marisa von Bülow traces women's roles in resisting Bolsonaro's presidency in Brazil and highlights the challenge of centering women's voices once the most overt threats to democracy have been overcome. Also in the Americas, Saskia Brechenmacher and Erin Jones detail women's mobilization against Trump as well as broader threats to democracy in the United States and assess how escalating attacks on reproductive rights are influencing the U.S. prodemocracy movement. In Central and Eastern Europe, Paweł Marczewski contrasts Polish women's mass protests against the Law and Justice Party's attacks on reproductive rights with women's more limited antigovernment mobilization in Hungary.

Three additional contributions focus on countries further down the path of democratic erosion. Vijayan MJ examines how women-led movements for social, economic, and environmental justice are revitalizing the progressive resistance against Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu majoritarian agenda in India. Özge Zihnioğlu probes the recent uptick in Turkish women's mobilization against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government and its conservative gender policies. She outlines the effects of their activism on Turkish opposition parties as well as the persistent limits of women's political influence. Houda Mzioudet, by contrast, explores how Black Tunisian women have challenged entrenched racial and socioeconomic hierarchies in Tunisian society following the country's fragile democratic opening—and describes how their activism has been met with increasing illiberal backlash since President Kais Saied's ascent to power in 2019.

Finally, three authors examine fully autocratic regimes where citizens are nevertheless resisting exclusionary governance. Katsiaryna Shmatsina analyzes women's prominent roles in the 2020 postelection protests in Belarus and their continuous leadership in the exiled opposition, despite the regime's brutal crackdown. Tharaphi Than details the diversification of women's activism after the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, where some women have joined the armed resistance and others contest the military dictatorship using nonviolent means. Finally, drawing on her own experience running for parliament in Zimbabwe, Maureen Kademaunga reflects on the emergence of a new generation of female democracy activists in the country and their relationship to established women's rights and democracy movements.

The case studies affirm women's pivotal roles in democratic resistance movements around the world. Particularly in countries where illiberal or autocratic leaders have attacked women's rights and embraced deeply conservative gender norms, women have spearheaded mass protests that have energized broader antiauthoritarian coalitions, even if they did not immediately achieve their political aims. Democratic erosion also has pushed some women's rights organizations to become more involved in prodemocracy activism, giving rise to new cross-issue alliances. In addition, women in several countries have used their voting power to help defeat backsliding governments and have successfully diversified the candidates running for and elected to political office.

The compilation also highlights how women are reshaping prodemocracy movements through their advocacy priorities, tactics, and broader political vision. Across different countries, women's participation "on the front lines" has challenged traditional gender norms and placed gendered concerns higher on the opposition agenda. However, the extent to which women democracy activists have emphasized gender equality issues has varied, as has the responsiveness of typically male-dominated opposition parties.

Beyond gender equality, however, women's political advocacy has often emphasized substantive equality and democratic inclusion. Women—and especially minority women—have linked their struggle for democracy to other movements for economic justice, minority rights, antiracism, gender equality, and environmental protection, rather than embracing a narrower, procedural understanding of democracy. In several countries, women's groups and leaders have emphasized the need to model inclusionary practices within prodemocracy movements and protests.

Their varied forms of activism inevitably have triggered backlash, ranging from state repression and state-sponsored countermobilization to more diffuse threats and harassment from extremist nonstate actors. Women have not only confronted the overall closing of civic and political space; they have also had to contend with targeted, gendered threats and abuse as well as patriarchal norms within their own political coalitions. The chapters in this compilation thus tell a story of women's grassroots mobilization power and their resilience in the face of significant adversity and violence.

CHAPTER 1

Women's Activism: Resistance and Democracy in Brazil

Marisa von Bülow

Latin American history demonstrates that women's rights are especially vulnerable under authoritarian regimes. That women suffer disproportionately in these contexts was illustrated by Nobel Prize winner Mario Vargas Llosa in his novel *The Feast of the Goat*, which tells the story of the Dominican Republic dictator Rafael Trujillo and his systematic abuse of women.[4] Equally devastating were the decades of sexual slavery perpetrated by Paraguayan dictator General Alfredo Stroessner and his close group of supporters.[5] In Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay, women persecuted during the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s were robbed of their newborn children and experienced sexual violence while in prison.[6] These cases underscore that the absence of democracy—or even a decline in the quality of democracy—leads to fewer protections for women and more impunity for those who violate women's human rights.

Latin American activists have often noted the indissociable link between gender rights and democracy. Within the region, women have been key actors in democratizing campaigns, from the suffragists in the first decades of the twentieth century to popular resistance movements against military dictatorships from the 1960s to the 1980s and, more recently, campaigns to resist creeping autocratization. In addition to engaging in direct action and protests, women have successfully lobbied decisionmakers to create more opportunities for women's political participation and fought for leadership roles in political parties and in government. In 1991, Argentina pioneered the implementation of electoral gender quotas in the region. From securing the right to vote to institutionalizing gender parity rules for public office, women's activism has had a major impact on democratic institutions and processes across the continent.

Brazil is emblematic of women's prominent role in prodemocracy activism. As members of feminist organizations, political parties, faith-based organizations, trade unions, and community associations, Brazilian women have been at the forefront of popular resistance to

autocracy and the rise of the far right in recent years. They have launched grassroots protest movements and built broad-based campaigns around which new cross-issue coalitions have mushroomed.

Yet Brazil also showcases the challenge of centering women's voices and demands after the most overt threats to democracy are overcome. The defeat of incumbent president Jair Bolsonaro and the election of a center-left front led by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in late 2022 have provided women's rights activists with new opportunities to influence state policies. But these changes also have shed renewed light on the divisions between progressive actors. In fact, women's roles in bringing the opposition to power have not translated into equal representation in the new government. Furthermore, ultraconservative and authoritarian forces in the country remain strong. They are increasingly shifting their focus to subnational institutional arenas and the National Congress, where legislative projects limiting the right to abortion and other dimensions of women's rights are on the agenda.

The Rise of the Populist Far Right and Women's Resistance

In the Amazonian state of Pará, the slogan for the 2023 Women's Day mobilization was: "For women's lives, for democracy, against hunger, and in defense of the Amazonian territories."[7] In other parts of the country, women drew similar connections between grievances related to the state of Brazil's democracy, entrenched poverty, and women's rights and concerns. These cross-cutting calls to action can be understood only in the context of the resistance to the previous decade of autocratization and the empowerment of the far right, which achieved its peak with the election of Bolsonaro in 2018.

In 2023, a report by the Varieties of Democracy featured Brazil among the world's top ten autocratizers.[8] This ranking represented a significant setback for a country that had steadily strengthened its democracy until the mid-2010s. Over the past decade, trust in the country's political institutions rapidly declined: by 2018, less than 6 percent of Brazilians expressed trust in the National Congress and a mere 1 percent reported trusting political parties.[9] That same year, Bolsonaro—an outspoken champion of Brazil's military dictatorship—successfully campaigned for president on an anti-corruption platform. Although Bolsonaro had served in Congress for nearly three decades, he painted himself as an outsider who could clean up the corruption of previous governments and fight against the forces that threatened to destroy traditional values.[10]

For women's rights advocates, Bolsonaro's rise presented a clear and serious threat, particularly given his long history of attacking democracy, women's rights, and LGBTQ rights.[11] As a result, women activists from various sectors, ideologies, and backgrounds—such as feminists, left-wing activists from the labor movement, and Indigenous women's rights activists—played prominent roles in organizing the electoral opposition to Bolsonaro. By linking the fight against authoritarianism to the battle against misogyny, women made gender a central focus of mobilization against the far right. Leading up to the 2018 election, a diverse coalition of women launched a hybrid protest campaign, using both digital and street tactics to rally against Bolsonaro. Online, they created the hashtag #EleNão (#NotHim) and established a Facebook group called "Women United Against Bolsonaro" that eventually gathered almost 4 million members. Their manifesto, titled "Democracy Yes," was emblematic of their coalition-building approach: signed by a diverse group of women, it highlighted Bolsonaro's history of misogyny and conservative views on gender relations alongside the need to protect workers' rights and safeguard Brazilian democracy from a vocal supporter of the military dictatorship.[12] The group called for the unification of "women of all Brazil (and those who live outside of Brazil) against the strengthening of misogyny, racism, and other types of prejudices."[13]

This digital mobilization laid the groundwork for massive street protests in various cities in Brazil and abroad. A protest led by leftist women on September 29, 2018, not only marked the largest mobilization of women in the country's history; it also unified other sectors of Brazilian society, such as progressive evangelicals and people who did not support the Workers' Party candidate but saw Bolsonaro as the greater evil.[14] The #EleNão campaign was so successful that it spread internationally, with global celebrities such as Madonna and Cher posting #EleNão on social media.[15]

However, women's grassroots mobilization also spurred pushback. For one, the Bolsonaro campaign's well-oiled disinformation machine readily disseminated false information about the protesters and their grievances.[16] As feminist leader Sônia Coelho, one of the organizers of the #EleNão protests, said of Bolsonaro's supporters: "They were organized, they were filming everything, they came among us. . . . They could see the scale of the movement, which must have scared them. Because they were already prepared with a lot of fake news."[17] In one example, messages that surfaced on social media showed pictures of naked protesters that were taken at an entirely different demonstration held in Australia years before.[18]

Recognizing the political power of women's voices, conservative women also launched a grassroots countercampaign. Using the hashtag #EleSim (#YesHim) to organize, they took to the streets to show their support for Bolsonaro. Although their campaign was significantly smaller in numbers—their Facebook groups had around 300,000 members before the 2018 election—they focused on criminal violence, an issue that progressive groups often had ignored.[19] They also mobilized in defense of conservative values, a platform that spoke to the country's conservative religious electorate and has deep roots in Brazilian history. (For instance, in 1964, on the eve of the military coup, hundreds of thousands of women participated in a street protest called "Family March with God and Freedom."[20])

Ultimately, Bolsonaro won the 2018 election with 55 percent of all valid votes.[21] Religious conservatism and gender were crucial determinants of voter preferences. According to a public opinion survey conducted before the second round of the election, 59 percent of evangelical voters said they would vote for Bolsonaro, compared to only 26 percent who said they would vote for Fernando Haddad, the Workers' Party candidate.[22] Gender was another key determinant: 55 percent of men reported that they would vote for Bolsonaro, whereas

42 percent of women reported the same. Yet despite this overall gender gap, conservative women's mobilization produced tangible results: fifty-five out of the seventy-seven women elected to the House of Representatives in 2018 supported Bolsonaro and his anti-feminist agenda.[23] Additionally, a conservative religious woman was appointed as head of the newly created Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights.

Notwithstanding the empowerment of conservative women, however, women as a group lost representation and influence in government during the Bolsonaro years. Former president Dilma Rousseff once had as many as ten women in her cabinet (out of thirty-nine members), but Bolsonaro's administration counted a maximum of three, a number that fell to one in the last months of his presidency.[24] Bolsonaro also continued to be the star of several misogynistic episodes in which he attacked female journalists or downplayed the relevance of gender-based violence and women's rights.

Not surprisingly, women stayed at the forefront of the opposition to Bolsonaro throughout his time in office, arguing that they were the main victims of the administration's policies. Officials in his administration questioned the need for gender equality policies and reframed women's rights as "family issues," while ignoring demands related to women's reproductive and sexual health.[25] Faced with threats to their hard-won victories, activists created new organizational arenas, engaged in existing civil society organizations, and built broad prodemocracy coalitions. In 2019, for example, Indigenous women organized the first-ever Indigenous Women's March, protesting the Bolsonaro government's neglect of Indigenous communities and its embrace of deforestation. As part of the protest, women occupied the building of the Brazilian health ministry, calling out the dire lack of healthcare for Indigenous communities.[26] That same year, the March of the Margaridas, an annual gathering of leftist women that has been taking place since 2000, turned into a protest against the Bolsonaro government.[27]

In spite of the restrictions and challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, women also participated actively in the Oust Bolsonaro campaign in 2020 and 2021, calling for the president's impeachment with the hashtag #WomenOustBolsonaro.[28] In a manifesto signed by more than 45,000 women in 2020, a feminist organization presented their demands in the following terms: "We fight for the end of slavery and fascism, against the military dictatorship and for democracy."[29] In August 2022, another manifesto supporting former president and opposition candidate Lula, titled "Women United for Brazil," was signed by women's organizations, the most important labor organizations, and many other social movement organizations.

Women's support thus remained Bolsonaro's Achilles' heel. The president's campaign tried to counteract this weakness by launching the Women with Bolsonaro initiative, which saw first lady Michelle Bolsonaro and the Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights travel around the country to galvanize women's support by emphasizing conservative values, such as the need to defend the traditional family, protect children, and fight against abortion.[30] Throughout Bolsonaro's tenure, conservative women's groups—often linked to religious organizations—also continued to organize street rallies to express support for the president and his policies.[31] Yet in the weeks leading up to the first round of the 2022 presidential election, public opinion polls nevertheless showed that only 29 percent of women were planning to vote for Bolsonaro, compared to 46 percent for Lula.[32]

Representation in the Political System: From the Streets to Electoral Politics

Despite women's extensive mobilization during the 2018 and 2022 elections and throughout Bolsonaro's administration, their grassroots efforts have failed so far to translate into equal political power within formal institutions. This is not a new paradox. Even after decades of vibrant activism and engagement with political parties and the state, increasing women's political representation has remained "an all but insurmountable challenge."[33]

As the far-right threat in Brazil grew, progressive forces in civil society renewed their efforts to elect sympathetic representatives who would advance their agenda. New collective action initiatives emerged to empower progressive women representatives in the 2018, 2020, and 2022 elections. Some of these initiatives sought to provide much-needed support to women candidates. The nongovernmental organization Elas no Poder (Women in Power), for instance, was created in 2018 to offer capacity-building and mobilize on behalf of women who want to run for office.[34]

Other initiatives have sought to impact the institutional environment and address the challenges women face in formal politics through an intersectional lens. Black and Indigenous women face particularly high barriers to elected office, an issue that activists have been raising for a long time. In 2021, a coalition of 134 civil society organizations, academic groups, associations, political parties, and think tanks launched the Frente pelo Avanço dos Direitos Políticos das Mulheres (Front for the Advancement of the Political Rights of Women), with a dual goal: to prevent setbacks in electoral legislation and support new initiatives that "thematize gender and race-based political violence, in defense of the democratic society and of fundamental liberties of the Brazilian women."[35] New Indigenous women's organizations also drew attention to the issue in 2022, when Articulação Nacional de Mulheres Indígenas Guerreiras da Ancestralidade (the National Articulation of Indigenous Women Warriors of Ancestry) chose Indigenous women's representation in institutional politics as one of its six axes of mobilization.

The impact of these initiatives has been mixed. On the one hand, between 2014 and 2022, Indigenous women's candidacies increased by 189 percent—compared to only a 78.5 percent increase in Indigenous men's candidacies.[36] In 2020, more women ran for mayor and local legislative offices than ever before. On the other hand, women's relative lack of resources and the privileged position enjoyed by incumbents running for reelection remain key hurdles to women's election to office. In 2020, 88 percent of mayoral positions still went to men, the same share as in 2016, and only 0.8 percent went to Black women.[37]

A similar pattern was evident in 2022. The elections took place in a context of significant political upheaval. As Brazilians went to the polls to elect a new president, Bolsonaro alongside key national and subnational elected officials threatened to undermine the integrity of the process for the first time since the county's democratic transition.[38] In this fragile political environment, the percentage of women candidates was higher than ever before, at 33.3 percent of all candidacies. For the first time in Brazilian history, two Indigenous women activists were elected to the lower chamber, and the overall number of women in the chamber rose by 18 percent. Despite these positive trends, women still make up only 18 percent of all representatives (91 out of 513). The number of women elected to the Senate declined.[39]

The environment for women in politics, particularly for progressive women, has also grown increasingly hostile, despite a new law (passed in 2022) that criminalized political violence against women. Such violence is by no means a new phenomenon in Brazil. However, during the Bolsonaro administration, women representatives became constant targets of vicious online and offline attacks.[40] The assassination of local councilwoman Marielle Franco, who was gunned down in the streets of Rio de Janeiro in 2018, became a symbol of the violence targeting women representatives and the difficulty of holding the perpetrators of such violence accountable. In 2021, a report mapping gendered political violence on digital platforms found that 9 percent of 4 million online posts that mentioned female legislators were attacking them.[41] As Manuela D'Ávila, a former legislator and vice presidential candidate, argues, "The election of an openly misogynist president in 2018 opened the floodgates for violence against women in politics."[42] Manuela herself decided not to run for office in 2022, arguing that this decision was made because of recurrent attacks and threats against herself, her mother, and her daughter. The increasingly toxic and dangerous environment for women in politics has not changed after the 2022 election and remains a critical obstacle to the emergence of new political leaders.

Despite these continuing challenges, Bolsonaro's defeat and the victory of the coalition led by the Workers' Party has enabled the reestablishment of several institutional channels for women's participation in government. In the first months of the new administration, eleven members of the cabinet (30 percent) were women. The Ministry for Women was reestablished, and the new Ministry for Indigenous People was headed by the first Indigenous woman to ever hold a cabinet position.

Conclusion

Establishing the fact that without women's rights and participation there is no democracy remains an ongoing battle worldwide, even in countries that generally are characterized as democratic. In Brazil, after decades of slow but continuous improvements in gender equality and women's political participation, the rise of the far right led to a period of heightened resistance.

Paradoxically, the successes of the radical right also incentivized the creation of new coalitions of women, who led collective action campaigns linking the women's rights agenda to broader threats to democracy. In the face of a shared threat, these coalitions used a wide range of defensive tactics to resist. They also launched campaigns aimed at increasing women's political representation to bring more diverse voices and experiences into democratic institutions. These mobilization efforts opposed not only the far-right government but also newly empowered conservative women, who had been using the Bolsonaro government as an opportunity to push forward an anti-feminist agenda based on traditional religious values.

Bolsonaro's defeat in 2022 was in no small part due to women's ability to build broad prodemocracy alliances around frames that wove together economic, social, and gender concerns. As of early 2024 the impact of these initiatives has been mixed. It is clear, however, that regardless of who is in power, women's mobilization will remain critical for preventing future democratic setbacks and advancing gender equality in Brazil.

CHAPTER 2

Beyond the Women's March: Women's Rights and Mobilization in the U.S. Democracy Movement

Saskia Brechenmacher and Erin Jones

On January 21, 2017, the day after Donald Trump's inauguration as U.S. president, hundreds of thousands of women poured onto the streets of Washington, DC, and cities around the country to voice their outrage at his election. Witnessing Hillary Clinton, the first female presidential candidate of a major political party, lose to a man known for his misogyny proved to be a galvanizing moment. One woman's call to action on Facebook morphed into a national movement, drawing more than 400 organizational partners and over 2 million participants worldwide. The Women's March became one of the most visible manifestations of resistance against the Trump presidency, ushering in a period of heightened political contention.[43]

Trump's election was a wake-up call for many Americans who had trusted the resilience of the country's democratic institutions. Since then, signs of democratic distress have multiplied.[44] One of the country's two main political parties—the Republican Party—has been captured by an increasingly far-right faction that challenges the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election and seeks to entrench its power by limiting who votes and oversees elections. This extremist turn feeds on structural and institutional problems that have been developing for years, including increasingly minoritarian political institutions and rising political polarization.[45] However, escalating threats to U.S. democracy have catalyzed new forms of action to defend democratic institutions, beginning during the Trump years and accelerating following the 2020 election and the January 6 insurrection.

As in many other parts of the world, women have often been at the forefront of this prodemocracy movement, pushed to action by overlapping attacks on democracy, women's rights, and norms of equality. This article examines women's diverse roles in the evolving U.S.

democracy movement, highlighting several key patterns. First, women are driving prodemocratic mobilization at different levels: as grassroots organizers, Democratic-leaning voters, and leaders in politics and advocacy organizations. However, their engagement is shaped by cross-cutting partisan and ethnic identities, reflecting larger patterns of polarization. White women in particular are playing important grassroots organizing roles within illiberal networks. Second, the place of women's rights—particularly reproductive rights—in the struggle to defend U.S. democracy remains contested. Although attacks on reproductive rights in the United States have pushed more women and women's organizations to mobilize for democracy, they have revealed strategic divisions within the prodemocracy movement. Finally, women politicians and election officials standing up for democracy in the United States face disproportionate and gendered harassment and attacks.

Women's Roles in the U.S. Prodemocracy Movement

In the United States, popular mobilization focused explicitly on defending democracy largely subsided after the height of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Although various actors continued to push for voting rights, campaign finance regulations, and broader institutional reforms, they were mostly professionalized nongovernmental organizations rather than membership organizations galvanizing mass participation.

Trump's election in 2016 dramatically changed the political landscape. For one, the Trump administration fueled a significant spike in grassroots citizen mobilization, with analysts tracking more than 60,000 demonstrations during Trump's years in office. Although many of these protests focused on racism, immigration, policing, and gun violence, some also revolved explicitly around threats to democracy and spawned new organizing efforts aimed at defeating Trump at the polls.[46] Beyond this surge in protests, countless new organizations sprang up after the 2016 and 2020 elections to tackle democratic weaknesses that previously had received less attention, such as election subversion, political violence, and online disinformation. Efforts to build coalitions among these newer actors and older organizations, such as the NAACP and Issue One, also intensified.[47] "In some ways, 2020 was a catalyst in creating a common sense of purpose and underlining the urgency for a prodemocracy movement that goes beyond single issues," says Maria Stephan, chief organizer at the Horizons Project, an initiative focused on movement-building among social change organizations.[48]

What is striking about these new forms of mobilization is the central role that women are playing at different levels: as grassroots protesters and activists; as lawyers, advocates, and election officials; and as voters. The 2016 women's marches were the first indication of this pattern. In their aftermath, thousands of loosely connected women-led volunteer groups formed around the country, often drawing on the online networks formed during the marches.[49] Following outlines for action developed by the newly created Indivisible organization, they mobilized to help Democrats win back control of the House of Representatives in 2018, recruited hundreds of first-time women candidates to run for office, and rallied to protect healthcare reforms from Barack Obama's presidency. Yet these volunteer groups were not simply extensions of the Democratic Party. Although many were motivated by anti-Trump partisanship, they often framed their work in terms of defending American democracy. Their efforts proved highly effective. The Democrats won back the House in the 2018 midterm elections, thereby weakening Trump's political coalition; in addition, female candidates ran for office and won in record numbers, powered by women's grassroots support as well as established organizations such as Emily's List.[50]

Beyond the grassroots, women are well-represented in the leadership and staff of organizations fighting for democratic renewal. Women are currently at the helm of the States United Democracy Center, the Election Trust Initiative, Democracy Forward, Common Cause, FairVote, OpenSecrets, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and the Advancement Project, to name a few. Several women lawyers—such as Roberta Kaplan, Sally Yates, Stacey Abrams, and Vanita Gupta—played prominent roles in challenging Trump and his administration's policies.[51] Women are also organizing for democracy within religious communities, as leaders in organizations such as Sojourners and NETWORK that are confronting illiberal strands within faith communities. And they are deeply embedded in the management of U.S. elections, as more than 80 percent of the country's election workers are women.[52] Although these women may not necessarily describe themselves as democracy activists, they have found themselves on the front lines of ongoing struggles over democratic processes.

Finally, women have also emerged as an important electoral force opposing Trump and MAGA-affiliated candidates.[53] Women in the United States have long voted at higher rates than men and have been more likely to identify as Democrats or Democratic leaning than men (particularly Black women, the most loyal Democratic voting bloc).[54] This gender gap grew even more pronounced in the Trump years: In 2016, for instance, women were 13 percentage points more likely to vote for Clinton than for Trump. In 2018, women favored Democrats by 19 percentage points.[55] Gender differences in support for Trump narrowed somewhat in 2020, with 42 percent of women voting for Trump compared to 53 percent of men.[56] Yet in the 2022 midterms, battles over abortion rights once again brought many women out to vote against Republican candidates. Not only did women vote in larger numbers than men, but 53 percent voted Democratic; and in highly contested races, women's support for Democrats increased relative to 2020.[57] Of course, voting for Democrats should not necessarily be considered prodemocratic action: voting choices are strongly colored by partisanship, and concerns about democracy or Trumpism may only be a decisive factor for some voters. Yet in a political context in which attacks on democracy are emanating primarily from extremist factions of the Republican Party, women's electoral choices repeatedly have had a moderating effect.

Beneath these overarching patterns, women's roles in prodemocratic mobilization are deeply shaped by their cross-cutting identities, including race, partisanship, and educational attainment. For many women of color in the United States, current trends of democratic erosion represent not a radical break with the past but a revival of long-standing ethnonationalist and illiberal strands in American politics. Black women have mobilized for voting rights and against state-sanctioned, White supremacist violence throughout the twentieth century.[58]

Although few held formal leadership roles in the U.S. civil rights movement, they acted as critical "bridge leaders," using their social networks to recruit new members and build ties between local communities and the organizational core of the movement.[59] This legacy lives on today. Black women are one of the most active voting blocs in the U.S. electorate, as well as a leading force in the voting rights movement and in progressive politics more broadly, both as organizers and politicians.[60] They also have played critical roles in increasing voter turnout in the face of concerted attacks on their voting rights.

For many White women, by contrast, Trump's election and subsequent attacks on democratic rights and institutions were a shock to the system, triggering new forms of mobilization among women who previously had been less politically engaged. A 2019 study by Leah Gose and Theda Skocpol found that the grassroots resistance groups formed after Trump's election were overwhelmingly led by White, suburban, college-educated women, mostly middle-aged or older.[61] These women felt, perhaps for the first time, that the health of U.S. democracy was at risk and were repulsed by Trump as a public figure. At the same time, White women as a group have remained starkly divided by partisanship, which also colors their electoral support for antidemocratic candidates. Although White women since 2018 have swung toward Democrats, they have done so by a modest margin. Many conservative White women continue to support Trump and Trump-affiliated candidates.[62] White women without college degrees have been key supporters of the election fraud lie, with one survey finding that a majority believe that Joe Biden did not legitimately win the 2020 election.[63] Finally, grassroots women's networks such as Moms for Liberty as well as individual women like Marjorie Taylor Greene have taken on key political roles in the Trumpist movement. Their success illustrates that women are effective organizers on both sides of the political divide—a trend described in more detail below.[64]

Attacks on Reproductive Rights and Divisions Over Strategy

The uptick in women's mobilization for democracy has been driven in part by illiberal attacks on women's rights, and on reproductive rights in particular. Trump and the illiberal movements associated with him (including extremist groups like the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers) have relied on misogynistic rhetoric as a political mobilization tool. Misogyny runs through Trump's commentary on prominent women leaders, and anti–political correctness and the politics of insult are key parts of his popular appeal. His voter base reflects these attitudes: studies have found that hostile sexism is a primary predictor of support for Trump.[65]

Over the past several years, democratic erosion in the United States has coincided with increasing legislative and judicial attacks on reproductive rights. At the federal level, the Supreme Court in 2021 overturned the long-standing precedent of *Roe v. Wade*, which had guaranteed the right to abortion nationally. This decision reflected a pattern of minoritarianism in U.S. politics: it was made by a court in which most justices had been appointed by presidents who lost the popular vote and approved by a Senate that disproportionately represented low-population states.[66] At the subnational level, states implementing new voting restrictions often have been the same ones putting forward restrictive antiabortion laws or de facto abortion bans. This pattern is no coincidence: reproductive rights advocates note that voting rights restrictions and gerrymandering have produced legislatures that increasingly are out of sync with public opinion on abortion.[67]

Some state legislatures have openly attempted to restrict political participation in order to put forward unpopular abortion policies. In Ohio, for example, the state legislature in 2023 held a special election to try to increase the vote threshold required to pass constitutional amendments from 50 to 60 percent—an effort intended to thwart a ballot initiative that sought to enshrine reproductive rights in the state's constitution. The election followed a 2022 law that included new voter ID requirements that made it more difficult to vote.[68] Many other Republican-led state legislatures have taken or are trying to take similar steps to limit ballot initiatives on abortion, including in Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Mississippi, Missouri, North Dakota, Oklahoma, and South Dakota.[69] A similar convergence between antiabortion activism and antidemocratic action is evident in civil society. Antiabortion groups like Susan B. Anthony List have become more involved in advocating for voting restrictions since the 2020 election, and linkages have formed between groups pushing for harsh abortion restrictions and the White Christian nationalist movement.[70] In one example, a White supremacist group showed up to a March for Life rally in Chicago, viewing it as a recruitment opportunity.[71]

U.S. women's rights groups have long understood the right to bodily autonomy as an important building block to women's equal political citizenship and freedom from state violence. However, most previously did not see themselves as part of the U.S. democracy movement. Instead, they focused their work on policy advocacy related to issues ranging from gender-based violence and sexual harassment to abortion access. The current political context has pushed many to reconsider their strategy. Observing the use of antidemocratic processes and institutions to advance harsher abortion restrictions, they increasingly are framing their work in terms of defending democracy.

At the state level, some women's rights groups now focus on getting people out to vote and mobilize against voting rights restrictions, recognizing that functioning democratic processes are a precondition for achieving their other political objectives. In Ohio, for instance, the Ohio Women's Alliance not only collected signatures for the state's abortion rights ballot initiative but also collaborated with various democracy organizations to mobilize voters to turn out for the special election about the electoral threshold needed for constitutional amendments.[72] These grassroots efforts resulted in a dual victory for democracy and reproductive rights advocates. Ohioans rejected raising the bar for constitutional amendments and in November 2023 voted to enshrine the right to abortion in the state's constitution.[73] Some democracy organizations also have started linking their work on elections to reproductive rights, often by arguing that citizens should have a greater say in deciding state-level

abortion rules. In late 2023, the Public Rights Project, for example, filed an advisory opinion at the Florida Supreme Court contending that Florida voters should have the right to petition for a proposed state constitutional amendment to protect abortion rights.[74]

Despite these instances of state-level cooperation between women's rights and democracy advocates, the broader prodemocracy movement remains split on how to handle polarizing social issues like reproductive rights. Some activists and organizations view the pushback against women's rights—as well as racism and anti-LGBTQ mobilization—as key avenues for authoritarian actors to mobilize the support of socially conservative and religious voters, following the playbook pioneered by Russian President Vladimir Putin, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, and other illiberal leaders globally. Consequently, they argue that an effective response needs to overcome issue silos and foster stronger coalitions between different progressive movements—what political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks have termed "a united front for multiracial, cross-class, feminist democracy defense."[75] Key to this theory of change is the idea that attacks on democratic processes cannot be dealt with in isolation from restrictions on bodily autonomy and LGBTQ rights, as all of these efforts are rooted in a political vision built on sociopolitical hierarchies and exclusion.

Other groups have adopted a different stance. They may agree on substance. But strategically, they prioritize building a moderate political coalition that *includes* center-right voices as the most viable option for countering authoritarian threats. They argue that it is better to focus on defending democracy narrowly—by fighting for voting rights, fair elections, and institutional reforms—rather than tying these priorities together with divisive social issues like abortion and transgender rights. In this view, repairing democratic procedures and institutions would allow voters and politicians to tackle other contentious questions through a functioning democratic process.

In sum, among the different currents of the prodemocracy movement, there is general agreement on the urgent need to defeat Trumpist candidates, election deniers, and others mobilizing against democratic processes. But behind this near-term unity lies somewhat divergent visions of the movement's path ahead, with some actors placing strategic emphasis on restoring democratic health by rebuilding the political center and other groups emphasizing the need to more fundamentally challenge the exclusionary power structures and ideologies running through American society and fueling authoritarian movements. According to this latter view, dismantling an unjust system may require adversarial advocacy in the pursuit of social transformation.[76]

Gender, Violence, and Countermobilization

As political polarization has worsened, those standing up for U.S. democracy are confronting new forms of countermobilization by illiberal political actors, right-wing extremist groups, and radicalized citizens. Far-right organizing efforts such as True the Vote have popularized narratives of election fraud and pushed Republican secretaries of state and attorneys general to pull out of ERIC, an election security mechanism that once had bipartisan support.[77] Backlash has bubbled up against voter turnout efforts targeting youth, women, and other groups, and extremist groups have started forging alliances with sheriffs' groups in preparation for challenging future election outcomes.[78] Most alarmingly, political violence by far-right extremist actors has been on the rise, fueled by dehumanizing rhetoric from media personalities and political leaders.[79]

Such political violence is highly gendered. Sexism and political extremism are connected: those who hold hostile sexist views are more likely to justify the use of political violence.[80] Moreover, politically active women have been disproportionately targeted. For example, because the vast majority of election workers are women, they have found themselves at the center of extremist attacks on the U.S. election infrastructure.[81] A 2023 Brennan Center survey found that nearly one in three election officials had been harassed, abused, or threatened.[82] Although the perpetrators of these attacks are difficult to trace, most appear to be men who are within the orbit of far-right websites and conspiracy theories.[83] "When we talk about political violence and the impacts of the election denial movement, that burden is falling disproportionately on women," says an associate at States United.[84]

From Michigan's Attorney General Dana Nessel to Boise's Mayor Lauren McLean, women politicians are also confronting rising threats of violence tied to election denialism and White supremacist movements.[85] Although all politicians face intimidation, research suggests that women and other underrepresented groups are targeted at higher rates. One 2017 survey of mayors found that 23 percent of women respondents had experienced physical violence, compared to 10 percent of men.[86] Another national survey of local elected officials found that almost half had been insulted verbally and a third had been harassed—though officials that identified as women or racial or ethnic minorities were much more likely to experience insults, harassment, and threats.[87] These findings indicate that a more permissive environment for political violence has particularly severe consequences for those who challenge traditional gender and racial hierarchies.

Although many of the extremist groups that have gained in prominence in recent years are dominated by men and characterized by overt appeals to violent masculinity, women also play important roles within illiberal political movements and networks. Moms for Liberty, an organization created during the COVID-19 pandemic to oppose mask mandates in schools, has emerged as a particularly powerful vehicle for far-right mobilization, focused primarily on fighting progressive ideology in public education. In the legacy of White mothers' associations that fought to uphold Jim Crow order in the South, the group's members invoke motherhood to paint themselves as concerned parents.[88] Yet Moms for Liberty has cultivated ties to right-wing extremist networks such as the Proud Boys, and local group leaders have been convicted for harassing and threatening neighbors and school officials.[89] Women are also amplifying far-right ideas and conspiracy theories through social media, including ideas associated with the QAnon movement.[90] By playing into gendered tropes about women's inherent peacefulness and caregiving roles, women often contribute to making extreme political ideas and messages palatable to a broader audience.[91]

Conclusion

Women play a critical role in driving prodemocratic mobilization in the United States, owing to their strong presence as grassroots activists and professional advocates, their power as a voting bloc, and their overrepresentation among election workers. Yet their political engagement can only be understood through an intersectional lens. Among many White, suburban, and educated women, the Trump presidency spurred new forms of political action aimed at defending both U.S. democracy and progressive policy gains. At the same time, White women also play important organizing roles within illiberal and antidemocratic movements in the United States, often by tapping into traditional conceptions of femininity and motherhood. Women of color, by contrast, have a long history of mobilizing for voting rights and equal rights protections in the United States; for many, Trump represented a continuation of long-standing currents in American politics.

However, the place of women's rights—and reproductive rights in particular—in the struggle to defend U.S. democracy remains contested. Trump's misogynistic rhetoric and more recent right-wing attacks on abortion rights have made threats to democracy more salient to some women voters and activists. The fact that attacks on reproductive rights are emanating from the same legislatures and movements that are subverting democratic processes has also opened the door to new coalitions between democracy groups and those defending reproductive rights and gender justice. This is emblematic of a broader pattern: intensifying polarization and the authoritarian drift of the Republican Party are eroding the boundaries between policy issues and democracy issues. Yet some actors worry that bundling democratic activism together with progressive policy priorities will make it more difficult to build broad, bipartisan coalitions against political extremism. Struggles over abortion rights (as well as LGBTQ rights) thus surface deeper divisions over strategy in the prodemocracy movement. Some organizations and initiatives continue to focus fairly narrowly on the institutional dimension of democracy, setting aside divisive social issues to counter partisan polarization. Others adopt a broader definition of democracy that centers a longer list of nonnegotiable rights. They link the defense of democracy with movements for social, gender, and racial justice and emphasize coalition-building across these domains.

In some ways, these divisions reflect differences in time horizons. As the United States heads toward the next presidential election, defeating openly authoritarian politicians and minimizing risks of political violence are urgent priorities. Yet countering the illiberal and anti-women tendencies shaping American politics will require sustained mobilization long after November 2024.

CHAPTER 3

Mobilizing for Reproductive Rights: Women's Activism and the Crisis of Democracy in Poland and Hungary

Paweł Marczewski

When the Fidesz government in Hungary and Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice Party, or PiS) in Poland began undermining the rule of law, women joined protests against their governments' assaults on judicial independence. Some women were members of civil society organizations mobilizing in general defense of democracy. Others were active in feminist groups, collectives, and civil society organizations that saw attacks on the rule of law as a threat to gender equality and reproductive rights.

Their concerns were soon validated by the anti-feminist rhetoric and legislation put forward by both governments. In Poland, in October 2020, the PiS-controlled Constitutional Tribunal issued a ruling that penalized women for terminating pregnancies even in cases of severe damage to the fetus. An already very strict abortion law thus became more draconian. In Hungary, Fidesz had already inscribed the protection of life from conception into the Hungarian Constitution in 2012 and later passed new abortion restrictions requiring women to listen to the fetal heartbeat before having an abortion. These measures undermining reproductive rights would not have been possible if the rule of law had not already been eroded.[92]

Over the past several years, both governments have also engaged in aggressive campaigns against "gender ideology"—a vaguely defined umbrella term for progressive gender norms and policies that Polish and Hungarian pro-government media outlets have framed as a form of neo-Bolshevism aimed at destroying traditional families and lifestyles. Both countries' ministries of education have built on this rhetoric to interfere in public education. In

Hungary, gender studies programs have been expelled from universities.[93] In Poland, gender studies have not been banned, but former minister of education Przemysław Czarnek on many occasions denounced them publicly as "absurd" and "neo-Marxist."[94]

In both countries, the anti-feminist turn of both illiberal regimes has been closely connected with their assaults on the judiciary. A lack of guarantees for the rule of law has created a context in which the executives can use their discretionary power to limit reproductive rights and academic freedom without having to justify their actions to independent courts. However, these patterns have provoked varying responses. In Poland, women's protests against new restrictions on their rights became part of a larger struggle for democracy, thereby reinvigorating the broader prodemocracy movement. In Hungary, women's mobilization has remained much smaller in scale and has not had a powerful impact on the opposition against Fidesz.

Protests Against Limits on Reproductive Rights

After Poland's politicized Constitutional Tribunal ruled on October 20, 2020, that even abortions performed because of severe damage to or terminal disease of a fetus were illegal, the country witnessed its largest street demonstrations since 1989. According to confidential police estimates, at the peak of the protests approximately 430,000 people took to the streets in 410 demonstrations across the country.[95] The main force behind this mobilization was Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet (Polish Women's Strike, or OSK), a group of feminist activists who had already gained organizational experience during the so-called Black Protests that followed the government's first attempt to limit reproductive rights in 2016. OSK was supported by several human rights and prodemocracy civil society organizations, including the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights and Amnesty International Poland. In some regions, activists of the Komitet Obrony Demokracji (Committee for the Defence of Democracy), a critical force behind earlier protests in defense of the rule of law, also joined the movement. However, despite a call by OSK and the support of left-wing labor unions such as Inicjatywa Pracownicza, these demonstrations were not followed by a nationwide general strike.

As these demonstrations broke out during the COVID-19 pandemic, some police commanders, pressured by the ruling party and using an interior ministry decree banning all public gatherings as a pretext, initiated a harsh crackdown on the protesters. Attorney general Bogdan Święczkowski ordered prosecutors' offices to start proceedings against all those who organized or initiated the protests and stressed that they could face up to eight years in prison.[96] During eight weeks of continuous demonstrations, at least eighty people were held by the police.[97]

In contrast, protests against new abortion restrictions that came into force in Hungary on September 15, 2022, remained relatively limited, gathering only around a thousand people.[98] However, the Hungarian government's changes were far less consequential for women's reproductive rights. Whereas the ruling of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal effectively banned abortion in Poland, the new Hungarian regulations obliged healthcare providers to present women considering an abortion with the fetus's "vital signs of life," which in practice means forcing pregnant women to listen to the heartbeat. Terminating a pregnancy in case of fetal anomalies or in cases of personal crisis remains legal in Hungary.

Another factor that helps explain the more limited scope of protests in Hungary is Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's "social contract" with women, to use a term coined by analyst Orsolya Bajnay.[99] Women in Hungary are not adequately represented politically, but they enjoy a certain degree of economic stability that, according to Bajnay, limits their readiness to protest against Fidesz. After the 2022 elections, only 13.6 percent of parliamentarians were women, ranking Hungary 149th globally.[100] But some of the government's social policies are aimed at improving the economic situation of women, particularly mothers, such as day nurseries in all municipalities, housing benefits for families, and lifetime tax exemptions for women with four children or more. In addition, the gender pay gap in Hungary is 17.3 percent, above the European Union average of 13 percent but below the pay gap in Germany (18.3 percent) or Switzerland (18.4 percent).[101]

Both the Hungarian government under Orbán and the PiS government in Poland define themselves as conservative and stress their allegiance to conservative family values. Both countries also face rapid population declines; actual and symbolic infringements of reproductive rights are thus justified by some members of the ruling elite as measures to combat depopulation, even though they have had no proven positive (and potentially even adverse) effects on fertility rates. According to World Bank data, the total fertility rate (TFR) in Poland dropped from 1.4 children per woman in 2020 to 1.3 in 2021. The drop was particularly steep in large cities, where the TFR used to be above the national average before the total abortion ban. In Warsaw, it decreased from 1.5 in 2020 to 1.2 in 2021.[102] In Hungary, the TFR has risen from 1.2 in 2011 to 1.6 in 2021, despite the fact that abortion remains legal.[103] In sum, new abortion restrictions to date appear to have had little impact on people's decisions to have children. The restrictions have, however, curried favor with each ruling party's conservative voter base, though this dynamic has been more pronounced in Poland than in Hungary.

Living in Parallel Worlds: Social Views on Abortion in Poland and Hungary

In Hungary, government attacks on reproductive rights remain largely symbolic and have sparked only limited protests. In Poland, by contrast, a new legal framework has profoundly changed women's reproductive rights protections, triggering widespread popular resistance. What explains these differences?

Popular views on abortion across the two countries do not differ significantly. According to an Ipsos poll published in August 2022, 70 percent of Hungarians were in favor of the right to abortion.[104] In Poland, 66 percent supported the right to have an abortion up to the twelfth week of pregnancy.[105] In some respects, Poles seem to have more liberal views than Hungarians: Hungarian respondents were less inclined than Poles to support termination after six weeks of pregnancy.

Intergenerational divisions in Poland offer a partial explanation for the government's willingness to ignore popular opinion. In Poland, views on abortion are significantly shaped by generational rather than gender divides. Women and men favor the right to abortion up to the twelfth week of pregnancy at roughly similar rates.[106] Yet looking at attitudes across different age groups reveals significant cleavages. Whereas 83 percent of women aged eighteen to thirty-nine supported abortion up to the twelfth week of pregnancy, the Ipsos poll cited above found that only 49 percent of women aged sixty or older supported the same. According to CBOS, only 45 percent of female respondents aged sixty-five or older supported liberalizing the existing law.

Not surprisingly, mobilization in defense of reproductive rights has been driven by younger segments of Polish society. Women who took to the streets in the weeks after the Constitutional Tribunal ruling were not necessarily mobilizing against men trying to control their bodies but against older generations imposing their conservative viewpoints. According to a CBOS study from December 2020, 28 percent of women aged eighteen to twenty-four declared that they took part in the 2020 protests. Among women aged sixty-five or older, this figure dropped to 1 percent.[107] In Hungary, however, existing survey data do not suggest similarly stark intergenerational divisions on abortion. In fact, some younger Hungarians have more restrictive views than older generations. A 2023 survey by Ipsos showed that in Hungary, support for abortion was lowest among younger men—only 47 percent were supportive, compared with 72 percent of the general population.[108]

Religion also helps explain why illiberal leaders in Poland focus on limiting abortion. The social significance of religion and the political influence of the Catholic Church is much greater in Poland than in Hungary. According to the *Atlas of European Values 2017*, only 45 percent of Hungarians said that religion was very or quite important to them, compared to 79 percent of respondents in Poland. Only 10.3 percent of Hungarians said they attended church services at least once a week, compared to 47.7 percent Poles.[109] But even in Poland, where religion has far more influence over people's lives than in Hungary, younger generations are more secular than older ones. According to a Pew Research Center survey published in 2018, among all countries studied Poland had the largest age gap in reported religiosity. Among those under age forty, only 16 percent stated that religion was very important to them, whereas 40 percent of people over age forty said the same.[110]

Mass mobilization for reproductive rights in Poland thus reflected an intergenerational conflict between a younger, secular generation of Poles and an older, more religious part of Polish society that in many ways was the backbone of PiS. Older, more religious and younger, increasingly secular Poles continue to live in parallel worlds when it comes to reproductive rights. PiS made a deliberate choice to consolidate its electoral base in the latter group. Lavish state subsidies to Catholic educational institutions and civil society organizations and additional pensions to elderly citizens further indicate that the government has focused on appealing to an older and more conservative segment of the Polish society.

Spillover Effects: Gradual Changes to the Political Landscape

Despite their unprecedented scale, abortion rights protests in Poland did not bring about the immediate political change that many advocates had hoped for. The total abortion ban remained in place, the state budget continued to include donations to the Catholic Church, and the government did not resign. A draft law granting the right to abortion up to the twelfth week of pregnancy was dismissed by the Polish Parliament in June 2022, with 265 members of Parliament, mostly from the right-wing ruling coalition, voting against it.

Yet the 2020 protests nevertheless had important political effects. For one, they resulted in increased support for the opposition among women, particularly among younger women. According to an exit poll conducted after the 2019 elections, 43 percent of women voted for the ruling PiS and 30 percent for Koalicja Obywatelska (Civic Coalition, or KO), the biggest opposition party.[111] But women's voting preferences changed after the protests. By June 2023, 35 percent of women said they would vote for the KO (compared to 26 percent of men), and the share of women supportive of PiS had dropped to 31 percent (compared to 39 percent of men).[112] Support for the opposition was particularly high among women under age forty: 38 percent in that age group said they would vote for the KO, 18 percent for the far-right Konfederacja (Confederation), and 17 percent for Lewica (The Left). Only 7 percent of women under age forty said they would vote for PiS. In comparison, men under age forty were significantly more supportive of the far right: although only 11 percent claimed that they would vote for the ruling party, 40 percent expressed support for Konfederacja, by far the most popular party among men in that age group.

Women's mass mobilization against harsher antiabortion laws has also pushed the political opposition to acknowledge reproductive rights more explicitly in their platforms. Even though Lewica—an alliance of three left-wing opposition parties—had supported a liberalization of abortion laws even before the protests, the KO had never taken a clear position on abortion, leaving the decision to each of its individual members of Parliament. When the party governed from 2007 to 2015, it took no action on abortion. In a major turnaround in May 2023, however, the coalition announced a package of proposals focused on women's rights that included legalizing abortion up to the twelfth week of pregnancy.[113]

Reproductive rights figured prominently in voter mobilization campaigns before the October 2023 elections, many of which were aimed at young women. One campaign that went viral was organized under the slogan "Cicho już byłyśmy" (We already were silent) by a group of young activists called Inicjatywa Wschód, which had also actively participated in the 2020 abortion rights protests.

Women's mobilization and opposition parties' acknowledgment of the importance of reproductive rights resulted in an uptick of women running for office: a record 43.8 percent of candidates in the October 2023 parliamentary elections were women. Lewica had the highest share of women on the ballot (49.6 percent), but nearly all parties exceeded the quota requiring parties to grant women at least 35 percent of party list positions.[114] Importantly, the KO also allocated 40 percent of the party's top positions on electoral lists to women, followed by Lewica with 34.2 percent, the PiS with 24.2 percent, and Trzecia Droga (Third Way) with 20 percent. The only party that did not offer women a substantial number of top positions was Konfederacja, with only 2.4 percent. These numbers indicate that most parties not only fulfilled their quota obligations but also took meaningful action to increase women's representation in politics—perhaps in order to appeal to voters concerned about reproductive rights.

The October 2023 parliamentary elections confirmed these trends and underscored the importance of reproductive rights to Polish voters. In the end, 74.7 percent of eligible women voted—12 percent more than in 2019. This increase highlights the effectiveness of preelection campaigns calling on women to cast their ballots.[115] Moreover, according to exit polls conducted by Ogólnopolska Grupa Badawcza, reproductive rights were critical in influencing voting choices, with 16.5 percent of voters ranking it as the most important issue (ranking second only to the economic situation).[116] Women's votes were shaped by the same generational divides that characterized the 2020 protests. Although many older women continued to vote for PiS, younger Poles turned out at higher rates than those over age sixty, and smaller opposition parties such as Trzecia Droga benefited from a surge in support from young women voters.[117] Together, these trends dealt a decisive blow to the ruling PiS. Although it remains the largest parliamentary party with 35.7 percent of the vote, it now lacks the majority needed to govern. Opposition parties won a total of 248 mandates, paving the way for a new center-left coalition government. And even though this government still has to take shape, it is certain that 29.6 percent of representatives in the Sejm, the lower house of Parliament that plays a key part in formulating legislation, will be women.

It remains to be seen whether these changes will ensure greater protections for reproductive rights. Although Lewica and the KO now support legal abortion until the twelfth week, its coalition partners Poland 2050 and the Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (Polish Popular Party, or PSL) would like to hold a referendum on the matter. PSL leader Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz indicated shortly after the elections that he would not accept a clear position on abortion as part of the coalition agreement.[118] But regardless of whether the elections will bring about legislative change on abortion, women's mobilization for democracy and reproductive rights already has had a significant political impact.

Such political shifts did not materialize in Hungary during the most recent 2022 elections. In Hungary, a consensus based on relatively liberal abortion laws and conservative antiabortion rhetoric appears stable. Orbán's social contract with women is still in place. Families with children continue to enjoy tax exemptions, housing benefits, and preferential loans that are meant to encourage them to have more children. Although this contract increasingly has been accompanied by the symbolic shaming of women who decide to terminate their pregnancies, these measures so far have not been enough to mobilize widespread resistance. Instead, during the 2022 election campaign, the opposition to Orbán's government focused on the corruption of the Fidesz government. (Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Hungary at seventy-seven, the lowest score among EU countries.[119]) In sum, reproductive rights are still not on top of the anti-Orbán agenda.[120]

Conclusion: A Liberal Backlash?

In recent years, much has been written about conservative backlash—the mobilization of right-wing parties, social movements, and civic organizations against legislation and cultural changes that they perceive as undermining a traditional way of life. In the 2023 Polish elections, high turnout rates among youth and women and the political and social mobilization that preceded the voting show that limiting reproductive rights can also trigger the opposite process—a liberal backlash of sorts.

PiS's first term from 2015 to 2019, when most legal changes undermining the rule of law were introduced, failed to provoke mass mobilization, even though this period also was marked by some demonstrations in defense of judicial independence. But infringements on reproductive rights—specifically, the Constitutional Tribunal's 2020 ruling on abortion—had a galvanizing effect, provoking mass resistance that reshaped politics long after street protests had stopped. Although these protests did not bring about an immediate change of government, they helped shift voting preferences and mobilized women voters, thereby contributing to PiS not being able to form a government on its own after the 2023 elections.

One can only speculate what would have happened during the 2022 elections in Hungary if the Fidesz government had gone beyond a symbolic constitutional amendment and similarly limited access to legal abortion. The Polish case shows that reproductive rights are very important to women voters, especially to younger women. In Poland, the right to access abortions proved to be more concrete and galvanizing than more abstract concerns about the rule of law. Orbán's offer of relative economic stability for women with children so far has had a demobilizing effect, but it is possible that a more direct attack on reproductive rights similarly would have broken or weakened his social contract with women voters. The Polish case shows that women's political mobilization can quickly become a mass phenomenon that fundamentally changes the political landscape.

CHAPTER 4

Women Crafting New Pathways for Democratic Resistance in India

Vijayan MJ

> "When the men kill, it is up to us women to fight for the preservation of life. When the men are silent, it is our duty to raise our voices on behalf of our ideals."[121] – Clara Zetkin

The landscape of Indian civic action is at a crossroads.[122] Over the past several years, the country's quickly shrinking democratic space has been marked by arrests of activists and academics across the country, legislative changes that threaten the Indian Constitution and democracy, growing sociopolitical majoritarianism, and punitive actions against civil society organizations and academic institutions. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns not only crippled political mobilization but also militarized society in a way that has discouraged people from asking questions or speaking truth to power; the lockdown induced by the pandemic has been converted into a continuing lockdown on democracy.

Amid this crisis, several women-led movements in India have emerged as shining examples of Clara Zetkin's words above. Both women-led movements for democracy and for gender justice are critical parts of India's new prodemocracy spectrum. The Indian Parliament in 2023 passed a law reserving one-third of the seats in legislative bodies for women. The passage of this national gender quota validates women's advocacy for gender justice and equality and also affirms the linkages between women's rights mobilization and prodemocracy mobilization and the success of their complementary advocacy and ground campaigns. However, there are important differences between these two currents of mobilization.

This article examines women's roles across a wide spectrum of popular movements in contemporary India and highlights the differences and intersections between women-led movements for gender equality and women-led movements for democracy, justice, and human rights. It also demonstrates how these movements collaborate and build the foundation for progressive resistance to authoritarian and antidemocratic forces. The Indian case

illustrates how women's prodemocratic mobilization can unfold in unusual spaces—not only around elections and civil liberties but also in contestations about citizenship, land rights, and the environment. In many of these movements, women are drawing connections between the anti-women posture of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the party's antidemocratic, majoritarian, antienvironmental, and anti-poor positions and policies.

The Struggle Against Sexual Violence

Over the past decade, women's rights movements in India have focused extensively on fighting sexual violence. In an early landmark achievement, the campaign for a legal framework addressing sexual harassment in the workplace led to the Indian Supreme Court's 1997 Vishaka Guidelines, which were superseded in 2013 by the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act.[123] However, sexual violence remained pervasive, whether in people's homes or in the streets. In 2012, for example, the Nirbhaya case—when a twenty-three-year-old woman was gang-raped in a moving bus in New Delhi—sparked mass protests, which eventually prompted legislative amendments that increased the punishments for sexual violence, rape, and threat of rape.[124]

The 2020 Hathras gang-rape of a Dalit girl by a group of "upper-caste" men with political backing similarly rocked Indian society and further brought the women's rights movement closer to the fight for democracy. The horrendous nature of the violence was not the only source of outrage: the fact that the Uttar Pradesh state police hurriedly buried the victim's body after she succumbed to fatal injuries in a Delhi hospital pushed people to come out of their homes and demand justice.[125] Forging a new alliance, the women's movement and the anti-caste movement came together to lead a series of protests across the country to demand action against the accused. Their mobilization led to the arrest of four people by the state police, the punishment of several police officers who had harassed the girl's family, and a high-level investigation by the Central Bureau of Investigation. The protests also compelled the state government to compensate the victim's family and allot them a house plot. More broadly, the incident and subsequent protests exposed the continuing feudal and caste-based sexual violence targeting the Dalit community as well as the political patronage that upper-caste elites receive from the BJP.

More recently, several gender justice struggles have made national headlines. The country-wide movement demanding justice for victims of sexual violence in the northeastern state of Manipur is a powerful example. In July 2023, a video that showed a crowd of Meitei men in the state parading two naked Indigenous Kuki-Zo women went viral across India.[126] Prior to the incident, anti-Indigenous and anti-Christian violence had been spreading in Manipur for several months, taking the form of rapes, gang-rapes, murders, and arson. Yet until the video went viral, the extent of the brutality was not widely understood.[127] In response, women's organizations, political parties, and human rights groups organized hundreds of protests across the country. People from diverse backgrounds condemned the violence and brutality and shamed the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi for its inaction and apathy. Within ten days, the protests compelled the state government—which had ignored the violence for more than two months—to arrest the perpetrators.[128]

Also in 2023, globally acclaimed women wrestlers from India's wrestling team took to the streets of New Delhi to protest sexual harassment and exploitation by the president of the Wrestling Federation of India—who is also a member of Parliament from the ruling BJP. Many prominent figures in sports came out to demand administrative action against the president, who was accused of molesting young female athletes and compelling them to give sexual favors. In a rare act of unity, opposition political parties and civil society jointly mobilized to show their solidarity with the athletes. The accused has not yet been arrested, likely because of the patronage and protection he receives from the ruling party.[129] Yet these protests had important repercussions. They fanned the flames of many northern Indian farming communities' opposition to the government and the prime minister, as many of the young women wrestlers belonged to the Other Backward Classes—a term used by the government to describe socially and educationally disadvantaged groups.[130] Though initiated as a movement for gender justice, the women wrestlers' struggle activated and strengthened prodemocracy forces across India.

These high-profile instances of sexual violence brought people of all genders to the streets in protest. However, despite the implementation of a new stringent law against sexual violence and public demands for stronger action against perpetrators, the number of reported rapes and sexual offences has increased in recent years. According to data by the Indian National Crime Records Bureau, India recorded 31,677 cases of rape in 2021, amounting to a daily rate of 86 rapes. It also recorded almost forty-nine complaints related to crimes against women every hour that year. In 2022, the Indian National Commission for Women alone received more than 31,000 complaints of crimes against women.[131]

Progressive analysts have explained the increase in violence against women by pointing to the rise of conservative civil society groups and politicians defending traditional gender norms, such as with respect to women's dress codes, as well as state patronage offered to offenders (as seen in the early release of the murderers and rapists convicted in the Gujarat Bilkis Bano case).[132] They have argued that India is witnessing a Hindutva-led "Talibanization" of society that encourages patriarchal oppression and violence.[133] For example, the comment by a BJP minister in 2012 that "women should not wear clothes that provoke others to misbehave with them" continues to haunt many people's consciences.[134] Yet rising violence has also led to new alliances, as the examples above illustrate. The Hathras incident saw women's rights organizations, Dalit and Ambedkarite groups, Adivasi organizations, and Muslim and Christian groups coming together to demand justice.

Muslim Women's Leadership in Indian Prodemocracy Movements

In addition to demanding gender justice and equality, Indian women in recent years have also taken the lead in mobilizing for democracy.

Women's leadership in the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Registrar of Citizens (NRC) in 2019 and 2020 exemplifies this trend.[135] The CAA grants eligibility for Indian citizenship to non-Muslim undocumented migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who reached India before 2015—but excludes Muslim migrants from the same countries. It thus makes religion an explicit basis for citizenship. The NRC, meanwhile, aims to enumerate all Indian citizens residing in the country and identify those who do not have legally valid citizenship documents for deportation. Both the CAA and NRC were introduced by the Indian government in a non-consultative fashion that triggered widespread criticism. As the scholar Ali Khan Mahmudabad has argued, "The Citizenship Amendment Act, India's Nuremberg moment, was a significant marker of the fundamental shift in the political, economic, legal, institutional, cultural and social status of Indian Muslims."[136] The legislation represented an extraordinary instance of exclusion of the Muslim community that made India their home country following partition and independence seventy-five years ago.

In response, Indian Muslims—led by young and elderly women—joined with other progressive forces to form a formidable resistance movement. Following Mahatma Gandhi's model, they initiated *dharna* and *satyagraha* (sit-in demonstrations) at Shaheen Bagh in Delhi.[137] Many similar sit-ins sprang up in cities and small towns across the country. Shaheen Bagh thus quickly became a popular model of mobilization, featuring artistic expressions like poetry, songs, theatre performances, and stand-up comedy. Political parties and scholars likened the protests to the nonooperation movement led by Gandhi against colonial rule in the 1920s.[138]

Women managed hundreds of such protest sites. In most cases, these were ordinary community women and not activists or professionals associated with any civil society organization. The fact that the protests were secular in character yet led by Muslim women lent significant credibility to the progressive nature of the anti-CAA/NRC resistance. Shaheen Bagh sit-ins set up across the country lasted for nearly a hundred days and were only curtailed when the government used the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown as an excuse to crack down on the protest sites.

In addition to taking on leadership roles, women bore the brunt of the conservative Hindutva backlash against the protests. Particularly in the district of North East Delhi, the site of a Shaheen Bagh-inspired protest site, this backlash resulted in communal polarization and violence. Several young women leaders were among the people arrested for demonstrating, and some are still in jail.[139] It took many months before a pregnant woman, Safoora Zargar, was able to get conditional bail on health grounds, and many more months for Ishrat Jahan, Devangana Kalita, Natasha Narwal, and other women to secure bail. Authors Ziya Us Salam and Uzma Ausaf wrote about what made the Muslim women of Shaheen Bagh and elsewhere stand up for equal citizenship, with the Constitution in one hand and the Indian flag in the other. For many of these women, it was a moment of reckoning with history and an opportunity to stand up against what they saw as a majoritarian and authoritarian government.[140]

The Farmers' Protests and the Revival of Grassroots Democracy

Like the Muslim women targeted by the CAA and the NRC, communities affected by struggles over natural resources in India have also become a key part of popular resistance against democratic backsliding. Over the past decade, women have increasingly taken on leadership roles in this realm—especially in critical political struggles like the farmers' mobilization against new farm laws.

In 2020 and 2021, widespread farmers' protests broke out across northern India.[141] The protests have been called the "largest and longest peasants' struggle in the history of modern India."[142] They came in response to three farm laws put forward by the BJP government that aimed to corporatize farming and end state subsidies and the Minimum Support Price for farm products. In response, agitated farming communities came together and mobilized amid the COVID-19 pandemic and government lockdowns. Although formal leadership for the movement was in the hands of male members of farmers' organizations, women agricultural workers and farmers spearheaded many of the protests, especially the blockade organized at the main borders of Delhi: Tikri, Singhu, and Ghazipur.[143]

The protesters wanted the government not only to repeal the legislation but also stop privatizing and corporatizing the agricultural industry, an impulse many viewed as anti-poor and antidemocratic. The government's refusal to engage in dialogue with the farmers was also widely unpopular. Overlapping grievances gave rise to a larger alliance among progressive political and civil society forces, minority rights organizations, and the farmers' movement. For example, statements issued by the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (a coalition of more than forty Indian farmers' unions) expressed opposition not merely to the farm laws but also to anti-minority violence, the anti-women stance of the BJP, the suppression of democratic voices, the abuse of Indian women wrestlers, the government's attacks on prodemocracy journalists, and the violence in Manipur, among other domestic and international topics.[144] This range of statements stood in contrast to earlier times of mobilization when farmers' movements stuck to narrower demands.

The Shaheen Bagh model inspired women in the farmers' protests to set up camps at different entry points to New Delhi. Women protesters communicated the movement's demands to local communities and toured nearby villages, singing songs and collecting food for the protesters. The fact that women from the farming community were mobilizing around issues of land and livelihood marked a drastic change from the past, highlighting the possibility of a new type of feminist movement. Indeed, comparative analyses of the anti-CAA/NRC

protests and the farmers' protests found women's leadership to be the most promising and progressive common denominator.[145] "The farmers' movement not only led to a slowdown in the BJP government's aspirations for a Hindutva state, but it has also created space for the resurgence of grassroot democracy," wrote Rajinder Singh Deep Singh Wala of the Kirti Kisan Union.[146]

The farmers' mobilization highlights that the struggle for land rights in India is deeply intertwined with the struggle for women's rights. Since legal titles usually make men the formal owners of land, women are excluded from any decisionmaking rights. In the western state of Maharashtra, for example, 88 percent of rural women work in the agricultural sector, without any rights over the land.[147] Women-led civil society organizations have come to realize that women's land ownership is critical to establishing their rights and participation in an agricultural economy. With this purpose, in 2020 the Swayam Shikshan Prayog—a women-led network based out of the city of Pune—initiated a program to make sure women gain land ownership and decisionmaking rights.[148] Their activism has encouraged other women to take on leadership roles in the agricultural movement and in the region's farmers' protests.

Women's Defense of Natural Resources as Prodemocratic Mobilization

Women's mobilization for land rights is also evident in the climate movement. Especially in the resource-rich central-eastern states of India, women are at the forefront of resistance to displacement induced by land grabs and natural resource exploitation. For example, Adivasi women leaders are opposing private sector mining companies and energy projects in the Indigenous homelands of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh.[149]

However, far from recognizing their contribution to preventing ecological damage, government narratives often paint these women leaders as Maoists, supporters of left-wing extremism, and threats to national security. Charged under national security laws meant to prevent terrorism, women Adivasi leaders such as Hidme Markam and Soni Sori have gone through long periods of incarceration and endured sexual and gender-based violence for their staunch opposition to land grabs, crony capitalism, ecological looting, and the destruction of Indigenous homelands.[150]

The All India Union of Forest Working People (AIUFWP) epitomizes women's leadership in the environmental movement, especially since the enactment of the Forest Rights Act in 2006. Men—and upper-caste men in particular—traditionally lead labor unions in India. In sharp contrast, the AIUFWP is almost entirely fronted by women. Sukalo Gond, an Adivasi woman from the mineral-rich Kaimur forest region in Uttar Pradesh, is the national president of the AIUFWP as well as a militant activist and orator.[151] Incarcerated multiple times, including under the National Security Act, Sukalo Gond and her colleagues have been instrumental to the forest workers' movement in India.[152] The women-led union has campaigned for climate justice, allied with the farmers' movement and the anti-CAA resistance, and stood up against sexual violence and the authoritarian repression of democratic voices. Through a national initiative called Bandini, they also have been instrumental in bringing together and raising awareness of women political prisoners.[153] By doing so, they have carved out an important space for prodemocratic alliance-building within the land and livelihoods movement.

Beyond the forest sector, some women have taken on leadership roles in trade unions. In India, the larger unions have often been accused of sticking to their sectoral demands and not joining hands with other democratic and pro-Constitution forces. Several women are challenging this pattern. Amarjeet Kaur, the national leader of the largest trade union in India, the All India Trade Union Congress, has forged new alliances with other anti-communal, anti-caste, and secular progressive forces fighting authoritarianism—for instance, conducting joint protests with those leading the farmers' movement.[154] Others, like the young trade unionist and Dalit rights activist Nodeep Kaur of the Mazdoor Adhikar Sangathan (Organization for Labor Rights), have been kept in jail for months but consistently have been at the forefront of the larger struggle against the authoritarianism of the Modi regime.[155]

When Going Gets Tough: Women and the Civil Rights Movement in India

All women actively engaged in the democracy movement or the movement against communalism in India today risk being arrested or jailed. For example, women's media collectives that seek to educate the public about democracy, fight caste-based discrimination, and redefine gender roles—like *Khabar Lahariya* ("News Waves") or BehanBox—have been targeted by conservative forces.[156] The minimum punishment usually consists of multiple police raids, interrogations, or public harassment from online trolls. Enjoying widespread impunity, right-wing actors increasingly attack women with hate speech and online threats of sexual and gender-based violence. This has been the experience of many women leaders, including environmental leader Medha Patkar; labor lawyer Sudha Bharadwaj; women's movement leader Annie Raja; forest union activist Roma; academic Shoma Sen; jailed student leaders Gulafsha Fatima, Valarmathi, Natasha Narwal, Devangana Kalita, and Richa Singh; civil liberties advocate Kavita Srivastava; poet Meena Kandasamy; renowned activists Syeda Hameed, Shabnam Hashmi, Anjali Bhardwaj, Kavita Krishnan, and Brinda Karat; and prominent journalists Teesta Setalvad, Rana Ayyub, Arfa Khanum Sherwani, Anuradha Bhasin, Nidhi Razdan, Barkha Dutt, and Sagarika Ghose. Threats are worse for Muslim women and worse yet for Kashmiri Muslims, since women with intersectional identities are more vulnerable in a context of rising Hindu majoritarianism.[157]

However, politically active women have been protected in the legal sphere by an army of strong, progressive women lawyers. Although women lawyers in the lower courts are rarely acknowledged, women wield notable power in the higher courts, especially at the Supreme

Court. From senior lawyers like Indira Jaising, Kamini Jaiswal, Rebecca John, Nitya Ramakrishnan, Vrinda Grover, Karuna Nundy, and Indira Unninayar to the rising generation of lawyers from the best legal education institutes of India, women lawyers are lining up for a wide range of prodemocracy causes. Most focus on protecting human rights and civil liberties, but some women lawyers like Shomona Khanna have prioritized community resource rights. Availing themselves to causes and people who cannot afford regular lawyers, they provide crucial assistance to marginalized people. These women are modeling a sense of defiance against authoritarianism and championing the constitutional, democratic rights movement in India. They are building narratives of love and compassion at a time when hate speech and militarized nationalism have become the norm.

At a dark time for democracy, women's leadership in civic action in India represents a strong silver lining that narrates new stories and brings a vibrant sense of hope to the progressive movement at large. Recognizing the interconnectedness of various struggles for rights and justice, women have brought together different progressive movements under the umbrella of mobilizing for democratic inclusion. In an assertive response to the clarion call by Zetkin, countless women have indeed taken it on themselves to carve out a democratic future for India at the risk of their careers and lives.

CHAPTER 5

Women's Activism for Democracy in Turkey: Impact, Limitations, and State Response

Özge Zihnioğlu

The Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, or AKP), a conservative party with Islamist roots, has controlled Turkey's national government since 2002. Although the AKP under the leadership of current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan implemented some democratic reforms during its early years, it began to drift away from democracy later in the decade. Democratic backsliding intensified significantly in the aftermath of a failed coup attempt in 2016. A 2017 referendum transforming the parliamentary government into a presidential system marked an important turning point, effectively institutionalizing one-man rule. Over the past fifteen years, the government has systematically eroded the rule of law, relying on arbitrary prosecutions as well as restrictions on freedom of expression and association to tighten civic and political space.[158]

These antidemocratic measures have provoked intermittent waves of countermobilization. In 2013, the Gezi protests brought together a broad-based coalition of prodemocracy groups that initially challenged a local urban development effort in Istanbul but quickly expanded to contest the government's broader attacks secularism and democracy. Offshoots of the Gezi protests, such as City Defenses or "park forums," continued to challenge the government's policies over the next several years by modeling an alternative form of politics rooted in dialogue and bottom-up participation.[159] Although they gradually lost momentum, these prodemocracy groups also organized "no" campaigns in the lead-up to the 2017 referendum.

In recent years, democratic backsliding in Turkey has coincided with escalating attacks on women's rights, triggering new forms of activism among women. Particularly in the lead-up to the 2023 election, women's organizations that previously were less engaged in debates about democracy have become more involved. At the same time, women's intersecting identities have also influenced the goals of their mobilization. For instance, Kurdish women

have a long history of protest against undemocratic practices, fully aware of the detrimental consequences of autocratic centralization for their community. Some Islamic women, by contrast, have criticized the AKP's approach to women's rights yet generally have maintained their allegiance to the party. These divisions have made it difficult to build broad-based coalitions. Growing civic repression and the fact that even reform-minded political parties do not perceive women as significant political actors have further constrained women's prodemocratic mobilization.

With their extensive experience in civic activism and their ability to connect with diverse segments of society, women nevertheless offer significant opportunities for democratic resistance in Turkey. The key challenge for the women's rights movement lies in expanding to embrace a broader prodemocracy agenda while navigating the increasing pressure exerted by the state.

Women's Activism and Turkish Prodemocracy Campaigns

The prodemocracy movement in Turkey encompasses diverse groups, from secularists and Kurdish nationalists to feminists and environmentalists. Over the past decade, these groups have come together in unified opposition to Erdoğan and his policies. They have organized various campaigns and protests against democratic backsliding, especially during the Gezi protests and in the years that followed. In the lead-up to the most recent May 2023 elections, prodemocratic mobilization focused primarily on preventing Erdoğan's reelection. One of the strongest actors in this coalition was the Nation Alliance, a group of six political parties known as the Table of Six and led by the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, or CHP) that campaigned for restoring a strengthened parliamentary system, reversing democratic backsliding, and reinstating the rule of law. The Nation Alliance garnered support from many Turkish women's organizations that openly endorsed CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the presidential candidate of the Nation Alliance. Recognizing the significance of the elections to preserving not only women's rights but also the space to fight for those rights, many women activists adopted a broader prodemocracy discourse.

Although separate from the prodemocracy movement, the women's rights movement in Turkey has contributed to the country's democratic development and culture since the 1980s.[160] Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, secular women who identified as feminists—typically educated women based in Turkey's urban centers—initiated campaigns and protest movements to advocate for women's rights and against domestic violence, and they established new civil society organizations and women's studies programs and centers within universities.[161] These efforts had tangible results, including Turkey's 1985 ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and a 1998 law on domestic violence prevention. In the early 2000s, feminist bureaucrats ("femocrats") helped amend discriminatory articles in the legal framework, such as those that previously designated the husband as the head of the family and those pertaining to property regimes within families.

Yet the Turkish women's rights movement is not homogenous: it encompasses secular, Islamic, and Kurdish feminists and organizations. These actors occasionally work together to advance joint priorities but also voice distinct political demands. For instance, Kurdish women have historically fought for women's rights alongside the right to ethnic self-determination, challenging Kurdish patriarchy and the Turkish state—as well as Turkish women who dismiss their unique plight.[162] By the late 1990s, they had successfully established a gender quota in Kurdish political parties, which they have worked to strengthen over time. Islamic women, by comparison, traditionally have mobilized for gender-based religious rights, especially following the Council of Ministers' 1981 decision to ban students and women employees in public institutions from wearing headscarves. Embracing a language of rights, they argued that the headscarf ban violated their religious rights and their right to education.[163]

After the AKP's ascent to power in 2002, the party initially leveraged women's rights protections and liberal discourse on gender equality to soften any negative perceptions and fears related to its Islamist roots.[164] The government during its first term advanced various women's rights reforms to bolster its legitimacy, including with regard to secular Turkish elites in the military and state bureaucracy. However, as Erdoğan moved to centralize power and escalate civic repression, feminists' political influence gradually waned. As the AKP marched toward authoritarianism, it rallied women aligned with conservative gender norms to support the party and established new conservative women's institutions and organizations that supported the government's political and ideological agenda. In his speeches, Erdoğan began lashing out against progressive gender norms and LGBTQ rights, framing them as opposed to Turkish culture and tradition.[165]

Over the past decade, the government has increasingly reinterpreted existing legal frameworks to advance conservative gender norms, using its growing control over the courts to strengthen the role of religion in family law and public life.[166] For example, in 2019, Erdoğan began targeting the Istanbul Convention, a landmark treaty on preventing and combating domestic violence and violence against women, for undermining traditional family values. He eventually withdrew Turkey from the convention in 2021. Court rulings and laws formalizing religious marriage and granting religious officials the right to perform marriages have stripped women of their civil marriage rights and paved the way for an increase in early marriages. More recently, the Islamist parties that are part of the AKP's current election alliance, the New Welfare Party (Yeniden Refah Partisi) and the Free Cause Party (HÜDA-Par), have sought to end indefinite alimony for divorced couples and amend Law No. 6284 on the Protection of the Family and the Prevention of Violence Against Women, which incorporates the Istanbul Convention into domestic law.[167]

As a result of these changes, many women across the ideological spectrum have felt that their rights are increasingly vulnerable. They have responded by mobilizing for women's rights alongside standing up for democracy. For one, despite the constraints placed on the freedom of peaceful assembly, women have remained undeterred in their determination to take to the streets. In 2021, after Erdoğan issued a presidential decree announcing Turkey's withdrawal

from the Istanbul Convention, they organized protests across fifty-one locations.[168] They argued that leaving an internationally recognized treaty through a presidential decree, which had been approved by the parliament, not only disregarded the people's will but also violated Turkish law.[169]

Furthermore, women's organizations have actively mobilized during election campaigns. Before the 2017 presidential referendum, for instance, the We Will Stop Femicides platform moved beyond reporting on femicides to also launch a "no" campaign against Erdoğan's proposed constitutional changes.[170] The group spoke out about the government's role in femicides, emphasizing the insufficient punishment of perpetrators and inadequate protection of women.[171] It also demonstrated solidarity with the opposition newspaper *Cumhuriyet* during its trial and protested the detention of Kurdish women politicians during the state of emergency imposed after the 2016 coup attempt.[172] During the May 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections, various women's organizations also called on women voters to oppose Erdoğan, pointing to the government's economic mismanagement, the country's deepening poverty, and the government's mishandling of the catastrophic earthquake that struck the country in February. They organized on social media as well as offline, with groups such as Feminists for Elections distributing leaflets and engaging with women at public markets in Istanbul.[173] As active participants in the campaign process, they urged women to stand up for their rights and exercise their right to vote.

In addition to mobilizing women voters against Erdoğan and the AKP, secular women's organizations called on political parties to support women's formal participation in politics. The number of women members of parliament in Turkey has historically been relatively low, rising from around 2 percent in the 1990s to slightly over 4 percent in 2002. Women's representation gradually increased in subsequent years, fluctuating between 14 percent and 17 percent during the 2010s.[174] Although the AKP's percentage of women members of parliament was 11 percent and around 17 percent in the 2015 and 2018 elections, it was the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, or HDP) within the opposition that played a significant role in raising the overall percentage of women members of parliament.[175] Ahead of the 2023 polls, women's organizations therefore advocated for parties across the ideological spectrum to run as many women as men candidates and support women's campaigns with party funding.[176] To ensure that no further progress on women's rights was lost, various women's organizations also challenged the anti-feminist rhetoric of both the government and the Islamist parties with whom the government formed a new election alliance.

Islamic feminists have at various points joined the opposition to the AKP's policies on women's issues, though they have refrained from explicitly mobilizing against the government. In the 2010s, they launched initiatives such as Reçel ("Jam") Blog, the Muslim Initiative Against Violence Against Women, and Women in Mosques to open a new space within the Turkish feminist movement for Muslim women. During this period, they actively voiced their objections to certain government policies that had an impact on women and girls. They expressed their concerns in debates regarding the authorization of religious officials to perform civil marriages and voiced their opposition to child abuse legislation.[177] They also advocated for the Istanbul Convention.[178] In the run-up to the May 2023 elections, Islamic feminists organized events to discuss the election process, but they did not directly campaign against Erdoğan. For instance, the Islamic women's organization Havle brought together young religious women with women politicians from across the ideological spectrum to discuss young women's priorities ahead of the elections.[179] Many religious women attending these meetings were critical of the government's social policies, especially of social and economic assistance that supports women only within the framework of the family. Like other women's organizations and activists, Islamic feminists also disputed women's underrepresentation in and exclusion from elected office.[180]

Kurdish women's organizations and activists, by contrast, have a long history of protesting undemocratic practices and recognizing their detrimental consequences for women in the region. Indeed, Kurdish women's organizations have established a narrative that explicitly links the broader democratic struggle to the advancement of women's rights. For instance, the government has in recent years removed elected mayors from the pro-Kurdish HDP and replaced them with state-appointed trustees. Protesting this policy, Kurdish women activists have emphasized how the trustees have eliminated the gender quotas in hiring for which Kurdish women had fought, in addition to disbanding all women's units and counseling centers previously established under the elected mayors. In other words, the central government's intervention has led to women's spaces being eroded.[181] The Kurdish women's movement therefore sees democratization as a necessary precondition for women's empowerment and rights protections and views patriarchy as intrinsically connected to Kurdish oppression by the state.

Women's intersecting identities thus have shaped their responses to democratic backsliding. Secular women have mobilized to preserve the rights they have acquired since the 1980s, whereas Kurdish women are dedicated to achieving ethnic self-determination. Islamic women who previously had advocated for gender-based religious rights have in recent years taken steps to challenge the prevailing Islamic patriarchy. In pursuit of their goals, each of these movements employs a language of rights and challenges the patriarchal structures of the state.

Women's Impact on the Turkish Prodemocracy Movement—and Their Limits

One of the main successes of Turkish women's mobilization over the past several years has been to bring women's rights—and violence against women in particular—onto the political opposition's agenda. For instance, Kılıçdaroğlu, the main opposition leader and presidential candidate, repeatedly defended Law No. 6284 (on violence against women) and said that the removal of the law should not be allowed.[182] Prominent figures from another opposition party, İYİ, have also made supportive statements, asserting that "we are returning to all international agreements because we know that the Istanbul Convention saves lives."[183]

Furthermore, the law granting religious officials the authority to conduct civil marriages has drawn negative reactions from opposition parties such as CHP, İYİ, and HDP since its conception.[184]

Yet women's mobilization, while noteworthy, has so far failed to fundamentally reshape the Turkish prodemocracy movement, for three main reasons. First, collaboration among women's organizations and other actors within the prodemocracy movement remains limited. There have been some examples of joint initiatives, such as the Rosa Women's Association partnering with legal and medical associations to establish a network on combating violence against women.[185] However, these alliances remain the exception rather than the rule. This rarity can be attributed to the fact that Turkish civil society organizations often have been inwardly focused, not just on their ideologies but also on specific thematic areas.[186] In addition, the development of civil society in Turkey, with the exceptions of some women's organizations, is recent. Many key actors are relatively new and do not know each other well, which inhibits alliance-building. As a result, the demands, expectations, and discourses of women's rights advocates often do not extend beyond their own organizations and networks.

Second, heightened political and social polarization makes it difficult for women to build broad coalitions across ethnic and religious divides. As noted above, some conservative women close to the AKP have expressed their dissatisfaction with the AKP's anti-feminist policies and the hostile rhetoric of party officials within the AKP's electoral alliance. Similarly, some women AKP politicians and conservative women closely associated with the AKP—such as the Women and Democracy Association (KADEM)—have shown support for the Istanbul Convention and Law No. 6284.[187] For instance, AKP Deputy Group Chair Özlem Zengin referred to Law No. 6284 as "our red line" in a parliamentary statement. Former minister of family and social services Derya Yanık also stated that "opening the subject to discussion is unacceptable to us."[188]

Yet these expressions of protest by conservative women have not necessarily resulted in a complete break from the party. Instead, women in or close to the AKP who are uncomfortable with the government's anti-feminist rhetoric still maintain their overall political identity. Their allegiance to the party—rooted in a broader set of ideological and political considerations—tends to outweigh these policy concerns. In short, women's rights policies and concerns are not the primary factors shaping their alliances. Women's efforts to build broader prodemocracy campaigns therefore suffer from low levels of unity, making it more difficult to bring women's issues to the forefront.

The third challenge is that despite their active participation in protests and civic mobilization, women are still not seen as significant political actors by prodemocratic political parties. This mindset is most evident in the composition of opposition parties' parliamentary candidate lists. With a few exceptions like the Green Left Party (now called the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party), most opposition parties ahead of the 2023 elections either limited the number of women candidates or strategically placed them in positions that offered them little chance of being elected. As a result, women's representation in the newly formed Turkish parliament remains low. For instance, out of the 169 members of parliament representing the main opposition party, CHP, only 30 (17 percent) are women—a slightly lower share than in the AKP's parliamentary faction, which includes 50 women among its 267 representatives. The İYİ Party, the CHP's largest partner in the Nation Alliance, also counts only 6 women among its 44 representatives.[189] Women's marginalization in parliament is further reinforced by high levels of party discipline, which constrains women's ability to speak up on gender issues.[190]

The consequences of these exclusionary practices are far-reaching. In recent years, political parties have increasingly emerged as a key platform for prodemocratic opposition in Turkey. Women's exclusion from these parties therefore poses a particularly pressing challenge. The parties disregarding women as full political subjects and failing to provide them with opportunities for meaningful participation restricts women's ability to consolidate their voices and interests within broader prodemocracy campaigns, particularly since women's strong representation in parliament would likely bolster their influence in civil society as well. Conversely, the opposition's exclusionary practices limit the overall impact of women's advocacy for their rights and democratic values.

Understanding State Responses to Women's Activism

Women's mobilization in Turkey is unfolding in a context of increasing state hostility. Over the past fifteen years, but particularly since the 2016 coup attempt, the government has imposed significant restrictions on peaceful assembly and freedom of association. The police have intervened consistently to limit street mobilization, including for the International Women's Day march on March 8, protests in solidarity with the Istanbul Convention, and demonstrations against violence toward women. In addition, many women's rights activists have been arrested and fined for their participation in peaceful protests and campaigns in recent years. Women activists and politicians who protested Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, for example, were met with a wave of criminal complaints.[191] The total amount of fines imposed on members of the Mersin Women's Platform, who organized a sit-in protest, exceeded 120,000 Turkish lira (around $14,000).[192]

Increasingly, women activists and women's rights organizations have been attacked when they adopt broader prodemocracy discourse and challenge the government's policies. For instance, many members of the Kurdish Rosa Women's Association, which protested the replacement of elected mayors by state-appointed trustees in southeastern Turkey, have been detained and arrested in various waves.[193] Similarly, in response to their work monitoring violence against LGBTQ individuals, the We Will Stop Femicides Platform in 2021 faced a lawsuit accusing the group of "engaging in activities contrary to law and morality" and requesting the association's dissolution. In September, courts dismissed this lawsuit.[194]

An important reason for the increasing pressure on women activists and women's organizations who advocate for democracy lies in Turkey's highly polarized environment. The government perceives any prodemocracy stance as a sign of support for the political opposition. Consequently, it does not view women activists as independent civic actors but rather as integral parts of the opposition landscape. Especially during election periods, it therefore relies on legal cases, detentions, and arrests to divert the focus, energy, and resources of women activists, thereby suppressing women's autonomous activism altogether. These tactics are also aimed at stigmatizing and criminalizing women's organizations in order to diminish their legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Pressure on women activists and women's rights organizations thus serves a dual purpose: disrupting their efforts from within and undermining their credibility externally.

Conclusion

Turkey's long-standing women's rights movement has a wealth of policy and advocacy expertise and enjoys widespread grassroots support. Over the years, this movement has achieved significant progress for women's rights and gender equality. At the same time, some women's organizations and women activists have also engaged in prodemocracy initiatives. Secular women's involvement in prodemocratic mobilization has aimed to preserve their hard-fought legal rights and political spaces, whereas Islamic women have traditionally aimed to expand gender-based religious rights. More recently, both groups have voiced opposition to the Erdoğan government's policies on women's rights and participated in some initiatives to open up new political spaces for women. Kurdish women's mobilization, by contrast, is influenced by their perception of patriarchy as inherently intertwined with the Turkish state's oppression of the Kurds. Despite state restrictions on peaceful demonstrations, the determination of these diverse women to take to the streets to protest has served as a powerful testament to their commitment to defending their rights.

However, the impact of women's mobilization on the broader prodemocracy movement has remained somewhat limited. In recent years, opposition to Erdoğan has consolidated in opposition political parties, yet these parties have not fully recognized women as critical political agents. In addition, despite the potential for agreement on specific issues with the AKP's stance on gender-related issues, political and social polarization poses a significant challenge to coalition-building. Moreover, the women's movement has increasingly become a target of government repression. The pressures on and the scrutiny faced by women's organizations are even greater when they explicitly embrace prodemocracy discourse and activism. However, despite these pressures, women continue to mobilize. Their activism is crucial not only for safeguarding past gains in women's rights but also for preserving space for the women's rights movement, with its extensive experience and commitment to democracy, to continue its advocacy.

CHAPTER 6

Black Tunisian Women's Mobilization and the Fight Against Racist and Populist Backlash

Houda Mzioudet

On February 21, 2023, Tunisian President Kais Saied made an inflammatory speech warning of the danger posed by Black African migrants allegedly hell-bent on replacing Tunisia's Arab-Islamic identity with an African one.[195] His rhetoric encouraged some Tunisians to attack sub-Saharan African migrants and accuse them of wanting to colonize the country. Many Tunisians remained silent about the president's speech, whether because of fear of repression or implicit agreement. Yet a minority denounced what they described as fascist and racist discourse and called for the protection of vulnerable Black African migrants in Tunisia.

This article examines the role of Black Tunisian women in the Tunisian prodemocracy movement since 2011. It focuses on several Black Tunisian organizations, including ADAM (Association for Equality and Development), M'nemty, and Voix des Femmes Tunisiennes Noires (Voice of Black Tunisian Women, or VFTN), as well as the work of the late Ennahdha member of parliament Jamila Ksiksi. By examining their activism, it analyzes how Black Tunisian women have placed human rights, particularly the rights of Black African migrants, at the heart of their political vision.

Drawing on their own experiences, Black Tunisian women activists have called attention to the nexus of racial, gender, and class discrimination in Tunisian society. They have stressed that these intersecting dynamics impact their daily lives not only as Black women but also as activists who often feel alienated by the stereotypical image of the light-skinned Tunisian woman and Tunisian state feminism.[196] By questioning this image, Black Tunisian women have sought to make themselves and their own experiences visible and shape a new

conception of Tunisian feminism.[197] Through intersectional and transnational activism, they have centered the rights and empowerment of the most marginalized communities in their battle for democracy and justice.

In the post-2011 period, Black Tunisian women's activism benefited from a climate of loosened censorship in the media and politics, enabling more open discussions of race and human rights. Yet in recent years, their efforts have been met with increasing resistance. Tunisian women's rights activists have faced smear campaigns spearheaded by the Tunisian Nationalist Party (TNP), an ethnonationalist party that seeks to criminalize and displace Black African migrants in North Africa. This party, which supported Saied's February 2023 speech, has targeted human rights organizations defending migrants—led by M'nemty, VFTN, and Ksiksi—and has labeled them enemies of the state.[198] Still, despite increased vulnerability, some Black Tunisian women continue to organize, now with more mainstream support.

Black Tunisian Women's Activism During Tunisia's Democratic Opening

Before 2011, Black women were almost entirely absent from the Tunisian public sphere. Virtually no one questioned their political marginalization, even in Tunisian feminist circles. Although no official figures exist, advocacy organizations suggest that the Black community makes up approximately 10 to 15 percent of the Tunisian population.[199] However, Black Tunisians represent a majority in various economically marginalized areas in the south of the country. Lacking both social and economic capital, they have struggled to escape poverty and exclusion since Tunisia formally abolished slavery in 1846. In contrast, Black Tunisians living in the north of the country have had relatively more access to higher education, which has offered them greater social mobility.[200]

Despite the persistence of racial discrimination, the authoritarian regimes of Habib Bourguiba (1957–1987) and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987–2011) treated the rights of minority groups as a distraction. Both framed problems of racism and racial exclusion as narratives imported from the West to sow division within Tunisia.[201] Restrictions on Tunisians' freedom of association made it difficult for Black Tunisians to collectively advocate for their rights. Except for Saadia and Affet Mosbah, two Black Tunisian activists and sisters who spoke up against anti-Black racism in Tunisia in the early 2000s, few Black Tunisians publicly challenged the status quo, fearing repression from Ben Ali's authoritarian regime.[202] The result was a de facto taboo on debating racial politics: the issue of race was shrouded in silence.

The 2011 Tunisian revolution opened new space for Black Tunisian women to speak up for human rights and defend marginalized groups. During the uprising, their activism initially took shape online. Activist Maha Abdelhamid set up two Facebook pages as spaces for discussion for like-minded Black Tunisians, most of whom were young university graduates and researchers focused on anti-Black racism and discrimination.[203] During the mushrooming of associational life that followed Ben Ali's departure, Black Tunisian women joined other parts of Tunisian civil society to participate in the constitution drafting process. For the first time, Black Tunisian activists—often led by Black women—openly advocated for Black Tunisians' and Black African migrants' rights, including for their full social, economic, and political participation.

Two organizations, ADAM and M'nemty, were pioneers in this movement. ADAM emerged out of anti-racism protests held in front of the National Constituent Assembly in 2011. With many people mobilizing in front of the assembly, several Black Tunisian activists—including three women, Maha Abdelhamid, Saadia Mosbah, and Amina Soudani—seized the opportunity to draw attention to racial discrimination. Abdelhamid went on to become one of the cofounders of ADAM, whereas Mosbah established M'nemty. Both organizations mobilized against racism and pushed to have a prohibition of racial discrimination included in the new constitution. In 2012, they launched a petition to this effect.[204] However, their demand was not immediately endorsed by representatives in the National Constituent Assembly, who told them that anti-racism would be integrated in the Penal Code at a later stage. Black Tunisian women activists deplored the nonresponse from state institutions and civil society and the lack of solidarity for their cause, which continued in subsequent years.

The lack of state response pushed Black Tunisian activists to get out of closed spaces such as cultural centers and conferences and focus more explicitly on mobilizing public support. In March 2014, approximately one hundred Black Tunisians began a four-day march across the Tunisian south. Led by three women—Maha Abdelhamid, Amina Soudani, and Imen Ben Ismaïl—they crossed the island of Jerba; marched through the southern city of Gabes, home to the largest Black population in the country; and then went on to Sfax, Tunisia's second-largest city, before ending in Tunis.[205] The march drew men, women, and young people from all social and economic backgrounds. In Tunis, they protested in front of the National Constituent Assembly to call for an explicit prohibition of racial discrimination in the newly adopted constitution.[206] The group was met by several members of parliament, who discussed their demands and promised to present them to the parliament.

In addition, M'nemty and the Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD), a well-known Tunisian feminist association, also organized an anti-racism caravan in Jerba. Several prominent human rights activists, including the late Gilbert Naccache and his wife Azza Ghanmi, took part in the protest. However, the limited support Black Tunisians received from other parts of Tunisian civil society led many Black Tunisian activists to focus on their own fight without seeking the solidarity of mainstream activists.[207]

Although the 2014 constitution ultimately failed to include race as a cause for discrimination, it did mention "positive discrimination" to ensure greater regional equity in economic development.[208] Black Tunisian activists later used this clause to press for the promulgation

of the 2018 anti–racial discrimination law. By building a grassroots ecosystem of organizations within a broader Black Tunisian civic awakening, Black Tunisian women helped break the racial taboo in Tunisian society. Moreover, the dynamism of Tunisian civil society during this period achieved several important milestones with respect to gender equality and ethnic, sexual, and religious minority rights, including a new law criminalizing gender-based violence.

Black Tunisian women activists also began to forge connections with like-minded activists abroad. One of the main highlights of the Tunisian democratic transition was the organization of the World Social Forum in Tunis in 2013 and 2015. This anti-globalist gathering brought together hundreds of Indigenous groups and civil society organizations from around the world, mainly from the Global South. The event allowed Black Tunisian women to meet Afro-descendant activists from France and Brazil and build new coalitions around fighting anti-Black racism in their respective countries. Through these exchanges, Black Tunisian women activists strengthened their activism and gained more clout within the broader circle of Tunisian civil society activists, human rights practitioners, and policymakers, many of whom previously had shunned them.

Black Tunisian Women Break the Glass Ceiling

Black Tunisian women's political mobilization after 2011 was not limited to civil society. Several Black Tunisian women also broke the glass ceiling by attaining positions of high-level leadership.

For example, Najiba Hamrouni in 2011 became the first female head of the Tunisian journalists' union (Syndicat National des Journalistes Tunisiens, or SNJT). In this very visible position, she endured racist attacks, including a smear campaign from radical supporters of the Islamist party Ennahdha, who attacked her for denouncing the party's press censorship during its 2012–2014 coalition government with secular political parties.

Moreover, in the 2011 National Constituent Assembly elections, nine Black candidates competed for parliamentary seats—five of whom were women.[209] Among them was the activist Maha Abdelhamid of ADAM, who ran on a platform of fighting pollution in her hometown of Gabes, which since the 1970s had been plagued by pollution caused by the processing of phosphates in the area. Although her candidacy was unsuccessful, symbolically it was important for her community: she wanted to highlight the impact of the chemical plant's noxious effects on the area's most vulnerable communities, particularly on Black people employed in menial positions.[210] In the end, the only Black Tunisian member of parliament to be elected to the 2011 assembly was Béchir Chammam from the southwestern city of Kebili representing Ennahdha.[211] His election marked the first time that a Black Tunisian was elected to the assembly.

Between 2011 and 2018, various civil society groups focused on increasing voter turnout rates among Black Tunisians in presidential, parliamentary, and municipal elections. Ahead of the 2011 polls, several Black Tunisian activists specifically tried to elect Black parliamentarians.[212] Ultimately, only one Black Tunisian woman—Jamila Ksiksi of Ennahdha—was elected. The 2018 municipal election, however, saw a growing number of Black women running for seats in municipal councils. Aicha Bousetta became the first female Black mayor in the southern town of Kettana. Her cousin, Halima Makkari, also ran in the 2018 elections and was elected as member of the municipal council in Mareth. These women were models of Black Tunisian political empowerment for their communities. Their election encouraged fellow Black Tunisian women to participate in democratic civic action.[213]

Black Tunisian Women's Intersectional Politics

Black Tunisian women are triply marginalized in Tunisian society because of their gender, race, and status as working-class citizens. As a result, their mobilization in formal politics as well as in society has been characterized by an explicitly intersectional approach, cutting across gender, race, and class.

For instance, following the passage of the Tunisian Constitution in 2014, women activists working with M'nemty and ADAM continued to press for anti-racism legislation. They organized roundtables, conferences, and discussion groups to sensitize the wider public to anti-Black discrimination. Both organizations also called on the parliament and the president (then Béji Caïd-Essebsi) to make January 26 a national holiday commemorating the abolition of slavery in Tunisia. After Jamila Ksiksi was elected to the parliament in 2014, she supported their cause by lobbying the speaker of the parliament and fellow parliamentarians for the passage of an antidiscrimination law. Black Tunisian women activists also worked with the Office of the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights in Tunis to implement Tunisia's international commitments to combating racial discrimination.[214] For instance, both Saadia Mosbah and Jamila Ksiksi had attended the UN Human Rights Council's annual Universal Periodic Review to testify about the state of human rights in Tunisia. These advocacy efforts eventually paid off: in October 2018, the parliament unanimously adopted an anti-racism law (Law 50-2018).[215]

Black Tunisian women's intersectional activism is also evident in their struggles against sexual harassment, as exemplified by the work of VFTN, the first Black Tunisian women's organization. In late 2019, the global #MeToo movement (#EnaZeda) reached Tunisia.[216] A group of Black Tunisian women began speaking out about the sexual harassment they faced in their daily lives and reflecting on their experiences juggling their sexual, racial, and class identities. Aware of their invisibility in an overwhelmingly "White" feminist public space, Black Tunisian women realized the importance of sharing the specific forms of discrimination that Black Tunisian women experience.[217] Activists like Maha Abdelhamid emphasized the need to move "from the margin to the center," in the words of the Black American feminist bell hooks.[218]

In January 2020, five Black Tunisian women established the collective VFTN as a platform to empower Black Tunisian women to speak freely about the issues affecting them. By setting up a private Facebook group, the collective aspired to create a safe space where only Black Tunisian women could share their views, to avoid being judged and misunderstood by non-Black Tunisian women.[219] VFTN also created a public page to inform the wider public about Black Tunisian feminism and Black Tunisian women's experiences. Coming at a time when the #MeToo movement had broken taboos about sexual harassment in Tunisian society, the page went viral, opening the eyes of many Tunisians to the complex reality of anti-Black racism and its intersection with gender inequality.[220]

Finally, Black Tunisian women activists also mobilized for vulnerable migrants from sub-Saharan African countries and members of Tunisia's LGBTQ community. A migration crisis gripped the country in 2014 after the crisis in Libya made Tunisia a new hub for irregular migrants attempting to reach Europe. By lobbying, protesting, and forming transnational coalitions, Black women activists sought to frame the racism that these migrants encountered as a central human rights issue plaguing Tunisia's young democracy. They also initiated new alliances with LGBTQ organizations—the most prominent of which, called Damj, was until recently headed by a Black Tunisian woman, Fatma Ltifi.[221]

Jamila Ksiksi exemplifies Black Tunisian women's intersectional activism. She not only pushed for Law 50-2018 that criminalized anti-Black discrimination but also connected victims of racial discrimination with lawyers and lobbied ministries to enhance Black Tunisians' and migrants' inclusion in public life, including by improving their access to housing and working conditions. She particularly focused on the social and economic integration of Black African migrants in her constituency of Raoued, home to the largest Black African migrant population in Tunis. She also collaborated with organizations such as M'nemty to uncover and address Tunisia's legacy of slavery and combat human trafficking. In parliament, Ksiksi was a strong advocate for radical legal reforms to Tunisia's migration regime that fails to protect vulnerable migrants.[222]

The Anti-Black Backlash and Its Impact on Black Tunisian Women's Activism

Black Tunisian women activists have faced digital attacks since 2011, particularly owing to their efforts on behalf of migrant rights. However, these threats have escalated dramatically in recent years. By late 2020, the TNP had declared a digital war on Black African migrants, describing them as a threat to Tunisian identity and security.[223] They accused human rights organizations of being complicit in settling migrants in Tunisia. Both Black Tunisian women activists and Jamila Ksiksi were threatened online by the party's sympathizers and other groups embracing anti-Black and anti-migrant sentiments.

Democratic backsliding under Saied has only exacerbated this extremist current. Saied rose to power in 2019 after running as an independent. His emphasis on direct democracy and populist attacks against the political establishment garnered support among many disaffected Ennahdha supporters and nonpartisan Tunisians, especially among youth. He further earned the support of the TNP, which shared his conspiratorial beliefs that the country's economic woes should be blamed on various external forces, including on Black African migrants. After his election, Saied began attacking civil society organizations as foreign threats to Tunisia's sovereignty. The TNP condemned Black Tunisian organizations such as M'nemty for serving a foreign agenda. However, according to M'nemty's president, the organization had not received any foreign funding.[224]

Saied's self-coup in July 2021 shocked Tunisians of all backgrounds, including Black Tunisians. But it was Black Tunisian activists who felt most worried about the repercussions of the president's racist, populist rhetoric. The dissolution of the parliament in July 2021 and subsequent arrests of prominent political figures have shrunk democratic and civic space significantly. Jamila Ksiksi openly spoke out against the coup and continued fighting for democracy until her death in December 2022. Yet since Saied's 2023 speech attacking Black African migrants, many Black Tunisian women have adopted a lower profile, concerned about threats from the TNP and Facebook groups that have accused M'nemty's president and Jamila Ksiksi of bringing Black African migrants to colonize Tunisia since the adoption of law 50-2018.

Some Black Tunisian activists have continued fighting back, often in collaboration with other civil society activists and members of leftist political parties. Shortly after Saied's inflammatory speech, several prodemocracy organizations, including feminist and LGBTQ groups, human rights organizations, and migrant rights associations, marched in the streets of Tunis denouncing his racist statements. The protest was dubbed "the Front for Fighting Fascism." The demonstrators lent their support to Black African migrants and linked the president's racist rhetoric to his muzzling of the Tunisian opposition.[225]

Black Tunisian women have continued denouncing Saied's rhetoric through M'nemty and VFTN, issuing statements on their Facebook pages and attending an anti-fascist protest in February 2023 that brought together several thousand Tunisians from all walks of life. They have organized online seminars about the threat the president's rhetoric poses to migrants and Black Tunisians. For example, various journalistic accounts have documented the police racially profiling dozens of Black Tunisians, as well as angry non-Black Tunisian citizens attacking Black Tunisians.[226]

Support from the prodemocracy movement, including feminist and human rights organizations, has been instrumental to highlighting that these attacks on Black African migrants and Black Tunisian activists represent an attack on all Tunisians' civil liberties and the future of Tunisian democracy itself. For instance, the Tunisian leftist party Tayyar

Dimokrati has called Saied's speech an attack on human rights that undermined Tunisia's democratic gains, including its trailblazing antiracism law.[227] Tunisian feminist organizations, despite their hushed voices after the July 2021 coup, have also joined forces with Black Tunisian women to denounce Saied's racism. In a show of solidarity, the feminist organization Beity provided Black African women migrants shelter as well as psychological and legal support and advocated for their rights, while M'nemty provided food, clothes, and other basic necessities to migrants who had been kicked out of their houses. For the first time since 2011, Black Tunisian women's struggle for racial justice has become inextricably linked to the mainstream feminist struggle against Saied's conservative, patriarchal, and authoritarian ideology. Indeed, during protests for the release of political prisoners, some family members of imprisoned Ennahdha politicians expressed support for Black African migrants and Black Tunisians, recognizing that they were all on the receiving end of Saied's repressive tools.[228] Those who attended the February 2023 protest against fascism have also launched fundraising campaigns to assist stranded Black African migrants; the campaigns have since garnered the support of diverse civil society organizations.

Conclusion

After 2011, Black Tunisian women pressed for a more open debate about racism in Tunisian society alongside the mainstream prodemocracy movement. The democratic opening allowed many socially and economically marginalized women to join the fight for racial justice and equality and draw greater attention to the plight of Black African migrants, whose fate they saw as closely linked to their own.

Following Saied's self-coup in 2021, Black Tunisian women activists faced the same fate as many prodemocracy activists and members of the political opposition. They have been doxed and threatened by Saied's supporters from the TNP. The silencing of Black Tunisian women activists was exacerbated after Saied's 2023 speech that framed Black African migrants as an existential threat to Tunisia. Black Tunisian women's continuing struggle in the face of backlash is a testament to their resilience. They have reached out to and found solidarity with other human rights and prodemocracy civic actors fighting Saied's dictatorship. Their activism for human rights and racial justice thus remains linked to the overall fight for equality and political participation.

The future of Black Tunisian women activists and their democratic mobilization remains unknown, but the current outlook is bleak. Although they are adopting creative strategies and building alliances with like-minded organizations, the rapid autocratization of the regime and the criminalization of any form of autonomous civic action create profound challenges.

CHAPTER 7

Women's Resilience in the Belarusian Prodemocratic Movement: From Grassroots to Leadership Roles

Katsiaryna Shmatsina

Today, women play prominent leadership roles in the Belarusian prodemocracy movement: Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya leads the political opposition from exile in Lithuania.[229] Several other women spearhead the Coordination Council, a sixty-four-member body coordinating the opposition to Alexander Lukashenko's authoritarian regime.[230] However, this degree of public visibility and high-level representation has emerged only over the past three years. Before then, women were involved in various grassroots civic initiatives challenging Lukashenko's governance, but they did not play leadership roles in the democratic opposition.

The catalyst for this change was the 2020 presidential campaign and subsequent countrywide mass protests. Prompted by widespread perceptions of electoral fraud, the protests quickly morphed into a broader movement against authoritarian rule, fueled by the Lukashenko regime's ruthless use of violence against its opponents. In this challenging political environment, women leaders emerged to push for progress, despite risks of repression and entrenched conservative gender norms. Even as the protest movement subsided and the democratic opposition was forced into exile, women continued to exercise political leadership, in a significant shift relative to the past several decades.

This article focuses on the changing role of women in Belarusian prodemocratic politics over the past several years, as well as the barriers to leadership that women still face in the country. It also illuminates the Lukashenko regime's responses to women's activism and the conservative countermobilization of women loyal to the regime.

Invisible Women

When Belarus regained its independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union, initially the political landscape was pluralistic. Several political parties competed for power, including the Communist Party, the right-wing Belarusian Popular Front, the Belarusian Christian Democratic Union, the United Democratic Party, and several others.[231] Women made up nearly one-third of members of these newly formed democratic political parties.[232] Moreover, a left-wing party focused specifically on advancing women's rights and social democracy, Nadzeya (Hope), was formed in 1994. However, the party later experienced retaliation for its opposition to the Lukashenko regime and was liquidated by the Supreme Court in 2007.[233]

Despite this diverse political landscape, following Lukashenko's ascent to power in 1994, Belarus turned increasingly authoritarian. Participation in politics quickly became a dangerous enterprise. The disappearance of political opponents, surveillance and intimidation by the state's security services, and arbitrary arrests once again became part of the daily life of the democratic opposition. In this challenging environment, many women chose to disengage from politics. Those who remained faced intimidation and repression. For example, the first woman presidential candidate in contemporary Belarusian history, Natalia Masherova, entered the race against Lukashenko in 2001.[234] However, she quickly withdrew her candidacy, likely owing to fears of retaliation by the regime. Between 1991 and 2001, at least at least four opposition candidates had disappeared. The same pattern of repression persisted throughout the 2000s and 2010s, with opposition candidates and parties routinely being denied registration or only being registered as nonprofits.[235]

In addition to state repression, patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes further impeded women's political involvement. Within political parties, women were often called "ноги партии" (the "legs of the party"): they were confined to grassroots tasks, such as participating in door-to-door campaigns to gather signatures in support of male candidates.[236] In contrast, most prestigious leadership positions were held by men. Women's organizations at various points challenged women's lack of leadership and influence in opposition parties, albeit with little success.[237] Some women nevertheless competed in parliamentary and local elections, and several won positions in local councils.[238] However, they would run into pushback when speaking on issues that went beyond those traditionally considered "women's issues." Nina Stuzhinskaya, the head of the Belarusian Women's League, concluded in 2010 that although women made up 53 percent of the electorate, most people viewed women politicians in a negative light.[239]

Lukashenko himself often played into and reinforced traditional gender norms and roles, framing himself as a father figure and describing women as weak and in need of protection.[240] Although he implemented a quota ensuring that women held 30 percent of seats in (a largely toothless) parliament, he did little to promote women into positions of high-level executive leadership.[241] Men occupied—and still occupy—leadership positions even in so-called women-dominated spheres, such as education and healthcare.[242]

Against this backdrop, Tatsiana Karatkevich's presidential run in 2015 represented something of an exception. She was the first woman presidential candidate who was able to participate throughout the entire presidential race and the only candidate representing the opposition on the 2015 presidential ballot.[243] Those who gathered signatures for her registration noted that some women supported her candidacy out of female solidarity. Others, however, considered her "too young" at thirty-eight years old—even though Lukashenko himself was only thirty-nine when he first ran for president.[244]

Karatkevich's campaign strategy distinguished her from her competitors. She traveled across the country visiting remote areas and small towns to better understand the needs of the voters. In a context of fraudulent and manipulated elections, other opposition candidates considered this grassroots engagement a waste of resources. They instead pursued strategies oriented around gaining visibility rather than actually winning the election. Yet Karatkevich's efforts helped boost her public profile. It may have even contributed to shifting voter attitudes toward women's leadership: independent polls suggest she received around 20 percent of the vote.[245] Her presidential run, although unsuccessful, signaled a renewed uptick in women's political participation that would grow much more significant during the 2020 elections.

Women's Civic Initiatives Challenging the State Bureaucracy

Despite their underrepresentation in opposition parties and high-level leadership, women were active in challenging Lukashenko's regime through their civil society activism. Two examples showcase the power of women's civic initiatives in navigating the authoritarian environment in the years leading up to the 2020 political turmoil. In both cases, women used nonviolent means to engage in dialogue with state officials, even in a restrictive authoritarian context that treats independent, grassroots initiatives with suspicion.

"March, Baby!"

In 2018, Lukashenko rejected a long-awaited draft law on domestic violence, dismissing it as Western "nonsense."[246] The law also provoked conservative backlash from state officials and the Catholic Church, who argued that it could harm "family values."[247] In response, a group of women created a Facebook group called "March, baby!" aimed at generating public discussion around the need for better domestic violence protections in Belarus. The group quickly gained 2,000 participants and prompted various offline meetings.[248] Their advocacy took various forms: group members organized "one billion rising" dance flash mobs, self-defense workshops, and a petition appealing to the parliament.[249] At the 2019 forum of the European Union Eastern Partnership in Brussels, the "March, baby!" initiative cofounder Maryna Korsh raised the issue directly with then Belarusian minister of foreign affairs Vladimir Makei. In the context of an international forum, the Belarusian minister was forced to respond, which would not have happened within Belarus.[250] Although domestic

violence protections ultimately were not codified, the discussion with the foreign minister did boost media attention to the issue and contributed to raising awareness among state officials involved in dialogue with the activists.

"Mothers 328" Advocate for the Liberalization of Repressive Drug Policies

Another women-led civic initiative, Mothers 328, was founded to bring together women whose children were convicted under Article 328 of the Belarusian Criminal Code, often referred to as the "drug article." This article criminalizes even the personal consumption of marijuana and imposes long prison sentences for nonviolent drug-related crimes. Investigations and court trials in these cases are often conducted in a biased manner, without proper examination of the evidence and without meeting the burden of proof.[251] Mothers 328 sought to draw attention to these injustices and demand the liberalization of anti-narcotics legislation.

The group at various points succeeded in engaging state officials and legislators in a conversation about the need to liberalize drug policy. Activists organized pickets and hunger strikes outside of detention centers to draw attention to the plight of their sons and daughters, demanded meetings with Lukashenko and other high-level officials, and offered concrete suggestions for how to improve existing laws.[252] Their efforts contributed to one important change: legislators decided to lower the sentences proscribed by Article 328 of the Criminal Code.[253]

These civic initiatives showcase women-led efforts to address social injustices using various legal means and nonviolent tactics, such as petitions, flash mobs, and even hunger strikes. These groups initially did not describe themselves as political or view themselves as part of a broader struggle for democracy and against Lukashenko's regime. However, some of their members became politicized by their activism and in 2020 took part in the anti-regime protests.

Women's Rise to the Political Scene in 2020

Following Lukashenko's victory in the widely disputed 2020 presidential elections, mass protests demanding the president's resignation broke out in cities across the country.[254] At the time, these prodemocratic protests commonly were described as a "women-led" or "female revolution."[255] In stark contrast to the previous decades of Belarusian politics, women turned out in large numbers to participate in peaceful demonstrations. Many were members of the opposition political parties or civil society groups, including those working on human rights, gender equality, and environmental initiatives. But many others had never before participated in political life.

Even before the election, it was three women—Tsikhanouskaya, Maria Kalesnikava, and Veronica Tsepkalo—who had rallied support for a united democratic opposition. They spearheaded the campaign against Lukashenko after the regime had imprisoned or forced into exile all of the male frontrunners.[256] Perhaps underestimating women's political power, Lukashenka had allowed Tsikhanouskaya—the wife of one of his opponents, Syarhei Tsikhanouski—to appear on the ballot. Tsepkalo was also the wife of a candidate, Valery Tsepkalo, who had been forced to flee Belarus amid threats. Kalesnikava, by contrast, was the head of opposition frontrunner Viktar Babaryka's presidential campaign. The three women quickly agreed to show a united front, campaigning for the release of political prisoners and for free and fair elections.

At public rallies, this trio and other women in leadership positions justified their prominent roles by speaking on behalf of their imprisoned husbands and relatives. Tsikhanouskaya, for instance, often referenced family values in her speeches. This message resonated even with conservative voters, who would have rejected the female leadership team otherwise. Yet some gender equality advocates took issue with the trio's positioning and criticized them for replicating traditional gender roles. For example, Irina Solomatina, the founder of the Gender Route project in Minsk and the chair of the Belarusian Organization of Working Women, criticized Tsikhanouskaya for relying on heteropatriarchal norms in lieu of a sound policy platform and for suggesting that she was acting on behalf of her imprisoned husband only and did not have political ambitions herself.[257] However, Tsikhanouskaya's stance shifted over time: as she positioned herself as a national leader, she increasingly started speaking for herself and acting as a president-elect, albeit in exile in Lithuania.

While the prodemocratic opposition's leadership often played into heteropatriarchal norms, other women's groups, including feminist initiatives, took part in the marches. According to Yulia Mitskevich, cofounder of the Femgroup of the Coordination Council, women protesters made a unique contribution to the street protests: they implemented horizontal communication mechanisms and a decentralized leadership style, rather than establishing a top-down hierarchy. Women's marches were organized according to the principle "I am not the only leader here—we all are."[258] One woman who participated in the protests described her experience as follows: "When I find myself in an atmosphere of truth, freedom, justice, and realize how many people are united, I feel very confident and stress goes away for a week."[259]

However, women who turned out to protest were not a homogenous group. Some were feminists fighting for gender equality or members of professional associations. Others were mothers and housewives who held more traditional opinions of women's place in society.[260] Moreover, women's participation did not automatically dismantle patriarchal norms and beliefs in Belarusian society. In fact, as the protests dissipated in the face of repression, some opposition activists blamed women's approach to protesting for the movement's failure. Rather than singing songs and carrying flowers, as many women had done, they argued that the protesters should have used force against the police and stormed government buildings. According to Mitskevich, this narrative highlights how women's contributions to

revolutionary action are often disproportionately scrutinized and devalued.[261] Critics also conveniently ignored that previous male-led protests against electoral fraud in 2006 and 2010 had also been violently dispersed by the police.

Despite these controversies, women's unprecedented visibility in the demonstrations appears to have influenced public opinion about their leadership. A Chatham House opinion poll conducted in the spring of 2021, a few months after the end of the mass protests, indicated that around 67 percent of respondents believed that Belarusian society was ready to vote for a woman as president.[262]

Repression, Silenced Protest, and a Pivot Toward Nonpolitical Civic Initiatives

The Lukashenko regime responded to the protests by cracking down brutally. According to the human rights center Viasna, between May 2020 and October 2023, 2,800 people—490 of them women—were detained as political prisoners. Many of these prisoners have since been released, but as of December 2023, 1,496 people—174 of them women—remain behind bars.[263] One of the most visible figures of the 2020 campaign, Kalesnikava, was sentenced to eleven years in prison on fraudulent charges of "extremism." Like many other political prisoners, Kalesnikava has been kept in isolation, denied access to medical care, and deprived of any contact with her family or lawyer for months.[264]

Severe repression has made prodemocratic mobilization inside the country virtually impossible. The regime forced most journalists and activists to flee the country and liquidated political parties and nonprofit organizations. Assessments on how many Belarusians were forced to leave vary, but the overall number is at least 143,600, including most vocal activists and political figures.[265] As a result, the Belarusian prodemocracy movement today exists predominantly in exile.

Many women activists who remain within Belarus not only fear for themselves but also fear losing their children to orphanages while in prison. Women whose family members are political prisoners typically maintain a low profile or else risk going to jail themselves. For example, Darya Losik, a vocal opponent of the regime who stood up for her jailed husband Ihar, ended up arrested and imprisoned as well, leaving the couple's daughter to be raised by her grandparents.[266] Another method to intimidate opponents of the regime has been to subject them to compulsory psychiatric treatment. For example, Maria Uspenskaya, the widow of Andrei Zeltser, who was killed in a shooting with a KGB officer during his violent unlawful detention, was sent to a psychiatric hospital against her will.[267]

In this context, a relatively safe way for women to maintain their civic engagement within Belarus is to refrain from any explicitly political activity and instead focus their efforts on cultural, educational, and recreational initiatives—though even these activities are under the surveillance of state security services. Even conducting research on matters of public affairs, security, and international relations is not safe: political analyst Valeriya Kostygova and public administration expert Tatyana Kuzina, for instance, were both sentenced to ten years in prison.[268] High levels of repression have pushed politically active women who stayed in Belarus to reorient their work toward more indirect ways of promoting democratic development.

Countermobilization: Women Supporting Lukashenko

Not all women joined the 2020 protest movement. Some women instead maintained their political support for Lukashenko's regime. As noted earlier, despite his embrace of traditionalist values and norms, Lukashenko has actively promoted women into government structures, thereby superficially signaling a commitment to equality. The most visible of these women include Iryna Kastevich, the minister of labor and the only women in the Lukashenko ministerial cabinet; Olga Chupris, the deputy head of the Lukashenko administration; and Natallia Kachanava, the speaker of the Council of the Republic (the upper chamber of parliament).[269] According to the sociologist Alena Aharelysheva, Belarusian women who have carved out a successful career within the power vertical are often highly politically loyal, partly because they had to fight hard to attain their positions.[270]

Regime-loyal women have openly condemned women who support the prodemocratic movement. Amid the government's violent crackdown on the protesters in 2010, for instance, Lidia Yermoshina, then head of the Central Election Commission, described women protesters as "shameful" and as having "something wrong" with their intellect, adding that women should rather "cook borscht" and "read books to their children" than take part in street protests.[271] Owing to women's engagement in pro-regime politics, some scholars have characterized Belarus as an authoritarian "femocracy." Women can occupy limited positions of leadership as long as they do not challenge patriarchal hierarchies and remain loyal to the regime.[272]

Pro-government women's associations have also supported the government's position. For example, the Belarusian women's union, which counts over 150,000 members, has spoken out against international sanctions imposed on the regime.[273] Since the crackdown on civil society in 2020–2021, the authorities have further tried to reshape civil society, often by establishing "nonprofits" that are de facto government structures rather than voluntary grassroots initiatives. Among these GONGOs—government-organized nongovernmental organizations—are several that target women. For example, the former minister of interior, Ihar Shunevich, known for his hardline repressive approach toward opposition activists, recently initiated the creation of a women's hunting club that seeks to bring together women who are professional hunters.[274]

Despite its antagonism toward the democratic movement, Lukashenko's regime now recognizes the popular appeal of women's political leadership and purposefully seeks to undermine it. In 2023, a state TV channel aired an episode that sought to defame the

Belarusian opposition politician Volha Kavalkova. Undercover journalists invited Kavalkova to an interview with an allegedly independent media outlet. The interviewer later reached out to Kavalkova, suggesting that Russian oligarchs were willing to finance her campaign to replace Tsikhanouskaya as the leader of the democratic forces. This "investigation" was aimed at portraying Kavalkova as a politician who was willing to accept dirty money to betray her colleague. Kavalkova later commented that the video had been heavily edited.[275] Such defamation attempts show that propagandists recognize women politicians' power and influence in the opposition movement: they deliberately are trying to sow division by fueling distrust between Tsikhanouskaya and Kavalkova.

Women in the Democratic Movement in Exile

Belarus once again entered a phase of political stagnation in 2021, after the protests subsided and most of the opposition leadership had left the country or gone to jail. Russia's aggression in the region and Russian President Vladimir Putin's determination to keep Belarus in the Kremlin's sphere of influence make a near-term democratic transition unlikely.

Despite this challenging political context, women have gained greater visibility as prodemocratic actors. In exile, Tsikhanouskaya has become a preeminent symbol of the Belarusian prodemocracy movement. Acting as a de facto national leader, she conducts high-level negotiations in Europe and the United States and attracts international attention to the Belarusian cause. Women are also well-represented in the Coordination Council, the quasi-parliamentary structure formed in exile, as well as in the United Transitional Cabinet, which serves as the quasi-executive branch. Women activists in the Belarusian diaspora also continue to engage in critical displays of solidarity, for example by bringing in policymakers from their host countries together with Belarusian democracy activists.[276]

History suggests that women's contributions to the struggle for democracy could be forgotten once politics in Belarus liberalize. Having studied women's movements in Eastern and Central Europe, gender researcher Barbara Einhorn concludes that after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, women often were "elbowed aside by male ex-dissidents."[277] She argues that male dissidents sought public acknowledgment for their past achievements—and that the newly established "male democracies" largely ignored "women's needs."[278] For now, however, Belarusian women are organizing to ensure their voices are heard. The watchdog Femgroup of the Coordination Council, for instance, monitors the gender balance in the opposition movement. At the 2022 "New Belarus" conference of the democratic forces, members of the group called out the organizers for the lack of women's representation.[279]

Despite continued repression and exclusionary gender norms, women significantly shaped the Belarusian democracy movement at a pivotal moment in 2020. For the past three years, women have held leadership roles in the ongoing fight for Belarusian democracy. However, a successful democratic transition alone does not guarantee that women will maintain these positions. The voices of gender equality advocates in the opposition remain critical to safeguarding against infringements on women's basic rights.

CHAPTER 8

Myanmar Women's Activism After the February 2021 Coup

Tharaphi Than

> "We are Anyarthu.[280] We used to lead simple lives, planting paddies while singing, enjoying our time growing beans and pulses. Our hands that harvest these crops are now carrying guns aiming at the enemies. We stepped forth to carry out the duties demanded by the time and the system."[281] – Myaung Woman Warrior

On February 1, 2021, the Myanmar military took power in a coup, claiming that the 2020 election had been fraudulent.[282] As of March 2024, the military government, known as the State Administrative Council, has yet to consolidate power nationwide, largely because of the unexpectedly strong resistance from the people of Myanmar, including from many women.

The first wave of resistance against the coup took the form of protests. On February 6, 2021, thousands marched on the streets of Yangon, led not by Myanmar's male political elites but by women workers' unions, student unions, and two prominent women activists, Ei Thinzar Maung and Esther Ze Naw. Many of the protesters belonged to the fringe of society, and their mobilization was fueled by multiple overlapping grievances. Women workers, particularly garment workers, had been locked in labor disputes with the pre-coup democratic government and used protests and strikes to demand their labor rights. Students were protesting against unsatisfactory education reforms, internet cuts in Rakhine State, and former state counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi's appearance at the International Court of Justice to defend her government and the military. Ei Thinzar Maung and Esther Ze Naw were standing up in solidarity with the Rohingya people and protesting the military as well as the civilian government for issues including inadequate education policy, land grabs, and the country's ongoing civil war. Under the leadership of women activists and labor unionists, this first mass protest paved the way for successive demonstrations, encouraging people to join the movement against the military.

Protests turned into armed resistance around May 2021 as the security forces began violently cracking down on protests. In response, many young people fled to rural areas partially controlled by ethnic armed groups to begin military training. Over the past two years, women who previously had no record of activism have transformed themselves into fighters and activists. Farmers, teachers, nurses, homemakers, and nuns—women with diverse backgrounds—have converged on the path of resistance against the Myanmar army. One Myaung Woman Warrior, who belongs to an all-women combat group established in central Myanmar in October 2021, exemplifies this trend with the quote above.

This article looks at the changing landscape of women's activism in Myanmar. Immediately following the February 2021 coup, women were the backbone of street protests and the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Over time, two types of activism have emerged. The first continues the gender equality work that gained momentum during the period of civilian rule between 2012 and February 2021, though it is now shaped by a new generation of radical women's groups that are using online tools to center minority rights and gender justice in the struggle for political transformation. The second form of activism takes the form of armed resistance against the Myanmar army, with women taking up positions that range from frontline fighters to medics and logisticians.

The breakdown of Myanmar's fragile democracy has thus profoundly reshaped the civic landscape. The backgrounds of women activists, the goals they pursue, and the types of mobilization they undertake are more diverse today than during the democratic period, even as women continue to confront patriarchal norms and heightened threats of political repression.

Women's Mobilization During the Democratic Period

Following Myanmar's partial political opening in the early 2010s, veteran women activists were able to restart their work inside Myanmar after decades of operating in exile. These returnees included members of groups that dated back to the 1988 uprising against the Burma Socialist Programme Party, such as the Burmese Women's Union and the Women's League of Burma. In a context of political liberalization, their leaders began pushing women's rights issues in parliament. New women's coalitions formed, and many groups converged under umbrella organizations such as the Gender Equality Network, spearheaded by Kachin activist May Sabe Phyu; the Women's Organizations Network of Myanmar; and the Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process.[283] One of the landmark achievements of this period was the launch of the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women in 2013, the first major initiative by the Burmese government to advance women's rights and welfare.[284]

As democratization accelerated under the diarchic governance of the military and the civilian state, urban civil society advocacy and awareness-raising activities gained greater visibility, popularity, and funding. During this period, women's activism was driven primarily by professionalized nongovernmental organizations that pressured lawmakers for legal and policy change. Their activism reflected many of the themes shaping global feminist activism, including a focus on sexual violence and harassment inspired by the #MeToo movement, LGBTQ rights, and women's inclusion in political leadership. As people pinned their hopes on governmental reform, direct actions such as protests and boycotts attracted little attention from policymakers or the wider public.

One Burmese feminist, Shunn Lei, critiqued women's activism during the democratic era for incorporating global agendas while sidelining the voices and experiences of marginalized and minority women in Myanmar.[285] She argued that the embodied predicaments of marginalized women—such as those living in ethnic minority areas and outside of major cities—did not inform the demands of prominent advocacy groups. Yet despite these omissions, women's activism during the democratic period deserves credit for expanding the space for civic mobilization and popularizing new lexicons to talk about gender and LGBTQ issues in a Burmese-speaking context. For example, advocates adopted not only English but also Japanese words to describe the spaces and practices of feminist and LGBTQ communities.[286] These efforts helped encourage the participation and acceptance of women and LGBTQ people in public spaces.[287]

The wheel of activism—from underground work in exile to parliamentary engagement—has once again turned backward after the coup. Democratic backsliding has sent many women activists back into exile. But unlike the 1988 uprising, the 2021 coup has transformed many ordinary women into freedom fighters, who have either joined armed groups as soldiers and supporters or have mobilized others to support the resistance and each other via online platforms. The 2021 coup therefore represents a watershed moment, pushing more women—and different types of women—to mobilize politically than during the democratic period. Previously fringe groups, rural women, and women from minority groups have come to the forefront of the resistance. As many women leaders fled or had to adopt a lower political profile, new leaders and activists have emerged. Women groups that worked in tandem with human rights groups and other democratic forces have been radicalized, and many have come to support the armed resistance.

Women's Roles in the Initial Armed Resistance

Women played critical roles during the early days of mass resistance against the military's takeover. In the weeks following the coup, women organized protests and distributed food and protective gear to the protesters. They also used tactics that radically challenged traditional gender norms. For example, on International Women's Day in March 2021, women joined anti-coup protests by flying banners saying "Our *Htabi*, Our Victory" ("Our Sarongs, Our Victory") and hanging up women's sarongs, thereby publicly challenging the idea that women's clothing and undergarments pollute men's *hpon* (aura). Flying women's sarongs shook the security forces as well as parts of Myanmar society that do not see women as equal to men. Pictures of soldiers removing sarongs spread on social media. Men rallied support for these radical acts of protest by distributing the lectures of a famous monk explaining

that men's *hpon* is shaped by their own actions rather than external factors and that taboos and prejudices barring men from walking underneath sarongs should be discarded.[288] The early days of resistance were thus marked by solidarity between women and men who jointly challenged patriarchal opposition to women's participation.

In the months that followed the coup, women solidified the CDM by going on strike, refusing to cooperate with the military, and leaving their jobs in government and in the education sector. Without the involvement of hundreds of thousands of women civil servants who at the time made up the majority of the country's government workforce, the CDM movement would not have taken off. Women who were married to military officers encouraged them to defect or even divorced their husbands; many women healthcare workers, lawyers, and even some nuns also joined the resistance forces. Women union members and workers—most of whom worked in the garment industry in satellite towns of Yangon, such as Hlaing Thaya—drove the street protests with their sheer numbers.[289] Women who had rebuilt the country alongside the democratic government in the 2010s were outraged to see past progress being reversed, and they vowed to resist a military government that they viewed as bringing the country back to the dark ages.[290]

Women in the countryside also emerged as a new, if unusual, driver of political mobilization. Before the coup, women from the countryside—particularly those from conflict areas such as Kachin and new industrial zones such as the Letpadaung Chinese mining site—actively engaged with local issues. But the coup brought these women to the center of the resistance: being in the countryside allowed them to mobilize more freely and in connected groups, which was difficult for women in cities. Although the media's attention often focused on city protesters, who electrified the streets with their cosplays,[291] beat music, and English banners, women from the countryside marched through the fields to protest even after demonstrations in the cities had slowed down.

Though public symbols of the women's rights movement—such as the celebration of International Women's Day or Pride Parade—disappeared, the initial wave of disobedience involved women of diverse backgrounds and experiences, many of whom would not fit the traditional conception of an activist. This shift highlights the need for a different understanding of who counts as an activist under extraordinary political circumstances. Activists in "normal" political settings need visibility to mobilize grassroots and high-level support. In a context of revolution or prolonged resistance, however, visibility becomes a liability. Moreover, civil society activists previously could earn modest to attractive salaries for their political work, thanks to the support of global citizens and international organizations with similar goals. Yet in the aftermath of the coup, ordinary women could no longer rely on these professional advocates to mobilize for them. Instead, they themselves became activists, even though few would describe themselves as such: most consider their activism an obligation as members of a community with a shared purpose—to resist the military.[292] For example, the wives of military officers who encouraged their husbands to defect have mobilized other wives to do the same.[293] This group of women likely would not have become activists in a "normal" political context, but they have taken on an important role in the CDM movement.[294]

Women in the Armed Resistance Movement

Beginning in May 2021, more and more protesters turned to armed resistance against the military, organizing as People's Defence Forces (PDF) in different regions of the country. Witnessing the violent crackdown enacted by the security forces, many people within the county as well as in the Burmese diaspora supported the move to take up arms. As a result, Myanmar's military has failed to gain control of the entire country, while the civil war has spread from minority areas to Bamar-controlled areas.[295]

Women have joined these forces as soldiers and in support roles. Some have taken up arms as part of the Myaung Women Warriors, the only known all-women unit formed in Sagaing's Myaung Township. As of late 2022, the unit included around 225 women members, including former university students and women from rural villages. One of their main roles has been to make and distribute land mines to other units and carry out mine attacks themselves.[296]

Yet in some ways, the Myaung Women Warriors remain an exception. Historically, women soldiers in Myanmar have performed primarily noncombatant duties, even though the army often recruited them with the intention of sending them to battlefield.[297] This pattern persisted in 2021: even though many women joined nascent armed groups, they have had to stay back performing office duties, retraining other soldiers, or treating the injured. Armed group leaders have argued that they cannot guarantee women's safety—that is, shield them from gender-based violence and harassment from both the armed forces and local communities. Moreover, men in the armed resistance often hold traditional gender norms and view women who take up arms as a challenge to their masculinity.[298] Some also do not believe that women have the physical strength required to fight on the front line.

These perceptions are difficult to overcome without tackling patriarchal norms that are deeply rooted in institutions as well as traditional beliefs and practices. As a result, women who want to join the armed resistance have often faced a brick wall. Some have left the armed resistance altogether after they realized they could not participate on equal terms with men and were assigned traditionally "female" duties. However, there is regional variation in the treatment of women in the armed resistance. In Bamar heartlands such as Myaung Township, the creation of the Myaung Women Warriors was possible. In minority areas such as Kachin, Karenni, and Karen, by contrast, women joined in high numbers but have remained sidelined from combat fighting. One reason for this regional variation is that men belonging to minority groups (such as in Kachin and Karen) have a long tradition of ethnically based armed organizations prior to the coup, which already were organized internally

along gendered lines. In contrast, men from the Bamar heartlands historically joined the national army. Nascent resistance groups in the Bamar region have afforded women greater mobility than already established armed organizations.

In the early days of the armed resistance, many Western activists warned the people of Myanmar that they would lose international support if they waged armed resistance.[299] As women activists have joined armed groups, they have challenged not only traditional gender norms within the resistance but also the typical tactics of the global women's movement, which is more familiar and comfortable with peaceful protests, advocacy, awareness-raising, and solidarity-building.

The Post-coup Emergence of New Leaders Advancing Women's Rights

Not all women active in the resistance have joined the armed struggle against the military. Some women have continued to mobilize nonviolently for women's rights and political inclusion more broadly, building on the activities initiated during the democratic opening. Yet the women leading this work, the tactics they use, and the goals they pursue have all shifted in the new political environment.

As many established organizations shut down or went underground after the coup, ordinary individuals—as opposed to professional activists—stepped forward to champion women's causes. One of their areas of focus has been the issue of sexual violence and harassment.[300] Using social media platforms such as Facebook, women have publicly shamed their abusers and encouraged others to follow suit. They have also demanded the prosecution of resistance fighters who have harassed and abused civilian women in conflict areas, thereby challenging the traditional views and practices silencing and shaming women who speak out. Along the same lines, new groups of women activists have focused on highlighting the consequences of militarization for society. An online group called *Thu Pone*, translated as "The Rebel," draws attention to the risks of an increasingly militarized society through online discussions and social media posts.[301] They argue that militarization strengthens patriarchy by endangering women and downgrading women's issues.

Compared to the previous decade, these women are mobilizing at greater personal risk. For one, they no longer have a support network provided by women's organizations in Myanmar. Moreover, drawing attention to problems of sexual violence and militarization places women in opposition to both the military and the armed resistance and exposes them to harassment and threats from both sides. Many people who support the armed resistance argue that mobilizing against issues other than military persecution risks dividing society. Women activists have responded by pointing out that people must fight against sexual violence in addition to fighting the military and that no one should have impunity for such crimes.[302]

In sum, the coup has had a radicalizing effect on some women, who are challenging even their own allies for prioritizing the fight against the military over women's right to safety from violence. They are highlighting the importance of including women's voices and experiences in the revolutionary struggle for social and political transformation. In their view, the resistance movement should bring meaningful change for everyone in Myanmar by modeling a more inclusive political order from the bottom up, as opposed to counting on the eventual winner—be it the elected government or the armed groups—to implement top-down reforms to empower less powerful groups. New collectives of radical feminists are thus trying to lay the groundwork for a demilitarized future that will guarantee more safety and inclusivity for women and all marginalized groups.

As the example of *Thu Pone* highlights, women's debates and activism have largely moved online after the coup. Advocates have little physical space to continue their work, especially in cities. Yet online activism and mobilization has expanded, and new revolutionary online magazines and podcasts are trying to mobilize people to support women's rights. Online activists now include university students, union leaders, vloggers, journalists, and women's rights activists who use pseudonyms to organize discussions, write articles, and collect financial support for the resistance. Online magazines such as *Social Democrats, Myit Kwe* (Turn of a River), *Tumee* (Handmade Gun), *Sitho* (Towards), and *Oway* (Peacock)—alongside groups such as *Thu Pone*, *Revolution Ground Zero*, and *Satchokethama* (Women Sewers)—are advancing conversations about the issues facing women, LGBTQ communities, and other minority and marginalized groups. Difficult debates—including about the perils of prioritizing the defeat of the army over the protection of vulnerable groups—regularly appear on the pages of these radical outlets.

For example, the online journal *Revolution Ground Zero* has argued that a capitalist economy can be just as harmful as the military, as both exploit and harm women. It has also highlighted the danger of tackling sociopolitical issues in a piecemeal manner, rather than recognizing and addressing all the intersectional injustices affecting women.[303] Its rationale is that the revolution cannot be called a revolution if it does not center feminism and respect for LGBTQ rights and human rights as part of the struggle for democracy.

The shrinking of physical civic space—alongside an expanding space for online activism that reaches communities outside the traditional domains of nongovernmental organizations and urban activists—distinguishes women's activism after 2021. Paradoxically, this shift has enabled greater solidarity across class, gender, ethnic, and religious divisions. In the face of military surveillance and repression, virtual private networks (VPNs) and other security software have enabled ordinary citizens to continue their ideological battles against the military. However, these activities are not without risk: the use of VPNs can put people in jail for up to three years.[304]

Conclusion

In Myanmar, the prodemocracy movement today is synonymous with the anti-military, anti-coup, and antiauthoritarianism movement. Even though the activists and revolutionary groups that emerged after the February 2021 coup are not explicitly framing their struggle in terms of democracy, their tacit goal is to restore democratic governance in the country. In this context, women's activism in Myanmar has transformed significantly. It has moved away from issue-based, piecemeal, and professionalized activism driven by traditional civil society organizations to a much broader mobilization for fundamental political and social change.

Ordinary women are staking their lives and participating in this revolution in any role they can. Using tactics that range from underground dialogues and social media organizing to logistical support for the armed resistance, farmers, workers, housewives, delivery women, nuns, and teachers have emerged as a new generation of activists. The coup has mobilized a more diverse range of women—women who did not find space or were not willing to partake in activism prior to the coup—to resist the military and restore democracy. Moreover, many women are also challenging the resistance to become more inclusive and incorporate goals that guarantee a democratic society for all. While fighting the Myanmar army, women are also educating the public about the risks of militarization to ensure a safe future for women, LGBTQ people, and other marginalized communities that live in the shadow of century-long wars.

Although physical civic space has closed, these women's groups are employing new and innovative tactics to sustain and escalate their political activism. International policymakers and women activists could find ways to follow their leadership. To understand and (re) build solidarity with Myanmar women's evolving activism, global women's rights advocates and organizations should demonstrate sisterhood and form alliances on equal terms. The latter should also share risks by demanding that their own governments and businesses stop supporting the Myanmar military and listen to people opposing military rule.

CHAPTER 9

Women's Voices in Zimbabwe: Resilience in the Face of Tyranny

Maureen Kademaunga

In 2023, I ran for a parliamentary seat in Zimbabwe. My personal experience traversing the country's restrictive political terrain to campaign as part of the prodemocracy movement required me to showcase resilience and fortitude in the face of repression. My victory in the August 23, 2023, general election—against all odds—is an opportunity to take the fight for democracy from the streets to another theater of the struggle and to act as an inspiration for other women.

However, it was not without cost. On September 12, three weeks after the election and two weeks after armed men in unmarked vehicles raided the homes of my campaign team, I was thrown into prison on trumped-up charges of three counts of attempted murder, malicious damage to property, and arson. As I was led through a dimly lit corridor in the notorious law-and-order section of the Harare Central Police Station, I reflected on the brave journey on which women on the front line in the struggle for democracy in Zimbabwe have embarked for generations. It is by now a familiar story: autocratic regimes often start their attempts to shut down civic space and quash dissent by scapegoating vulnerable elements of society, especially women.[305] In Zimbabwe, the rise of women's voices that could bring progress in the struggle for democracy has been met repeatedly with disproportionate, abusive force by the regime.

The Resurgence of Women's Voices in Zimbabwe's Struggle for Democracy

In postcolonial Zimbabwe, women initially organized themselves into social clubs and community-based initiatives focused on economic empowerment. In the 1980s, the ruling ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front) government often supported these efforts. The 1990s, however, saw the rise of critical civil society voices that spoke

out against the government's excesses and its poor economic management, which had led to unbearable increases in the cost of living. By the end of the decade, many women had joined the newly formed opposition movement as well as politically oriented civic society organizations, even as their main base remained the women's movement.[306]

The 2009–2013 period of the Government of National Unity (GNU)—a power-sharing government between ZANU-PF and the two main opposition parties, the MDC-T (Movement for Democratic Change–Tsvangirai) and the MDC (Movement for Democratic Change)—and the three years that followed saw a decline in women's activism. As Tamuka Charles Chirimambowa and Tinashe Lukas Chimedza have observed, civil society was almost paralyzed during the GNU, either unable or unwilling to hold the government accountable.[307] Coalitions such as the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition and the Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe became weaker as they and most of their members opted to work closely with the government rather than play their traditional watchdog role. When the GNU ended in 2013, civil society struggled to regain its vibrancy. Fatigue had crept into the women's movement, and activism continued to decline. This period of demobilization created a vacuum in civic activism, opening space for new forms of political consciousness and civic organizing. It ultimately paved the way for a resurgence of women's political activism in 2016.[308] In contrast to the established women's rights movement, this new wave of mobilization was driven by individual women activists who joined broader prodemocracy campaigns.

Between 2015 and 2017, a brief period of reenergized activism against dictatorship laid the foundations for the ouster of Robert Mugabe, ending his nearly thirty-eight-year rule. New social movements emerged that brought forth an energetic new generation of women leaders and activists.[309] These women activists were embedded within broader social movements such as #ThisFlag and #Tajamuka that challenged the country's floundering governance architecture. Both movements used social media campaigns, street protests, and stay-aways (a form of nonviolent popular protest akin to a general strike) to campaign against deepening poverty and oppression and call for the end of Mugabe's rule and a return to democracy.

This wave of mobilization represented a moment of hope for women. Many rose to the fore in previously men-dominated spaces, organizing and leading alongside their male counterparts. Young women took frontline roles in protests against human rights abuses and economic hardships, giving voice to the general political disenchantment among Zimbabwean youth. Among them was Fadzayi Mahere, a young lawyer and activist who became one of the leading figures of the #ThisFlag movement and used her strong social media presence to mobilize and agitate. Another prominent figure was Linda Masarira, an effective grassroots mobilizer who led protests under the #Tajamuka banner, which led to her incarceration for eight months. In sum, during the brief period of political opening before the military's takeover in 2017, women co-led the prodemocratic resistance movement.

The military's takeover in November 2017 led to a collective pause, with most women activists choosing to retreat to private life. Street protests and other new forms of organizing began to decline. In some ways, they followed the typical life cycle of social movements, which emerge, grow, and mature and then often stagnate.

However, there were some efforts to redirect people's energy from street protests to the ballot: eight months after the military removed Mugabe, the country held general elections. Zimbabwean women make up 52 percent of the country's population, yet their representation in politics is usually around 30 percent.[310] As a result, many of the issues that women face are largely ignored. To help address this gap, I launched the #SheVotes2018 movement that sought to get more women to vote and be elected.[311] Some women also ran for office. Prominent women activists who had been leading voices in the vibrant 2015–2017 social movements, such as Mahere, Vimbai Musvaburi, Duduzile Nyirongo, and others, moved into mainstream politics by running as independent candidates. Others, like Masarira, competed under the banner of existing opposition political parties. Some also cooperated with the regime by endorsing the ZANU-PF presidential bid of Emmerson Mnangagwa. At this point in time, a distinct aspect of women's prodemocracy mobilization was its fluidity and seamlessness: women activists migrated from social movements to mainstream politics to preserve their political agency while remaining focused on the fight for democracy.

The months following the 2018 election saw civic protest return to the political arena. State security forces cracked down violently in response, gunning down six civilians in August 2018.[312] Another violent clampdown followed a peaceful national shutdown on January 4, 2019. From then on and into the COVID-19 pandemic era, the targeted victimization of activists increased. The Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum and the Zimbabwe Peace Project recorded gross violations of human rights in the form of abductions, torture, unlawful arrests, surveillance, brutality against protesters by the police and the military, and unlawful killings of civilians during protests. These violations happened in an environment in which the fundamental rights of freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and freedom of association were curtailed and there was no right to truth or access to justice and reparations.[313] The gendered nature of these violations became more pronounced, perhaps owing to the remasculinization of public spaces and the militarization of policing and law enforcement after the 2017 coup. During the January 2019 fuel protests, for example, there were reports of women community mobilizers and activists being raped during home raids.[314]

Civic space shrank further as the country joined the rest of the world in the fight against COVID-19. Militarism coupled with new restrictions enforced under the guise of pandemic responses resulted in an increase of women who were violated. The government used the public health crisis to enact sweeping restrictions on citizens' freedom of movement and assembly and crack down on activists and political opponents. An incident involving three democracy activists—Joanah Mamombe, Cecillia Chimbiri, and Netsai Marova—highlights the risks that women's human rights defenders in Zimbabwe face. All three were abducted

and subjected to sexual torture and assault after staging a demonstration demanding that the government provide social protection for the poor during the lockdown.[315] Other women's human rights defenders were arrested unlawfully during home raids conducted by the military in the townships ahead of a planned citizen protest in July 2020. Once again, victims and witnesses reported incidents of military brutality against women, including cases of rape.

Despite these challenges, women have continued to push back against the closing of civic space. In the 2023 election, my fellow social movement leader Mahere and I were elected to Parliament representing the opposition Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC). On the civil society front, women spearheaded several initiatives to push for women's political participation, such as Women In Politics Support Unit and the Women's Academy for Leadership and Political Excellence.[316] However, women's voices in less formal movements appear to have disappeared with the decline of social movements more generally.

Inasmuch as the rise of women's voices at the front lines of the prodemocracy movement brought a progressive dynamism, three main factors have undermined women's effectiveness: a problematic relationship with the mainstream women's rights movement, the male-dominated nature of the prodemocracy movement, and repression by the state.

Divisions Between Women's Rights Organizations and Women Democracy Activists

Struggles around the globe reinforce how fighting for democracy and fighting for women's rights often go hand in hand. After all, the idea of democratic governance is premised on the notion of equal participation by all citizens.[317] As a result, one might expect the rise of women in the Zimbabwean prodemocracy movement to work as a catalyst for women's rights more generally. However, in Zimbabwe, synergies between women's rights activism and women's activism for democracy have proven difficult to establish. This fragmentation has limited the ability of women democracy activists to push a radical democracy and equality agenda.

Throughout the uptick in civic mobilization in 2015–2017, established women's rights organizations working on women's empowerment, bodily integrity, and social rights continued their traditional organizing tactics in isolation from the prodemocracy movement. In fact, some established organizations viewed the rise of new forms of radical activism as not serving women and women's rights and blamed them for allowing women's issues to be pushed down the national agenda. Established women's rights spaces such as the Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (a national membership-based network of women's rights activists and organizations that facilitates collective activism on a broad array of issues) increasingly delinked their work from the broader democracy movement they historically had been part of, for instance as members of the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition.

The relationship between the women's rights movement and the democracy movement first weakened during the GNU period from 2009 to 2013. This rift has continued to widen, primarily owing to some women's organizations' desire to work with women across the political spectrum, whether they are aiding autocracy or pushing for democracy. In addition, most professionalized women's organizations rely on donor funds and thus have incentives to occupy "neutral" or apolitical ground—especially in the face of a draconian law that seeks to ban organizations that are deemed political.[318]

The divide between traditional women's rights actors and the new generation of women democracy activists represents a missed opportunity to forge solidarity. Although some degree of diversity and heterogeneity is to be expected, both groups confront the consequences of operating in a highly repressive political environment. This restrictive context is characterized by numerous sexist practices that shape the experiences of both groups of women.

The failure to strengthen the nexus between the traditional women's rights movement and women democracy activists also has resulted in two self-defeating developments. First, women's rights issues have remained low on the agenda of the broader prodemocracy movement, as traditional women's organizations missed an opportunity to influence women mobilizing for democracy to become ambassadors for gender equality. Second, in the face of widespread rights violations, women in the prodemocracy movement have struggled to access the much-needed gender-sensitive support that traditional women's organizations could offer. Instead, these groups have been criticized for not offering solidarity when called for. Without closer collaboration, the voices of women in the male-dominated prodemocracy movement have become less effective.

A Male-Dominated Prodemocracy Movement

The stereotypical image of a democracy activist in Zimbabwe is deeply gendered: he is most often imagined and depicted as an adversarial, aggressive male activist with a strong public profile. This characterization has resulted in the sidelining of women's rights groups and women leaders, whose work has consequently become less visible.

Women mobilizing for democracy in Zimbabwe have been forced to fight a dual struggle, grappling with patriarchy in their own movement as well as abuse from the state. Fighting for space within the prodemocracy movement means that women often come into conflict with their male counterparts, as women's increased participation on the front line is challenging the structural constraints that have limited women's political participation in the past.

For one, politics in Zimbabwe is a dangerous and violent terrain, given the reality of state-sponsored terror. The threat of violence has discouraged many women from participating in mainstream politics as part of the prodemocracy contingent.[319] Women have also observed that the prodemocracy space has turned militant as a way of immunizing

itself against abuse, which has created a hostile environment in which women have found it difficult to thrive.[320] Moreover, the student movement, the mainstream opposition, and mainstream civil society organizations all lack gender parity in their leadership. Most reserve for women only deputy posts and special gender-related posts. Finally, patriarchal norms that relegate women to the domestic space and frame them as suitable only for childbearing and household chores also contribute to the low numbers of women in politics. In the 2018 election, only 12 percent of the directly elected legislators were women. In 2023, this share declined to 10 percent.[321] The prodemocracy movement as fronted by the CCC counted only ten women among their seventy-three elected parliamentarians.

Women continue to challenge the traditional roles to which they have been relegated. The MDC-Alliance and later the CCC have brought marked improvement in women's leadership, ushering in the first female spokesperson of the opposition, the first female secretary for international relations in the opposition, and the first female national party chairperson, among other changes. Yet the general political environment remains violent and intolerant, which makes participation costly for women and acts as a deterrent.

Women's Voices Under Siege

The rise of new social movements between 2015 and 2017 brought welcome new voices into the political and civic sphere. However, restrictions on civic space became even more pronounced after the 2017 military coup, fueling a remasculinization of public spaces and a further militarization of policing. As noted earlier, women activists have been subjected to unlawful arrests as well as police brutality.[322] Over the past several years, Zimbabwe also saw new forms of political repression supported by stringent restrictions on freedom of movement and freedom of assembly enforced under the guise of fighting the spread of COVID-19.

Among the most prominent voices that have been threatened and targeted are women artists who joined the fight for democracy. They include internationally acclaimed author Tsitsi Dangarembga and activist Julie Barnes. Both were arrested for staging a peaceful protest in 2020 and convicted of participating in illegal demonstrations and spreading political messages to cause public unrest. (The judgment was later overturned following an appeal at the High Court).[323] Well-known comedian Samantha Kureya (popularly known as Gonyeti), who had criticized the regime in her satirical skits, was abducted, stripped naked, beaten, and forced to drink sewage before being dumped by her assailants.[324] Women such as Mamombe and others who were abducted and sexually assaulted during the election campaign period are further evidence of the regime's continuous efforts to silence women. The younger crop of women activists who emerged after the 2018 election, such as Namatai Kwekweza and student leader Nancy Njenge, were also arrested for protesting against the government's constitutional malpractices and pushing for female students' welfare.[325]

The regime's modus operandi is thus to target prominent figures in order to punish them and make them an example that deters other women from speaking out. Because of these gendered risks, the number of women on the front line of the prodemocracy movement or serving in public office has remained low overall. Women suffer police brutality during protests, abduction, arbitrary arrests, and sexual harassment and assault alongside further violations from family and society, such as machismo and abuse from their romantic partners and ostracism from their communities.[326]

Yet women activists nevertheless have remained resolute in the face of state brutality, exploring other ways of amplifying their voices while limiting threats to their personal safety and security. Social media has become a legitimate and strategic theater of the struggle: online platforms have given Zimbabwean women a space to air their grievances and champion campaigns on different issues, such as security sector brutality and rape.[327] But the state has begun to take note of this shift in tactics. A case in point was the arrest and detention of Mahere and her subsequent conviction on trumped-up charges of spreading fake news.[328] Many believe this judicial harassment was meant to prevent Mahere from effectively using social media to mobilize for democracy.

The Future for Women on the Front Line for Democracy in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, space for mobilizing for democracy is more constricted in the post-Mugabe era. Yet remarkably, women's voices are still on the rise. Women are some of the most outspoken advocates for democratic reform. They are organizing at great risk, faced with threats of unlawful arrests, judicial harassment, sexual violence, and even death.

In the face of untold repression, women activists have injected new energy into and reconfigured Zimbabwe's prodemocracy efforts in three main ways. First, the disjuncture between the women's rights movement and the prodemocracy movement has historically weakened women's voices in the struggle against autocracy. The rise of prominent women democracy activists has therefore created a strategic opportunity for gender equality issues to rise further up the democratization agenda, particularly if more deliberate synergies are forged. Women have put their lives at risk and become important emblems of the struggle, thereby changing the face of the movement and making it harder to dismiss women's interests and perspectives. Second, women's participation on the front lines has challenged the structural constraints that for decades have limited the participation of young women activists, thereby paving the way for more inclusive, democratic processes and norms within the movement.[329] Lastly, the resilience of women activists in the face of repression has helped expose the regime's excesses, further reinforcing the urgent need to secure people's freedoms.

However, individual efforts that are not supported by resources, networks, and collaboration remain fragile. The fluid nature of women's activism in Zimbabwe makes it difficult for them to access international support for their work, particularly as women move back and forth between social movements, civil society organizations, and mainstream political parties or shift from being human rights activists to candidates/elected officials in Parliament or local government. There is a need for women activists to forge strategic alliances with traditional civil society organizations that can provide greater sustainability as well as research and documentation capacities to enhance their work. The remarkable rise of a new generation of women democracy activists in Zimbabwe should see the birth of a common platform to coordinate and unify their voices so as to increase the impact and reach of their critical work.

CONCLUSION

Global Trends in Women's Mobilization for Democracy

Saskia Brechenmacher, Erin Jones, and Özge Zihnioğlu

This compilation highlights the breadth and vibrancy of women's mobilization for democracy across different countries and regions. At a time of global democratic doom, their activism emerges as a critical bright spot that deserves greater analytical and policy attention. This conclusion zooms out from the individual country cases to highlight several striking comparative insights.

Women Leading and Energizing Antiauthoritarian Action

Across the countries examined in this compilation, women not only participated in but also led antiauthoritarian political action, particularly at the grassroots. They initiated protests and civil disobedience, mobilized to influence elections, and launched new civic initiatives, often activated by illiberal leaders' attacks on democratic institutions and disregard for gender equality and women's rights. In several countries, these efforts proved critical to defeating antidemocratic leaders; in other contexts, they merely helped invigorate the political opposition.

Organizing Protests

Women played particularly pivotal roles in organizing and leading street protests against illiberal and antidemocratic leaders—often in more visible ways than men. In Brazil, Myanmar, and the United States, for instance, women initiated and led mass demonstrations against leaders they perceived as threatening past gender equality gains as well as democratic norms. In other countries, specific legislative or policy measures provoked women's mass resistance. India exemplifies this pattern: spearheading the mobilization against the Narendra Modi government's Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), Indian Muslim women organized

hundreds of sit-ins in Delhi and other cities across the country. In Poland, women launched mass protests after the politicized Constitutional Tribunal ruled in favor of an almost total abortion ban in the country. In both India and Poland, these protests drew in other parts of civil society and grew into broader channels to contest each government's illiberal drift.

The women involved in these protest movements were not necessarily traditional "democracy activists" or "feminist activists." Instead, they came from diverse backgrounds and occupations. In Myanmar, for example, the anti-coup resistance was driven by thousands of working-class women, rural women, and women working in the civil service—a stark contrast to the urban, professionalized women's organizations that had gained influence during the country's democratic opening. The anti-CAA protests in India, the protests against President Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus in 2020, and the grassroots mobilization against U.S. president Donald Trump following the 2016 election similarly involved many women who previously had not been engaged in civic and political activism. Although these protests generally were not successful at removing authoritarian leaders or reversing antidemocratic actions and policies, they became powerful symbols of broad-based popular opposition and sometimes helped inspire subsequent demonstrations. They also, in many cases, gave rise to new coalitions and grassroots initiatives aimed at defending democracy, including through advocacy and voter turnout campaigns.

Electoral Mobilization

In countries where elections remained competitive, women's protest mobilization prompted follow-on initiatives to defeat autocratic and illiberal actors at the polls. Across Brazil, Poland, Turkey, the United States, and Zimbabwe, women activists launched initiatives aimed at encouraging women to turn out to vote—and to vote for women and opposition candidates in particular. In Brazil and Poland, women voters proved critical to defeating Jair Bolsonaro and the Law and Justice Party, respectively. Women's electoral mobilization was also decisive in ensuring that the Republican Party lost control of the U.S. House of Representatives in 2018, thereby weakening Trump's governing coalition. In these countries, illiberal leaders' attacks on gender equality, feminism, and minority rights provoked an electoral backlash among many women voters. Women's lack of electoral support therefore became backsliding governments' "Achilles' heel," as Marisa von Bülow notes in her article on Brazil. This pattern was not universal, however. In India, for instance, Modi has gained—and intentionally cultivated—the support of many women voters, even as women's rights groups have mobilized against his presidency.

Across multiple cases, democratic erosion also propelled more women to run for office or help other women win elections. They witnessed male-dominated institutions embrace exclusionary policies and observed the limits of street protests in driving change. As a result, many women recognized the need for reform-minded allies to counter antidemocratic politics from *within* formal political institutions. New women's groups formed to get more prodemocratic, progressive, and diverse women elected. This was the case in Zimbabwe, where several women leaders active in prodemocracy movements decided to shift their energies from the streets to electoral politics in 2023, while others launched initiatives to support women's candidacies. In Turkey, women's organizations called on political parties to select more women candidates and fund their campaigns ahead of the 2023 elections. In Brazil and Tunisia, progressive actors organized to get more women from marginalized social groups elected, leading to increases in the number of Indigenous and Black women candidates, respectively. The United States in 2018 and Poland in 2023 saw record numbers of women running for office.

The impact of these efforts has been mixed. One could argue that the uptick in women running for office represents a positive change in and of itself, a first and important step toward normalizing women's political ambition and diversifying the political landscape. In some countries, women's mobilization also resulted in representational gains. In Poland, for instance, several opposition parties placed more women into electable party list positions, ensuring a slight increase in women's share of seats in Parliament. Women achieved important gains in the U.S. Congress, and in Tunisia, several Black women made history by winning parliamentary or municipal council seats. Yet structural and institutional constraints limiting women's political representation proved difficult to overcome, producing a disconnect between women's grassroots political energy and their continued underrepresentation in political institutions. Brazil exemplifies this challenge. In 2020, more women ran in local elections than ever before, yet men retained 88 percent of mayoral seats.[330] Women's financial constraints, their newcomer status, high levels of political violence, and patriarchal norms in political parties emerged as obstacles across multiple cases.

Political Diversity and Cross-Cutting Cleavages

Despite women's frontline role in driving antiauthoritarian protests and electoral mobilization, the case studies also highlight significant political diversity among women. Women's rights organizations in backsliding countries often embraced prodemocracy discourse and tactics, but not always. Moreover, partisanship and cross-cutting identities structured women's individual and collective political engagement.

Women's Organizations Engaging in Antiauthoritarian Action

In most of the countries examined in this compilation, democratic backsliding has been closely intertwined with attacks on women's rights and appeals to traditional gender norms and hierarchies. Leaders have not only weakened checks and balances and concentrated power in the executive but have also forged close alliances with ultraconservative religious and nationalist groups that tend to oppose abortion, LGBTQ rights, and protections for gender-based violence and that emphasize women's domestic and childbearing roles. Many

of these leaders have cracked down ferociously on autonomous feminist activism. In these contexts, progressive women's rights organizations have generally become more involved in broader antiauthoritarian coalitions and movements, recognizing that their agenda (and in some cases, their existence) depends on democratic renewal.

In the United States, for instance, reproductive rights groups have observed that democratic deficiencies are facilitating radical new abortion restrictions. In response, many of those groups have started engaging in state-level struggles over voting rights. Feminist and women's rights movements in Belarus, Brazil, India, Myanmar, and Turkey have also joined broader antiauthoritarian coalitions. Turkish women's organizations, for instance, have organized against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's efforts to entrench himself in power, mobilizing against him during the 2017 constitutional referendum and the 2023 elections. In Myanmar, a new wave of feminist activists and collectives has endorsed the armed resistance against the military while also emphasizing the importance of centering women's voices in the struggle for political transformation. Indian women's rights activists, meanwhile, have sought out new coalitions with Adivasi and Dalit rights groups, labor unions, and other groups that are also speaking out against Modi's Hindu majoritarian agenda. These examples illustrate that threats to democracy can generate new synergies between gender equality activists, prodemocracy campaigns, and other movements for rights and inclusion.

However, women's rights activism and prodemocracy struggles do not always align. In Zimbabwe, Maureen Kademaunga observes a disconnect between a new generation of women democracy activists engaged in contentious street politics and online activism and the wider circle of established women's rights organizations, many of which have distanced themselves from the democracy movement. The latter have instead adopted a more politically neutral or apolitical stance, seeking to maintain avenues for collaboration with the government and access international funding. This divide has decreased the salience of gender equality issues within the democracy movement. The case of Zimbabwe echoes other countries where women's movements have cooperated with autocratic regimes in order to safeguard their space for action and advance women's rights reforms within the existing political system, such as Rwanda and Uganda.[331] Particularly in countries in which autocratic leaders promote top-down women's rights reforms to build their domestic and international legitimacy, coalitions between professionalized women's rights groups and democracy movements may be slower to emerge.

The Role of Cross-Cutting Identities and Partisan Polarization

Divisions between women democracy activists and traditional women's rights organizations in Zimbabwe shed light on a broader point: all forms of antiauthoritarian action are shaped by women's intersecting identities. In many countries, threats to and reversals of hard-won gains in gender equality and political representation have prompted women to join prodemocracy movements, whether as protesters, voters, candidates, or grassroots activists. Women from marginalized communities who experience multiple, overlapping forms of oppression and exclusion have been at the front lines of political resistance. This was the case for African American women in the United States, Muslim women in India, Black women in Tunisia, and Indigenous women in Brazil.

However, across all case studies, some women instead chose to support antidemocratic or illiberal leaders and governments, because of their religious, ideological, or partisan commitments. In Turkey, for example, Islamic feminists have critiqued the approach of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) to gender issues, but they have refrained from mobilizing directly against the party or Erdoğan himself. Instead, secular and Kurdish women have been the primary drivers of women's opposition to Erdoğan's government. In Poland, older, religious women overwhelmingly remained loyal to the Law and Justice Party, despite its antiabortion stance. Many conservative-leaning White women in the United States have similarly doubled down on their support for Trump and his political allies. Some have played important organizing roles within far-right networks and civil society groups.

Democratic stagnation and erosion are often accompanied by heightened political polarization.[332] The case studies highlight that women as a group are not immune to this trend. In politically polarized societies, women's (and men's) partisan alignment tends to outweigh their concerns about abstract democratic principles.[333] Moreover, some women share the conservative gender norms espoused by many illiberal and antidemocratic political parties and leaders, particularly when those norms are framed as protecting religious communities, children's welfare, and traditional family structures. Bolsonaro in Brazil, Erdoğan in Turkey, Lukashenko in Belarus, and Viktor Orbán in Hungary have all cultivated the support of conservative and/or religious women and promoted some into positions of public visibility and leadership.

Women Broadening Prodemocracy Struggles

The case studies highlight that women are not only leading and participating in antiauthoritarian action: they are also changing how the struggle for democracy is defined and fought. They are, in many cases, advancing a vision of democracy that centers women's and minority rights, substantive equality, and the sociopolitical inclusion of marginalized groups. Yet this vision has encountered pushback within prodemocracy movements.

Centering Gender Equality

Unsurprisingly, women's prodemocratic mobilization has drawn attention to gender issues. In highly patriarchal societies, women's participation in street protests and other forms of oppositional activism in and of itself subverts traditional gender norms and expectations. In both Myanmar and Zimbabwe, for instance, women's public resistance against state security forces challenged the notion that antiauthoritarian movements are the reserve of men. In Belarus, women's leadership in the 2020 opposition campaign against Lukashenko was

similarly radical and unprecedented—although the women leaders in question purposefully downplayed their political role in order not to alienate conservative Belarusians. In all three cases, disruptions in established norms fostered fragile openings for women to advance their political interests with greater authority.

Through protests, online activism, and other forms of mobilization, women have stressed the linkages between antidemocratic actions, illiberal ideologies, and attacks on gender equality. They have argued that safety from gender-based violence, women's bodily autonomy, and equal political representation are all integral to women's basic rights and equal citizenship. In doing so, they at times have brought gender equality issues onto the agenda of political opposition parties. This was the case in Turkey, where various opposition parties have started to speak out against the government's rollback of legal protections for gender-based violence. In Poland, women's mass mobilization similarly pushed opposition parties to acknowledge reproductive rights more explicitly in their platforms.

An Inclusive Democratic Vision

However, women activists have not only prioritized gender equality. They have also put forward a broader—and, in many ways, more radical—vision of democracy that prioritizes the substantive equality and inclusion of all citizens, particularly of the most marginalized groups. This vision of democracy is shaped, in part, by the interconnected forms of discrimination women themselves face. It stands at odds with a narrower, more procedural understanding of democracy focused on elections, civil liberties, and the rule of law. In Brazil, India, and the United States, for instance, women protesters and activists linked the struggle for democracy and gender equality to broader movements for social, economic, and racial justice, and they emphasized the interconnectedness of these agendas. Exemplifying this strategy, Brazilian women protesting Bolsonaro drew explicit connections between his misogyny and anti-LGBTQ views, his authoritarian tendencies, and his government's attacks on workers' and Indigenous people's rights and in doing so built coalitions across these domains.

Women from marginalized social groups in particular emphasized the importance of weaving together different struggles for rights and justice. Black Tunisian women activists have drawn attention to the nexus of racial, gender, and class discrimination in Tunisian society and called out racial blind spots among "mainstream" democracy organizations and feminist groups. In India, Muslim women and women farmers pushed back against not only Modi's autocratic tendencies but also the ruling party's Hindutva ideology and neoliberal economic governance. Kurdish women in Turkey, in a similar vein, have long linked the defense of democracy to their struggle for ethnic self-determination and gender equality and framed gender inequities as resulting at least partly from their oppression by the Turkish state.

In several case studies, women tried to embody this vision of equality and sociopolitical inclusion through their resistance tactics, by modeling the equitable and caring society they were trying to build. The Shaheen Bagh protesters in India, for example, created protest sites where people of different backgrounds and identities could come together, create and share art, and take care of one another. Women leading the protest movement in Belarus prioritized horizontal communications and leadership styles while rejecting hierarchical practices. In Myanmar, women activists have challenged the democratic resistance not only to fight the military by all means possible but also to live up to their principles internally. They have cautioned against the risks of militarization and the need to protect women, LGBTQ people, vulnerable workers, and other marginalized groups within the struggle for political transformation.

Divisions and Pushback Within Democratic Coalitions

These efforts to widen the scope of prodemocracy mobilization have met resistance within antiauthoritarian coalitions. In some cases, this resistance has stemmed from strategic disagreements. In the United States, for instance, some organizations mobilizing for democratic renewal—including many led and staffed by women—are wary of tying their cause too closely to various progressive social and political agendas, including reproductive rights. Instead, they see a narrower focus on institutional reform as essential to building the cross-partisan coalition needed to defend U.S. democracy.

In other cases, pushback is rooted in exclusionary norms and practices within prodemocratic opposition parties and movements, which often replicate rather than challenge existing social hierarchies. Black women activists in Tunisia struggled to gain the support of mainstream democracy organizations and feminist activists. Solidarity with their cause has only strengthened as overt attacks on racial minorities have made the linkages between authoritarianism, patriarchy, and racism more evident. Women-led protests in Belarus have come under fire from critics who dismiss them as not being sufficiently confrontational in their discourse and tactics, while women in Myanmar who joined the armed resistance have found themselves relegated to secondary support roles. Gender discrimination also characterizes Turkish opposition parties, several of which performed worse than the ruling AKP with respect to women's electoral representation. As Kademaunga writes in her article on Zimbabwe, women democracy activists are forced to fight not only state repression but also the patriarchal, exclusionary, and sometimes militaristic attitudes of their male partners and allies.

Confronting State Repression and Violence

Finally, women activists across all countries examined in this compilation have faced political violence and intimidation. This adversity has ranged from online threats and harassment to legal persecution and physical abuse. Women have confronted both the broader effects of closing political and civic space along with gender-specific risks, including sexual violence and gendered disinformation campaigns.

The types of threats facing women democracy activists vary by political context. In countries marked by high levels of state repression, state actors tend to be the primary perpetrators of violence. In Zimbabwe, for instance, prominent women leaders have been subjected to arrests, abductions, and sexual assault by state security forces. Belarusian women advocating for democracy have been forced to go into exile or risk imprisonment or involuntary psychiatric treatment. In India, Tunisia, and Turkey, women challenging government policies have been targeted with investigations, raids, criminal procedures, and jail time, tactics that are aimed at limiting women's effectiveness and credibility. In countries that remain politically more open, by contrast, threats have not necessarily (or primarily) emanated from state actors. Instead, the Brazilian and U.S. cases highlight how heightened political polarization and hateful discourse by political leaders have fostered a more permissible environment for harassment and violence by extremist actors.

Across these different contexts, women activists have faced gendered (and, in some cases, racialized) forms of violence. Sexual violence and abuse are recurring threats for women's rights defenders in India, Myanmar, and Zimbabwe. Many authors also emphasize the challenge of gendered and sexualized online hate speech, threats, and disinformation seeking to disparage women's leadership or push them out of the political sphere. In Belarus, for instance, state-sponsored disinformation efforts have tried to sow divisions between women opposition leaders and portray them in a negative light. In Brazil, India, and the United States, by comparison, online abuse emanates primarily from nonstate actors—yet politicians have fueled and encouraged such attacks. The cases of Tunisia and the United States also illustrate the disproportionate targeting of women of color, who contend with not only gendered attacks but also racist harassment and violence. Heightened political toxicity has far-reaching effects, sometimes leading women to withdraw from politics and public-facing activism out of fear for their safety. This pattern can persist even after illiberal and antidemocratic leaders have been removed from office.

Yet even in contexts of immense repression, women continue to mobilize in creative ways. The digital realm and social media platforms have emerged as particularly important spaces for activism, awareness-raising, and coalition-building in Myanmar, Tunisia, and Zimbabwe. Women in Myanmar, for example, have launched new online journals and collectives that foster democratic and open debate even in a challenging political environment. Many Belarusian women activists continue to advocate for democracy while in exile abroad.

Even as mass mobilization ebbs and flows, several case studies emphasize how women's prodemocracy engagement persists by shifting forms, sometimes becoming highly visible and other times operating more quietly behind the scenes.

Concluding Insights

Together, the case studies illustrate women's critical leadership in prodemocratic resistance movements in different parts of the world. Pushed to action by autocratic threats to human rights, democracy, and gender equality, they are organizing street protests, mobilizing around elections, and pushing previously neglected gender and inclusion issues onto the agenda of opposition parties and organizations.

Sociopolitical cleavages shape which women mobilize for democracy in any given country. Women who benefit from or believe in their government's ideological projects are less likely to denounce infringements on women's rights or democratic institutions. Yet despite these divisions, women are playing a notable role in energizing resistance movements through mass protests and electoral mobilization. Their leadership reflects women's grassroots organizing power. But it also speaks to the fact that antidemocratic actors often threaten women's rights, support regressive gender norms, and weaken human rights protections more broadly—perhaps making the risks of autocracy more acute to women, and to minority women in particular.

This compilation does not assess whether women's involvement improves the overall effectiveness of antiauthoritarian movements, though some research suggests that it does.[334] Women in several cases proved critical to voting illiberal leaders out of power. Often, however, women's activism did not produce immediate reversals of antidemocratic policies or the removal of antidemocratic leaders. These cases nevertheless highlight wide-ranging effects. Women's grassroots mobilization brought people out to the streets in large numbers, which laid the groundwork for new political coalitions and politicized previously disengaged citizens. Women also helped bring more diverse representatives into formal politics and diversified opposition actors' agendas by drawing attention to women's rights concerns and related struggles for minority rights and democratic inclusion.

When faced with parallel attacks on gender equality and democracy, women's movements and prodemocracy movements often came closer together. Yet this compilation highlights that such coalitions are not without hurdles. Women's rights organizations are sometimes hesitant to associate with oppositional prodemocratic struggles if they fear being perceived as political and want to preserve space for action in closed political settings. In other contexts, democracy groups are wary of aligning themselves too closely with "issue-based" struggles, either because they deem these causes less essential or because they fear losing members of their desired political coalition. Together, these dynamics mean that the place of women's rights (and LGBTQ rights) within broader democracy movements often remains fragile.

Relatedly, the compilation highlights that women's grassroots organizing frequently fails to translate into proportionate influence in formal politics. In some cases, this is due to brutal state repression. But even in less restrictive contexts, women have found it difficult to translate collective mobilization into political influence. They generally remain marginalized even in reform-minded opposition parties, and gains in political representation have been incremental. Governments, philanthropic foundations, and other actors that seek to support and strengthen inclusive prodemocracy movements thus face several tasks. They should support and lift up women's grassroots leadership and offer protection from state repression. In addition, however, supporters need to address the political and institutional hurdles that limit the political empowerment of women and other marginalized groups even in pluralistic political systems. A comprehensive strategy should seek to foster an environment in which women's prodemocracy activism can be fully realized.

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Chapter 8

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Conclusion

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