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1

Autocratic Genderwashing

An Unlikely Gender Champion

July 17, 2023. The modern, expansive BK Arena in Kigali, Rwanda—marketed as “the events hub of Africa”—is filled with six thousand participants from across the globe. Activists, policymakers, donors, researchers, and civil society representatives have gathered for the Women Deliver Conference.

A booming voice fills the arena: “If you could all rise to your feet to help me welcome their excellencies to the BK Arena. His Excellency President Paul Kagame, president of the Republic of Rwanda!” The audience erupts in applause and cheers as President Kagame enters, stepping into the spotlight alongside Nobel Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai. The show has begun.

The Rwanda National Ballet performs next, followed by Kagame’s opening speech, where he encourages everyone to “please, feel at home.” The audience listens attentively as he stays close to his prepared script, greeting dignitaries and speaking about the importance of gender equality and the need to push further.

About six minutes into his speech, Kagame highlights Rwanda’s achievements: “In Rwanda, we have created an enabling environment for women to be equally represented in leadership positions, including in politics, and at all levels.” The statement is met with applause and

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cheers, prompting a brief pause. He goes on to recommend some of Rwanda's key tools for advancing gender equality, such as the annual gender budget statement, which ensures that public spending decisions take gendered impacts into account. More applause follows. When he mentions the need for men to share responsibility for childcare, the audience responds again, interrupting his speech with cheers. The script is working.

Rwanda's role as the first African host of the Women Deliver Conference, and its ability to stage-manage the event—from setting the agenda and casting the actors to directing the message—is a striking example of how gender can be used for image management. At the time of this event, the show was well rehearsed. Rwanda has long placed its gender equality reforms center stage and in the spotlight—and it has become highly skilled at doing so. In 2003, Rwanda amended its constitution to reserve a significant number of parliamentary seats for women. In September 2008, it became the first country in the world to have a majority of women in its national parliament. It has used this position strategically ever since.

The opening speech at the Women Deliver Conference was thus nothing new to President Kagame. He is a seasoned playwright and actor on the gender stage. While there are no Academy Awards for this type of performance, Kagame has won gender-equality awards for promoting women into the political system. In 2007, he went to Dakar, Senegal, to collect the African Gender Award for his “exceptional efforts to promote the rights of women in his country.”¹ Nine years later, he picked up the Gender Champion Award from the African Women's Movement “for his tireless efforts towards championing women's rights and empowerment on the continent.”²

Kagame himself states that part of his inspiration for dramatically increasing women's representation is being lectured by international lending institutions about the importance of gender. His listening and learning have paid off, and Rwanda has received significant recognition and praise from international institutions. During the ceremony for the Gender Champion Award in 2016, the African Union chairperson, Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, emphasized the international prominence and prestige that the number one rank has given President Kagame: “We thank you for creating a Rwanda which is a place for women as well

as everyone. President Kagame is not only the President of Rwanda but also the global leader for gender.”³ The very same week, Kagame also received the first-ever “Gender Scorecard Award,” which is tied to the UN’s standardized assessment of gender mainstreaming practices, the UNCT-SWAP scorecard.⁴ Rankings have become increasingly crucial for manifesting and measuring progress, and Rwanda has been firmly positioned as “number one for women.”⁵

This spotlight on gender-equality progress has drawn attention away from other aspects of Rwandan politics that take place in the dark. Rwanda is an autocracy.⁶ President Kagame has dominated the country’s politics since the country emerged from genocide and civil war in the early 1990s. He has held the position of president for more than twenty years, amid widespread reports of electoral fraud, coercion of opponents, pervasive surveillance, and human rights violations by the Kagame regime.⁷ For instance, the regime has been accused of orchestrating murders and kidnappings of political opponents in exile, such as the brutal murder of Rwanda’s former external intelligence chief Patrick Karegeya at a hotel room in Johannesburg, South Africa, on New Year’s Eve in 2014. Karegeya had fled Rwanda in 2007 after a high-profile falling-out with President Kagame and set up an opposition movement. On several occasions, he had been warned by local security agents of plots to kill him. Kagame publicly denied involvement in the murder, but he is reported to have celebrated it by cracking open a bottle of champagne. In a speech shortly after the murder, he also said that “you cannot betray Rwanda and get away with it. . . . Anyone who betrays our cause . . . will fall victim.”⁸

The government of Rwanda’s gender-equality initiatives are part of a broader strategy to provide the regime with diplomatic leverage and deflect attention from undemocratic practices.⁹ It brands Rwanda as an attractive, well-functioning, safe, and low-corruption country that is a reliable partner for governments, organizations, and investors—and a premium destination for high-end tourism.¹⁰ Gender equality has also proved to be a remarkable costume, a costume that lets Rwanda pass as more democratic than it is. As an observer of Rwandan politics has claimed, by significantly increasing women’s representation in politics, the Kagame regime has effectively “disguised its increasingly authoritarian governance as a democratic system.”¹¹

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Rwanda is not the only autocracy that has made remarkable progress in women's political inclusion and capitalized on it. In fact, it has been something of an authoritarian trend in recent decades. For instance, when we look at the global front-runners in women's parliamentary representation, the Scandinavian countries were consistently ranked among the top five until the early 2000s. Today, twenty years later, their positions have been overtaken not only by Rwanda (still ranked number one), but also by countries such as Cuba (number two), Nicaragua (number three), and the United Arab Emirates (number six).¹² This new group of "gender champions" have more in common than the fact that they have all adopted ambitious electoral gender-quota policies: They are not democracies. Their track records on political inclusion, civil rights, and individual freedoms are poor. All four countries consistently violate human rights, and none hold free and fair elections.¹³ Prior to adopting gender quotas, women's political representation in these countries was generally very low.

The advancements in the area of women's rights among autocratic states may come as a surprise, as these countries historically have exhibited stark gender inequalities.¹⁴ Also, a lot of media attention has recently been given to how authoritarian leaders such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey attack, rather than promote, women's rights and gender equality. Counterintuitive as it may be, since the end of the Cold War, we have witnessed a dramatic change in legislation related to women's rights in the very countries where we might least have expected it.

This book seeks to understand the notable trend that many gender-equality reforms have been adopted in nondemocratic settings. Taking a strategic approach, *our main argument posits that autocratic governments use gender as a versatile tool to legitimate their rule and stay in power*. Autocrats can seek specific benefits from spotlighting gender equality. By doing so, they project an image of being progressive, liberal, and even democratic—while using that spotlight to deflect attention from persistent authoritarian practices.

We refer to this strategy as *autocratic genderwashing*. This is not a book exclusively about Rwanda but a book about the authoritarian theater that is autocratic genderwashing. Using illustrations of countries and leaders from around the world, along with case studies, descriptive

statistics, and survey experiments, we seek to make sense of what autocratic genderwashing is, how it has emerged, what it aims to achieve, how it works, where and when it takes place, the extent to which it has succeeded, and the consequences it may entail.

What Is Autocratic Genderwashing?

Modern autocrats no longer rely solely—or even primarily—on coercion to stay in power. They also seek some degree of acceptance of their rule. For a long time, the dominant answer to the question of what grants legitimacy has been democracy.¹⁵ But for autocrats, democracy is not an option. They must therefore find alternative strategies—stand-ins that can mimic the positive signals of democracy. This is where gender enters the stage. Welcome to the genderwashing theater.

We suggest that autocratic genderwashing can be better understood as theater—a show produced and directed by the autocratic leader for a specific audience, with the spotlight on carefully chosen scenes. Like a theater play, autocratic genderwashing may be carefully directed or leave more room for improvisation on stage. Some autocratic regimes, like Rwanda's, carefully spin every move they make through elaborate public-relations plans, allocating large budgets for PR and lobbying, collaborating with influencers, and controlling the media and the digital space. Others engage in opportunistic genderwashing, such as when autocrats claim credit for gender-equality gains they did not actually contribute to, or when they jump on the bandwagon and adopt electoral gender quotas because it is what everyone seems to be doing, and it seems to serve them well.

Whether it is elaborately budgeted and planned or opportunistic (or a bit of both), autocratic genderwashing involves a risk-reward assessment. Gender-equality reforms tend to involve little risk to the regime compared with changes that might actually strengthen the opposition or lead to fair electoral competition. In many autocracies, women legislators have so far been more loyal to their parties than men.¹⁶ Women are often more dependent on party hierarchies and leadership because they have limited access to other pathways to politics, such as local patronage networks.¹⁷ In an autocratic setting, women's loyalty may even be a condition for their inclusion. Bringing

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more women with ruling-party affiliations into parliament can solidify rather than threaten regime support. Enhancing women's political inclusion, in other words, can be an effective co-optation strategy that carries little risk for an autocracy's survival.

But autocratic genderwashing is special because it also sends strong signals about liberalism and democracy, and, as such, it may well enhance the prospects for regime survival. Women's inclusion has become an integral component of democracy-promotion efforts, to the extent that gender equality and democracy are now widely regarded as inseparable "bundled norms."¹⁸ If and when the association between democracy and gender equality rests on an uncritical assumption rather than on careful analysis, even shallow gender-equality reforms may be mistaken for meaningful democratic progress. This creates an opening for autocrats, who can promote women's political inclusion as a symbolic gesture of democratization—even when the institutions to which women are appointed lack real power.

Looking more closely at the concept of autocratic genderwashing, it can also be used without the adjective *autocratic*.¹⁹ Organizations, companies, and states engage in genderwashing when they exaggerate the gender-equality gains they have made, or prioritize superficial but visible reforms over transformational change. In this way, it is a concept similar to its linguistic cousins *whitewashing* and *greenwashing*—deliberate attempts to gloss over and conceal unpleasant facts, by making a company look more climate friendly than it actually is, for instance.

Autocratic genderwashing, we purport, adds another important dimension to the concept. While genderwashing in general could be about making a country look more gender equal than it actually is, autocratic genderwashing *also* exploits the understanding that gender equality can substitute for democratic reforms. In other words, countries engaging in *autocratic* genderwashing do not only try to look *better* than they are with respect to gender equality but also try to look as if they are something *different* altogether—namely, more progressive, liberal, and even democratic. In this sense, autocratic genderwashing is similar to *sportswashing*, in which autocracies use sports (e.g., the Saudi Public Investment Fund's ownership of soccer clubs) and high-profile sports events (e.g., the FIFA World Cup in Qatar in 2022 and

Formula One races in various Gulf states) to distract from human rights abuses and boost their reputation for democracy.²⁰ This book sheds light on this particular exploitation and thus zooms in on authoritarian states and the genderwashing activities that they employ in order to enhance autocratic regime stability. Rather than seeking out the difference between genderwashing in general and autocratic genderwashing, the book aims to better understand the drivers behind and consequences of autocratic genderwashing.

From a normative perspective, then, too tight a bundling of gender equality and democracy may be problematic. Even if we think that there can be no true democracy without the inclusion of women, this does not imply that women's inclusion automatically gives us true democracy. This very confusion gives autocrats an opening to use inclusion as a ploy to fend off fairer competition from the opposition. Fair competition is a nonnegotiable aspect of democracy, and other "good" reforms—even those promoting women's inclusion—do not, in and of themselves, constitute democratization. In the absence of fair competition, however, autocrats are in a position to spin even seemingly inclusive reforms into instruments that primarily serve their own exclusionary purposes.

But let us be clear: Recognizing the theatrical elements of promoting gender equality in autocracies does not mean dismissing all reforms as mere spectacle. We do not deny that autocrats may have multiple motives for embracing women's rights, including ideological ones. Communist and socialist regimes, for instance, are well known for their ideological commitments to equality, including, at least in theory, women's participation in public life.²¹ Nor do we dismiss those courageous women who have been the architects—and not merely beneficiaries—of these reforms. As we show (see, e.g., chapter 4), women's rights activists and local feminist movements have relentlessly advocated for change and shaped these policies.²² Nor do we question that meaningful progress has been made. In countries like Rwanda, there has been real, tangible, and in many respects impressive progress toward gender equality. The lives of many ordinary women have improved significantly in recent decades, partly owing to increased political representation and investment in women's education and health. Our focus is not on discrediting these motives, actions,

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and outcomes but on understanding autocrats' underlying strategic concerns. The point is that controlling the narrative and showcasing progress in gender equality serves a purpose beyond the progress itself: It is a legitimacy-seeking strategy for autocrats.

To comprehend this strategy, it is necessary to revisit the 1990s, following the end of the Cold War. In the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of American unipolarity, the liberal international order established after World War II expanded substantially, based on the principles of democracy, human rights, free markets, and multilateralism. Western democracies used their leverage to promote liberalization abroad—for instance, by conditioning their economic relations and foreign aid on democracy or human rights reforms. These practices exerted considerable pressure on authoritarian regimes to adjust their relations with liberal norms.²³

Because gender equality became a strong liberal norm in the post-Cold War era—deeply embedded in efforts to promote democracy and human rights—autocrats have learned to use it to claim legitimacy, telling a story of a country that is liberalizing. In this legitimization play, the autocrat sets the stage, selects the script, and casts the actors. Essentially, the autocrat controls the spotlight, deciding which parts of the stage the audience notices. In the genderwashing theater, this allows the autocrat to highlight particular reforms and accomplishments—such as laws on violence against women, higher representation of women in parliament, or the establishment of women's policy agencies—and the actors involved. These efforts are expected to win applause from the theater's audience: liberal and democratically minded segments of the domestic population, as well as international actors invested in liberal values and democracy.

But as in any staged show, the spotlight also obscures. While attention is drawn to progress on gender equality, it is diverted from authoritarian practices that might otherwise provoke criticism—such as election manipulation, repression of dissent, or human rights abuses.

The idea that fiction plays a central role in authoritarian narratives is not new. Already in the 1950s, Hannah Arendt, in her analysis of Nazism and Stalinism, observed that the “ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction . . . and the distinction between true and

false . . . no longer exist.”²⁴ Authoritarian propaganda primarily aims to influence people’s associations rather than simply persuade them.

The fiction created by authoritarian leaders is often negative and may involve what Johannes Gerschewski would label as overpoliticized narratives of “us and them” that construct enemies to legitimize authoritarian rule.²⁵ It is easy to think of examples of these types of negative propaganda and conspiracy theories spread to discredit and smear certain political actors, thereby misleading or distracting audiences.²⁶ Influential books like Anne Applebaum’s *Autocracy Inc.* also show how authoritarian information dissemination now operates at an entirely new level, as the propaganda efforts of modern autocracies are systematic and use media networks and social media with global reach.²⁷

This book seeks to remind the reader that we should not only be wary of the negative messages authoritarian leaders spread about a real or imagined threat or an “other” but also think twice about the positive messaging they spread about dictatorships. The genderwashing theater analogy builds on insights that fiction and narratives are important authoritarian tools, but it focuses more on the positive stories that regimes strive to be associated with. Fiction is also important in this positive propaganda production. Soviet leadership used to invite foreign writers and intellectuals to Moscow for “charm sessions” with Stalin. Writers like George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, and Pablo Neruda proceeded to praise the regime, sometimes in literary and poetic terms.²⁸ And North Korea has, over the years, used “staged tours” (which include mass performances and spectacles), for tourists and celebrities like basketball player Dennis Rodman, as tools of propaganda and geopolitics.²⁹ Image management, as Alexander Dukalskis calls it, is probably the modern-day concept of how strategies used in fiction also play a part in authoritarian states’ efforts to promote “soft power,” public relations, and propaganda.³⁰ Positive experiences, such as extravagant shows, impressive military parades, or visionary films or content, subconsciously promote the regime behind them. Their claim to influence rests on positive associations with gender equality rather than on an accurate representation of reality. Autocratic genderwashing, as we describe it, is a form of political theater that uses *spotlight capture* to strategically direct attention to specific

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positive achievements, such as gender equality reforms, to captivate domestic and international audiences alike. It reflects the complexity of modern authoritarian rule, which relies not only on repression and social control but also on policy and service delivery—carrots as well as sticks. In such environments, autocrats have a vested interest in highlighting their successes while concealing the coercion and cruelty happening behind the scenes. This book adopts the autocrat’s perspective by focusing on that carefully directed spotlight. We examine how normative pressures influence autocracies, looking at how autocrats utilize gender-equality reforms to build a narrative of progress and legitimacy, thereby supporting their nondemocratic rule.

The Gender Play

Why do autocrats create plays about gender? We see autocratic genderwashing as part of a broader strategy in which authoritarian leaders appropriate liberal values in order to pursue an illiberal agenda.³¹ As such, it can be seen as a form of soft power, whereby regimes benefit from being associated with things with positive connotations, be it sports events, modern architecture, pop culture, art, or even a particular brand of chocolate.³² In contexts where gender equality is perceived as normatively “good,” promoting it shines its light on autocratic regimes.³³

Over the past few decades, the promotion of gender equality as a global norm has been unprecedented. The global push for gender equality, which accelerated with the United Nations’ Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in the mid-1990s, has ensured that gender issues are on the global agenda and on the agendas of country leaders—whether they like it or not.

While it is easy to celebrate the many gains from finally integrating gender into international and domestic agendas, it is more difficult to identify potential risks that may arise if such norms are promoted in superficial or uncritical ways. Gender equality, as an international norm, has often been promoted as unequivocally good—symbolic, widely endorsed, and morally compelling. At the same time, the gender agenda has been broad in scope, ambitious in aspiration, but often rather loosely defined.

Why has gender become such a useful tool for autocrats? We contend that gender is a concept that is both symbolically potent and highly flexible, making it ideal for strategic manipulation. Our intention here is not to take a stance on or correct the use of the word *gender*; we simply note that it is used in many different ways and conveys many different meanings. While originally used to distinguish social sex roles from biological differences, it has since been used to denote the empowerment of women as well as sexual identity. This is also evident in the language about gender in international discourse: We talk about *gender equality*, *gender mainstreaming*, *gender identity*, and *gender ideology*—using the word *gender* to denote a range of different things.

This makes *gender* an efficient multipurpose tool for authoritarians. The fact that it can also be used in a negative manner is the clearest illustration of its malleability, and it distinguishes gender from many other positive concepts and phenomena that autocrats try to associate themselves with in their soft-power strategies. While this book is about *genderwashing*, it is useful to juxtapose autocratic genderwashing to its cousin *genderbashing*: another strategy that deploys gender.³⁴ Gender equality has become a symbol of many things, including the West. For instance, the principle of gender equality between women and men is “an EU value,” which means that it should underpin all European Union policies and be relevant in all areas. Because gender equality is widely seen as a symbol of the West, an autocrat’s stance on it will largely depend on their preferred relationship with the West. An autocrat who seeks to distance their regime from Western influence—and who caters to populist, nationalist, or far-right audiences—is more likely to signal *genderbashing* than *genderwashing*.

Branding oneself as egalitarian has long brought positive attention and international prestige. But power dynamics are shifting, and some illiberal forms of nation branding are now gaining traction. Today, signaling distance from the liberal world order has become a form of image management. When authoritarian leaders publicly condemn so-called “gender ideology,” they are signaling alignment with illiberal counterparts across borders—positioning themselves on the same side of a global “culture war.” The fragmentation of information channels makes it easier to manipulate public understanding of issues like gender, spreading distorted narratives and disinformation to construct

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the straw man of “gender ideology,” or in Judith Butler’s words, to turn gender into a “catchall phantasm” that absorbs a host of fears.³⁵ Genderbashing is more than classic rule by fear: It is a contemporary strategy used to legitimize authoritarian rule at home while also attracting approval from certain audiences abroad.³⁶

We also need to elaborate on the differences between the autocratic genderwashers and the genderbashers. The sexist remarks or derogatory statements about gender ideology of the Bolsonaros, Orbáns, and Putins have dominated popular discourse on the role of gender in authoritarian settings. Genderbashing signals a regime’s distancing itself from foreign influence and a protection of national values. Genderwashing is a more well-established and entrenched strategy, which emanates from the West’s success in spreading soft power and reinforcing a liberal world order in the post–Cold War era. The recognition that autocratic genderwashing gets is visible in prizes, rankings, and voter support, but it does not reach the headlines to the same extent as homophobic war rhetoric in Russia or the withdrawal of reproductive rights in Poland. Many autocracies, however, aspire to increase their regional power or appease liberal segments of the population that challenge regime stability. This book is about these autocracies, the ones that engage in autocratic genderwashing.

While using the same word—*gender*—genderwashing and genderbashing represent two distinct logics of autocratic rule. According to Johannes Gerschewski, authoritarian states can either overpoliticize or depoliticize an issue.³⁷ In an overpoliticizing strategy, the autocrat exaggerates “them and us” and seeks to create animosity and mobilize people against an enemy, often through propaganda and disinformation. This is a tried-and-true autocratic logic, akin to the hard power that we can see at play in genderbashing, where gender ideology is portrayed as a threat to traditional family values and to children’s well-being. A depoliticizing strategy, on the other hand, relies on delivering “good goods” to people, keeping them passive and content and unlikely to rebel against the regime. It focuses on promoting a variety of offerings that both citizens and international audiences will enjoy.³⁸ Tourism, sports events, art galleries, music, and Dubai chocolate are all part of the image management of authoritarian regimes, advertised and spread through modern PR bureaus, media strategies, and internet

influencers. Most of these types of “products” are clearly depoliticized, aiming not at mobilization but at complacency. Soft power is often a form of depoliticization: A regime wants to be associated with pleasant and unthreatening things. When autocrats manage to depoliticize the inherently political gender-equality issue and use it as an attraction, the curtain goes up for the genderwashing theater.

In the realm of political theater, the Wizard of Oz in the musical *Wicked!* exemplifies how autocrats manipulate perceptions through selective role assignment, using the same authoritarian logic of over-politicizing and depoliticizing. As the Wizard claims: “The truth isn’t a thing of fact or reason—it’s simply what everyone agrees on.” In *Wicked!*, we realize that the feared Wicked Witch of the West and Glinda, the Good Witch of the North, are not inherently evil or good—they are cast into these roles by the Wizard, whose power depends on controlling the narrative.³⁹ Authoritarian actors similarly recast gender depending on what the performance requires. Gender equality can become Glinda: virtuous, radiant, magically “good”—and strategically aligned with the regime’s projection of democratic progress—a tool of genderwashing. Alternatively, gender can be framed as the Wicked Witch: threatening, unruly, and dangerous—an object of genderbashing. But just as in Oz, these portrayals reflect the needs of the Wizard, not the truth of the witches. The question is not whether gender is good or wicked, but what role it is made to play—and for whose benefit.

Recognizing that gender is a powerful symbol, yet easy to imbue with different meanings, helps us understand why it has become such a useful tool. Autocrats have realized that it can mean anything and nothing, and that they can use it to send different signals to different audiences. *Gender equality* might seem to be an inherently political term, but on the genderwashing stage, autocrats manage to pull off a magic trick: Gender is simultaneously depoliticized *and* conflated with democracy.

Identifying Autocratic Genderwashing

Not all autocrats practice genderwashing, and not every policy in autocracies is aimed at it. For example, communist and socialist regimes are recognized for their ideological focus on equality, which,

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at least in theory, includes women's involvement in public life.⁴⁰ During the Cold War in Asia, only China, North Korea, Mongolia, Vietnam, and Cambodia had over 10 percent women in parliament in 1980. In 2000, this pattern persisted, despite efforts like the Beijing Platform for Action, with the parliaments of China, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and Turkmenistan—still communist regimes—maintaining over 20 percent women.⁴¹

Our task, therefore, is not only to define autocratic genderwashing but also to determine how to identify it. Otherwise, the concept risks becoming too vague or expansive, to the point where “everything” could be interpreted as autocratic genderwashing. How can we tell whether the promotion of gender equality is intended to make a regime appear progressive, liberal, or even democratic, while diverting attention from its persistent authoritarian practices? Deducing motives is a challenging task for social scientists, as we cannot directly observe what is happening in people's minds. Therefore, we need to rely on other strategies to identify autocratic genderwashing.

A starting point for this endeavor is to consider an assumption that underlies much research on autocratic politics: that a dictator's overarching goal is to stay in power. This means that no policies will be adopted unless they, in one way or another (directly or indirectly), benefit the regime. For example, consider how many one-party dictatorships responded to Western democracies' push for liberalization in the 1990s, when trade agreements, loans, and foreign aid programs were conditioned on human rights or democracy reforms: They introduced multiparty elections to mimic democratic institutions, but they manipulated the elections and the political playing field to such an extent that the countries never democratized—and the autocratic governments prolonged their rule.

When dealing with autocrats, it is therefore important to exercise skepticism and not take inclusive reforms at face value. A key question to ask is: What are the potential benefits for autocratic regimes of supporting specific gender-equality reforms? Just as gender-equality reforms during the development of welfare states in Western democracies were motivated not only by gender-equality ideals but also by economic factors (e.g., to develop the labor market and increase tax income), an analysis that includes strategic motives needs to look

beyond gender-equality concerns and consider the bigger picture. Yet, unlike analyses of democracies, such an analysis needs to include an examination of what the regime is trying to hide, and thus of what is happening outside the spotlight.

Let us use a few guiding tools to better understand when to suspect that a government is exercising autocratic genderwashing. One such tool is to consider the timing of a gender-equality reform and place it in relation to a country's past record on gender equality. If an autocratic regime suddenly advocates for women's rights, we should pause and consider what motivates such a reform. For example, when Jordan, a long-standing autocracy, suddenly adopted its Family Protection Law in 2008 to combat domestic violence—following accusations of electoral fraud and the passage of a law that stifled civil society—we concur with political scientist Summer Forester that there is cause for concern.⁴² Up until then, the Jordanian government had not been known for its engagement in gender-equality issues. By passing the law, the regime could shift the spotlight from its abuses to policies that provide positive associations. Such a shift was important not only domestically (to reduce resentment and enhance stability) but also internationally, as Western democracies tied aid and trade to gender mainstreaming mechanisms. We can compare this case to a hypothetical one in which we believe there is less reason to worry that a reform is being introduced strategically to distract from the regime's authoritarian practices: if a communist regime like the Cuban government, known for its heavy investment in public health, launches an initiative to support maternal health. In this case, embracing maternal health aligns with the path the regime has followed since its inception.

This brings us to a second guiding tool—to follow the money. To use the same examples: If we see significant investments in maternal health or programs against gender-based violence, who is paying for them? Is it fully funded by the country's ordinary budget, or is the investment made after the signing of an aid or trade deal with a country or institution that commonly conditions its contracts through gender mainstreaming mechanisms (such as Sweden and the EU)? Whenever the reform is covered by the ordinary budget, the risk is relatively lower that it is an act of autocratic genderwashing. In the Cuban case, it is

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likely that the government is prioritizing the reform more to serve its own agenda than to simply appease external pressures.

A third guiding tool is to look for inconsistencies in how governments approach gender. Think about the case of Nicaragua, for example, which has advanced in the gender-equality rankings since the 2010s (thanks to a parity law, etc.) after having adopted one of the harshest abortion laws in the world. The abortion ban was a result of an unholy alliance between the left-wing Sandinista Party, which had a tradition of being generally supportive of women's reproductive rights, and the Catholic Church, which the Sandinista party leader Daniel Ortega needed to win the presidency and transition the country into an autocracy.⁴³ As Ortega consolidated his power by repressing political opponents and civil-society actors, branding his government as a gender champion became an increasingly important strategy to deflect criticism and seek recognition.

Despite these guiding tools, a challenge in identifying autocratic genderwashing is distinguishing it from gender-based activities that autocracies engage in purely for pragmatic reasons. In aid-dependent countries, such as Uganda, donor countries have invested heavily in democracy support programs that are, more often than not, gender mainstreamed, with a focus on women's political inclusion. President Museveni and his National Resistance Movement (NRM) may embrace initiatives such as empowerment programs for women in Ugandan parties, run by Swedish party-affiliated organizations (PAOs), to comply with donor demands, maintain good relations with the PAOs, keep women in the NRM happy, or provide jobs for local people involved in implementing the programs. None of these motives can be directly described as the government projecting an image of being progressive, liberal, or democratic while shielding its authoritarian practices: They are more pragmatic reasons (although they certainly do not hurt the NRM government). In the long term, initiatives such as these may be part of the learning process for authoritarian governments, whereby they learn how to spin the initiatives for their own purposes. There is thus no clear-cut "either/or" category for autocratic genderwashing. We should rather view it as a strategic element that may be more or less conscious on the part of the autocrat and more or less visible to observers. Distinguishing autocratic genderwashing from mere pragmatism

is not an easy task and requires a nuanced approach, an acknowledgment of gray zones, and case-by-case consideration.

In our approach, we see practices of autocratic genderwashing as distinct from pragmatism in at least two ways. First, when we look at autocratic genderwashing, we look for autocratic governments that take credit for gender-equality policy adoption. Even when such adoption is an initiative from women's movements or women members of parliament, or even from international actors, a spin dictator engaging in autocratic genderwashing consciously seeks positive recognition for the reform.⁴⁴ In this sense, gender-equality policies are made to be high-profile reforms for the government. More pragmatically driven reforms are likely to be low profile and may not receive the same attention from government-controlled media. They may simply be an easy way out for a government that is being pushed by specific constituencies or international actors to engage in certain activities. Let us take Saudi Arabia's reform to allow women to drive as an example. Information about the reform was disseminated through the government's controlled media to attract significant global media attention. Progressive women in Saudi Arabia had been pushing for this change for quite some time. At the same time, the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and his government advanced this step toward greater gender equality while restricting civil liberties—including those of the very activists who had originally campaigned for the reform, whose efforts the regime then claimed as its own. If granting women the right to drive were simply a pragmatic concession to women's rights activists, the reform would have attracted less media attention, the government would have downplayed its role, and its response to reform advocates would likely have been less aggressive.

This brings us to a second distinction, which is related to a reform's implementation. Although policy reforms in all types of contexts may result in failure because of implementation problems, we expect that there will be, generally, relatively limited implementation whenever autocrats engage in autocratic genderwashing. In such activities, adopting gender-equality policies is more of a signaling device than when gender equality is embraced for pragmatic reasons (or for ideological reasons, for that matter). As autocrats are using gender-equality policies as image management, emphasis is on the message that they convey

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to different audiences whenever they adopt the policies. Even cosmetic changes tend to end criticism, at least temporarily.⁴⁵ Whether and how these policies are properly enforced is not a main concern. We can thus expect selective compliance from autocrats, where implementation is cheap or easy.⁴⁶ In addition, whenever policies are implemented, we may also see inconsistencies—or even contradictions—with the signaled ambitions of the adopted policy, simply because autocrats were engaging in lip service. Once the policy has been adopted and the spotlight is gone, autocrats may want to send somewhat different signals to targeted groups to avoid disrupting power imbalances between men and women or to maintain stability and avoid potential mobilization of specific groups.

Again, we can use Saudi Arabia as an illustration. When Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman adopted measures to empower women as part of his modernization strategy, many Saudi women perceived him as progressive and reformist. One of them, Manahel al-Otaibi, was interviewed in 2019 by the German broadcaster Deutsche Welle, where she stated enthusiastically that Saudi Arabia was undergoing “radical changes.”⁴⁷ Three years later, on International Women’s Day in 2022, the crown prince continued his efforts to liberate women by introducing the Personal Status Law. He framed the law as “a qualitative leap in the government’s efforts in protecting human rights, consolidating family’s stability, enhancing women’s empowerment and promoting rights,”⁴⁸ as it attempted to modernize the legal framework governing family life. However, the law was criticized for perpetuating the male guardianship system and for codifying discrimination against women in most aspects of family life.⁴⁹ In early 2024, five years after the interview with Deutsche Welle, Manahel al-Otaibi was found guilty of “terrorist offences” and sent to prison for eleven years, where she was held in solitary confinement, had a broken leg as a result of physical abuse, and was denied health care. The crime she had committed was to exercise the rights that she had perceived the crown prince had given her: the right to express her views and the right to wear the clothes she wanted. As a fitness instructor and women’s rights activist, she had published a video online in which she wore fitness clothes and called for an end to Saudi Arabia’s male guardianship system.⁵⁰

Putting the Pieces Together

As political scientists studying gender-equality policy, we have dedicated the past twenty years to observing how states have evolved in their approach to women and gender. We have witnessed an unprecedented increase in the number of women in politics and in the adoption of gender-equality policies. Sometimes states have opened up slowly and reluctantly, spurring research on incremental change. Other times, change seems to come about quickly and without much opposition. We started as graduate students in 2003—the same year that Rwanda changed its constitution and adopted a quota system. As we continued our research on representation and democracy, the empirical facts around us started to change. Autocratic countries seemed to become more gender equal. Ten years later, we conducted an interview study on the implementation of gender quotas in Tanzania, an electoral authoritarian state.⁵¹ We realized that the ruling party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi, took credit for expanding quota adoption and advancing women's rights, even as it had designed the quota in a manner that initially supported its dominance in parliament. The party clearly had strategic reasons for adopting gender-equality policies and increasing women's representation. For us, this realization—though not wholly unexpected—became the start of a research agenda infused with skepticism. Was the gender-equality progress we had seen in our early careers nothing but window dressing? How and when do autocrats gain from advocating gender equality? Can it even be the case that gains in gender equality have strengthened undemocratic rule?

For more than ten years, we have been trying to find answers to these questions. We cannot get into the heads of autocrats, but we have turned this question around, trying to see it from an autocrat's perspective: What's in it for them? We have conducted a series of studies approaching this question from different angles. We have used survey data, sometimes with experimental components; analyzed global data on gendered parliamentary representation; explored election results and documents; and conducted interviews. We have focused on different countries and collaborated with colleagues with relevant, complementary expertise. This book synthesizes this research and develops a theoretical framework, serving as our means of bringing everything together.

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Uncovering autocratic genderwashing as a strategy, the book's primary focus is *on the process*, describing its rationale, how it operates, and the contexts in which we are more likely to see it. However, we also explore the outcome, addressing the question of to what extent the strategy "works" from the point of view of autocrats. While drawing on our previous data collection and adding new data (e.g., survey experiments), we also use numerous illustrative examples to highlight the strategy's global scope. These examples are also useful for theory building, as they have not only illustrated the theory of how autocratic genderwashing works but also refined and nuanced it. More often than we expected when we embarked on this journey, we have found that our theoretical framework has helped us gain a broad and rich understanding of autocratic behavior and the adoption of gender-equality policies in autocracies. For this reason, the project's scope and focus have changed over time. What began as a project heavily inspired by our experiences in Tanzania, and focused primarily on electoral reforms (e.g., gender quota policies) in autocracies that hold multiparty elections (i.e., electoral autocracies), gradually expanded as we applied our lens to more cases. The project now covers a broader range of gender-equality reforms and a wider set of autocratic regimes. In fact, even democratically elected leaders who are moving toward autocratization seem to employ autocratic genderwashing as a strategy to hide their abuses of democratic institutions and citizens' rights and liberties (see, e.g., chapter 4).

An overall ambition of this book is to bridge two literatures that rarely speak to each other: that on autocratic politics and authoritarian-regime survival strategies and that on the causes and effects of gender-equality policies. We contribute to the latter literature by zooming in on authoritarian states and by focusing explicitly on the regime's decision to adopt gender-equality policies and on how it can benefit from them.⁵² While we are not the first to adopt this perspective,⁵³ our theoretical and empirical focus is broader: We integrate previously separate empirical insights into a coherent conceptual framework that draws on various literatures within research on autocratic politics, and we move beyond a focus on autocracies in Africa and the Middle East to emphasize the global scope of these authoritarian strategies.

We contribute to research on autocratic politics by theorizing and empirically demonstrating how gender serves as a versatile tool for autocrats seeking to stay in power. This literature has largely ignored gender,⁵⁴ despite an increased focus on how autocrats complement repression with noncoercive strategies such as legitimation, image management, co-optation, patronage, and responsiveness.⁵⁵ In the book, we show how a gender perspective informs the literature on all these strategies. More specifically, building on the autocratic legitimation literature, we develop a theoretical framework that explains how gender-equality policies interact with these noncoercive authoritarian strategies to claim legitimacy for autocratic rule. Importantly, although most of the focus in this book, and in the literature more generally, is on autocrats' legitimacy-seeking activities, we also examine citizens' legitimacy beliefs (i.e., the demand for autocratic legitimation) using an innovative survey experiment. By analyzing both elite activities and citizen responses, we also put the book in conversation with how autocratic governments and legislatures selectively respond to policy demands, offering women some form of valued representation while co-opting organized women and managing patronage-based relations with their supporters. In addition, our analysis of electoral gender quota reforms shows how electoral institutions can be used to manipulate the playing field between government and opposition parties and to manage elite coalitions. Finally, we connect international relations literature on international norms to research on autocratic legitimation by demonstrating how autocratic governments engage in selective norm compliance to claim—and secure—external legitimacy.

In the chapters to come, we will break down the elements of autocratic genderwashing. Following this introductory chapter, which introduced autocratic genderwashing as a theme, we will move on to explore its origins, broader theoretical foundations, and the questions of *how and why* autocrats use gender-equality reforms to promote regime survival. While there has been a strong focus on autocrats' use of coercive strategies to stay in power, gender-equality reforms belong to another type of autocratic strategy: legitimacy-seeking. Chapter 2 thus presents a theoretical framework that includes the specific legitimation strategies that genderwashing autocrats use while remaining authoritarian and coercive. We liken these strategies to a theater, as

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they include both how autocrats set the stage and determine the rules (or the script), and how they control the spotlight so that different audiences focus on the actors and activities that make them like the show, while their attention is diverted from what happens in the shadows. In chapter 3, we zoom in on a first aspect of genderwashing: setting the stage and casting the actors. Through an analysis of electoral gender quota implementation, the chapter focuses on how autocratic regimes stage legitimacy by creating a narrative that the regime has established political institutions that are becoming increasingly inclusive and democratic. The two following chapters zoom in on the audience. In chapter 4, we take a closer look at domestic audiences, seated close to the stage, and what the autocrat thinks they want to see to gain internal legitimacy. The chapter focuses on how autocrats claim responsiveness through selective policy concessions and how citizens respond to them. It also shows how autocratic leaders use selective framing and co-optation of civil-society actors to control the play and its script. Chapter 5 highlights the international audience, in the theater's balcony. The genderwashing play they get to see aims to make the country look good to enhance its international reputation for democracy and secure access to aid and trade benefits. Symbolic and visible performances of gender-equality advancement demonstrate modernity and progress. The chapter shows that the international audience applauds the show and updates its beliefs about the country after watching it. Chapter 6 concludes the book, but also takes a broader perspective. We discuss whether gender-equality reforms adopted by genderwashing autocracies are merely window dressing or may, after all, improve women's political, economic, and/or social inclusion and transform gender roles. When doing so, we examine the prospects for successfully implementing (or enforcing) gender-equality policies and how implementation processes vary across policy areas. We also bring up women's agency, including in parliament, and how it is shaped by formal and informal institutions. In this chapter, we also explore how to respond to autocratic genderwashing. While a key goal of this book is to raise awareness of autocratic genderwashing, we also provide five recommendations (or guiding questions) for assessing gender-equality reforms in an authoritarian setting. Finally, we discuss autocratic genderwashing in light of recent trends of democratic backsliding and

autocratization, in which the liberal world order is being challenged. Antigender campaigns, where governments engage in genderbashing to roll back hard-won gender-equality reforms, are a prominent element of this development. This leads us to raise the question of the future of autocratic genderwashing: Are we witnessing the end of an era and the birth of a new era of genderbashing? Our tentative answer to that question is “no.” For a versatile tool such as gender, we believe autocrats will continue to use dual approaches and choose the script they believe best serves their interests. As individuals committed to democracy, we must be prepared to watch the performance with a critical eye.

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