Gender and Populism: How Political Movements Shape Women's Rights

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Abstract

Populism, which is frequently portrayed as a political voice for the "common people," has different implications for women's rights depending on the political, cultural, and historical environment in which it emerges. Some populist leaders have empowered women within their ideological frameworks, while others have limited women's rights by reinforcing traditional gender norms and undermining progressive institutions. This article investigates the link between populism and gender by looking at how political movements in India, Brazil, Hungary, and the United States have influenced women's rights. To further understand the populist impact on gender equality, the study conducts qualitative analyses of legislation, public rhetoric, and institutional reforms. The findings imply that, while populism can provide forums for female participation, it frequently does so selectively and under patriarchal restrictions. The report ends with ideas for defending women rights in populist political environments.

Keywords: populism, gender equality, feminism, political movements, women's rights, India, Brazil, Hungary, and the United States.

Populism is widely regarded as a political strategy that pits "pure people" against the "corrupt elite." It can emerge in both left-wing and right-wing ideologies and thrive in democracies as well as authoritarian regimes. Characterized by charismatic leadership and a distrust of established institutions, populist movements often appeal to nationalism, tradition, and a rejection of globalism. These themes frequently intersect with cultural norms around gender, resulting in varied implications for women's rights.

In recent years, the global growth of populism has led to significant transformations in political narratives and policy agendas, especially concerning gender roles and women's autonomy. Populist leaders may use traditional gender imagery to reinforce patriarchal systems while dismissing feminist movements as elitist or foreign. Yet, in some cases, populist platforms have created limited spaces for female political involvement, albeit within ideologically constrained frameworks.

This study examines a key question: how does populism influence women's rights and gender equality? The research investigates the nuanced and often contradictory impact of populist politics on gender justice. By exploring the interaction between populism and gender in multiple national contexts—including India, Brazil, Hungary, and the United States—this paper aims to assess whether such movements hinder or promote the broader struggle for gender equality.

Populism frequently reduces complicated social issues to binary oppositions: people vs. elites, tradition vs. modernity, and nationalism vs. globalism. These dichotomies, often rooted in emotional appeals

rather than factual complexity, provide a simplified lens through which populist leaders frame their agendas. Unfortunately, such binaries tend to reinforce patriarchal values and restrict social progress. In this framework, women are often positioned as symbols of morality, tradition, and family integrity, limiting their autonomy and diminishing their role in public and political spheres. The idealized image of the "virtuous woman" serves to marginalize those who seek more progressive or independent identities.

In contrast, feminist political philosophy calls for equal rights, recognition, and representation for all genders. It critiques systemic inequality and challenges the social norms that perpetuate gender discrimination. The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, deepens this critique by showing how overlapping identities—such as race, caste, class, and religion—compound women's experiences of oppression. Feminist theory thus acts as a direct challenge to the populist framework, which often views such critiques as threats to national unity or cultural authenticity.

Populist leaders frequently use gendered rhetoric to reinforce established roles. They may portray women as cultural bearers or moral protectors of the nation, limiting their public and political power. Furthermore, populist movements can undermine independent institutions and civil society organizations dedicated to advancing female rights. Simultaneously, some populist movements have created chances for women to enter politics, albeit within ideologically conformist frameworks. Populist leaders frequently use gendered rhetoric to reinforce established roles. They may portray women as cultural bearers or moral protectors of the nation, limiting their public and political power. Furthermore, populist movements can undermine independent institutions and civil society organizations dedicated to advancing female rights. Simultaneously, some populist movements have created chances for women to enter politics, albeit within ideologically conformist frameworks.

Case Studies

a. India (Modi Government) Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has witnessed a surge in Hindu nationalism, forming the cultural bedrock of the government's populist approach. While flagship programs such as "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao" (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child) appear promising on the surface, critics argue that the initiative has seen more investment in publicity than in tangible outcomes. Despite government claims of promoting gender equity, women's participation in the labor force has dropped significantly in recent years. Moreover, incidents of gender-based violence continue to rise, with law enforcement mechanisms often proving inadequate or indifferent.

The populist rhetoric in India frames ideal womanhood in traditional Hindu terms, glorifying motherhood and self-sacrifice while undermining autonomy and dissent. Feminist organizations that demand systemic change are often branded as "Westernized" or "anti-national," especially if they critique dominant religious or cultural ideologies. Consequently, while women may be showcased as symbols of national pride, their voices in policymaking remain limited.

b. Brazil (Bolsonaro Government) President Jair Bolsonaro's populist regime in Brazil has projected a distinctly hypermasculine image. Bolsonaro's public statements have often downplayed or even mocked issues like sexual harassment and domestic violence. His administration cut funding to gender-based programs and dismissed the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights as secondary in political importance.

Women who advocate for reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ inclusion, or gender equality have frequently faced public backlash from pro-Bolsonaro factions. Feminist groups are dismissed as "radical leftists," and their protests are depicted as threats to national unity. Although some women supported Bolsonaro

under the promise of restoring traditional family values, many others view his tenure as a step backward for gender equality, as rights to bodily autonomy and safety have become increasingly politicized.

c. Hungary (Orbán Government) Under Viktor Orbán's leadership, Hungary has seen a pronounced shift toward authoritarian populism. The regime promotes a Christian-nationalist vision of the state, with an emphasis on traditional family structures. Women are encouraged to marry early and have more children, and financial incentives are offered to reinforce this model.

Orbán's government has also curtailed academic freedom by eliminating gender studies programs in universities, describing them as ideologically driven and unnecessary. International conventions on gender equality, such as the Istanbul Convention on preventing violence against women, have been either rejected or ignored. Feminist NGOs operating in Hungary often face legal and bureaucratic hurdles, especially those receiving foreign funding. The result is a narrowing of the public space in which women's rights can be meaningfully advanced.

d. United States (Trump Administration) During Donald Trump's presidency, populist language frequently intersected with regressive gender attitudes. Although women were represented in high-profile positions within his administration, substantive policy decisions often undermined gender equality. The Trump administration reinstated and expanded the "global gag rule," which restricted funding for international organizations that provided or discussed abortion services.

Domestically, Title IX protections against sexual harassment on college campuses were weakened, and attempts were made to restrict access to contraception under the Affordable Care Act. Trump's rhetoric often trivialized or dismissed women's experiences, as seen in his response to the #MeToo movement. While some conservative women rallied behind him, national feminist movements—most notably the Women's March—mobilized millions in protest against his policies and public discourse.

The Trump era revealed a deeply divided nation, with gender equality becoming a battleground for broader ideological conflicts. Populist strategies, such as discrediting the media and judicial oversight, made it more difficult for feminist groups to sustain legal challenges or promote nuanced public debate. Across the four case studies, consistent trends emerge:

- Populist leaders generally advocate for reverting to traditional gender roles.
- Feminist organizations and gender equality institutions are underfunded or delegitimized.
- Women can participate in politics if it coincides with the populist narrative.

However, the degree of impact varies according to the context. In democratic cultures with strong civic institutions, opposition to regressive gender policy is more effective. In semi-authoritarian regimes, populism effectively silences female voices.

Populist rhetoric often includes references to protecting "family values" or returning to a glorified past, which can resonate with conservative sections of society. This rhetorical framework makes it easier to justify rollbacks in gender-related policies under the guise of preserving tradition or national identity. By presenting feminist movements as elitist, foreign-funded, or anti-national, populist leaders can delegitimize gender advocacy and reduce public sympathy for such causes. This tactic isolates feminist voices from mainstream political discourse and fosters an environment of mistrust.

In addition to influencing policies and public dialogue, media representation under populist regimes frequently perpetuates traditional gender roles. Women leaders are subject to increased scrutiny, with focus often placed on their appearance, family life, or behavior rather than their competence or achievements. Feminist protests are often depicted as unruly or destabilizing, contributing to negative public perceptions. Social media, which populist figures use skillfully to bypass traditional media and communicate directly with their followers, further complicates this issue. It becomes a double-edged

sword—while offering visibility, it also exposes women activists to coordinated disinformation campaigns, online harassment, and threats.

This environment, shaped by both state-controlled narratives and digital populism, discourages women from participating in political and public life. Over time, it erodes the foundations of gender equality, making it harder for feminist movements to gain momentum or legitimacy. Combating these trends requires not just policy intervention but also cultural and institutional change, rooted in democratic values and inclusive participation.

To ensure gender equality in populist circumstances, the following methods are suggested:

- **Strengthening independent gender commissions and civil society groups:** Providing these institutions with autonomy and adequate funding ensures they can function effectively, free from political interference. These organizations often serve as the first line of defense against regressive gender policies. When properly supported, they monitor government actions, advocate for policy reform, and provide essential services to vulnerable women and marginalized groups. Empowering these bodies enhances the resilience of democratic institutions and ensures sustained advocacy for gender justice.

- **Promoting gender-sensitive education to oppose patriarchal narratives:** Education plays a critical role in shaping public consciousness. By integrating gender-sensitive content into school curricula and public campaigns, societies can challenge deep-rooted gender biases. This includes teaching respect for diversity, encouraging critical thinking about gender roles, and addressing the intersection of gender with caste, religion, and class. A well-informed citizenry is more likely to question populist narratives that marginalize women.

- **Fostering international pressure and collaborations to support women's rights:** International organizations and non-governmental bodies can play a crucial role by applying diplomatic pressure and supporting grassroots movements. Through funding, training, and knowledge-sharing, these collaborations enhance the capacity of local activists and organizations. Countries that are signatories to international treaties on gender equality must be held accountable for their commitments through global advocacy and reporting mechanisms.

- **Enhancing digital channels for feminist mobilization and resistance:** In an era of digital populism, feminist groups must harness the power of technology to counter dominant narratives. Social media platforms can be used to build communities, share resources, document abuses, and organize protests. Additionally, digital literacy initiatives can equip women with the skills to safely navigate and use online spaces for activism. By reclaiming digital spaces, feminist movements can resist censorship and broaden their reach across regional and international boundaries.

Populism is not intrinsically anti-women; however, its ideological structure frequently reinforces patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles. In many cases, it limits women's rights by confining them to culturally sanctioned identities, such as mothers, caretakers, or symbols of national honor. While populist regimes may provide certain opportunities for women's engagement in public life, these opportunities are often shaped by traditionalist or nationalist motivations rather than a commitment to genuine gender equality. As a result, women may find themselves symbolically included in political spaces but without substantive influence or autonomy.

The balance between symbolic inclusion and actual empowerment remains highly skewed under most populist governments. Inclusion is often conditional—women are accepted only if they conform to the ideological and cultural expectations of the regime. Feminist movements that challenge these

expectations are frequently delegitimized, underfunded, or labeled as elitist and foreign. This suppression of critical voices not only weakens democratic debate but also restricts the possibilities for social transformation.

To resist these trends, it is essential to strengthen civil society, promote legal safeguards, and ensure institutional independence. A robust and vigilant civil society can serve as a watchdog and mobilizer for gender justice. Additionally, global solidarity networks can play a crucial role in amplifying local feminist struggles and holding governments accountable to international human rights norms. Legal frameworks, such as constitutional protections and gender-equality laws, must be enforced without political interference.

Feminist responses to populism must be intersectional, inclusive, and flexible. They should address not only gender discrimination but also its intersections with class, caste, religion, and ethnicity. Creating safe physical and digital spaces for women to organize, protest, and advocate is vital. In the face of rising populist narratives, resilience, unity, and innovation are key to safeguarding and advancing gender equality.

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