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# (En) Gendering Authoritarianism

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**A Six-Strategy Framework Examining How Political  
and Cultural Leaders Weaponize Gender in Ways that  
Advance Authoritarianism**

*A Project of the Democracy & Belonging Forum and Over Zero*

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The **Democracy & Belonging Forum** is a network and research hub that aims to counter democratic degradation, reduce fragmentation and mistrust, and oppose authoritarian populism in Europe and the U.S. by connecting and supporting leaders in both regions who are committed to bridging across lines of difference while advancing belonging for marginalized groups. The Forum is a project of the Othering & Belonging Institute.

The **Othering & Belonging Institute** at the University of California, Berkeley, advances groundbreaking research, policy, and ideas that examine and remediate the processes of exclusion, marginalization, and structural inequality—what we call othering—to build a world based on inclusion, fairness, justice, and care for the earth—what we call belonging.

**Over Zero** works to prevent, address, and build societal resilience to identity-based and political violence and underlying risk factors, including dangerous rhetoric, scapegoating, and democratic backsliding. We have a particular focus on the role of communications and narratives in either driving or counteracting these dynamics. A core component of our work is synthesizing historical and global trends, interdisciplinary research, and insights from practice into frameworks and tools for action.

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# PART ONE

# Weaponizing Gender

This report examines how gender is weaponized to normalize and build a permission structure for authoritarianism and political violence. It is organized into two main sections: Part 1 contextualizes the current weaponization of gender within broader trends of democratic erosion and makes the case for why gender is centrally relevant to anyone concerned with democracy. We trace the evolution of the concept of so-called “gender ideology,” and establish the connection between attacks on women’s rights, LGBTQ scapegoating, and authoritarianism. The second section presents and unpacks six political and cultural strategies through which authoritarian populists leverage gender to advance their political project.

In 2025, keeping apace with the myriad ways that gender is strategically leveraged to normalize and facilitate authoritarianism is a tall order. Around the world, from [Buenos Aires](#) to [Budapest](#) to [Kampala](#), political and cultural leaders are manipulating narratives about the defense of traditional values, weaponizing concerns about declining birthrates, and deepening or manufacturing gender-based grievances to roll back rights and protections for all those associated with feminism, women’s rights, and/or LGBTQ rights, while simultaneously entrenching their own power.<sup>1</sup>

In the United States, we’ve seen a deluge of rhetoric, policies, and actions strategically leveraging gender following the [Dobbs decision](#) that overturned *Roe v. Wade*, the 2024 election that returned Donald Trump to the presidency amid popularized chants of “[your body, my choice](#),” and a slew of [anti-trans executive orders](#) that pushed trans people (further) out of public life under the pretext of “[defending women](#).”<sup>2</sup> Project 2025 [lists](#) as its first “promise” or priority to “restore the family as the centerpiece of American life,” actualized in part through “deleting the terms sexual orientation and gender identity (“SOGI”)...gender, gender equality, gender equity, gender awareness, gender-sensitive, abortion, reproductive health, [and] reproductive rights...out of every federal rule.”<sup>3</sup>

Simply put, it would be impossible to catalogue in a single report all the ways this is happening. Instead, we seek to illustrate (1) *that* it is happening, building on other [critical work](#) on the topic<sup>4</sup> and (2) *how* it is happening, particularly through highlighting six political and cultural strategies (outlined below) that leverage gender to facilitate authoritarianism. Throughout the report, we include both brief references and longer snapshots that illustrate how weaponizing gender facilitates authoritarian goals, with a particular focus on North America and Europe—regions that by no means have a monopoly on democracy (or its erosion), but that are primary areas of focus for our two organizations.

Many of these examples exist at the intersection of weaponizing gender and [sexuality](#).<sup>5</sup> Why? Because, and as we explain further below, it is hard to fully disentangle the two. Sometimes, political and cultural leaders pit women’s and LGBTQ rights against one another. For instance, framing LGBTQ people, and in particular trans people, as threats to feminism and women’s advancement. This is not an accidental strategy: authoritarians know that a united coalition threatens their power. In other instances, LGBTQ and women’s rights are lumped

together as a single boogeyman, often under the moniker of “gender ideology,” that is said to pose a threat to a nation’s physical and cultural security, and the traditional family structures and gender roles that exist therein. This provides cover for legislation targeting these groups, civil society and other checks on executive power. Still, in other instances, stigmatizing and scapegoating the LGBTQ community provides a pretext for undermining rights and protections for women—as with arguments against ratifying the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence because it purportedly “promotes homosexuality.” Across these and other instances, gender and sexuality are strategically weaponized to extend state power, undermine independent checks on executive authority, and entrench a rigid social hierarchy.

**Note on using “gender,” gender identity, sexual orientation, gender equality, and women’s rights**

Gender identity and sexual orientation are often conflated, though they refer to distinct aspects of identity. Generally, *gender identity* relates to an individual’s internal sense of self as male, female, transgender, nonbinary, or another gender. *Sexual orientation*, by contrast, refers to patterns of romantic and/or sexual attraction, including heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, and others. Some scholars also use the language of “gender justice” to refer to the broad category comprising distinct fields such as women’s rights, reproductive rights, sex education, and LGBTQ rights.

In this paper, we primarily analyze how authoritarian populist movements deploy discursive, political, and cultural strategies to target and weaponize issues related to gender identity, women’s rights, and reproduction. We also examine how these movements weaponize sexual orientation, as such attacks often accompany broader campaigns against so-called “gender ideology.”

For brevity and readability, we often use the term “gender” as a shorthand to encompass gender identity, women’s rights, and sexual orientation. When referring specifically to either gender identity or sexual orientation, we use precise and appropriate terminology.

We use the term **anti-gender** to capture actors, movements, and campaigns against so-called gender ideology, feminism, gender equality and women’s rights, and LGBTQ rights. This term borrows from the academic literature. Where appropriate and relevant, we name these actors specifically; in other instances, to describe a more generalized coalition or world view, we use anti-gender.

## **PLURALISM, DIVERSITY OF VIEWS, AND GENDER**

Healthy and pluralistic societies are built on a diversity of views and beliefs, including on matters relating to gender and sexuality. This report does not advocate for society to conform to any single perspective on gender or sexuality. It recognizes that **personal, spiritual, and religious values lead individuals to hold and advocate for different positions. In a strong democracy, such differences are met with healthy debate, rather than targeting, scapegoating, or discriminating against any individual or group.**

**This report highlights how political and cultural figures manufacture, deepen, and/or exploit divisions over gender and sexuality. In addition to directly harming and undermining the rights and freedoms of women and LGBTQ individuals, this also helps launder and legitimize authoritarian aims.** Weaponizing gender and sexuality is part of a larger playbook that manipulates concerns about religion, morality, or “traditional family values” in service of consolidating power. While gender is not the only social category weaponized for authoritarian ends, it is a central one—and one often overlooked or misunderstood.

These strategies pose immediate dangers to targeted groups—women and the LGBTQ community—but they also endanger us all. **When authoritarians weaponize gender to capture and wield state power, they can turn that power against anyone deemed an “enemy.”**

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Gender is central to authoritarian populists' efforts to generate public support for their political agenda, justify anti-democratic practices, and ultimately consolidate power.
- Authoritarians need enemies—people or ideas they claim are a threat. Fighting, even eliminating, these so-called threats is used as an excuse to justify grabbing more power without constraints. Different groups are cast as embodying everything perceived as wrong, immoral, or threatening about modern life. This engineered threat often takes the form of fighting so-called “gender ideology,” a moniker that unites women’s and LGBTQ rights and freedoms into a single boogeyman. The boogeyman of “gender ideology” enables authoritarian actors to cast both outsiders and those within their own society associated with feminism or those who are gender or sexual minorities as enemies. Fighting these “enemies” creates a pretext for expanding state power (and eliminating independent checks on that power), pushing targeted groups out of public life, and even perpetrating violence.
- The fight against “gender ideology” allows political actors to leverage gender to reinterpret or reject key features of a healthy democracy—the rule of law, limits on executive power, human rights and the protection of minorities—while advancing an alternative view for society rooted in hierarchy and dominance.<sup>6</sup> Under the guise of protecting families, traditional values,<sup>7</sup> common sense,<sup>8</sup> women and children, religious freedom, and freedom of speech, authoritarian populists use combating “gender ideology” to justify expanding their power.
- Because gender and sexuality are deeply rooted aspects of identity that shape how individuals understand themselves and interact with the world—and because gender and sexuality are fluid and malleable concepts—issues even loosely associated with gender can be framed as threats to more “fixed” notions of tradition, national identity, and even personal identity. This makes gender a particularly potent weapon for authoritarians to leverage to build support for the expansion of state power and even violence against scapegoated groups in the name of “restoring order.”
- Ideas about masculinity and femininity are invoked to sell a rigid social order—where “real men” are dominant, and women focus on fulfilling their “natural” roles as mothers and homemakers. These gender tropes are used to stir up fear about societal decay, blame feminism or LGBTQ rights for national decline, and attract followers looking for a sense of belonging or control.
- Authoritarian populists often have a complex, even contradictory relationship with women’s rights, LGBTQ rights, and gender identity. Some strategically wedge women’s and LGBTQ rights against one another, for instance, presenting gains in LGBTQ rights as direct threats to women’s rights and/or feminism. Others promote and genuinely believe in traditional gender roles and gender essentialist arguments, others strategically and cynically lump together and attack women’s rights and scapegoat the LGBTQ community primarily to mobilize support. Still others co-opt the language of women’s or LGBTQ rights to stigmatize racial minorities.
- This is neither an organic nor a new trend. Political and cultural actors working to weaponize gender have spent decades mobilizing, rolling out long-term narrative and cultural strategies, and developing networks and infrastructure—whether by creating the Political Network for Values, hosting the annual World Congress of Families convening, setting up transnational funding structures,<sup>9</sup> or other such organizing platforms. This infrastructure is mutually beneficial for authoritarian populists and longstanding anti-gender actors—while political leaders gain access to new potential supporters,

their participation in these conferences and fora lends them an air of legitimacy. Further, this is not new: authoritarian movements have historically leveraged gender to impose rigid gender and racial hierarchies, shape culture, and justify power consolidation and state violence.

### **Authoritarian actors weaponize gender through six key political and cultural strategies:**

- 1. Construct a Threat:** Authoritarian populists depict so-called gender ideology, feminists, and LGBTQ people as threats to national identity, security, women and children, and traditional values. This fuels fear, entrenches us-versus-them thinking, and justifies authoritarian actions—from surveillance to political violence—under the pretense of protection.
- 2. Normalize Authoritarian Ideas:** Authoritarian populists use gender to reshape the public's understanding of what democracy entails. For instance, social hierarchy and dominance are first explored as they relate to gender relations, gender identity, women, and LGBTQ rights. This lays the groundwork for more broadly challenging equality, pluralism, and human rights—core ideals of liberal democracy—and framing them as unnatural, undesirable, or unrealistic.
- 3. Change Culture:** To shape the intellectual and cultural terrain in which politics occurs and make authoritarian ideas more palatable, authoritarian populists rely on cultural strategies that leverage gender and gendered anxieties. This occurs through two main pathways: (1) By establishing intellectual and educational institutions that help legitimize these ideas and (2) By introducing these ideas in environments that are not primarily political or partisan or do not self-present as such, including lifestyle content or fitness subcultures.
- 4. Build a Big Tent Movement:** Political and cultural leaders instigate gender-related anxieties that serve as the symbolic glue for a coalition bringing together groups that hold different beliefs related to gender (e.g., pronatalism, anti-trans rights, misogyny, opposition to so-called gender ideology). These groups have different entry points into the coalition, and may even have contradictory political values, but are united against a common, constructed enemy, and mobilized against abstract and loose ideas. This coalition broadens the pillars of support for authoritarian populists by providing access to new constituencies, as well as to organizations and institutions that can supply funding and other resources.
- 5. Divide and Polarize:** Authoritarian populists frame gender as inherently divisive in order to intensify us-versus-them thinking. This strategy operates at two levels: it polarizes society and fractures pro-democracy coalitions. By shaping the debate along divisive terms, these leaders obscure areas of general public agreement and common ground, deepening social and political polarization and intensifying emotional and political tensions. Simultaneously, they weaponize gender to fracture pro-democracy coalitions and weaken opposition to authoritarian practices.
- 6. Distract:** Authoritarian populists manufacture and exploit gender-related controversies, narratives, and policies—like sex education, trans rights, and purported threats to children's safety—to stir outrage and divert attention from anti-democratic power grabs, corruption, and/or unpopular agendas.

## DEMOCRATIC EROSION

Over the past two decades, we have witnessed a dramatic erosion of democracy across the world. Today, almost 40% of the world's population lives in countries where democracy is deteriorating; a sharp increase in the last ten years. According to Freedom House's most recent [Freedom in the World Report](#), 80% of the global population lives in countries or territories rated not free or only partly free; 2024 was the 19th consecutive year of declining freedom.<sup>10</sup> As V-Dem's [2025 democracy report](#) notes, the trend of democratic erosion shows no signs of slowing down.<sup>11</sup>

Prominent democracy scholars believe that the United States has become a [competitive authoritarian state](#)<sup>12</sup> or a [competitive autocracy](#),<sup>13</sup> a system in which parties compete in elections but incumbent abuse of power systematically tilts the playing field against the opposition. This is a transformation that Hungary reached years ago. According to the [EU's Rule of Law Report](#), journalists in Italy continue to face physical attacks, death threats and other forms of intimidations,<sup>14</sup> while Italian civil society remains under pressure from the government.<sup>15</sup> For years, authoritarian politicians in Poland (notably the Law and Justice party, or PiS) [worked to scale back people's rights](#), with consequences that linger even after a pro-democracy [coalition managed to win the last parliamentary elections](#).<sup>16</sup> Still, in 2025, a hardline nationalist affiliated with PiS won the presidential election, carrying significant risks for Poland's democracy.<sup>17</sup> In [Slovakia](#),<sup>18</sup> [Austria](#),<sup>19</sup> and the [Netherlands](#),<sup>20</sup> extremist parties have won elections, while in Germany the neo-Nazi Alternative for Germany (AfD) has managed to attain [record-breaking results](#) both in regional and general elections.<sup>21</sup>

**These are not isolated or one-off incidents. Rather, they represent a troubling global trend toward political systems that abandon—both narratively and in policy—a commitment to freedom, equality, and basic human rights.**

Across these examples, leaders, parties, and movements have exploited the levers of democracy to usher in anti-democratic forms of government, sacrificing even the most foundational democratic norms to consolidate power and advance their interests—all while claiming to act in defense of democracy and against so-called establishment elites. This combination of authoritarianism and populism is the defining feature of the political approach of [authoritarian populism](#),<sup>22</sup> which helps pave the way for authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states.

*How is this happening?* Unlike the military coups of the 20th century, democracies are undermined differently today—through democratically-elected leaders using the levers of democracy to systematically dismantle the rule of law, curtail individual rights and freedoms, undermine independent institutions, and consolidate their own power.<sup>23</sup> Here, we particularly focus on how authoritarian populist movements are weaponizing gender—not because they have a monopoly on using this as a tool, but because they are the predominant movements doing so across North America and Europe, the regions that are the focus of this report.

## WHY GENDER MATTERS

Gender is not secondary to the authoritarian project—it's a key lever authoritarians pull to consolidate power and **ENGENDER AUTHORITARIANISM**.

There are a number of reasons why gender identity and sexuality are particularly potent instruments for authoritarians to weaponize. First, they are deeply rooted aspects of identity, shaping how individuals understand themselves and relate to others. If authoritarians are able to regulate these most intimate aspects of ourselves, they have a starting point for control at a very personal level.

Gender and sexuality are also tied to longstanding social norms and expectations, and thus hold significant cultural and emotional weight—making them especially vulnerable to manipulation by authoritarian actors. Further, because gender—particularly gender identity and non-traditional family structures—is fluid or flexibly

“ Autocrats and aspiring autocrats need an effective way of communicating a very simple idea, which is I can take you back to an imaginary past ... That whole big promise of past-oriented politics can be communicated with this very simple strategy of attacking trans people, in particular, but then all of what they call gender ideology and LGBT rights. ”

**M. Gessen**

*We Need Better Narratives About Gender*<sup>24</sup>

defined, issues even loosely associated with gender can be framed as threats to more ‘fixed’ notions of tradition, religion, personal identity, or even national identity. This in turn also makes it easier for political leaders to frame “gender-related enemies” as foreign actors, adding to the perceived sense of insecurity.<sup>25</sup>

Gender also intersects with other identity categories frequently weaponized to divide, such as religion, race, and migration, further amplifying its power as a political tool. As scholar Annie Wilkinson describes, “base-building strategies often combine economic populist rhetoric with racialized and gendered resentment politics that tap into and exacerbate social and economic anxieties.”<sup>26</sup>

Gendered rhetoric resonates powerfully today, amid rapid socioeconomic and technological change, shifting gender roles, and, in Europe and North America, demographic decline.<sup>27</sup> Women’s expanded presence in the workforce and leadership positions has fueled perceived status loss among men at a time when working class men face particular economic vulnerability. As democracy scholar Saskia Brechenmacher notes, these trends clash with the “male ‘breadwinner’ ideal that is at the core of traditional concepts of masculinity” and coexists with “a loss of certainty about what socially valued masculinity looks like in modern society.”<sup>28</sup> This intersects with a belonging and loneliness crisis that is also impacting men around the world.<sup>29</sup> As Hannah Arendt observed, “authoritarianism bases itself on loneliness, on the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man.”<sup>30</sup> Absent

intervention from nonprofits, the state, and/or community leaders, this has created a vacuum for authoritarian populists to continue exploiting. In essence, as Brechenmacher notes, these actors have latched onto “the idea of a wounded, victimized, and emasculated man as a symbol for everything that is wrong with cosmopolitan social liberalism and contemporary society writ large.”<sup>31</sup>

Central to many of these movements’ myth-making is nostalgia. Authoritarian leaders often harness a sense of nostalgia, directing the discomfort that many feel about a quickly changing society onto constructed enemies—feminists, “gender ideology,” the LGBTQ community, alongside other targeted groups. Historian Anne Applebaum calls this “restorative nostalgia”: the idea that a once-great nation has been weakened or “sapped of its strength” by an enemy.<sup>32</sup> In this framing, targeting that group becomes key to restoring national greatness or returning to the nation’s former glory—and often the hierarchical social order and traditional gender roles that it represented.

## WHAT EVEN IS “GENDER IDEOLOGY”?

While weaponizing gender is not a new authoritarian strategy, today’s authoritarians often specifically invoke so-called “gender ideology” to engineer an existential threat that must be rooted out by all means. It often goes hand-in-hand with the claim to fight “woke ideology,” another umbrella term that has adapted in national permutations, for example, *le wokisme* in France or *ideología woke* in Spain.

The concept of “gender ideology” was developed in Catholic circles in the mid-1990s as a response to the recognition of sexual and reproductive rights within the United Nations rights system at the 1994 UN conference on population and development.<sup>33</sup> The term was initially created to oppose women’s and LGBTQ rights activism as well as the scholarship challenging traditional views on gender and sexuality.<sup>34</sup> Since then, this rhetoric has been adopted by a broader range of actors, including secular political figures, conservative civil society groups, and other religious actors in ways that facilitate authoritarian aims.

**“Gender ideology” has become a catch-all for opposing an array of reforms and rights that opponents abhor, including women’s rights, LGBTQ rights, trans rights, new reproductive technologies, sex and gender education, and even the Istanbul Convention combating violence against women. Political and cultural figures claim it is “a covert political strategy,” a conspiracy to seize power and impose minority, morally bankrupt values on average people.**<sup>35</sup>

**Opposition to so-called gender ideology functions as a symbolic glue that unites a diverse set of actors and allows for the lumping together of disparate topics into a single, constructed enemy that must be defeated by any means necessary, including the expansion of (and removal of checks on) state power.**

**The moniker “gender ideology” also enables opponents to label any issue to do with gender as an ideology or a set of beliefs, rather than a matter that affects people’s rights and identities. This also provides cover against claims of bigotry or discrimination, since efforts to root out so-called “gender ideology” are portrayed as battles against insidious ideas, rather than targeted attacks against groups of people.**

## SEARCHING FOR ENEMIES: SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE AND BUILDING A PERMISSION STRUCTURE FOR POLITICAL VIOLENCE

The boogeyman of “gender ideology” enables authoritarian actors to cast both outsiders and those within their own society associated with feminism or those who are gender or sexual minorities as enemies. Fighting these “enemies” creates a pretext for expanding state power (and eliminating independent checks on that power), pushing targeted groups out of public life, and even perpetrating violence. Different groups are cast as embodying everything perceived as wrong, immoral, or threatening about modern life. They are lumped together into a single enemy, whether “gender ideology” or something tailored to each national context. The rhetoric about who is dangerous is often rife with contradictions. For instance, some leaders use “gender ideology” to simultaneously condemn communism, Marxism, global capitalism, liberalism, and international institutions—technically contradictory forces. Consistency, however, is irrelevant in efforts to generate popular support through fear-based othering.<sup>36</sup>

Constructing enemies paves the way for political violence against the targeted groups and in society more broadly. Attacks on women and the LGBTQ community desensitize the public to violence, and set a precedent that any group posing a “threat” can be targeted and stripped of their rights. Threats and actual violence against targeted communities also communicate who belongs and can safely participate in public and political life. In this way, political violence serves as an enforcement mechanism for the hierarchy and intergroup divisions that authoritarians seek to construct, with political actors and aligned violent groups

wielding or threatening violence to “keep [the targeted group] in their place.”

This is part of a broader agenda of undermining any opposition to the authoritarian project, including those groups that would serve as checks on executive power. A society where violence is normalized is one where opposition to authoritarian power is riskier. It is also inherently at odds with the principles of democracy itself, in which people are supposed to be able to exercise their civil rights and freedoms without fear.

### **✱ Snapshot: Gendered Narratives Driving Women Out of Public Office**

Narratives and policies purporting to protect women, children and/or “family values” have been used to facilitate the expansion of state power, challenge the progress of women’s rights, and, ironically, have underpinned attacks on women. Many of these narratives advance arguments that women are too emotional, incompetent, or untrustworthy to hold positions of power<sup>37</sup>—or that doing so violates their patriotic duty to procreate.<sup>38</sup> Amid gender-based political appeals to win male votes, including attacks on feminism, these narratives are increasingly common, pernicious, and giving rise to violent and sexualized threats and harassment targeting women, and particularly women in leadership positions.<sup>39</sup>

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), an international organization of national parliaments, almost half of women legislators in Europe have received death threats or threats of rape or beating. IPU found that women parliamentarians are significantly more likely to be targeted for their gender than are men, including through sexual images of themselves shared on social media and through rape, death, and abduction threats.<sup>40</sup> The report further found that female parliamentarians active in addressing gender inequality and violence against women were particularly singled out for attack.<sup>41</sup>

The Brennan Center similarly found that women holding state and local office in the U.S. were three to four times as likely as men to experience abuse targeting their gender, and “women state legislators were nearly four times as likely as men to experience abuse of a sexual nature.”<sup>42</sup> Women of color face even higher levels of abuse.<sup>43</sup> Separate research found that female mayors were more likely than male mayors to experience physical violence, harassment, and psychological abuse.<sup>44</sup>

The impacts of this are visible. In 2020, we saw a violent plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer and a naked effigy of her hanging from a noose, following misogynistic rhetoric calling her a “tyrant bitch” who “loves the power she has now” over her COVID-related policies.<sup>45</sup> U.S. Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Córtez has publicly spoken about the violent and sexualized content spread about her online, including pornographic deep fakes.<sup>46</sup> New Zealand’s former Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, likewise faced a deluge of assassination and rape threats throughout her tenure, reportedly 50 to 90 times more than other public figures. Even with her widespread popularity, she ultimately resigned, citing that she did not have “enough left in the tank.”<sup>47</sup>

In this toxic environment, an increasing number of women are choosing to step back from positions of public leadership globally. In the U.S., for instance, the Brennan Center found that half of women officeholders surveyed said they were less willing to run for reelection or higher office because of the threats and harassment they faced. Officeholders also noted that the threats and abuse dampened their willingness to govern on certain issues, including LGBTQ rights and gun regulations, as well as their willingness to interact with their constituents.<sup>48</sup> Collectively, this shows the impact of gendered narratives in communicating that women do not belong in leadership positions, pushing women out of public service, and undermining democratic and representative governance.

## \* Snapshot: How ICE's Methods Normalize State and Targeted Violence Against Women

Anti-immigration arguments and policies, often couched in false claims that immigrants endanger women, are giving rise to state violence that directly endangers women and children. In the United States, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has moved swiftly to arrest and deport or detain—often without due process—immigrants of varying legal status, including those who are [DACA recipients](#),<sup>49</sup> those with [pending asylum cases](#),<sup>50</sup> and many others who have been in the United States for years. ICE and the Trump Administration insist that these activities are in part motivated by a desire to protect women—building on a longstanding, baseless, and dangerous narrative that immigrants from Latin America are “[rapists](#)” and thus a threat to (native-born, white) women and children.<sup>51</sup> These arrests have instead created the conditions for state and non-state targeted violence to be perpetrated against women and children (populations they purport to protect) and in society more broadly.

Many of those detained are themselves mothers who are forcibly and often violently separated from their children by ICE. In Louisiana, for instance, a [mother of two, married to an American citizen](#) and Marine veteran, who had recently given birth to a baby girl and was still breastfeeding, was arrested and detained during an interview for her green card application.<sup>52</sup> In Florida, a mom to a one-year old baby, also still breastfeeding, and also married to a U.S. citizen, was deported to Cuba without the option to bring her child with her.<sup>53</sup> In yet another case, ICE arrested and detained a woman who was five months pregnant and later suffered a stillbirth due to being denied medical care while in [detention](#).<sup>54</sup> This trend illustrates how these narratives are deployed in ways that deem *some* women worthy of protection—typically those that are white—but others “legitimate” or fair targets for state violence and discrimination.

ICE agents often conduct these arrests while wearing plainclothes, covering their faces, and [refusing to display a badge](#), purportedly to protect ICE agents from doxxing.<sup>55</sup> This has created an opportunity for other troubling instances, in which men are now [impersonating](#) ICE agents—who have normalized hiding their faces and not showing badges—and robbing, kidnapping, and even raping women.<sup>56</sup> This is just one example of how state violence—justified in the name of protecting women—both endangers women and creates a permission structure for further violence within society.

## \* Snapshot: Leveraging Foreign Agent Laws to Target Feminist and LGBTQ Organizations

Authoritarians often depict feminist and LGBTQ organizations as threats, encode this into law (further solidifying their status as a scapegoat),<sup>57</sup> and then take actions to push these organizations and the communities they support further out of public life.

An organized, coordinated, and resilient civil society poses an existential challenge to authoritarians. Recognizing this, authoritarians attack and seek to shrink civic spaces, or create parallel structures and civil societies that are allied with their goals.<sup>58</sup> Alongside reducing shared spaces and further dividing society, this undermines a key check on authoritarian power.

One of authoritarians' [weapons of choice](#) is “[foreign agent laws](#),” designed to discredit and undermine civil society by branding it as “foreign” and therefore [suspicious or subversive](#).<sup>59</sup> These laws force groups receiving foreign funding to register as “foreign agents” if they engage in vaguely defined “political activity,” including public debate, legal analysis, public opinion polling, or election monitoring. Passed under the pretext of national security or protecting the national interest, these laws' onerous reporting requirements make it near-impossible for already over-stretched organizations to operate, removing or severely constraining critical checks on executive powers.

Authoritarians target feminist and LGBTQ organizations with these and related laws, enabling them to portray these organizations as threats to national sovereignty and traditional values.

Russia's [foreign agents law](#)<sup>60</sup>—and its expansion—is a case in point, a law that has since inspired similar legislation (passed or proposed), in [Uganda](#), [India](#),<sup>61</sup> [Georgia](#),<sup>62</sup> [Slovakia](#),<sup>63</sup> [Serbia](#),<sup>64</sup> and [Hungary](#).<sup>65</sup>

In Russia, the law was passed in 2012 amid widespread anti-government protests following a rigged election that brought Putin to his third term in power. Subsequent legislation has expanded the law's reach alongside a separate bill banning “homosexual propaganda.” Together, these laws have been a [key tool](#) to go after feminist and LGBTQ organizations, including those that support domestic violence victims, under the pretext that they are foreign and threaten national security, women, children, and traditional values.<sup>66</sup>

Putin also [deployed the narrative](#) that women's and LGBTQ rights threaten Russia as a way to justify Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which he claimed was in defense of Russia's “traditional values” that were being attacked by a morally degenerate West.<sup>67</sup> That same year, the Kremlin [further expanded](#) the foreign agents law to include anyone supporting Ukraine, as well as the gay propaganda law to “effectively ban public discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity.”<sup>68</sup>

These laws paved the way for Russia to target feminism directly. In March 2023, Russia's lower house of parliament drafted a law labeling feminism as “extremist,” blaming feminists for the “destruction of traditional values” and accusing them of being “agents of the west.” As exiled Russian feminist Alyona Popova [noted](#), the proposed law reinforced arguments made previously against anti-domestic violence measures in the country: “feminists are ruining a unique Russian way of life, all feminists are sponsored from the West and feminists hate men.”<sup>69</sup> Popova had previously been forced out of Russia after being designated a “foreign agent.”

Later that year, in November 2023, the Russian Supreme Court designated the “International LGBT Movement” an “[extremist organization](#)” that threatens “the demographic situation in the country, [and] contributes to...the self-destruction of society, weakening of family ties ... and imposes ideas that imply the denial of human dignity and the value of human life.”<sup>70</sup> As part of the ruling, the court took a particular stance against “femininitives” or feminine gender-specific words, including the feminine forms of “leader,” “director,” or “author”—used within feminist circles as a way of making “women visible in the public space, acknowledg[ing] their expertise and work on par with men's.”<sup>71</sup> Speaking on the ruling, Aisyn Gaisina, a feminist organizer, explained, “We need a law against domestic violence so that women's partners and husbands will stop killing them...[instead] the government is doing everything it can so that women would see clearly that they live in a male state.”<sup>72</sup>

## LGBTQ SCAPEGOATING

Attacks on the LGBTQ community and women's rights function as complementary tactics in a larger campaign to manipulate concerns about “traditional family values” in service of consolidating power. LGBTQ scapegoating is central to efforts that weaponize gender in service of an authoritarian agenda. Sometimes attacks on women and the LGBTQ community go hand-in-hand—for instance, lumping the two together under the boogeyman of “gender ideology.” In other instances, as [Over Zero](#) previously [noted](#), it may be “more strategic to start by weaponizing pre-existing homophobia and transphobia” to then go after gender equality, while in other cases, these communities are wedged against each other as a way of undermining a large and powerful anti-authoritarian coalition.<sup>73</sup>

Scapegoating is a political strategy that names a societal problem—real or imagined—and then blames an entire group for that problem, creating an us-versus-them division: a threatening “them” to blame and a virtuous “us”

in need of protection. This us-versus-them division serves as a psychological tool that manipulates collective anxiety, anger, and fear to create a permission structure for power consolidation and violence.

As Over Zero explored in *Decoding LGBTQ Scapegoating*, LGBTQ scapegoating is “not random. It is not a natural consequence of polarization or an expected backlash to rights advancements.”<sup>74</sup> Rather, scapegoating is a strategy to deepen divisions and erode democracy. Authoritarian actors deploy a range of interconnected political strategies to this end—from casting LGBTQ communities as a common enemy to mobilize their base, to exploiting fears or anxieties about the LGBTQ community to distract from unpopular or ineffective policies. Further, by inflaming fear, disgust, and anger toward a targeted community, political actors justify and normalize violence—against the targeted community in particular and in society more broadly.

The consequences are measurable. As the Williams Institute *explored* in its cross-national study exploring the relationship between indicators of liberal democracy and acceptance of LGBTI people globally, “attacks on LGBTI people and their rights can be a precursor to democratic backsliding, and anti-LGBTI stigma and policies may contribute to the weakening of democratic norms and institutions.”<sup>75</sup>

## THE THROUGH LINES IN LGBTQ SCAPEGOATING & RESTRICTING WOMEN’S RIGHTS

Efforts to restrict women’s rights and to scapegoat the LGBTQ community often rely on overlapping rhetorical, political, and legal strategies that entrench social hierarchies, facilitate power consolidation, and increase state control—often in the name of “protecting women.”

- At the core of many of these efforts is gender essentialism: the belief that one’s gender is biologically determined based on one’s sex assigned at birth, and that any deviation from this is “unnatural.” This prescribes fixed and narrow gender roles: men as providers and protectors, women as mothers and caregivers. It asserts that motherhood is the natural fulfillment of a woman’s biological purpose—a view now amplified through “tradwife” influencers and the online “womanosphere,” where women are celebrated “as submissive homemakers, [and] men as strong providers.”<sup>76</sup>
- Beyond celebrating traditional gender roles, these narratives punish women who do not conform to gendered expectations. Related arguments suggest that women’s innate qualities render them too emotional or irrational for leadership—a view that was historically used to oppose women’s suffrage by portraying women as either too emotional or too morally pure to participate in “male” politics, and is now being adapted and repackaged to push gender essentialist ideas.
- Viewing women’s primary role as procreators also generates support for additional restrictions on women’s freedoms and healthcare options—particularly amidst concerns about population decline and “great replacement” by immigrants. **Indeed, as historian Ruth Ben Ghit notes “control over female bodies in the name of [white Christian] population growth is a throughline of authoritarianism, as are persecutions of LGBTQ+ individuals.”**<sup>77</sup>
- Gender essentialism also underpins policies to delegitimize trans identities and erase trans people from public life, often cloaked in appeals to “common sense” or “objective science.” In his inaugural address, Donald Trump declared that “there are only two genders: male and female,” setting the stage for a series of Executive Orders that restricted LGBTQ, and particularly trans, participation across public life. The ban on trans participation in the military, for instance, claimed that being trans is inconsistent “with the humility and selflessness required of a service member.”<sup>78</sup>
- Another unifying thread across attacks on women and the LGBTQ community is the use of

“protection narratives,” which justify rights restrictions and anti-democratic measures in the name of “protecting women and/or children.”<sup>79</sup> In the United States, such narratives have been used to justify book bans,<sup>80</sup> bathroom bills,<sup>81</sup> drag show bans,<sup>82</sup> and restrictions on access to life-saving medical care,<sup>83</sup> including miscarriage management.<sup>84</sup> Trump’s Executive Order ending legal recognition of transgender identity (titled “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government”) was likewise in the name of protecting women—even as his supporters greeted his electoral victory with chants of “your body, my choice,” “get back to the kitchen,” and calls to repeal the 19th amendment, which gives women the right to vote.<sup>85</sup>

Often in the name of protecting women and children, these narratives lay the groundwork for increased state control over personal medical decisions, normalize the surveillance of healthcare providers and private citizens, and invoke traditional values and protection narratives to restrict individual rights and freedoms. Together, this illustrates how efforts to target and scapegoat the LGBTQ community and ultimately to restrict women’s rights build on and amplify one another’s impact.

### **\* Snapshot: Leveraging Homophobia to Oppose Anti-Domestic Violence Legislation Across Europe**

The increasing opposition against the Istanbul Convention is another example of how opposition to so-called gender ideology and the purported defense of traditional gender norms are used to roll back critical protections for women and stall progress towards gender equality. It is also a clear instance of leveraging homophobia to undermine women’s rights and protections.

The [Istanbul Convention](#) is a Council of Europe treaty designed to prevent violence against women and gender-based violence.<sup>86</sup> Despite initial support for the treaty (and, ironically, its name), Turkey became the first country to withdraw from the convention. Turkey [claimed](#) that the treaty, which protected women from domestic violence regardless of their sexual orientation, “normalized homosexuality” and was thus incompatible with Turkish social and family values.<sup>87</sup> Turkish representatives also argued that the convention was rooted in “gender ideology” and threatened traditional gender roles and family structures. Alongside Turkey’s withdrawal from the Convention, there was a [measured increase](#) in femicides and “suspicious female deaths,” particularly among women who were employed, had children, and had sought legal protection.<sup>88</sup>

Other countries followed suit amid significant lobbying from activists working against equality and women’s rights. In [Bulgaria](#), for instance, the Constitutional Court, following additional pressure from politicians across the political spectrum, stated that the ratification of the convention was unconstitutional for similar reasoning.<sup>89</sup> The Bulgarian judges further used the opportunity to advance an interpretation of the Bulgarian constitution that associates the biological sex “woman” with motherhood.<sup>90</sup>

[Opposition to the Istanbul Convention](#) has become a key discursive tool for authoritarian populist actors across Europe, who frame their opposition as protecting national sovereignty, common sense, and popular will against global elites who in their view promote “gender ideology.”<sup>91</sup> This also allows political actors to leverage the threat of so-called gender ideology to appeal to anti-establishment sentiments, while ultimately weakening protections for women and gender minorities.<sup>92</sup>

### **\* Snapshot: From Banning “Homosexual Propaganda” to Banning “Childfree Propaganda”**

In Russia, measures used to target the LGBTQ community later served as a template for legislation restricting women’s rights. In 2012, the Kremlin passed a bill banning “[homosexual propaganda](#),” or information that

can “harm the spiritual or physical health of a minor, including forming the erroneous impression of the social equality of traditional and non-traditional marital relations.”<sup>93</sup> In effect, the homosexual propaganda bill made it illegal to claim social equality.<sup>94</sup> The law created an explicit association between homosexuality, harming children, and ultimately pedophilia—one that Putin and his supporters reinforced throughout subsequent rhetoric and policy. The propaganda bill was tied to a [threefold increase](#) in violence targeting [LGBTQ people in Russia](#),<sup>95</sup> and emboldened vigilante and militia groups to violently and publicly target, typically without accountability, those they suspected of being gay.<sup>96</sup> In 2023, following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine—which the Kremlin justified as defending “traditional values”—Russia [extended the gay propaganda law](#) to “effectively ban public discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity,” pushing LGBTQ people and feminist organizations farther out of public life.<sup>97</sup>

In 2024, amid declining birthrates and heavy losses from the invasion of Ukraine, the parliament [passed a law](#) punishing “childfree propaganda.”<sup>98</sup> The bill mirrored the earlier LGBTQ propaganda law and complementary legislation advancing “traditional family values,” but this time targeted organizations and individuals that “promote the virtues of women voluntarily not having children,” imposing fines up to \$51,000. Alongside bans on “childfree propaganda,” Russia has begun [restricting abortions](#), which had been legal in the country since the 1950s.<sup>99</sup> And in September 2024, a lawmaker from the ruling United Russia party submitted legislation to regulate divorces through mandating a reconciliation period, psychological consultations, and/or “reeducation” in cases where there are children or where one spouse wants to maintain the marriage. Critics note this is in instances of domestic violence, which has been largely decriminalized since 2017.<sup>100</sup> In an earlier interview with Radio Free Europe, activist Alyona Popova [explained that](#), according to the state “the function of a woman is to have babies to fill the ranks of soldiers that this regime needs...this is how the government has been thinking publicly for 10 years ... our system will try to destroy women’s freedom of thought and leave them only one function [as mothers].”<sup>101</sup>

## GENDER AND RACE

Authoritarians define the boundaries of national belonging and exclusion by connecting gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and citizenship, as is evident in now widely spread conspiracy theories such as “The Great Replacement Theory.” The Great Replacement Theory posits that white populations are being deliberately “replaced” by non-white immigrants through higher birth rates and migration—often blaming feminists, LGBTQ people, and liberal elites for undermining traditional family structures and lowering native birth rates.<sup>102</sup> In this narrative, **shifting gender roles, reproductive rights, and gender diversity are framed as threats to racial survival**, suggesting that only a return to rigid gender roles (where white women produce more children) can prevent demographic and cultural decline. This fuses racial panic with arguments about traditional gender roles, casting gender equality as complicit in the so-called “replacement.”

In this view, women are allocated a specific role as ‘mothers of the nation’ and guardians of the race. Across contexts and history, authoritarians place specific demands on the women of majority groups that can perpetuate the “true people” of the nation.<sup>103</sup> What follows is a combination of the reappraisal of motherhood and the need to place limitations on bodily autonomy and reproductive rights.<sup>104</sup>

The central role of women as mothers allows for a variety of narratives on race and/or migration to develop. Authoritarians frame mothers as vulnerable individuals that require male protection.<sup>105</sup> In the United States, for instance, Donald Trump repeatedly brings up “[angel moms](#)” or “angel families”—the parents or relatives of those who died because of an “illegal alien,” reinforcing the narrative that immigrants pose a direct threat to the safety of American women, children, and families.<sup>106</sup> This in turn reinforces certain gendered expectations of men and underscores the need for a hypermasculinity where strength and dominance are paramount to

combat the dangerous “Other.” Historically, these same narratives were used to justify lynching in the United States—specifically that Black men posed a threat to the security and purity of white women.<sup>107</sup>

The modern-day fight against so-called gender ideology—but also against migrants and other non-white people—is a way to exploit fear and garner support for nationalist, cultural, religious or political agendas.

In some cases, authoritarian populist movements are more flexible with certain aspects of gender and sexuality, engaging in what the academic literature calls *femonationalism*<sup>108</sup> or *homonationalism*.<sup>109</sup> This involves co-opting or manipulating feminist and/or LGBTQ rights and ideas in the name of perpetuating a uniform and homogeneous idea of who belongs and who doesn’t.<sup>110</sup> Here, protecting women or LGBTQ rights is invoked to reject migrants and racial minority groups, rather than to protect women’s or LGBTQ rights.

### **\* Snapshot: Manipulating Women’s and LGBTQ Rights to Support Anti-Migration Policies in the Netherlands**

In the Netherlands, the Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom, or PVV) uses women’s and LGBTQ rights as a cudgel to attempt to restrict migration. For instance, Geert Wilders, the leader of the PVV party, has leveraged defending women’s protection and rights and LGBTQ rights—even centrally incorporating the protection of LGBTQ rights into its party platform—to underpin anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies. Wilders has stated that “Islam is not a religion; it’s an ideology..of a retarded culture.”<sup>111</sup> He has called for the Dutch government to close the country’s borders as a way to protect women from Muslim men, whom he refers to as “Islamic testosterone bombs,” and has separately claimed that integrating “homophobic Muslim migrants” threaten LGBTQ rights across the country, and that Islam is “incompatible” with Dutch society (Wilders has been convicted of discrimination, a decision ratified by the Dutch Supreme Court in 2021).<sup>112</sup> Still, the support for women’s and LGBTQ rights only extends so far. With all the PVV’s rhetoric on protecting women and LGBTQ people, the party had previously voted against ratification of the Istanbul Convention on violence against women (though it did pass in parliament). More recently, Wilders noted “Trump is right, there are only two genders: male and female. Let’s bring common sense back to our society. No more woke madness or indoctrination.”<sup>113</sup>

## **A TRANSNATIONAL PROJECT**

Talking points, narratives, and organizing strategies among those opposing gender equality or so-called gender ideology are strikingly similar across contexts. This is not a coincidence. Transnational cooperation and coordination among these actors is well documented. This goes beyond politicians attending each other’s events across countries and meeting in international fora. It includes joint strategizing, spreading propaganda across borders, and collectively recruiting new followers.<sup>114</sup> Domestic organizations operate nationally and transnationally, as they embed within external organizations that bolster their influence. Together, this builds a formal and informal infrastructure that helps distribute narratives and strategies that weaponize gender globally.

As several scholars have shown, anti-gender campaigns function as a flexible toolkit, easily adapted across diverse national contexts.<sup>115</sup> Activist groups can selectively draw on elements that align with their local agendas, allowing their campaigns to resonate within different cultural and political settings. These campaigns are often used alongside other strategies to promote exclusion and undermine democracy—making them a powerful political weapon.

For instance, the International Organization for the Family (IOF) works to unite and equip leaders worldwide to promote and defend the “natural” family and is a key space where anti-gender equality and anti-“gender ideology” movements and authoritarian populist politicians converge. The IOF organizes the World Congress

of Families (WCF), which has contributed to an international coalition that has shifted political and cultural realities around the world for decades. The Southern Poverty Law Center [describes](#) the WCF as “an umbrella for a massive network... pushing for restrictions to LGBT rights under the guise of the defense of the ‘natural family’—defined as heterosexual married couples with their biological children.”<sup>116</sup>

The WCF’s annual conferences enable authoritarian leaders to expand their global reach, build support, and raise their profiles. In turn, their participation lends legitimacy to the WCF’s policy goals and amplifies its political influence. In 2017, for example, Viktor Orbán [addressed the conference](#), using his speech to advocate for Hungarian women to have more babies.<sup>117</sup> In her [2019 conference speech](#), Giorgia Meloni, now Prime Minister of Italy, criticized those purportedly working against traditional values in Italy: “They said it’s scandalous for people to defend the natural family founded on marriage, to want to increase the birth rate, to want to place the correct value on human life, to support freedom in education, and to say no to gender ideology.”<sup>118</sup> [The speech drew approval from right-wing U.S. political leaders.](#)<sup>119</sup> The conference has also leveraged pop culture figures to disseminate their ideas more broadly. For instance, Tamara Falcó, a Spanish aristocrat, socialite, and television personality [spoke](#) at the 2022 Mexico WCF conference, an experience she publicized through her social media.<sup>120</sup>

Another example is the Spanish HazteOir/CitizenGo, founded in 2001 by a hard-right Catholic lawyer. The group’s [slogan](#) is “Culture war: life, family, and freedom.”<sup>121</sup> In 2013, HazteOir created CitizenGo, a lobbying group and petition platform active in more than 50 countries that describes itself as defending life, family, and freedom. Their campaigns extend beyond gender issues to include anti-Islam efforts, COVID-19 denialism, and opposition to the World Health Organization.<sup>122</sup>

## PART TWO

# Six Strategies That Leverage Gender

Part 1 of this report explored the centrality of gender to authoritarian populists' efforts to generate public support for their political agenda, justify anti-democratic practices, and ultimately consolidate power. We discussed how these actors have capitalized on years of well-funded and coordinated efforts by extremist movements to push rigid, often hierarchical views of gender, sexuality, and "traditional values," and in turn have lent these movements political legitimacy and credibility.

Efforts to weaponize gender and sexuality are particularly effective because both are deeply rooted aspects of identity that shape how individuals understand themselves and interact with the world—and thus are both intimately sensitive and touch on myriad aspects of our personal, social, and political lives. If authoritarians are able to regulate these most intimate aspects of ourselves, they have an inroads or a starting point for control at a very personal, foundational level.

Coupled with broader societal and political change and uncertainty, this has allowed political and cultural figures to transform "gender ideology" into a boogeyman that allegedly threatens families, traditional values, common sense, women and children, religious freedom, and freedom of speech. In doing so, these figures manufacture a common enemy that serves to unite unlikely allies, polarize society more broadly, and distract from policy failures and corruption.

Alongside these political strategies, authoritarian populists weaponize gender through cultural strategies that leverage or intensify gendered anxieties and launder social hierarchies through spaces often perceived as apolitical and in society more broadly. This normalizes and builds an appetite for authoritarian ideas, shaping the overall intellectual and cultural terrain in which politics occurs. Together, this generates support for and/or gives political figures cover to consolidate their power and even justify political and state violence, further weakening the institutions and movements that defend rights, democracy, and pluralism.

In Part 2, we explore how authoritarian populist movements leverage gender toward these aims through six interrelated strategies. While these strategies are not necessarily exhaustive of all the ways that gender is leveraged to facilitate authoritarianism, they provide a helpful framework to both illustrate the mechanics of how this is happening and potentially to organize responses.

- 1. Construct a Threat:** Authoritarian populists depict so-called gender ideology, feminists, and LGBTQ people as threats to national identity, security, women and children, and traditional values. This fuels fear, entrenches us-versus-them thinking, and justifies authoritarian actions—from surveillance to political violence—under the pretense of protection.
- 2. Normalize Authoritarian Ideas:** Authoritarian populists use gender to reshape the public's understanding of what democracy entails. For instance, social hierarchy and dominance are first

explored as they relate to gender relations, gender identity, women, and LGBTQ rights. This lays the groundwork for more broadly challenging equality, pluralism, and human rights—core ideals of liberal democracy—and framing them as unnatural, undesirable, or unrealistic.

- 3. Change Culture:** To shape the intellectual and cultural terrain in which politics occurs and make authoritarian ideas more palatable, authoritarian populists rely on cultural strategies that leverage gender and gendered anxieties. This occurs through two main pathways: (1) By establishing intellectual and educational institutions that help legitimize these ideas and (2) By introducing these ideas in environments that are not primarily political or partisan or do not self-present as such, including lifestyle content or fitness subcultures.
- 4. Build a Big Tent Movement:** Political and cultural leaders instigate gender-related anxieties that serve as the symbolic glue for a coalition bringing together groups that hold different beliefs related to gender (e.g., pronatalism, anti-trans rights, misogyny, opposition to so-called gender ideology). These groups have different entry points into the coalition, and may even have contradictory political values, but are united against a common, constructed enemy, and mobilized against abstract and loose ideas. This coalition broadens the pillars of support for authoritarian populists by providing access to new constituencies, as well as to organizations and institutions that can supply funding and other resources.
- 5. Divide and Polarize:** Authoritarian populists frame gender as inherently divisive in order to intensify us-versus-them thinking. This strategy operates at two levels: it polarizes society and fractures pro-democracy coalitions. By shaping the debate along divisive terms, these leaders obscure areas of general public agreement and common ground, deepening social and political polarization and intensifying emotional and political tensions. Simultaneously, they weaponize gender to fracture pro-democracy coalitions and weaken opposition to authoritarian practices.
- 6. Distract:** Authoritarian populists manufacture and exploit gender-related controversies, narratives, and policies—like sex education, trans rights, and purported threats to children’s safety—to stir outrage and divert attention from anti-democratic power grabs, corruption, and/or unpopular agendas.

## 1. Construct a threat

Depict feminists, LGBTQ people, and “gender ideology” as existential threats



## 2. Normalize authoritarian ideas

Exploit gender to reshape the public’s understanding of what democracy entails



## 3. Change culture

Rely on cultural strategies that leverage gender and gendered anxieties to reshape the broader political terrain



## 4. Build a big tent movement

Leverage gender to unite unlikely allies and broaden support for authoritarian movements



## 5. Divide and polarize

Frame gender as inherently divisive to polarize society and divide pro-democracy coalitions



## 6. Distract

Leverage gender-related controversies to stir outrage and divert attention from corruption and power grabs



# Construct a Threat

Authoritarian populists depict “gender ideology,” feminists, and LGBTQ people as threats to national identity, security, women, children, and traditional values. This fuels fear, entrenches us versus them thinking, and justifies authoritarian actions—from surveillance to political violence—under the pretense of protection.

**“ Fear, both imagined and real, is a potent political tool. It trumps and overrides all emotions and considerations. It bulldozes the entire political arena and justifies the suspension of basic rights and liberties.”**

**Eva Illouz**, *The Emotional Life of Populism*<sup>123</sup>

## How is gender leveraged to construct a threat?

- The process of constructing a threat is not incidental but central to the authoritarian playbook. This engineered threat informs and legitimizes nearly every other strategy. Purporting to eradicate a threat allows authoritarians to pursue extreme rhetoric, policies, and actions that both aggrandize their power and target those who stand in their way: most immediately, anyone deemed to belong to targeted or scapegoated groups and their defenders, including civil society, media, and cultural institutions—all critical checks on executive power. This creates a [permission structure](#) for rights restrictions, privacy violations and surveillance, and political and group-targeted violence.<sup>124</sup> Over time, the public can become desensitized to these measures, viewing them as an acceptable way to address threats, gender-related and otherwise.
- Authoritarian populists frame feminists, LGBTQ people, and so-called gender ideology and those associated with it as the shared enemy that represents a threat to one’s way of life and physical security, women and children, and national survival. This [involves](#) a rhetorical strategy to conflate these groups and activists with totalitarianism, terrorism, and cultural colonization, which allows political and cultural leaders to fashion themselves as the defenders of democracy—the only ones who can fix and root out these threats, and restore the country’s greatness.<sup>125</sup>
- **Framing targeted groups as subscribing to a dangerous ideology allows these leaders to rhetorically separate their dangerous rhetoric, actions, and policies from the people being harmed. This also shields against accusations of bigotry and makes efforts to undermine or eliminate LGBTQ and women’s rights more palatable.**
- Authoritarians also cast an array of gender-related measures—ranging from anti-domestic violence legislation, gender equality norms, or rights for gender and sexual minorities—and gender and sexual minorities themselves as a stand-in for the discontents of modern life and for undermining the nation’s potential or its past glory.<sup>126</sup> This can be particularly effective because it taps into and leverages the understandable anxieties rooted in the past decades’ rapid technological and economic shifts. The argument goes that once they eradicate this group or threat, the nation can return to greatness and its mythologized past.
- Taken to an extreme, the perceived threat of so-called “gender ideology” has been weaponized to justify wars of aggression—as seen in the [Kremlin’s partial justification](#) for its war against Ukraine as a defense against moral decay and greater gender and sexual equality in Ukraine.<sup>127</sup> It has also underpinned policies to push targeted groups out of public life. As one notable example, in 2020, political leaders from hundreds of cities across Poland, declared their cities as [so-called “LGBT-free zones.”](#)<sup>128</sup> These were areas where local laws prohibited “LGBT ideology,” though they have since been repealed.
- Leveraging gender to construct a threat can also take the form of generating support for [discriminatory policies](#) that target non-white populations through claims that they endanger women and the LGBTQ community, as explained in the Gender and Race section.<sup>129</sup>

## PROTECTION NARRATIVES: WHAT’S THREATENED?

Scholars Phillip Ayoub and Kristina Stoeckl, among others, have explored the common frames—the language that shapes how people understand and act—across the global anti-gender movement. These frames particularly relate to who or what is portrayed as threatened and in need of protection, and in turn help legitimize authoritarian power grabs.<sup>130</sup> We explore several common frames from the literature below:

- **Religion:** The language of equal rights, including women’s and LGBTQ rights, is depicted as part of a totalitarian project intended to restrict or extinguish religious freedom and traditional or religious values, constructing a zero-sum narrative between the two.
- **The Nation:** Belief in the supremacy of the nation leads to rejecting pluralism, diversity, and transnational solidarity.
- **Children:** Education on matters involving gender identity, sexuality, and feminism, and LGBTQ individuals themselves, are presented as a threat to children, all part of a broader effort to unravel the nuclear family. Schools and universities are cast as sites of ideological indoctrination, where exposure to content related to gender and sexuality undermines parents’ rights to raise their children according to their values.
- **Women:** Women are framed as vulnerable and needing protection. More recently, this rhetoric has shifted to include the claim that transgender rights threaten cisgender women, portraying equality for trans people as an erasure of “biological” women, illustrated perhaps most notably by the [TERF movement](#).<sup>131</sup>
- **The Family:** Heteronormative nuclear families are advanced as the only legitimate family form and the foundational building block of society.
- **Traditional Gender Roles:** Rapid social and cultural change, including shifting gender roles and the increased presence of women in the workplace, is framed as a threat to men’s traditional, dominant role in society.
- **Society:** Demographic decline is regularly depicted as a major threat for societies across the world, particularly in Europe and North America. In this view, homosexuality and choosing not to have children are frivolous, selfish, and cause decreasing birth rates. This also underpins pronatalist arguments on women’s imperative to have children.
- **Common Sense:** Authoritarians frame shifting norms around gender and sexuality as defying common sense and science (see below). They depict themselves as castigated defenders of common sense and a supposedly silent majority that disagrees with changes that have either gone too far or are “anti-natural”—particularly nonbinary gender identities.<sup>132</sup> Relatedly, as part of their efforts to change culture, authoritarian populists also focus on reshaping what is perceived as common sense in society (see Change Culture section).
- **Science:** Authoritarians simultaneously co-opt science and portray “real science” as under attack from politicized scientists who prioritize ideology over rigor and push a “woke” agenda in service of global elites.<sup>133</sup> As one activist [exclaimed](#), the “fake science” of the left has established “fraud, propaganda, and even (see ‘transgenderism’) literal insanity as the basis of our public policy...We have to fight to take the mantle of science back from the leftists who have appropriated it...”<sup>134</sup> Authoritarians seek to co-opt science by establishing and bolstering parallel institutions and figures—from wellness influencers to academic centers and think tanks—who push traditional family values and publish untested science that lends a veneer of legitimacy to their claims.<sup>135</sup>

While these frames appear across countries, their specific manifestation shifts according to what is most contextually relevant and strategic for the particular context. Often, they remain deliberately vague—invoked as concepts that require no explanation, and thus reinforcing the common sense frame above.

## DECLINING BIRTH RATES AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

Authoritarian populists single out childless women as selfish, unnatural, and existential threats to the future of the nation, a stark contrast to the idealized, self-sacrificing mother. In 2015, László Kövér, one of the founders of the Fidesz party in Hungary and currently Speaker of the Parliament, stated: “We don’t want the gender craziness. We don’t want to make Hungary a futureless society of man-hating women, and feminine men living in dread of women, and considering families and children only as barriers to self-fulfilment.. And we would like if our daughters would consider, as the highest quality of self-fulfilment, the possibility of giving birth to our grandchildren.”<sup>136</sup> In the United States, JD Vance famously dismissed “childless cat ladies” as not caring about the U.S., claiming that those without children couldn’t possibly have a stake in its future.<sup>137</sup> Vance has separately argued that people without children should pay higher taxes and have fewer voting rights.<sup>138</sup>

This kind of rhetoric is illustrative of pronatalism—policies and narratives promoting higher birth rates—as a tool to advance broader ideological goals. While framed as offering support for families, pronatalist politics frequently impose specific expectations on women, reducing their value to their capacity to reproduce. These policies also disproportionately target immigrant populations: calls to boost native birth rates accompany warnings about immigration and a “great replacement” by (non-white) migrants.<sup>139</sup> For instance, at the 2017 World Congress of Families congress, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán noted: “In Europe today there are two distinct views on [declining birth rates]. One of these is...address[ing] Europe’s demographic problems through immigration. And there is another view, held by...Hungary. Our view is that we must solve our demographic problems by relying on our own resources and mobilizing our own reserves, and—let us acknowledge it—by renewing ourselves spiritually,” expressly linking the country’s spiritual survival with resisting replacement by (Muslim) migrants and encouraging more (Hungarian) babies.<sup>140</sup>

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy party has made Italy’s declining birth rate central to its campaign for a return to traditional gender roles. In December of 2023, Lavinia Mennuni, a party member, declared that it should be a young woman’s “first aspiration” to have children, and suggested that women who chose not to have children were neglecting their natural role as mothers and caregivers.<sup>141</sup>

Central to the appeal of pronatalist rhetoric is a legitimate concern about declining birthrates and their impact on a country’s economic and social future. As democracy scholar Saskia Brechenmacher notes, “the most obvious solution to these economic problems—welcoming more immigrants—has become politically fraught as a result of rising nationalist sentiments, deepening the sense of crisis.”<sup>142</sup> Against this backdrop, ultra-conservative and right-wing populist politicians and civil society groups have pointed to women’s career ambitions and their rejection of traditional gender roles as the main culprits for declining birth rates.<sup>143</sup>

### ✦ **Snapshot: From Attacks on “Gender” to Attacks on Civil Society and Human Rights Activists in Bulgaria**

In Bulgaria, the English word “gender” entered the national lexicon and transformed into a slur, meant to belittle sexual minorities and gender nonconforming people.<sup>144</sup> The hostile rhetoric intensified in 2019, when government officials and the Orthodox Church openly challenged the legitimacy of organizations advocating for gender equality and LGBTQ rights, driving public institutions to distance themselves from civil society groups connected to a wide range of issues, including the safety of women and LGBTQ people—but also freedom of expression, assembly, and religion, and protection for Roma and refugees. These groups were also sidelined in the legislative process. The term *gender*, in its derogatory use, became part of a broader arsenal of hateful language directed at human rights advocates and civil society activists.

In 2024, the Bulgarian parliament passed a vaguely worded amendment to the country’s education code

which prohibits the “propaganda, promotion, or incitement” of LGBTQ “ideas and views” in schools.<sup>145</sup> The amendment was introduced by the far-right and pro-Russia Revival party and was unexpectedly backed by other mainstream and pro-EU parties. The new legislation closely tracks the Russian and Hungarian anti-LGBTQ propaganda laws and goes as far as to state that content related to gender and sexual orientation “in the vicinity of” these educational establishments should also be banned.<sup>146</sup> In essence, leveraging gender-related anxieties provided the state a pretext for public censorship and extended control over education.

### ✦ **Snapshot: Creating a Surveillance State in Texas**

In Texas, the engineered threat of so-called “gender ideology” and LGBTQ people has laid the groundwork for a web of passed and proposed legislation that extends the arm of the government into private homes, classrooms, doctors’ offices, and even into other states. Together, this has created a robust surveillance state monitoring individuals, parents, and teachers across and beyond Texas.<sup>147</sup> Vaguely-worded laws ban nearly all abortions with narrow exceptions, encourage Texans to report their neighbors for violations, and enable private lawsuits against anyone who assists with an abortion after six weeks, leaving physicians fearful of providing care like D&Cs (dilation and curettage), critical for miscarriage treatment, resulting in delayed care and at least three patient deaths.<sup>148</sup> Texas Governor Abbott has also ordered investigations of parents of trans children, framing gender-affirming care as “child abuse” inspired by “gender ideology” that is responsible for “transing” kids.<sup>149</sup>

Texas is also testing whether it can enforce its restrictive policies beyond its borders. It is suing a New York physician for prescribing abortion pills to a Texas resident, while also demanding records from a medical provider in Georgia for allegedly providing gender-affirming care to Texas minors.<sup>150</sup>

Texas has expanded surveillance over private citizens and their medical decisions in the name of protecting women. In May 2025, a Texas sheriff performed a nationwide search of over 83,000 license plate cameras to track a woman suspected of self-managing an abortion—he claimed the search was undertaken for the woman’s safety.<sup>151</sup> And a recently proposed Texas Senate Bill would mandate wastewater testing for hormones linked to birth control, abortion, and gender-affirming care, under the guise of “environmental protection”<sup>152</sup> (though the state recently moved to exempt the oil and gas industry from environmental regulations).<sup>153</sup>

Finally, “parents’ rights” arguments have provided rhetorical cover for Texas and other states to dramatically restrict access to a huge swath of books and information under the guise of rooting out gender ideology. In Texas, a series of book bans—one just passed in May 2025—encourage students and parents to report those who teach banned books, including works with LGBTQ characters or those deemed to violate “community values.”<sup>154</sup> In Texas and beyond, these book bans purport to prevent school-age children from accessing material that is “obscene” or “pornographic.” In reality, PEN America reports, these book bans are being weaponized as a means of restricting access to any books that deal with or even touch on gender and sexuality. PEN America’s data showed that about 19% of banned books addressed or included descriptions or discussions of sexual violence, many of them designed to help young adults—particularly girls—navigate and heal from these experiences if they have survived them. About 36% of books banned in the fall 2023 semester dealt with LGBTQ themes, or featured an LGBTQ character.<sup>155</sup>

Together, these pieces of legislation have dramatically expanded state power—reaching into doctors’ offices, classrooms, bathrooms, and private homes. But beyond extending the state’s reach, it has fostered a culture of surveillance, encouraging, even incentivizing, individuals to police one another’s behavior. This shift recalls the paranoia of the Red Scare, creating what Adam Serwer, writing in *The Atlantic*, calls a “Snitch State.”<sup>156</sup>

# Normalize Authoritarian Ideas

Authoritarian populists use gender to reshape the public's understanding of what democracy entails. For instance, social hierarchy and dominance are first explored as they relate to gender relations, gender identity, women, and LGBTQ rights—arenas in which hierarchies may appear less contested or have already been normalized. This lays the groundwork for more broadly challenging core ideals of liberal democracy, including equality, pluralism, and human rights, and framing them as unnatural, undesirable, or unrealistic.

**“ A focus on gender points to a broader political picture: the radical right actively engages in ongoing gender struggles, in transformations of gender relations, in order to transform liberal democracies. ”**

**Birgit Sauer**, “Authoritarian Right-Wing Populism as Masculinist Identity Politics. The Role of Affects.”<sup>157</sup>

## How is gender leveraged to normalize authoritarian ideas?

- As the quote above explains, gender is a crucial part of broader attempts to reshape society in ways that normalize anti-democratic practices, such as enforcing social hierarchies, increasing state surveillance, and facilitating executive overreach and restrictions on civil and political rights. These are not just efforts to turn back the clock, but rather to push towards a new and more anti-democratic model.
- Authoritarian populists rarely reject democracy outright. Instead, they *reinterpret* the language of democracy, appropriating it to their own ends, while rejecting its core principles, such as pluralism, equality, inclusion, human rights, and anti-discrimination.<sup>158</sup>
- Gender is a strategic entry point for authoritarian ideas. Debates around gender roles—especially women’s roles—are used to challenge and give new meaning to notions of equality and to socialize people into beliefs about the value and inevitability of predetermined social roles, hierarchy, and dominance.<sup>159</sup>
- In the authoritarian populists’ worldview, women tend to have a specific place in society, while LGBTQ people (or at least trans people) have none.<sup>160</sup> What begins with discourse on men and women’s natural roles extends further to normalize the idea that social hierarchies and dominance in society is natural, even desirable.<sup>161</sup>
- In an effort to re-define and present themselves as the defenders of democracy, authoritarian populists seize pro-democracy language to claim that feminists, LGBTQ people, and advocates of “gender ideology” are authoritarian actors who distort the popular will to attain political power and impose minority rule on the majority. At the same time, democratic ideals, including human rights, equality, and individual rights and freedoms, are blamed for moral decline, falling birth rates, and demographic crisis.<sup>162</sup>
- Narratives on gender are also used to co-opt common sense and science and invoke the “natural order” as a source of legitimacy.<sup>163</sup> These gender discourses are closely tied to nativism—the belief that certain racial, ethnic, or religious groups (often white and Christian in Western contexts) are superior and must be preserved. According to this logic, women are expected to serve the nation through reproduction, especially during times of real or perceived demographic decline. This is reflected through pronatalist, pro-family policies that reinforce traditional gender roles while excluding those that do not conform to traditional views or the nativist perspective. This framing helps them appear pro-welfare and responsive to economic discontent.

## THE CENTRAL TENETS

Three central tenets of the anti-gender movement function to advance authoritarian ideas: (1) Gender complementarity lays the groundwork for accepting hierarchical relationships, (2) familism ties national strength and identity to rigid family structures and shrinking individual autonomy, and (3) advancing a rigid sexual and social hierarchy enables authoritarians to cast dissent or diversity as dangerous, using moral panic to mobilize support for repressive policies in the name of protecting civilization or national unity.

- **Gender complementarity:** This view suggests that the natural order dictates that men and women have “biologically” different and complementary roles in family and society.<sup>164</sup> This is a corollary to gender essentialism, discussed earlier. There is an implication that women should be subservient to

men, legitimized by the claim that there is honor and dignity for women in traditional and submissive roles, just as there is honor and dignity for men in dominant ones. What begins with discourse on men and women extends further, to normalize the idea that social hierarchies and dominance in society are natural, even desirable.

- **Familialism:** This is a [form of politics](#) that views the traditional family as the foundation of the nation and subjugates individual (mostly women's) reproductive rights and self-determination to the demands of perpetuating the nation.<sup>165</sup> Policy—including tax rebates and government subsidies—is designed to support or reinforce the heterosexual nuclear family and traditional gender roles, while deliberately excluding from benefits those that do not conform to predetermined roles.<sup>166</sup>
- **Sexual and social hierarchy:** A rigid and “natural” sexual and social hierarchy is viewed as the foundation of a stable and unified society, in which men serve at the head of the family and ultimately in society, and women's roles are subordinate to them. From this idea springs a more expansive notion of the white “natural” family—composed of a married man and woman and their biological children—as the most important unit in a healthy society, and the one whose needs and sanctity must be prioritized at all times. Any challenge to this sexual order is [cast](#) as an attack on the “natural order” itself.<sup>167</sup> Women's rights are framed as disrupting the hierarchical order, while LGBTQ people and gender non-conforming individuals pose challenges to biological essentialism and must thus be opposed.

## CEMENTING THE CENTRAL TENETS THROUGH FAMILY POLICY

One notable yet often misunderstood feature of authoritarian populist actors is their approach to social policy and the welfare state. Despite being broadly categorized as far-right or conservative—labels typically associated with a limited state role—many of these actors have actively endorsed welfare provisions, particularly for families. This support can seem paradoxical, but it reflects an effort to reinforce traditional family structures and gender roles based on familialism, gender complementarity, and a specific sexual and social hierarchy.

Consider, for instance, the Polish Law and Order's (PiS) “Family 500+” program, launched amid PiS' longstanding efforts to dismantle democracy through undermining judicial independence, controlling the media, attacking civil society, and scapegoating vulnerable populations. Family 500+ provided [a monthly benefit](#) of 500 Polish zloty for every child, with the goal of increasing overall birth rates.<sup>168</sup> This policy would traditionally be unlikely for a conservative party, and while it failed to achieve its goals, it did lead to a drop in child poverty. Evidence suggests that it also led to the labour force participation rate of mothers to drop, as a result of the “Family 500+” benefit.<sup>169</sup>

Empirical research on [six European](#) authoritarian populist parties demonstrates that the far-right PiS in Poland is not an outlier in advancing such policies.<sup>170</sup> Research spanning Sweden, Finland, Spain, Austria, Germany, and Italy demonstrates how these actors consistently advocate and design family policies that exclusively support certain family models: the male as breadwinner, and the woman as homemaker and caretaker, embodying gender complementarity ideals.<sup>171</sup> The resulting policies include a variety of tools—for example, family allowances and child benefits, cash transfers and tax rebates. But these tools are generally limited to those that facilitate caretaking within the family. What follows is that someone needs to stay at home doing the caring, a task that normally falls on women.<sup>172</sup> This bolsters the familialist framework by encouraging women to remain at home while men occupy the public, economic domain. These parties generally do not support other types of family policies, such as childcare outside of the home, that allow families to have dual-earners. This has gendered consequences: they undermine efforts toward gender equality and marginalize non-traditional family forms.<sup>173</sup> While some policies undoubtedly provide benefits women, as scholars Grzebalska and Peto note, “they also conceptualize them primarily as mothers, and not as citizens whose equal rights need to be assured.”<sup>174</sup>

## ✦ Snapshot: Normalizing Authoritarian Ideas through Tradwife Content

Authoritarian populists often perpetuate a narrative harkening back to the “good old days,” when, they say, family life was prioritized, and men and women had clear gender roles. Tradwives—short for traditional wives—peddle the idea that the true path to women’s liberation is to be freed from the demands of an independent career and the modern world and instead return to their true calling—life as mother, homemaker, and wife. Like many other actors in the broader authoritarian ecosystem, tradwives begin with a kernel of truth, effectively leveraging the well-acknowledged reality that for women, motherhood and having a career are often in tension with one another. However, tradwives take this kernel of truth to the extreme, in ways that are often mutually reinforcing with authoritarian ideas and policies. Importantly, tradwives are not just pushing stay-at-home motherhood (and there are myriad reasons women choose to be stay-at-home moms), but a more pernicious message about returning to a time when men and women had distinct and rigid roles.

Tradwives’ messages about fulfilling one’s biological vocation tend to be more nuanced than the more overtly patriarchal and misogynistic messages found in the “manosphere,” and they are delivered through idyllic social media content that often obscures their political messages. Tradwife content creators often eschew rigorous science (such as vaccines), mainstream schooling, and gender equality in favor of home remedies, homeschooling, and subservience to their husbands.<sup>175</sup>

**Tradwives embody the three central tenets—gender complementarity (the idea that men and women have complementary but fundamentally unequal roles to play), familialism (the idea that the traditional nuclear family is at the center of society), and sexual and social hierarchy (the idea that the “natural” and hierarchical family—comprised of a married man and woman and their biological children—keep society pure, functional, and healthy).**

Tradwives firmly believe in and perpetuate gender complementarity, particularly when it comes to motherhood and marriage. The idea that women and men have complementary but fundamentally different or even unequal roles is a throughline in almost all tradwife content. Many of them even perpetuate the idea that women belong in a submissive role to their husbands. The notion that a woman’s ideal role is not just in the home, but in a position of submission to their male partners is a critical part of the pipeline from homemaking content to authoritarianism, as it sows ideas about differentiated gender roles that are hierarchical rather than equal.

Second, the tenet of familialism is a defining feature of tradwife content. The focus on having babies is a cornerstone of tradwife content, and different creators vary in the extent to which they overtly reinforce nativist narratives. Being a mother is almost a requirement for being a tradwife (though there are some unmarried trad-girlfriends who aspire to be tradwives), and almost all focus on motherhood as the core and defining facet of their life, giving them sole purpose and identity.

The obsession with motherhood in the tradwife community also serves as a key testing ground for broader authoritarian language and policies. Popular tradwife creators tend to be white women, some even starkly expressing the need for there to be more white babies to combat the “invasion” of migrants.<sup>176</sup> One tradwife creator, Wife with a Purpose (Ayla Stewart), created the “white baby challenge,” urging her (white) followers to “match me or beat me” in birthing white babies.<sup>177</sup> Although the post posing the challenge was taken down, researchers note that it received plenty of positive comments that supported the “need” for white families to make procreation a serious goal.<sup>178</sup>

Other tradwife content also further the narrative that their country (whether in the United States or Europe) needs to raise birthrates of white women.<sup>179</sup> Take, for example, alt-right creator Rebecca Hargraves (Blonde In the Belly of the Beast on social media), who makes videos about the threat of “degradation of European

culture,” and discusses her concerns about “civilizational decline,” and whose content reinforces the view that white families need to “take back” the West from migrants.<sup>180</sup> While still mostly on the fringes, this content normalizes talking about demographic changes in ways that frame Brown and Black people as “Other,” not belonging in Western society, and as a demographic threat. These mirror [great replacement narratives](#) that have been used to justify discriminatory actions and policies against immigrants and people of color.<sup>181</sup>

Tradwives also illustrate the third central tenet: sexual and social hierarchy. [Tradwife content](#) often acknowledges the very real hardship of being the sole caregiver to a large family of children, but draws on the narrative perpetuated by the Christian Right (in the United States), that suffering for the family is a key way for women to bring honor and dignity to their family.<sup>182</sup>

Tradwives, of course, are not monolithic, and different creators embrace or express these views to different extents. [While some of them are overtly political](#), others do not publicly take political positions but nonetheless facilitate the normalization of the far right agenda, which seeks to roll back rights and protections that women and the LGBTQ community have gained over the last 50 years.<sup>183</sup> As [Seyward Darby](#), tradwife researcher and author of the 2020 book *Sisters in Hate: American Women on the Front Lines of White Nationalism*, notes: “[I]t is a slippery slope – and sometimes there’s no slope at all – between ‘I’m just a nice woman who wants to be a wife and mom’ and having a very white nationalist agenda. Whether they realize it or not, those are the waters they are swimming in.”<sup>184</sup>

The ideas perpetuated by tradwives now intersects with the policy preferences of authoritarian populists in ways that are mutually reinforcing. That is, we see key messages from politicians and policy-makers mirrored in tradwife content, in the same way that the important throughlines in tradwife content are reflected in political and policy approaches being implemented now.

For example, the Trump administration recently [solicited proposals for policy ideas](#) to entice women to have more children.<sup>185</sup> In addition to the mainstay arguments about reducing access to reproductive care and limiting bodily autonomy, the White House debated proposals ranging from putting women in classes to teach them about their menstrual cycles to giving those who birth many children “motherhood medals.” Other administration [proposals](#) would favor communities with higher-than-average marriage and birth rates when providing federal grant funding,<sup>186</sup> even as healthcare providers anticipate that cuts to medicaid will force hospitals to reduce their pregnancy-related healthcare offerings, [resulting in perinatal medicine deserts](#) and pregnant women needing to drive hundreds of miles for care.<sup>187</sup>

Further, Project 2025 and tradwife content contain many of the same narratives about familialism and sexual and social hierarchy. On the importance of heterosexual nuclear families as the core of a healthy social order, the Project 2025 authors write: “Families comprised of a married mother, father, and their children are the foundation of a well-ordered nation and healthy society [...] In the context of current and emerging reproductive technologies, [Health and Human Services] policies should never place the desires of adults over the right of children to be raised by the biological fathers and mothers who conceive them.”<sup>188</sup> It later reiterates, “...married men and women are the ideal, natural family structure because all children have a right to be raised by the men and women who conceived them.”<sup>189</sup>

This mutually reinforcing dynamic between authoritarian populists’ policies and the idyllic tradwife content that builds support for and normalizes those policies illustrates how different actors in the ecosystem can exploit gender in ways that advance social hierarchies. Tradwives serve as very convenient messengers for these ideals: By often appearing in gauzy, light colored dresses, highlighting their roles as mothers, and speaking slowly and gently, they appear purposely benign, which can obscure their political and cultural messaging.

# Change Culture

To shape the intellectual and cultural terrain in which politics occurs and to make authoritarian ideas more palatable, authoritarian populists rely on cultural strategies that leverage gender and gendered anxieties. This occurs through two main pathways: By (1) establishing intellectual and educational institutions that help legitimize these ideas; and (2) introducing these ideas in environments that are not primarily political or partisan or do not self-present as such, including lifestyle content or fitness subcultures.

**“ Today’s far right is characterized by more diverse entry points, fragmented scenes, and newer groups and associations, some of which deliberately target domains not previously known to be particularly key to far-right and white-supremacist groups. Far-right youth today might initially encounter extremist narratives through chance encounters in mainstream spaces like the MMA, a campus auditorium, a podcast, or a Youtube video. Each of those mainstream spaces, however, can act as a channel, opening the door to dedicated far-right MMA festivals, alt-tech platforms and encrypted communication platforms, and dedicated YouTube subscriptions that mix mainstream interest in cooking or music with far-right ideology. ”**

**Cynthia Miller-Idriss, Hate in the Homeland<sup>190</sup>**

## How is gender leveraged to change culture?

- Authoritarian populists always need a degree of public support both to attain and maintain power. It is thus necessary to build an appetite for anti-democratic ideas and forms of governance. This support is generated through both political and cultural strategies.
- Authoritarian populists rely on cultural strategies designed to shape the intellectual and cultural terrain in which politics occurs. This is known as metapolitics. Rather than seeking immediate policy gains, the goal is to influence how people understand politics, identity, values, and society, through making certain ideas appear reasonable or even inevitable over time. Today, cultural strategies centered around gender and gendered anxieties are key to the authoritarian populist playbook.
- Authoritarian populists pursue cultural strategies through two main pathways: By (1) establishing intellectual and educational institutions that help legitimize these ideas; and (2) reaching people in environments that are not primarily political or partisan or do not self-present as such (or, instead, self-fashion as transcending party politics and left-right ideology in favor of truth and common sense).<sup>191</sup>
- Authoritarian ideas are laundered into mainstream culture through coded messaging in spaces that are generally gendered and perceived as apolitical or neutral—fitness studios, social media pages, podcasts, and tradwife platforms, for instance. By positioning these ideas within familiar contexts, authoritarian populist actors are able to subtly and incrementally shift public attitudes around political ideas while still appearing apolitical.
- By engaging people where they already are—physically, emotionally, and culturally—these movements are able to introduce authoritarian ideas through the lens of everyday grievances, particularly those related to gender. These spaces are powerful precisely because they speak to deeply personal feelings of disillusionment, offering empathy, validation, and a sense of agency—frequently through simple, individual recommendations that are easily actionable and can yield visible results, such as health, fitness, or financial recommendations, or parenting advice.
- As gender norms shift under this influence, attitudes on broader issues such as race, family, and national identity often follow. Indeed, blaming women, feminists, LGBTQ individuals and organizations for everyday discontents provides a rationale to reshape education, culture, law, and politics in ways that consolidate authoritarian control.<sup>192</sup> This slow normalization process prepares individuals to accept deeper democratic erosion, such as sacrificing liberal rights or pluralism “for the greater good.”

## CULTURAL STRATEGY AND THE AUTHORITARIAN LONG GAME

Part of the power-winning and consolidation strategy of authoritarian movements consists of what academic circles refer to as “metapolitics:” a long-game strategy to shift mainstream values and beliefs so that more extreme ideas eventually feel normal. This can also be thought of as shifting the Overton Window.

This strategy traces back to the 1960s, when French far-right thinkers, reinterpreting Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, argued that cultural change must come before political power. Rather than seizing power outright, authoritarian populists focus on reshaping public attitudes—what people see as normal, acceptable, or just “common sense.”<sup>193</sup> Since the 1960s, a series of organizations have picked up the mantle, with entities such as the Political Network for Values and CitizenGo as two central organizations in the contemporary ecosystem (see section “A Transnational Project”).

This strategy plays out today across podcasts, YouTube channels, fashion brands, and meme accounts, as well as in physical spaces that bring together people in a way that is typically gendered. Influencers and authoritarian activists subtly weave anti-democratic ideas into lifestyle content, humor, or cultural commentary. It's not always obvious and perhaps not always conscious—extremist messages are often coded, dressed up in irony, or hidden inside broader complaints about modern life. The point is to make the public more receptive to these ideas by wrapping them in familiar, even appealing, packaging.

**Commentators, influencers, lifestyle gurus, and edgy content creators push ideas that quietly undermine democracy, all while claiming to speak uncomfortable “truths.” In this way, extremist ideas are laundered into the mainstream—not through violence, but through aesthetics, algorithms, and purported culture wars.**

### **Snapshot: Mainstreaming the “Manosphere”**

The “manosphere” is another sub-culture in which authoritarian ideas and gender hierarchies are introduced and popularized. The manosphere broadly refers to a loose network of online communities and influencers that create and share content targeting men and boys, including anti-feminist and male supremacist content. This content openly calls for women to be subjugated to men, as perhaps most [infamously exemplified by Andrew Tate](#), who has “publicly stated that if a girlfriend doesn't accept cheating, ‘that's when you start hitting her and being abusive.’ Mr Tate has said that he will choose a husband for any daughter... ‘she'll end up pregnant at 21 like she's supposed to be.’”<sup>194</sup> The reach of the manosphere has grown in recent years: Research from Dublin City University found that it can take [as little as 9 minutes](#) for TikTok to feed misogynistic or “manospheric” content to accounts inputting gaming, fitness, or other male-coded search terms.<sup>195</sup> As the lead researchers, Catherine Baker and Maja Brandt Andreassen, [noted](#), this “not only serves to mainstream anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQ ideology, but may also function as a gateway to fringe and other extreme worldviews.”<sup>196</sup>

Male supremacist content is not catching on in a vacuum, but amid a “[male loneliness epidemic](#)” in which men are struggling to have meaningful friendships, face underexamined mental health challenges, and are navigating shifting and conflicting notions of masculinity, as discussed earlier.<sup>197</sup> As manosphere researcher Claudia Young argues, “the manosphere is extremely effective at targeting the legitimate fears and anxieties of boys and young men and then scapegoating women as the root of all their problems.”<sup>198</sup>

One particularly misogynistic corner of the manosphere is the group of men called “incels,” short for involuntary celibates. These are men who would like to find a female sexual partner, but claim to have been rejected by women. Incels use their rejection to justify a deeply-held hatred of women, intense misogyny, and even violence against women. For example, the first known incel perpetrator of violence, Elliot Rodger, left behind a manifesto, which has been described as a “potentially hagiographic text,” and inspired, according by some counts, at least seven other episodes of mass violence against women.<sup>199</sup> In addition, [researchers have found](#) that men who espouse “incel” views are more likely to demonstrate a higher tolerance or proclivity for political violence, further demonstrating the pipeline from manosphere to violence against women and in society more broadly.<sup>200</sup>

In its obsession with masculinity and traditional gender roles, this content helps shape a cultural terrain in which men are mollified into accepting anti-democratic practices, especially those that roll back rights and protections for women and women's equality. As Rachel Snyder explains in the New York Times:

Meanwhile, as Elon Musk's shadowy team of tech bros move with abandon, site after site devoted to women's health, safety, autonomy, accomplishments and work is being erased. The Office on Violence Against Women has [withdrawn all funding opportunities for 2025](#) from its website. The [White House's Gender Policy Council is gone](#). At the same time, domestic violence agencies are suspending services or going bankrupt, and millions of dollars in federal [funds to address teen dating](#)

violence, trafficking and stalking have been frozen.

We live in a new world, where words like “women,” “gender” and “trauma” are banned or limited in research studies. Phrases like “women are property” and “gay people are mentally ill” are no longer violations of conduct at Meta. The fringe went mainstream, and then became the U.S. government. It appears that a [Trump administration official intervened](#) on behalf of the Tate brothers to bring them from Romania to the United States in February. The White House recently hosted [Conor McGregor](#), the Ultimate Fighting Championship star who was found liable for sexual assault in a civil trial in Ireland. Such activities might not be meaningful politically, but they certainly send a message. Mr. Trump, Mr. Musk, the so-called Department of Government Efficiency and the manosphere share the same dark vision of the world: that in order to win, others have to lose.<sup>201</sup>

Together, this illustrates the pathways through which these ideas can move from fringe online spaces to mainstream political forums, and more perniciously, into policy decisions.

### ✦ **Snapshot: Gamergate and Gaming Subcultures as a Gateway to Right-Wing Extremism**

Scholars and activists point to 2014’s “Gamergate” as a [catalyzing moment](#) in extremists’ use of the internet to attract young men in particular into communities and spaces espousing extremist ideologies. It also illustrates how the pipeline from misogynistic and anti-feminist spaces to full-blown alt-right spaces facilitates broader culture change.<sup>202</sup> Gamergate began in chat rooms like 4chan and Reddit, where Zöe Quinn, a female video game developer, was accused by her ex-boyfriend of cheating and trading sex for positive game reviews. His accusations sparked [widespread hate](#) toward female and non-binary gaming celebrities, who received death and rape threats.<sup>203</sup> Those who came to female creators’ defense were labeled “social justice warriors,” popularizing the term that would take hold of online anti-liberal discourse in the years to come.

Men’s Rights Activists (MRA), a male-supremacist movement that claims to be fighting against feminists conspiring to subordinate and oppress men, capitalized on Gamergate, using its momentum to galvanize support for their traditionalist, anti-feminist beliefs. Game Studies scholar Megan Condis [says](#) alt-right gamers poke around gaming chat rooms for users who “exhibit curiosity about white nationalists talking points.”<sup>204</sup> They then “are escorted through a funnel of increasingly racist rhetoric,” intended to normalize white supremacist rhetoric and ideas. Condis argues these “modern internet-based recruitment efforts” targeting young, impressionable gamers, are “designed around the creation of a frictionless pipeline that slowly inoculates potential converts to hate.”<sup>205</sup>

Steve Bannon, Trump’s former chief political strategist, later reflected on the political utility of Gamergate and of more broadly using online spaces to create a cultural shift. According to Bannon, “you can activate that army. They come in through Gamergate or whatever and then get turned onto politics and Trump.”<sup>206</sup> Breitbart News [catalyzed efforts](#) to make the Zöe Quinn controversy into a national war cry with the capacity to unite male gamers, incels, anti-feminist, and anti-LGBTQ+ men to fight the supposed threat of feminism and ‘woke-ism.’<sup>207</sup> Gamergate illustrates the key tactics of metapolitics: creating a cultural shift by injecting extremist ideologies into mainstream discourse and doing so through a gateway community that targets young men.

### ✦ **Snapshot: Kennedy Center Purge, Spain’s Vox and Culture Change Strategies**

Political actors are often explicit about their cultural strategies. A metapolitical approach is pursued before power is achieved, which is useful to shape culture, normalize authoritarian ideas, and justify censorship. But

such cultural efforts continue once leaders are in power.

In the United States, for instance, President Trump successfully took over the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, a partially federally-funded arts institution which historically had bipartisan support. Trump [purged the board](#), named himself as Chair, and replaced its longtime president with his former ambassador to Germany and longtime Trump loyalist, Richard Grenell.<sup>208</sup> Trump [justified the takeover](#) on his social media platform, Truth Social, noting “Just last year, the Kennedy Center featured Drag Shows specifically targeting our youth — This WILL STOP.” He later stated that the Kennedy Center must instead “reflect the brightest STARS on its stage.”<sup>209</sup> Political commentators [noted](#) that in personally overseeing the programming, Trump was following “in the footsteps of Russian czars or monarchs like Louis XIV of France, who established arts institutions as extensions of royal power.”<sup>210</sup>

Spain’s far-right party Vox is also a case-in-point. Vox’s leaders routinely invoke “culture war” rhetoric, speaking of an alliance between so-called “gender ideology” and the “woke agenda,” and at times linking these to [Islam or immigration](#), painting them as jointly responsible for national decline.<sup>211</sup> While Vox has never held power nationally, it has entered several regional and local coalition governments, where it often [seeks control](#) over cultural departments—a move that reflects the party’s broader objective of reshaping public values through institutional influence in the cultural and artistic realm.<sup>212</sup>

In these [cultural roles](#), Vox has promoted a nativist and homogenized vision of Spanish identity, using its authority to censor or defund cultural expressions it deems subversive. This includes targeting works that portray pluralism, critique colonial histories, or represent LGBTQ identities and immigrants. For instance, among the works vetoed by Vox in recent years is Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* and the Pixar movie *Lightyear*, the latter containing a scene where two women kiss. In terms of policy, Vox has identified several advocacy areas, including opposition to gender equality legislation, the LGBTI Equality Act, and legislation to prevent gender-based violence.<sup>213</sup>

In 2021, Vox published its own “Agenda España” for Spain, a cultural and political counter-narrative to the UN’s Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. The document [opposes initiatives](#) associated with gender equality, LGBTQ rights, or what it calls “indigenist” movements in Latin America—movements that highlight colonial violence and defend the rights of Indigenous peoples.<sup>214</sup> Consolidating diverse attacks against those Vox deems as advancing so-called gender ideology reflects a broader authoritarian populist tactic: fusing anxieties about gender, race, and nation into a single narrative of civilizational struggle.

# Build a Big Tent Movement

Political and cultural leaders instigate gender-related anxieties that serve as the symbolic glue for a coalition bringing together groups that hold different beliefs related to gender (e.g., pronatalism, anti-trans rights, misogyny, opposition to so-called gender ideology). These groups have different entry points into the coalition, and may even have contradictory political values, but are united against a common, constructed enemy, and mobilized against abstract and loose ideas. This coalition broadens the pillars of support for authoritarian populists by providing access to new constituencies, as well as to organizations and institutions that can supply funding and other resources.

**“ We should not only consider anti-gender campaigns as the endeavour of some conservative actors to turn the clock backwards or to resist the pressure of social change, but also as the invention of a powerful political device by actors who have understood the symbolic value of gender. In anti-gender campaigns, gender does not only serve as a symbolic glue. Regardless of its meaning or contextual use, ‘gender’ can also be waved as a red flag to mobilise a set of constituencies and to reach out towards new target publics. ”**

**David Paternotte**, “Victor Frankenstein and His Creature: The Many Lives of ‘Gender Ideology.’”<sup>215</sup>

## How is gender leveraged to build a big tent movement?

- To attain and maintain power, it is necessary to both construct and mobilize a broad movement that unites a diverse and sometimes contradictory mix of political and cultural figures. To that end, authoritarian populists leverage misogyny, pronatalism, and opposition to so-called “gender ideology” and related scapegoated groups to unite a motley crew of figures.<sup>216</sup> The coalitions take different forms internationally and nationally across countries, yet tend to unite far-right parties, populists, nativists, trans exclusionary feminists (TERFs), moral conservatives, libertarians, and oligarchs, despite their competing interests and agendas. This unites both religious groups across denominations, and religious and secular actors around a common enemy.<sup>217</sup>
- The vague idea of “gender ideology” acts as a unifying force, bringing together actors with otherwise divergent beliefs that are typically too fragmented to cooperate.<sup>218</sup> This broad coalition is a key strength of authoritarian populists, who operate like a “multi-headed hydra,” tailoring messages to appeal to varied audiences—whether driven by anti-establishment views, religious fundamentalism, conservatism, libertarianism, welfare nationalism, white supremacy, traditional family ideals, or gender essentialist views.<sup>219</sup>
- While their beliefs sometimes converge, other times alignment among these political and cultural leaders is transactional. They have learned that regardless of their ideological commitments, they can strategically benefit from partnering and acting together. This cooperation isn’t limited to the right—some actors on the left have also backed anti-gender campaigns.<sup>220</sup>
- As scholars Ayoub and Stoeckl note, the anti-gender movement binds diverse groups by framing gender as a threat tied to broader anxieties—whether communism, demographic decline, secularism, economic ideologies like Marxism and neoliberal capitalism, or EU integration and globalization.<sup>221</sup> In speaking to gender identity, gendered roles, reproduction, and the place of religion in society.
- The messages emerging from these movements tend to follow a common script and strikingly similar visual and symbolic imagery and language across settings—blaming elites and minorities, fueling fear about national decline, casting themselves as victims under attack for their beliefs, calling for a return to “traditional values,” and spreading conspiracy theories to explain social change.<sup>222</sup> They also tend to rely on similar tactics, including savvy use of social media to discredit “corrupt traditional media,” advocacy for referenda, and other types of activism that they argue reclaim the voice of “the people.”<sup>223</sup>
- Together, this coalition is part of a well-funded global effort to reshape the political and social order in ways that erode human rights, weaken democratic institutions, and legitimize authoritarian rule.<sup>224</sup>



**Source:** Paternotte and Kuhar, “Disentangling and Locating the ‘Global Right.’”

The image displays how different organizations across Europe that work against women’s and LGBTQ rights use similar images and language that evoke happy families, care for children, and upholding traditional values.

## ✦ Snapshot: Divided at Home, United Abroad: International Campaigning against Gender Ideology

Across national contexts, opposition to “gender ideology” has brought together an unlikely coalition of allies. This includes segments of conservative Evangelical, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox churches, often in cooperation with some Jewish activists and partner organizations in Islamic countries.<sup>225</sup> These religious coalitions frequently collaborate with non-religious cultural and political figures, including both state actors and civil society.<sup>226</sup>

As international relations scholar Kristopher Velasco remarks, “Today, illiberal, anti-LGBT+ networks are broad and diverse—consisting of INGOs, multilateral organizations, religious denominations, political elites, media corporations, academics, think tanks, and policy institutes. These distinct coalitions and sub-networks loosely coordinate through forums such as World Congress of Families, Political Network for Values, and Global Home Education Exchange...These efforts represent the vast global infrastructure and alternative international community polarizing countries’ approach to gender justice and (il)liberalism more broadly.”<sup>227</sup>

At the UN and in other global fora, this coalition has included governments in Islamic and post-Soviet states, the Trump administration, and groups such as the Organization for Islamic Cooperation, the League of Arab States, the UN Africa Group, and the G77.<sup>228</sup>

These actors forge cross-border alliances, building institutions and networks that operate as a broad, mobilized front. Transnational structures like the Political Network for Values exemplify this approach, linking activists and NGOs across continents in ways that mirror the strategies of international human rights organizations—or, as anti-LGBTQ activists often call them, the “global gender lobby.”

In ways that bolster these religious and state actors, opposition to “gender ideology” has also united an eclectic range of supporters, including anti-immigration activists, business elites, tech oligarchs, and wellness and lifestyle influencers. This has increased authoritarians’ pillars of support, the key organizations or institutions that give those leaders the resources and legitimacy they need to exercise power.<sup>229</sup>

## ✦ Snapshot: The U.S. Pronatalist Coalition

In the United States, specific issues tied to gender and sexual equality serve as the lowest common denominator to build a motley crew coalition of unlikely allies that work toward shared political goals. Consider the U.S. pronatalist coalition, which is united by two desires: first, to boost the population, and second, in their support of President Donald Trump and a shared contempt for “wokeness.” This coalition unites a subset of conservative religious and political figures with prominent tech-futurists.<sup>230</sup> These groups are “coalescing around an authoritarian agenda guided by anti-trans, gender-essentialist beliefs. Rather than a single movement with a unified ideology, though, right-wing pronatalism is better understood as a coalition of overlapping factions—one that allows traditional conservatives, abortion opponents, and White nationalists to find common cause with tech moguls, futurists, libertarians, and libertines,” even if they have different views of how to make that happen.<sup>231</sup> Despite significant differences, most of these groups also share the beliefs in rigid biological truths about gender and race and a rigid social hierarchy (see section “Normalize Authoritarian Ideas”).

# Divide and Polarize

Authoritarian populists frame gender as inherently divisive in order to intensify us-versus-them thinking. This strategy operates at two levels: it polarizes society and fractures pro-democracy coalitions. By shaping the debate along divisive terms, these leaders obscure areas of general public agreement and common ground, deepening social and political polarization and intensifying emotional and political tensions. Simultaneously, they weaponize gender to fracture pro-democracy coalitions and weaken opposition to authoritarian practices.

**“ Divide and conquer. For all its recent success, the LGBT alliance is actually fragile and the trans activists need the gay rights movement to help legitimize them. [...] Trans and gender identity are a tough sell, so focus on gender identity to divide and conquer. [...] Gender identity on its own is just a bridge too far. If we separate the T from the alphabet soup we’ll have more success. ”**

**Meg Kilgannon,** An anti-trans activist in Virginia<sup>232</sup>

## How is gender leveraged to divide and polarize?

- Polarization isn't just a description of how things are—it's often a deliberate strategy to deepen or create social divisions and distract from unpopular or ineffective policies. A polarized society is one rife with deep divisions, distrust, and animosity—all of which undermine the public's ability to serve as a democratic check on power. According to scholars, in polarized electorates, voters are willing to trade off democratic principles for partisan interests, as opponents are demonized and in extreme cases targeted with violence.<sup>233</sup> These tactics don't just stir controversy; they target and increase political violence against scapegoated communities. They exploit existing cleavages in society, fracture opposition groups, and fuel infighting.
- A polarizing strategy involves simplifying politics by framing debates in black-and-white and zero-sum terms, and making potentially divisive issues central to the political agenda. This us-versus-them approach allows authoritarian populists to misleadingly convey that (1) there are only two positions on a given issue, and that (2) society is neatly divided into two camps that are mutually exclusive and mutually distrustful. In reality, very few issues are actually black-and-white, with much more room for nuance and healthy debate.<sup>234</sup>
- Because gender issues are complex and deeply tied to identity, they can provoke strong emotional reactions, making them particularly effective for authoritarian populists looking to intensify social tensions.<sup>235</sup> Authoritarian populists take advantage of this complexity to claim the “common sense” position. This is an image they readily promote to further exploit the vulnerabilities of a fractured opposition and deflect attention from broader systemic issues. More specifically, they promote a story of society being divided between two opposing camps: An “anti-gender ideology” camp that advances common sense, family values, and even democracy (and that they lead); and an opposing “pro-gender ideology” camp run by an out-of-touch elite that is eager to impose their views on the majority. This cleavage is then superimposed on an array of other issues, preempting the collaboration and consensus-building necessary to advance policy and defend democracy.
- Through manufacturing or fueling controversies around gender, authoritarian populists frame gender-related topics as inherently divisive and/or controversial. This makes them more prominent, pushes them to the front of the political agenda, and obscures or minimizes areas of agreement, forcing opponents to argue within narrow, pre-defined frames.<sup>236</sup>
- Just as gender is an effective tool to polarize society, it is also an effective wedge issue in pro-democracy or opposition movements. Recognizing this, authoritarian populists and anti-equality activists seek to amplify and exploit divisions over gender-related matters, particularly trans rights, to divide movements.

### **Snapshot: Separate the T from LGBT as Political Strategy in the United States**

Faced with an increasingly LGBTQ-friendly electorate and the 2015 *Obergefell* Supreme Court decision that legalized gay marriage, the anti-gender equality activist movements in the United States were in search of another animating cause that could define and mobilize a social and political campaign, and divide their opponents. By their own admission, these groups “threw everything at the wall,” and found that transgender rights were a sticky issue across party-lines.<sup>237</sup>

These activists have been conscientious in their narrative building, and much of the discussion in the United States around trans rights has been boiled down to “protecting children.” This has enabled state legislatures to

pass laws expanding power of all sorts, including through allowing surveillance of girls in bathrooms. One school district, for instance, used taxpayer money to [install a window](#) into the gender neutral bathroom under the guise of protecting girls from trans students.<sup>238</sup> Proposed laws would also allow genital inspection for athletes in school and college level sports (as was proposed in [Kansas](#),<sup>239</sup> [Ohio](#),<sup>240</sup> and even in the [U.S. Congress](#)).<sup>241</sup>

But why is this movement focusing so much time, energy, and attention on an issue that affects relatively few children? H  l  ne Barth  lemy of the Southern Poverty Law Center [notes](#) that the focus on trans rights is a strategic decision “meant to weaken transgender rights advocates by attempting to separate them from their allies, feminists and LGBT rights advocates.”<sup>242</sup> By forcing this into the political sphere and making it a centerpiece of social and political discourse, it constructed or strengthened a wedge issue among an opposition that is not clearly aligned on their position on trans rights.

Indeed, conservative groups conducted a significant amount of research to identify an issue that would allow them to divide their opponents, claim the “common sense” majority opinion, and give far right candidates a unifying talking point. And while initial efforts to scapegoat trans people backfired with the 2016 North Carolina bathroom bills, this changed once conservative groups settled on framing trans rights as “harmful” to children and related “parents rights” arguments. According to Nadine Smith, the executive director of Equality Florida, “Once they opened that parents’ rights frame, they began to use it everywhere,” including to justify book bans and restrictions on teaching about racism.<sup>243</sup> The impact was both a mobilized political base and a divided opposition.

### **Snapshot: Not Just a Culture War: Trans Rights as a Tool to Divide and Polarize in the United Kingdom**

The anti-trans movement in the U.K. pointedly illustrates how political and cultural figures leverage debates over trans rights in ways that fracture opposition coalitions. The movement [brings together](#) self-described gender critical feminists (commonly referred to as Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists or TERFs, many of whom identify as feminists and progressives), anti-gender actors, pro-conversion therapy activists, and far-right conspiracy-prone groups.<sup>244</sup> TERFs [argue that](#) trans people threaten women’s rights and progress, and claim to protect women’s rights by excluding trans women from female-only spaces, while still supporting abortion access and anti-domestic violence legislation.<sup>245</sup>

The effort to use trans rights to polarize follows a familiar pattern. First, selecting a narrowly defined and complex issue that the public barely understands, and amplifying it in highly emotional and negative terms to provoke fear about its implications. These issues are then repeatedly invoked in public debates and media coverage to ensure the issue maintains its salience. The issue is framed in overly simplistic and binary terms, making it difficult to shift the focus to other topics or to engage in more nuanced discussion. Author J.K. Rowling, who has dedicated significant time and financial resources to anti-trans campaigning, has helped “gender-critical” actors gain visibility and influence in public discourse, despite representing a small segment of the feminist ecosystem.

Far-right actors have seized on TERF rhetoric to legitimize their own agendas. This has allowed far-right movements to present themselves as defenders of women—even as they continue to oppose reproductive rights, protections against gender-based violence, and LGBTQ inclusion.

For example, Tommy Robinson, one of the U.K.’s most well-known far-right and anti-Islam campaigners (who has accumulated a series of criminal convictions), [has centrally focused](#) on trans people as dangerous to women and children. His speech, THE TRANS TIME BOMB!!!, equated gender-neutral children’s books and LGBTQ education with child abuse and sexual grooming.<sup>246</sup>

This co-opting of TERF/gender-critical discourse has enabled authoritarian populist actors to fracture progressive coalitions and muddy public understanding, reframing opposition to trans rights as a credible feminist concern and, increasingly, as a pro-gay and pro-lesbian stance.<sup>247</sup>

As one example, the LGB alliance in the U.K. was founded in 2019 to see “lesbians, gay men and bisexuals living free from discrimination or disadvantage based on their sexual orientation,” but has focused on campaigning against trans rights, which it claims are dangerous to women and children.<sup>248</sup> For instance, it ran a campaign titled “The LGB and TQ+ must split” —which mirrors the strategy in the U.S. snapshot above—and has advocated that the U.K. Equality Act should focus on same-sex rights and exclude trans people from sexual orientation protection.<sup>249</sup> The group has been linked to the Heritage Foundation and the Alliance Defending Freedom, and was recently exposed as sharing office space with a variety of far-right think tanks.<sup>250</sup>

### **Snapshot: Defining a “Woman”**

In the United States, the nearly all-encompassing obsession by Republicans with defining gender has been used to force Democrats and others who might oppose their broader agenda into binary positions on polarizing issues that can later be used to frame them as unreasonable, incompetent, too radical, or lacking common sense. On multiple occasions, those testifying on Capitol Hill have been asked to define a woman, often in the course of hearings unrelated or only tangentially related to gender. For example, during her confirmation hearing to become an Associate Supreme Court Justice, then-Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson was asked to define a woman. President Biden’s Education Secretary, Miguel Cardonas was asked the same question.<sup>251</sup> During a more recent hearing, Representative Nancy Mace aggressively questioned Governor Tim Walz about being able to define a woman.<sup>252</sup> The far right in the United States then uses these staged “gotcha” moments to frame their opposition as being unable to answer a “common sense” question like “what is a woman?” While these issues and questions are framed as “obvious,” they are quite difficult to answer, as illustrated when the same politicians pushing these questions are themselves asked to define a woman.<sup>253</sup>

# Distract

Authoritarian populists leverage gender-related controversies, narratives, and policies—like sex education, trans rights, and purported threats to children’s safety—to stir outrage and divert attention from anti-democratic power grabs, corruption, and/or unpopular agendas.

**“ This isn’t coincidence—it’s strategy....The timing is calculated, the playbook well-worn: When economic anxiety rises, create a cultural boogeyman. Cable news fills hours with breathless coverage of trans athletes rather than investigating corporate price gouging. Politicians perform outrage over pronouns while quietly approving corporate subsidies and bloated military contracts. ”**

**J. Dylan Sandifier**, “America’s Anti-Trans Panic Is a Scam”<sup>254</sup>

## How is gender leveraged to distract?

- In seeking to consolidate their own power, authoritarian populists often pass policies that are either ineffective or unpopular. In other instances, they will plunder or entirely eliminate critical public resources for things like health and education, or attempt to enrich their allies by privatizing previously public goods. This leads to a deterioration in the quality of public goods and services.
- Knowing these policies are likely to be deeply unpopular, authoritarian populists will generate fear, anger, and anxiety toward a real or engineered controversy or a scapegoat to distract public attention from these ineffective and often corrupt government actions.
- This is both a political strategy and a cultural one. Politically, it allows authoritarian populists to consolidate power under the guise of protecting the nation from an engineered enemy. A public consumed by the perceived threat—kept alive by a media ecosystem driven by clicks and outrage—is often too distracted to notice, or too polarized to oppose, the simultaneous power grabs.
- These distraction campaigns also aim to implicate those who defend, support, or set the record straight about the targets, including civil society, the media, and independent activists. They thus carry the added political benefit of bogging down watchdog groups in rebutting attacks—diverting their attention and resources from exposing government failures or corruption.
- Culturally, this also keeps gender issues salient, which the authoritarian can also use to their advantage. As part of this, it reshapes and preoccupies the public debate and concern to a focus on the scapegoated group, reinforcing us-versus-them divisions and legitimizing social hierarchies that authoritarians seek to construct.

### **Snapshot: Generating a Moral Panic to Distract from Economic Troubles in Turkey**

President Erdoğan declared 2025 “the Year of the Family,” in an effort to emphasize traditional and Islamic values, address falling birthrates, and to combat the “policy of genderlessness” that was “attacking” the family in Turkish society.<sup>255</sup> This also allowed Erdoğan to distract from rising femicides in Turkey and an economic downturn. As part of the announcement, Erdoğan declared that “neither destroying the institution of the family, nor eliminating the line between men and women makes us modern ... [but rather] playthings of imperialists and globalists.”<sup>256</sup> Women’s rights activists in Turkey noted that—amid increasing femicides in Turkey (many without accountability)—the campaign would “only help to consolidate the subordinate role of women in society” and would “sweep male violence towards women and children under the carpet.”<sup>257</sup>

As the President of the Federation of Women’s Associations of Turkey told DW, “2025 should not have been declared the Year of the Family, but the year of preventing femicide...In a country where so many women are murdered, the top priority should be to protect this right [to life]. It is a big mistake to reduce women to encouraging them to give birth.”<sup>258</sup> Reflecting on the announcement, another women’s rights activist explained, “We are currently living in unprecedented poverty in Turkey. The government needs issues that distract citizens from the real problems, and at the same time keep society together. But the only topic of conversation should be the severe poverty, for which the government itself is responsible.”<sup>259</sup>

This did not emerge in a vacuum. It followed years of Erdoğan encouraging women to “give birth at least three times” to address falling birthrates, and, more recently, a 2023 presidential campaign that ratcheted up fears and anxieties around gender and sexuality to mobilize his conservative base and distract from concerns about inflation, the rising cost of living, and corruption.<sup>260</sup> The 2023 campaign followed years of

Erdoğan consolidating and removing independent checks on his power, including through controlling the media, attacking civil society, enfeebling opposition parties, and undermining the legislature and judiciary. Erdoğan's campaign rhetoric referred to the LGBTQ community as "deviant structures," a "virus of heresy," and "spreading like the plague."<sup>261</sup> He further noted that, "If the concept of family is not strong, the destruction of the nation happens quickly..."<sup>262</sup> Political commentators noted that the obsession with "family values" throughout the campaign rhetoric was an attempt to divert attention from rising cost of living and inflation. Erdoğan narrowly won the election, which commentators described as held "under deeply unfair conditions, where the opposition was set to fail."<sup>263</sup>

### **Snapshot: Leveraging Gender to Distract from Political Opposition in Hungary**

In Hungary, Viktor Orbán has long leveraged moral panic over gender and sexuality to consolidate power and create social hierarchies. Orbán has promoted fears such as a "Muslim invasion" that threatened Hungarian women and children, or depicted "gender ideology" as likewise threatening Hungarian values, women and children to mobilize his base and distract from ineffective or unpopular policies and his power consolidation. In 2018, for instance, he revoked accreditation for gender studies courses at universities, a move that his allies defended by declaring that gender studies has no business being taught since it is an "ideology not a science."<sup>264</sup> Orbán's far-right Fidesz party planned to replace gender studies with a "family studies" master's program.<sup>265</sup> In 2020, he passed a constitutional amendment to defend "Christian values" by banning gay adoption to distract from an unpopular COVID lockdown, Hungary's enfeebled healthcare system and public services, and a proposed new law that made it harder for opposition parties to run in elections.<sup>266</sup> Fidesz also passed a "child protection law," modeled after Russia's, that prohibited depicting LGBTQ people in media and literature available to minors and banned the public display of products that depict gender deviating from sex at birth.<sup>267</sup> Around the same time, the government launched a billboard campaign asking the Hungarian public: "Are you afraid your child could be exposed to sexual propaganda?" Orbán also regularly describes motherhood as a woman's patriotic duty to protect the country from demographic change spurred by migration, as noted. Together, this demonstrates how Orbán has engineered fear around the erosion of traditional "family values" and threats to children to pass measures that simultaneously target and endanger LGBTQ people and women, distract from ineffective policies, and facilitate power consolidation.

More recently, in 2025, faced with renewed political opposition, Orbán ratcheted up rhetoric against so-called "gender madness," amending the constitution to mandate that all Hungarians are either male or female. Fidesz also passed a constitutional amendment banning LGBTQ events, including Pride, claiming they threaten children's "moral, physical, and spiritual development."<sup>268</sup> According to Orbán, the "international gender network must take its hands off our children...Now, with the change in America [with the election of Donald Trump], the winds have shifted in our favor."<sup>269</sup>

Critics of the amendment note that it is an effort to generate public fear to distract from economic problems, corruption, and political opposition ahead of Hungary's 2026 general elections. The gender focus of the amendment also distracts from its larger impact: creating precedent that would enable the government to suspend freedom of assembly whenever it seeks to silence political opposition—particularly as opposition to Orbán's rule is surging.<sup>270</sup> For the first time since taking office fourteen years ago, Orbán is facing a political challenger, Peter Magyar, who has overtaken him in the polls through a campaign focused on Fidesz's corruption and plundering of public resources. Magyar initially rose to prominence through mobilizing opposition to Fidesz after the country's former President and Fidesz member, Katalin Novak, pardoned a man convicted of covering up pedophilia in a state-run children's home, a move that directly challenged Fidesz's self-styled image as protectors of Hungarian family values and children.<sup>271</sup>

## \* Snapshot: Focus on Trans Rights to Distract from Power Grabs and Anti-Democratic Practices in the United States

In the United States, the far right has been purposely inflaming and centering debate on rights for trans individuals as a means of distracting from deeply unpopular abortion restrictions and an anti-democratic agenda (e.g. Project 2025) that dramatically expands executive branch authority and severely cuts social services.<sup>272</sup>

During the 2024 election, experts and commentators noted that the intense attacks on trans rights was a ploy to drum up fear and distract from Trump's unpopular or inconsistent stances on abortion.<sup>273</sup> While trans people comprise just 0.6% of the population, Republicans spent nearly \$215 million on anti-trans advertisements throughout the election, perhaps most notably the “Kamala is for they/them; President Trump is for you” ad.<sup>274</sup> Discussing the strategy of these ads, journalist Erin Reed explained, “the purpose of a fear campaign is to distract you from issues that you normally care about by making you so afraid of a group of people...that you're willing to throw everything else away because you're scared.” She further noted, “So afraid that you're not going to care about the economy anymore, you're not going to care about abortion anymore.”<sup>275</sup> As a means of distracting from both the abortion conversation and the campaign's policy proposals, the Trump campaign instead shifted the focus to trans individuals and their rights.<sup>276</sup>

Since the Republican party took control of the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the Presidency in January 2025, there has been a public all-out assault on trans individuals, most notably through Trump's multiple executive orders eliminating rights for trans individuals, including through (1) defining “men” and “women” using sex rather than gender, (2) disallowing gender-affirming care for minors, (3) laying the groundwork for the Department of Defense to out, dismiss, and ban trans individuals from serving in the military, and (4) banning trans women from competing in women and girls' sports.<sup>277</sup>

Republicans in Congress and state legislatures have been no less effusive about pursuing the persecution of trans individuals, and have themselves introduced and passed a slew of bills targeting trans rights,<sup>278</sup> including legislation that specifically targeted the first openly trans member of Congress, Sarah McBride.<sup>279</sup> That the legislation was designed to target McBride was not a secret: the sponsor of the bill, Nancy Mace, admitted it publicly.<sup>280</sup> The House has also held hearings to castigate the head of USA Fencing, for disqualifying a female fencer for refusing to compete against a trans woman.<sup>281</sup> At the same time, there have been no Congressional investigations into the multiple allegations of executive overreach (including very serious concerns about impoundment, disobeying court orders, and denial of due process rights to immigrants) by the Trump White House.<sup>282</sup>

This overt and outsized focus on targeting trans individuals exemplifies the strategy of stirring up a cultural and moral panic to distract from the unpopular and authoritarian practices.<sup>283</sup> Representative Sarah McBride underscored the strategic nature of the continued obsession with trans individuals (and trans women in particular) in the weeks after her election:

I think we are all united that attempts to attack a vulnerable community are not only mean-spirited but really an attempt to misdirect. Because every single time we hear the incoming administration or Republicans in Congress talk about any vulnerable group in this country, we have to be clear that this is an attempt to distract. [...] Every single time we hear them say the word ‘trans,’ look at what they're doing with their right hand. Look at what they're doing to pick the pocket of American workers, to fleece seniors by privatizing social security and Medicare.<sup>284</sup>

McBride's comments anticipated much of what we would begin to see in early 2025, but is also supported by new polling, which suggests that the American people, too, are beginning to see that the manufactured “crises” around trans rights are a means of distracting from the Administration's policy agenda and an expansion of executive authority that challenges the system of checks and balances that define American democracy.<sup>285</sup>

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# Conclusion

This report explored the connection between global democratic erosion and attacks on women’s rights, feminism, and LGBTQ rights. These attacks are not random. They are not the organic outgrowth of a “culture war” or a clash of worldviews. Instead, they are part of the authoritarian playbook that leaders use to consolidate their power, remove checks on that power, and even justify political violence.

The report proposed a framework to organize *how* political and cultural leaders exploit gender for these ends through the following six interrelated political and cultural strategies:

- 1. Constructing a threat**
- 2. Normalizing authoritarian ideas**
- 3. Changing culture**
- 4. Building a big tent movement**
- 5. Polarizing society and dividing pro-democracy and opposition movements**
- 6. Distracting from unpopular or ineffective policies and/or power grabs**

Our research highlighted additional key takeaways:

- Weaponizing gender and sexuality is part of a larger playbook that manipulates concerns about religion, morality, or “traditional family values” in service of consolidating power. In healthy democratic societies, a diversity of views on matters related to gender and sexuality is met with healthy debate and discussion, rather than targeting, scapegoating, or discriminating against any individual or group. Put differently, it is possible to have different views or beliefs related to gender and sexuality without targeting or scapegoating these groups.
- Though gender is not the only issue exploited in this way, it is a particularly potent and often misunderstood one. This is because gender is a deeply rooted aspect of identity that is both intimately sensitive and touches on myriad aspects of our personal, social, and political lives. By regulating this most intimate aspect of ourselves, authoritarians have a starting point for control at a deeply personal level.
- Gender also intersects with other identity categories that authoritarians regularly weaponize, including race, religion, immigration status.
- Efforts to weaponize gender often interact with those to scapegoat the LGBTQ community—whether through wedging women’s and LGBTQ rights against one another, lumping feminism and

LGBTQ rights together under “gender ideology,” or scapegoating the LGBTQ community to ultimately undermine women’s rights.

- We often think of authoritarianism as a purely political project, but efforts to build support for power consolidation and violence also happen in the cultural realm. Alongside political strategies that leverage gender, authoritarian populists leverage or intensify gendered anxieties, launder social hierarchies, and shape the overall cultural terrain in which politics occurs. This helps sanitize, normalize, and build an appetite for authoritarian ideas.
- Political and cultural leaders often manipulate concerns for protecting women and children to build support for measures that simultaneously attack women’s rights, feminism, and LGBTQ rights while consolidating executive power or removing checks on that power. For instance, leveraging concerns over protecting children from “gender ideology” or trans people to expand control over education via book bans, bounty laws to report on teachers, and bathroom bills.

Our hope is that this framework, building on other critical work, contributes to understanding *that* gender is weaponized in ways that fuel authoritarianism, *how* this is happening through six interrelated strategies, and provides an organizing framework for responses. At a time when democracy and human rights are under increasing strain, we all have a role to play in resisting authoritarianism.

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