

ANALYTICAL ESSAY

The Misogyny of Authoritarians in Contemporary Democracies

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Contemporary democracy in multiple countries has been under assault from what has been variously called right-wing populism, authoritarian populism, cultural majoritarianism, new nativism, new nationalism, quasi-fascism, and neo-fascism. While the authoritarian behaviors of several electorally legitimated leaders in these countries have been in focus, their misogyny is seen as merely an incidental part of their personality. This article highlights the centrality of misogyny in legitimating the political goals and regimes of a set of leaders in contemporary democracies—Trump, Modi, Bolsonaro, Duterte, and Erdogan (all but Trump are still in power)—in countries from across Global North/South, non-West/West, with mixed populations and different majority religions. The argument proceeds as follows. First, I clarify the conceptualization of misogyny and explain why it matters. Second, I demonstrate the substantive misogyny of political leaders who are/have been heads of hegemonic right-wing political projects in five contemporary democracies (Trumpism, Modification, Bolsonarismo, Dutertismo, and Erdoganism). Third, I put forward three systematic ways in which misogyny works as an effective political strategy for these projects, by enabling a certain politics of identity to demonize opponents as feminine/inferior/anti-national, scavenging upon progressive ideas (rather than rejecting them) and distorting them, and sustaining and defending a militarized masculinist approach to policy and delegitimizing challenges to it. This article, thus, contributes to the literature on how masculinity, misogyny, and gender norms more broadly intersect with political legitimacy, by arguing for understanding the analytic centrality of misogyny to the exercise of political power in multiple global projects.

La democracia contemporánea en varios países ha sido atacada por lo que se ha denominado de diversas maneras como populismo de derecha, populismo autoritario, mayoritarismo cultural, nuevo nativismo, nuevo nacionalismo, cuasifascismo, neofascismo. Si bien se ha centrado la atención en los comportamientos autoritarios de varios líderes legitimados electoralmente en estos países, su misoginia se considera simplemente una parte incidental de su personalidad. En este artículo, se destaca la centralidad de la misoginia en la legitimación de los objetivos políticos y los regímenes de un conjunto de líderes en las democracias contemporáneas: Trump, Modi, Bolsonaro, Duterte y Erdogan (todos menos Trump se encuentran en el poder) en países del norte/sur global, orientales y occidentales, con poblaciones mixtas y diferentes religiones mayoritarias. El argumento procede de la siguiente manera. En primer lugar, aclaro la conceptualización de la misoginia y explico por qué es importante. En segundo lugar, demuestro la misoginia sustantiva

de los líderes políticos que son, o han sido, jefes de proyectos políticos hegemónicos de derecha en cinco democracias contemporáneas (trumpismo, modificación, bolsonarismo, dutertismo, erdoganismo). Por último, planteo tres formas sistemáticas en las que la misoginia funciona como una estrategia política eficaz para estos proyectos, al permitir: una determinada política de identidad para demonizar a los oponentes como femeninos/inferiores/antinacionales; una búsqueda de las ideas progresistas (en lugar de rechazarlas) y distorsionarlas; sostener y defender un enfoque masculinista militarizado de la política y deslegitimar los desafíos que se le plantean. Por lo tanto, en este artículo se contribuye a la literatura sobre cómo la masculinidad, la misoginia y las normas de género se cruzan de manera más amplia con la legitimidad política, al defender la comprensión de la centralidad analítica de la misoginia en el ejercicio del poder político en múltiples proyectos globales.

La démocratie contemporaine de multiples pays a été prise d'assaut par ce qui a été diversement qualifié de populisme de droite, de populisme autoritaire, de majoritarisme culturel, de nouveau nativisme, de nouveau nationalisme, de quasi-fascisme ou de néo-fascisme. Bien qu'une attention ait été accordée aux comportements autoritaires de plusieurs dirigeants légitimés par l'électorat de ces pays, leur misogynie est souvent simplement considérée comme étant une composante accessoire de leur personnalité. Cet article met en évidence la centralité de la misogynie dans la légitimation des objectifs et régimes politiques de tout un ensemble de dirigeants de démocraties contemporaines—Trump, Modi, Bolsonaro, Duterte et Erdogan (tous sauf Trump sont encore au pouvoir)—de pays du monde entier, qu'ils soient des pays du Nord, du Sud, occidentaux ou non-occidentaux, et dont les populations sont mixtes et les religions majoritaires sont différentes. Je traite cet argument de la manière suivante: D'abord, je commence par clarifier la conceptualisation de la misogynie et par expliquer en quoi elle est importante. Ensuite, je démontre la misogynie substantielle des dirigeants politiques qui sont/ont été à la tête de projets politiques de droite hégémonique dans cinq démocraties contemporaines (Trumpisme, Modification, Bolsonarisme, Dutertisme, Erdoganisme). Enfin, je mets en avant trois manières systématiques dont la misogynie fonctionne comme stratégie politique efficace pour ces projets, en permettant: une certaine politique de l'identité diabolisant les opposants comme étant féminins/inférieurs/anti-nationaux, une récupération et une déformation des idées progressistes (plutôt que de les rejeter), et le maintien et la défense d'une approche masculiniste militarisée de la politique tout en délégitimant les contestations de celle-ci. Cet article contribue ainsi à la littérature portant sur la façon dont la masculinité, la misogynie et les normes de genre s'entrecroisent avec la légitimité politique en plaidant pour une compréhension de la centralité analytique de la misogynie dans l'exercice du pouvoir politique dans de multiples projets mondiaux.

Keywords: misogyny, democracy, right-wing politics

Palabras clave: misoginia, democracia, política de derecha

Mots clés: misogynie, démocratie, politiques de droite

Introduction

This article highlights the centrality of misogyny in legitimating the political goals and regimes of a set of leaders in contemporary democracies: Trump, Modi, Bolsonaro, Duterte, and Erdogan. Although at the helm of democratic systems—all but Trump are still in power—these leaders have often functioned in an authoritarian

manner, and their projects (Trumpism, Modification, Bolsonarismo, Duterteismo, and Erdoganism) have been variously labeled as right-wing populism, authoritarian populism, cultural majoritarianism, new nativism, new nationalism, quasi-fascism, and neo-fascism. These projects are quite innovative, being an evolution of, and also a break from, twentieth-century ideological polarities and conceptual schematizations of them. For instance, many of the successful and not too dissimilar exclusivist majoritarian nationalisms that have now emerged in established democracies are both neoliberal and nationalist at the same time, and further, they defy the conventional opposition on gender between right-wing illiberal conservatism and left-wing progressivism by functioning in ways that are at times deeply and overtly misogynist, and yet at other times use progressive gender talk to promote regressive gender agendas.

These dynamics are often studied within individual country cases. In contrast to the in-depth treatment of a case, here I identify and examine the workings of a core commonality—arguing that a key part of these present political projects is their misogyny. The rationale for looking at the centrality of misogyny¹ in certain types of political leaderships in *different* democracies across the world is two-fold. First, this article situates itself within a legacy of feminist work that has typically crossed disciplines and nation-state contexts (for instance, see [Ben-Ghiat 2020](#) on the “masculinist strongman ideal” over time and across nations), and second, this article is cognizant of the critiques of methodological nationalism in social science (see [Wimmer and Schiller 2002](#); [Sager 2016](#)) that have drawn attention to the significance of perceiving processes and dynamics that are not restricted within singular geographical entities such as nation-states.²

Before going any further, I wish to explain the choice of my examples. In a recent interview, the gender theorist Judith Butler noted, “It’s unclear whether Trump is watching Netanyahu and Erdoğan, whether anyone is watching Bolsonaro, whether Bolsonaro is watching Putin, but I think there are some contagious effects” (in [Gessen 2020](#)). Like Butler, many have remarked upon the resonance between these leaders, and indeed, these leaders have often praised each other (see [AFP 2020](#)). However, as in Butler’s formulation, leaders from the “non-West” are rarely included by way of comparison with western leaders. Here, however, I have chosen to focus on the relationship between misogyny and political projects of leaders from the United States, India, Brazil, Philippines, and Turkey (namely Trump, Modi, Bolsonaro, Duterte, and Erdogan). They represent a spectrum across Global North/South, non-West/West, with mixed populations and different majority religions. I do this because, notwithstanding the geographical and geopolitical differences of Global North and Global South or West and non-West, there is a salient commonality to the ways in which these political projects function: all of them are led by electorally legitimated misogynist authoritarians who claim a monopoly on nationalism (i.e., denounce their critics as anti-national), come to power challenging neoliberalism, while profiting from crony capitalism. Further, they embody a paradoxical mix of neoliberalism and nationalism, what [Kaul \(2019a\)](#) has formulated in terms of a postcolonial neoliberal nationalism that co-constructs ideas of the nation and economy, alongside a promise of a politics of pre/anti-colonial purity in formerly colonized nations, and imperial nostalgia in the former colonizers.

The leaders of all of these projects, who act in an authoritarian manner, are both electorally legitimated and demonstrably misogynist. In order to argue for the instrumentalization of misogyny as a political strategy in contemporary democracies, I have chosen to draw examples from leaders who came to power through elections

¹ Although the terms misogyny and sexism are sometimes used interchangeably to denote a patriarchal context, there are important differences in the role played by each, as I will explain in the sections below.

² Critiques of methodological nationalism highlight the ways in which perceiving a singular nation-state as a bounded container of social and political processes (for instance, migration) is problematic and limiting in terms of capturing supranational commonalities, pathways, and dynamics.

that they *might* easily have lost. This is different from ostensibly democratic regimes with strongmen leaders but where the opposition cannot really win electorally (for instance, on misogyny and Putin in Russia, see [Sperling 2014](#)).

Throughout this article, I draw upon and cite the growing body of recent scholarly work that investigates the ways in which masculinity, misogyny, and gender norms more broadly intersect with political legitimacy. The existing work tells us that the contemporary leaders who claim—often successfully in electoral terms—to be “strongmen” are part of a tradition; they emulate each other, and they have toxic/regressive effects in terms of gender equality outcomes. In building upon this, the present article *specifically* elucidates the role of misogyny in their political projects. In other words, I argue for the analytic centrality of misogyny as a way to understand the political projects of electorally legitimated misogynist authoritarian leaders in a specific set of democracies in the contemporary era. I demonstrate how such leaders/projects are not exceptional to any country/geography/religion, and further how they strategically operationalize misogyny in their political projects (including, but not only, during elections) in a similar manner.

Although a common and simplistic conception of misogyny is related to hatred and disgust toward women by men, misogyny can also be internalized by women. In order to argue for perceiving the use of misogyny as a political strategy, this article provides an account of misogyny—related to, but conceptually distinct from sexism, masculinity, and patriarchy—that is not *only* about a direct expression of hate or disgust toward (embodied) women by (embodied) men. The use of misogyny as a political strategy is dependent upon unpacking a manner of exercising power such that not only women, but also that which is constructed/perceived/presented as “feminine,” which is “feminized,” is also seen as inferior and devalued. Thus, specific identities/groups/behaviors that are constructed/perceived/presented as “feminine” and are “feminized” (for instance, minorities, indigenous communities, environmental concerns, and human rights concerns) are able to be legitimately subdued and dominated.

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What Is Misogyny?

A typical dictionary definition of misogyny sees it as a “hatred of, aversion to, or prejudice against women” ([Merriam-Webster n.d.](#)). The term “misogyny” has a telling backstory. In 1615, an English fencing master and pamphleteer called Joseph Swetnam published an influential text called *The Arraignment of Women*. According to him, women were crooked by nature, wily, cunning, deceitful, treacherous, with a bite worse than an old dog and a hungry flea; they sprung from the devil and were the root of all evil ([Swetnam 1807 \[1615\]](#)). In his view, “they were like pumice stones because their hearts were filled with holes...like painted ships because they looked pretty but contained only lead” ([Aron 2019](#)). His views elicited several prominent responses from those who sought to counter the dislike, contempt, and prejudice that he promoted. One of these was *Swetnam the Woman-Hater Arraigned by Women* (see [Grosart 1880 \[1620\]](#)), which as part of its plot puts Swetnam, called Misogynos, on trial by a court of women. This play—with the earliest use of the term misogyny in English—as [Jordan \(1987\)](#) shows, goes beyond upholding the

worth of women, in how it ideologically critiques “patriarchalism” as a system of thought, and draws upon the analogy between the family and the state to show how justice symbolized by androgyny (uniting the opposites of gender) can both literally and symbolically act “as the basis for a mutually beneficial contract between a monarch and his or her subjects” (Jordan 1987, 150).

As a concept, misogyny has been indexed in different ways across disciplines. Historical accounts of misogyny encompass ancient myth, philosophy, religion, enlightenment epistemology, legality, and modernity (see Gilmore 2001; Holland 2006; Papa 2017). Feminist narratives focus on personal activist trajectories of challenging everyday misogyny (see David 2016). Misogyny, arguably the world’s oldest prejudice, is also one that is common across different ideologies, including anti-systemic ones. In the last few decades, feminist work has explicitly grappled with the various ways in which patriarchy percolates through intersectionality, and misogyny is no exception, as the terms misogynoir (see Bailey and Trudy 2018) or transmisogyny indicate. It is significant to recognize the moves beyond the conventional understanding of misogyny. Anderson (2010, 2015) has drawn attention to the functioning of “benign bigotry” as a part of “modern misogyny,” and the use of subtle prejudice—“everyday, *seemingly* innocent slights, comments, overgeneralizations, othering, and denigration of marginalized groups” (Anderson 2015, xii, italics original)—that is nonetheless insidious because it can be nonconscious and unintentional, go unnoticed by the target or victim, and can have the veneer of a positive stereotype.

An important insight from recent work in feminist philosophy is the differentiation (in relation to patriarchy) of misogyny and sexism, such as that provided by Kate Manne (2017). Misogyny does not operate on its own; it works closely with sexism. In her book-length analytic philosophical treatment of misogyny, Manne (2017) sets the scene to disentangle misogyny from sexism and patriarchy. She argues for expanding the naïve understanding of misogyny from something that is seen as an individual property, to an “ameliorative”³ one where “misogyny [constitutively speaking] should be understood primarily as the “law enforcement” branch of the patriarchal order, which has the overall function of *policing* and *enforcing* its governing norms and expectations,” and sexism [constitutively speaking] “should be understood primarily as the “justificatory” branch of a patriarchal order, which consists in ideology that has the overall function of *rationalizing* and *justifying* patriarchal social relations” (Manne 2017, 78–79, emphases original).

Here, the differentiation between sexism and misogyny is important. Misogyny is “about controlling and punishing women who challenge male dominance. Misogyny rewards women who reinforce the status quo and punishes those who don’t” (Manne interview in Illing 2020). Misogyny can be understood as “the moral manifestation of a sexist ideology,” so that “sexism is the ideology that *supports* patriarchal social relations, but misogyny *enforces* it when there’s a threat of that system going away” (Illing 2020) Explaining the role of misogyny as the law enforcement branch of patriarchy, Manne states, “If you think about someone like Donald Trump claiming he’s the law enforcement president, I think that’s right. It’s the law of patriarchy, among other things, that he’s enforcing. It’s the law that polices and punishes women who transgress or threaten dominant men” (Illing 2020).

Thus, while both sexism and misogyny share a commonality of preserving a patriarchal social order, misogyny ought to be understood as more than a mere psychological state. By moving beyond an individual and psychological understanding of misogyny, it is possible, using Manne’s framework, to argue for how the logic of misogyny functions systematically, institutionally, and structurally to ensure that women continue to provide the moral goods that they are supposed to and which

³ Ameliorative analysis refers to a kind of revisionary approach that has often been influential in feminist philosophy. As Haslanger and Saul (2006, 95) explain, “Ameliorative projects . . . begin by asking: What is the point of having the concept in question; for example, why do we have a concept of knowledge or a concept of belief?” For more on “ameliorative projects and conceptual engineering,” see Saul and Diaz-Leon (2018).

men are expected to receive, because if they do not, then misogyny makes them the target of a multifaceted hostility that is designed to show them their place (the “give/take model”). Both sexism and misogyny, as justification and amelioration, are integral to maintaining and upholding a patriarchal order from the family to the state, such that women are meant to conform, either willingly or through policing. Anti-feminist “femininity” (sexism or internalized sexism) is accepted, even celebrated, but misogyny is reserved for feminists and anyone who defies sexist norms.

Here, I argue that the misogyny of individual political leaders is not simply the hatred of embodied women or women who step out of line, but further, it exemplifies the legitimization of violence against that (body, community, identity, or issue) which is constructed as “feminine” in general or feminist in particular. The “feminine” is eulogized so long as it conforms to male dominance and sexism, and demonized when it defies sexist-gendered norms. It is in this sense of *gender understood as a relationship of power* that we can see the link between the individual misogyny of authoritarian leaders in democratic setups and the projects of anxious and insecure nationalisms that are at the heart of the right-wing politics. Electorally legitimated misogynist authoritarian leaders seek to uphold a patriarchal status quo in terms of family, territory, and nation-state. Therefore, women, when they follow sexist norms (not only in terms of personal identity and behavior, but also in terms of providing care), can be accepted, promoted, and protected. However, when women challenge the patriarchal status quo by refusing to conform or to provide care, they can be punished or met with violence. This punishment can take the form of misogynist violence, ranging from insults to abuse to physical intimidation or worse.

Moreover, and beyond individual women, the electorally legitimated misogynist authoritarians shore up embedded patriarchy to project themselves in messianic and hagiographic terms as the champions and protectors of a certain idea of the nation, wherein the nation must be protected from its enemy “Others,” and their own variety of nationalism (right-wing, securitizing, anxious) is the way to do so. These Others that threaten the body politic are emphasized as being both within and outside the territorial boundaries. In each case, these “anti-national” enemies are believed to be emboldened by feminists/critical race theorists/LGBTQ rights proponents/progressive activists/environmentalists/human rights activists/political opponents.

Analogous to the way in which non-conforming women can be justifiably silenced and punished, these “anti-national” critics, dissenters, and other activists can also be punished for stepping out of line or questioning the leaders’ political projects. They can be explicitly “feminized” as a prelude to devaluing and subduing them (as in the case of environmental and human rights), or they can be “tarnished” by the association with feminist challenges, and/or viewed as part of an “unholy anti-national” nexus of indigenous rights, critical race perspectives, LGBTQ identities, minority rights, and so on. In either case, challenges to power and ability to dissent that are conceptually central to democratic systems in theory are delegitimized (by the projects of electorally legitimated misogynist authoritarians) as deserving justifiable punishment because of challenging or threatening the patriarchal social order of family, territory, and nation-state via challenging or threatening their own projects.

Misogyny: Globally Prevalent and Politically Salient

As the discussion so far indicates, misogyny functions in complex ways, and with a concept resonance, or a non-arbitrary correspondence and aligning, in relation to an umbrella of terms that include sexism, anti-feminism, masculinity, and patriarchy. Yet, to uncover its functioning, a recourse to quantitative data or qualitative surveys alone is not enough. As [Anderson \(2015\)](#) highlights, if we simply look at the data on gender equality over the last several decades across multiple countries, or at the numbers of women in full-time employment or university graduands, we

might think that we are on a steady march toward progressive gender equality. Similarly, scholars have noted the difficulty of drawing conclusions on attitudes toward gender roles from cross-cultural surveys (Constantin and Voicu 2014) or the wide distribution of beliefs around gender so that individuals can hold progressive and regressive views at the same time (Kenny and Patel 2017). Beyond research that is focused broadly on gender outcomes (rather than specifically understanding or disaggregating the role of misogyny per se), there is a supplementary merit in pursuing an analysis of the kind presented here that combines cross disciplinary insights to discern the instrumentalization of misogyny.

A couple of clarifications are in order to address the following questions at the outset—Aren't these leaders different in terms of how they project themselves in terms of strongmen and the nature of their remarks? And further, why attend to speech acts at all; does it matter what they say? I respond to these in turn. First, certainly, though Trumpism, Modification, Bolsonarismo, Duterteism, Erdoganism (as their projects have come to be known) are all deeply rooted in the cult of personality and the affirmation of a particular idea of national pride, they carry differences of accent on specific right-wing positions. Trump, Modi, and Bolsonaro appear/ed to hold economically right-wing positions, whereas Duterte and Erdogan have at times supported populist social welfare policies. My argument, however, concerns the ways in which misogyny helps their project sustain and silence those who critique, oppose, or dissent from their project (any aspect of it). So, in the Indian case, for instance, misogyny might be useful to delegitimize female protestors who are against citizenship amendment or farming laws (both of which have seen significant women leaders/protestors); in the Brazilian case, it has been the feminist and LGBTQ movement; in the Philippine case, the human rights movement. It is in this sense that my work here illuminates the uses of misogyny as part of sustaining a specific kind of political leadership in contemporary democracies; salient across multiple countries. Further research can apply this analytical insight to comprehensive in-depth case study of *an* individual leader's project and *a* specific political issue of enabling/silencing.

To return to the first question, we might note also the variations of the masculinist strongman ideal that these leaders offer: while Trump, Bolsonaro, and Duterte have most explicitly sexualized and objectified women, projecting themselves as profusely virile and predatory, Modi and Erdogan have promoted themselves as protective, and occasionally, even renunciatory, father figures. Again, this must be seen within the context of varying patriarchal norms. Regardless of their different personal projections, each of these leaders has sought "to keep women and minorities in their place," so that they may not threaten them or their political projects by, in some cases, transgressing the familial norms, or in other cases, by espousing progressive feminist causes. In such instances, and regardless of whether they seek to be attractive alpha men or moralizing father figures, they instrumentalize misogyny to ridicule, devalue, and subdue such challenges: as being from loud/nasty/crooked/immoral women, or as being disparagingly feminine, or as being feminist/anti-national.

Second, why do misogynist speech acts matter? Put simply, through their misogynist speech and strategic silence, these leaders have sought to assert their superiority, build support, entrench their policies, intimidate or silence their critics, and regulate political perception. Tirrell (2019) provides an extensive account of why toxic misogyny in speech is important to address. Drawing upon an array of feminist legal scholars and philosophers, she explains that speech is a systemic act; it is a kind of coding, a marking; misogynist speech shapes the entry of women into nearly *all* speech situations; it determines "who can speak when, what can be said, what has to be asked, what counts as an answer"; it is an action that normalizes hierarchies, makes social stratifications appear inevitable and right; "through reductive classification, through highlighting or introducing nasty inferences, and through

fostering unjust social divisions,” it creates “derogatory networks of inferences, assumptions, and presuppositions” that deprive women’s speech of its authority and legitimate force (Tirrell 2019, 2447, 2449–50, and *passim*). Thus (Tirrell 2019, 2450–51), we see: “explicit claims as well as intimations that the rights of some do not matter,” and these intimations target “women, people of color, the physically and mentally disabled, those with fluid gender identities, and more.” This point is increasingly picked up as salient in media studies of misogyny. For instance, Marron (2020, 2–3) writes how “leaders in this era of conservative populism have escalated misogynist remarks, demeaning women, minorities, and non-hegemonic males,” observing further that “although gender is the primary focus of misogyny, it also pertains to intersectionalities such as race, ethnicity, age, ability, and other variables not aligned with supremacist hegemonic masculinity and the patriarchal system.”

As I have explained in my own argument in this article, this concept resonance is unsurprising and can be understood as indicative of the ways in which the devaluation of, not just women, but analogously, the feminine/feminist/critical/Other is a precursor to their domination and social and symbolic violence being legitimized against them. The toxicity of misogynist speech is the connective tissue that legitimizes the devaluation and subjection of the othered identities in relation to heteronormative patriarchy.

Misogynist Speech Acts

In this section, I use examples from the United States, India, Brazil, Philippines, and Turkey to show how leaders of hegemonic projects in these countries⁴—Trump, Modi, Bolsonaro, Duterte, and Erdogan—have used misogynist speech acts to exacerbate existing patriarchal norms and operationalize a certain relationship between gender and power. These leaders have often been in the media for what are termed “controversial” remarks, and many observers are surprised that their success is not affected negatively by their misogyny. In contradistinction to this, I argue that these leaders do not succeed “despite” their “controversial” views, but rather because of them. The misogyny of these leaders is tied to other systematic devaluations of the feminine/feminist/marginalized/Other.

The New York Times compiled a list—that ran into hundreds of entries—of various people, places, and things that Donald Trump insulted since he originally declared his candidacy prior to the 2016 elections. He has disparaged and dismissed women who are prominent in public life (especially media, law, and politics)⁵ using abusive commentary about their body (see *Vox Media n.d*). His moniker for the experienced female—and feminist (see Gibson 2014)—politician who challenged him was “crooked Hilary.” Hilary Clinton’s defeat to Trump in 2016, in spite of his comments about “grabbing them [women] by the pussy” and Clinton’s better performance in the debates (see Freeman 2016), was initially made sense of in the media without reference to the overwhelming role of misogyny (for an exception, see Sanders 2016). The exclusive focus on economic deprivation of the “white working-class” as explanans for the result has been thoroughly refuted by data analysis such as that by Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta (2018), who found that the economic difficulties faced by less educated whites were much less powerful than attitudes on race and gender, even after controlling for partisanship and ideology.

The missing misogyny link has further been comprehensively articulated in recent scholarship. Boatright and Sperling’s (2020) analysis of the 2016

⁴None of the countries considered here ranks in the top or the bottom 10 in the Gender Inequality Index. See <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/GII>.

⁵In 2019, he suggested that prominent American Congresswomen (such as Ilhan Omar, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, and Ayanna Pressley) “go back to countries they came from.” He has insulted female reporters, called a female politician (Maxine Waters) a “low-IQ individual,” and used the terms “that dog” and a “crazed, crying lowlife” for a former staffer at the White House (Omarosa Manigault Newman).

presidential race shows how gender was central to it, not just in terms of the candidates' identification and willingness to vote for a woman, but in terms of what normative behavior and attitudes were seen as acceptable for women and men. [Strauss and Bar On \(n.d., 2\)](#) illustrate how Trump's speech coded Clinton as "weak" and "lacking stamina" in contrast to himself as the "hypermasculine 'symbolic head of the national household'", and why, even as he lacked in experience and expertise, being a man, he was able to suggest to the electorate that he would be more competent on economic and military issues. The support for misogyny can also be inferred both from studies of "BernieBros" using misogynistic ageism (see [Harp 2018](#)) and from the fact that the following sold well among Trump supporters: badges such as "Life's a bitch, don't vote for one" or "KFC Hillary Special: 2 Fat Thighs, 2 Small Breasts, Left Wing," or T-shirts showing Trump standing triumphant in a boxing arena with his feet on a prostrate Clinton, or Clinton falling off a motorbike driven by Trump that stated "If you can read this, the bitch fell off" (see [Jamieson 2016](#)).

In the parallel domain of policies and legislation, in June 2018, Trump administration overturned asylum protections for domestic violence and gang violence victims ([Kopan 2018](#)), putting especially female refugees and asylum seekers in grave danger. In January 2020, Trump announced that he would be the first president to attend the anti-abortion march ([Sink and Fabian 2020](#)). In the 2020 election campaign, Trump again referred to Democrat Vice Presidential candidate in Kamala Harris as a "monster," and his son has previously tweeted the word "whorendus" about her ([Prusher 2020](#)). As NPR ([Summers 2020](#)) reported, Trump's use of misogynist speech against women in politics is part of a pattern meant to diminish, devalue, and degrade them in the eyes of his supporters.

Indian society and polity is historically marked by a pervasive misogyny rooted in Brahminical patriarchy, which is responsible for violence against women in different contexts. As [Chapman \(2014, 58\)](#) writes: "Misogyny born of brahmanical patriarchy is impunity to violate and discipline women; to contest their access to the public domain; to challenge or subvert their determination to speak and act for themselves and to preserve male dominance." Under Modi in power, misogyny has become entrenched in public culture ([Wilson 2015](#); [Gopinath 2020](#)) and female activists and political leaders are targeted for delegitimization through vicious misogynist attacks by Hindu nationalists ([Zahbi 2020](#)).

Modi's misogyny ([Gupta 2012](#); [Swetha 2015](#); [Youtube 2018](#)) has been consistent over time. Women are emphatically only "mothers and sisters" (a connotation as providers of care and charges to be protected) in his speeches, but when women activists are assaulted or young Dalit or Muslim girls are raped and murdered in unspeakably horrible ways by upper caste or Hindu extremists, he maintains a studied silence. A whole host of BJP leaders, including Modi's protégé, Yogi Adityanath, have been in the news for the violence of their views on women's bodies, rights, and roles ([NYT 2018](#); [Bengali 2018](#); [BBC 2020](#)); to take an example from many, one has said that rape is a social crime that is "sometimes right, sometimes wrong" ([Malhotra 2016](#)). BJP ministers have been on record in the rape and murder case of an 8-year old girl saying, "So what if a girl died? ... Many girls die every day" ([Saran 2018](#)).

Modi has a history of ridiculing women in political and public life who challenge his power or his policies; they are acceptable only within a normative patriarchal role and image. The wife of an opposition politician is a "₹50 crore girlfriend" and the head of opposition Indian National Congress Sonia Gandhi is a "jersey cow" and her son Rahul Gandhi is a "hybrid calf." Modi explained high malnutrition rates in Gujarat by pointing out the beauty consciousness of middle-class girls and encouraged farmers with daughters to plant trees so that they can sell the timber to fund their wedding when they grow up. In 2015, he complimented Sheikh Hasina, the Prime Minister of neighboring Bangladesh, by congratulating her on a zero-tolerance policy toward terrorism "despite being a woman" ([Lakshmi 2015](#)). Like Trump's "monster" remark for Kamala Harris, Modi has referred to the

“demonical laughter” of a female opposition politician Renuka Chowdhury (Chakraborty 2018). In 2021 elections in the state of West Bengal, he referred to his female political opponent, Mamata Bannerjee, in lewd and insulting tones (Bhattacharya 2021).

Modi’s rise to power in India illustrates the ascendancy of an ultra-right-wing socially conservative ruling party backed by the paramilitary support of the “Sangh Parivar” (a “family” of Hindu right-wing organizations) that aims at converting India into a militarized masculinist Hindu nation. Modi has successfully managed to project his myth along the categories of an ascetic, paternal, and efficient leader; further, he has used different sets of scripts for the national and international audiences, proclaiming ideals globally and on twitter, while systematically and deliberately presiding over the decimation of these (see Kaul 2017).

The speech of Bolsonaro, the President of Brazil, has been called “colorful,” but this really refers to his mocking and demonization of significant sections of the population, robbing them of dignity, legitimacy, and rights. Bolsonaro has said that he would not rape MP Maria do Rosario because she “was not worth it”; that spanking sons who “showed signs” of being gay was the best way to make sure they would grow up to be “proper” men; that his having a daughter after four sons was the result of a moment of “weakness” (Assis and Ogando 2018); that he would rather have his son die in an accident than come out as a homosexual (Shukla 2019). He has also boasted that he once spent state money “on sex,” and holds the view that women should not be paid the same salary as men (The Wire 2020). In parallel, Bolsonaro has assiduously pursued an anti-rights agenda since becoming president (Canineu 2020). In spite of a fall in murder rates in Brazil, femicide remains on the rise. Brazil saw a 12 percent increase in femicides between 2017 and 2018, and again a 7 percent increase from 2018 to 2019. Bolsonaro’s Minister of Justice and Public Security has said that violence against women is a “negative side effect” of women’s growing participation and involvement in society, and Bolsonaro himself made comments during the Covid pandemic to suggest that domestic violence is a faultless crime under lockdown orders (Garcia 2020).

Women’s rights activists in Brazil recognize the misogynist nature of politics (Schipani and Elliott 2018) and the increase in political violence against women and the marginalized. Dissenting voices are faced with intimidation intended to silence them, or forced into exile (for instance, the feminist who gave expert witness at a public Supreme Court hearing on decriminalizing abortion; see Bähre and Diniz 2020). The intersectionality of identities⁶ that are the target of such misogynist authoritarian projects was keenly demonstrated by the assassination of Marielle Franco, a black lesbian politician and social justice activist in Rio in 2018. In 2019, former police officers were arrested for involvement and Bolsonaro lashed out against “fake news” when reports surfaced that the suspects met at his compound previously and a photograph was released in which he is pictured with a thumbs-up next to one of them (Phillips 2019).

The president of the Philippines, Duterte, gave a speech to soldiers saying they should shoot the female guerrilla fighters (rebels) “in the vagina.” Duterte’s words were: “There’s a new order coming from the mayor, ‘We will not kill you. We will just shoot you in the vagina,’” and that “without their vaginas, women would be ‘useless’” (in Ellis-Petersen 2018). During his election campaign in 2016, he had joked that he wished he himself had raped an Australian missionary (who had been raped and killed by inmates with her throat slashed in a 1989 prison riot when he was the city mayor). “What a waste. She was so beautiful, the mayor should have been [raped her] first” (Curato and Ong 2020). In May 2017, “he told soldiers in

⁶ He has said “indigenous people are becoming human beings,” “torture is good,” that descendants enslaved people are “overweight” and “do nothing.”

Mindanao—apparently as a joke—that while martial law was imposed, he would protect them from prosecution if they raped three women” (Ellis-Petersen 2018).

In May 2016, when Duterte was the president elect, he wolf-whistled at a female reporter while she asked him about his prospective cabinet appointees, and when a different reporter at the same press conference pointed out to him that his action was against the anti-sexual harassment ordinance passed by the city council and also signed by himself as mayor, he wolf-whistled at her too (Go 2019). There are several other examples (Go 2019): Duterte has called Ellen Tordesillas, president of the investigative journalism group Vera Files, “every inch a prostitute”; he has said that he kept an eye on Vice President Leni Robredo’s legs during cabinet meetings; that he would make Pope Francis watch a supposed sex video of Senator Leila de Lima to make him regret giving her a rosary; that if he were the boyfriend of the pretty town mayor who was seeking his endorsement, he would hold on to her panties until they snapped; he molested the maid when he was a teenager; responding in 2018 to a columnist who wrote about his alleged sickness, he said “you want to know if I’m still up to it? Do you have a wife? Lend her to me!”

While there is an arguable continuity between the strongman rule of Duterte and the prior history of Marcosian politics in the Philippines (see Hartweg 2017), there are also novel forms of misogyny under Duterte. Women are interpellated into his authoritarian policies, whether pursued in the war on drugs, economy or during the lockdown, in multiple ways; they face violence from the state and the gangs, in the labor market, and within the household (Tab 2018; Purugganan 2019; IWPR 2020).

The Turkish President Erdogan opposes equality between men and women: “You cannot put women and men on an equal footing. It is against nature” (Scott 2014). He has said that Muslim families should not engage in birth control or family planning, is against cesareans, has equated birth control with treason, and opined that women should avoid laughing in public (Bruton 2016). He is against quotas for women, has attempted to criminalize adultery in order to “protect the family” (see Ayata and Doğangün 2017; Cindoglu and Unal 2017), and after the defeat of a similar bill in 2016, Erdogan’s ruling party again sought to introduce a “marry your rapist” bill to enact a law which would not punish men accused of having sex with underage girls if they marry their victims. The emphasis on motherhood and procreation for women means that even when legislation banning abortion is attempted but not in place, in practice, abortion is hindered and stigmatized (MacFarlane et al. 2016). In his own words: “A woman who rejects motherhood, who refrains from being around the house, however successful her working life is, is deficient, is incomplete” (Oppenheim 2020). Mirroring the Hindutva discourse in India on population demography—where the ruling party and “Sangh” leaders advocate Hindu women to have multiple children so that the “overpopulating Muslim” minority does not take over the country (Anand 2007)—Erdogan and his AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) party suggests that ethnic Turk women have “at least three children” to compete with the birth rate of the country’s Kurdish minority.

On a range of policy issues in Turkey, the public sphere for women has been shaped by the longer-term contestations of varying feminist discourses over time (see Ayata and Tütüncü 2008; Cindoglu and Zencirci 2008; Çitak and Tür 2008; Bodur Ün 2019). The trajectory of AKP and the leadership of Erdogan have been key in recent years (Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018). Rejecting the idea that the politics of intimacy as articulated by Erdogan and the AKP in Turkey is merely a distraction from “real” politics, Korkman (2016) argues that dismissing these comments denies their significance for the lives of women and LGBTQ peoples, hides the centrality of these remarks to the economic and political governance of the country, and obscures the gendered nature of political rule and the value of feminist and queer politics in challenging it. Gülel (2020) used feminist critical discourse analysis to study official press releases and twenty-seven speeches by Erdoğan between

August 2014 and 2019 (concerning International Women’s Day, Mother’s Day, and the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women), finding that Erdoğan’s discourse exhibits patterns of misogyny that are consonant with Manne’s model—that misogyny is directed at women who do not conform to their “giving” roles by providing social, domestic, reproductive, and emotional labor.

Before moving on to the next section, a few observations are essential. As evidenced by the foregoing, in the case of each of these leaders, misogyny is the *common denominator* in their hate speech, whatever be their own personal identity is in terms of religion or ethnicity, as they target the economically vulnerable, the sexual minorities, human rights activists, and political opponents. Misogyny is salient to them because it weaponizes and reinforces the pre-existing heteropatriarchal norms in society for political profit. While all these leaders have projected themselves along the classic populist trope of not being elite, their misogyny is not simply an odious or idiosyncratic or particular individual behavioral trait (Beinart 2019). Instead, the devaluation of women, the “feminine,” and the feminist in these countries should be read against the background of women being prevented from having equal access to the law, autonomy over their bodies, and the stigma attached to femininity, especially when women refuse to conform to their “natural” supportive roles as wives, mothers, and producers of children. For instance, marital rape is not criminalized in India; divorce is not legal in Philippines; abortion is not allowed or increasingly threatened in the United States, Brazil, and Philippines; rape legislation has been undermined or weakened as a consequence of the leaders’ views in Philippines, India, and Turkey.

Moreover, these leaders are not only similar, they have been known to draw upon, admire, and emulate each other. Bolsonaro was the invited chief guest at India’s Republic Day function in January 2020. Bolsonaro has been called the “Trump of the tropics.” When Trump was campaigning to be US President in 2016, Hindu supremacist groups in the United States rallied for his victory. Trump told them that he loves Hindus, he loves India, and he looks forward to working with Modi. Modi and Trump held spectacular joint rallies packed with multitudes in India and the United States, including lastly in Gujarat in February 2020 after the onset of the Covid pandemic. Trump also addressed them in Hindi saying “Ab ki baar, Trump Sarkar” or “this time, a Trump government,” referencing a successful slogan for the campaigning Modi’s party in India in 2014, which had been “Ab ki baar, Modi Sarkar” or “this time, a Modi government.” Prior to his election as president in 2018, Bolsonaro was also spoken of as “the Brazilian Duterte.” A recent “Report of the Group of Ministers on Government Communication” in India in December 2020 explicitly suggested that “the right wing parties of other countries need to be roped in to find common ground” (The Wire 2021).⁷

Finally, it is not coincidental that intellectual challenges to male supremacist authoritarian politics via critical thinking are sought to be suppressed by such projects.⁸ The electorally legitimated misogynist authoritarians perceive that critical thinking on gender and identity has the potential to undermine their power base and so they seek to attack or ban such pedagogy and publication. Therefore, we saw Trump’s attack on “critical race theory” (Lang 2020), and the concerted and continuing attack on critical and progressive educational institutions and academics in India (Kumar 2020). Likewise, Bolsonaro has emphatically focused on attacking “gender ideology” in Brazil (Assis and Ogando 2018) and his regime

⁷This media strategy document among its suggestions includes the “colour coding” of journalists based on their being pro- or anti-government or fence-sitters.

⁸Analogously, there is also an attack by the far-right on “gender studies” in several European countries, being most pronounced in Hungary and Poland that are governed by leaders akin to those in the countries discussed here (see Appery 2019; Dietze and Roth 2020).

vowed to revise school textbooks to remove references to feminism, homosexuality, and violence against women (Osborne 2019).

Uses of Misogyny as a Political Strategy

Having demonstrated that the misogynist speech of these electorally legitimated authoritarian leaders emboldens the existing patriarchal norms in society and creates opportunity structures for new versions of right-wing nationalist political projects, in this section, I put forward three systematic ways in which we might see how misogyny works as an effective political strategy for such projects. First, it allows the formation of strong supporter identities, the silencing of critics, and the feminization of opponents. Second, it allows use of contradictory policies in a variety of domains so that legal and political institutions can use feminist and progressive gains for conservative patriarchal ends, either through policies that do not deliver in practice because they are not intended to do so or through policy institutions that are headed by people who oppose the reasons why those institutions exist. Third, it allows a gendered biopolitics of the nation that can only be protected/modernized/developed by such projects whose authoritarian leaders can restore its pride and maintain its glory. It helps the leaders entrench, defend, and sustain their policies as strong and delegitimize challenges to it as feminine/feminist/anti-national. In what follows, I elaborate on each of these in turn.

First, I suggest that misogyny helps to consolidate the supporters for such leaders and their projects both during and between/beyond elections, because misogyny and authoritarian attitudes are strongly correlated, further, misogyny is useful in silencing critics and in devaluing political opponents by “feminizing” them as ineffective or lacking in autonomy.

Empirical research has repeatedly found a strong *positive correlation* between authoritarian attributes and antifeminist dispositions, with no sex differences in respondents. The authoritarians, whether sex identifying as male or female, prefer traditional gender role boundaries where women stay within the “feminine” domain, relationships are traditionally gendered, and are potentially aggressive toward those who transgress. Specifically investigating the link between authoritarian attitudes and misogyny, Centers (1963, 85, emphasis added), using the Sanford and Older scale, clearly indicated that “factors such as age, education, race, socioeconomic status, social class identification, marital status and occupation did not significantly contribute to the relationship and that *authoritarianism was itself the only significant correlate of variations in antifeminism scores*” (Centers 1963, 81).

Early experimental findings were repeated using Likert-type scale to find that for both men and women there was a strongly positive correlation between authoritarian and antifeminist beliefs, and this persists even when controlled for age, education, and religion (Sarup 1976). Duncan, Peterson, and Winter (1997, 41) used Altemeyer’s Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale to again find that “high scores on authoritarianism were related to traditional gender-role identity and attitudes, rating political events concerning women as less important, and rating feminists and women as having relatively more power and influence in society.” Authoritarians are “*ideologically coherent in their support for at least one type of hegemonic structure—traditionally gendered relationships*” (Duncan, Peterson, and Winter 1997, 46); see also Duncan 2006). In addition, multiple analyses have also noted the interrelationships between misogyny and other forms of bigotry, “believing that feminism has upset the natural order”; there are also studies that show the relationship between misogynist views and the likelihood of expressing antidemocratic sentiment (Gracey 2020, 75, 82).

The strong positive correlation between authoritarian and antifeminist dispositions, the positive correlation between misogyny and other bigotries, and the evidence from specific electoral studies that indicate the powerful role of beliefs on

traditional gender roles, norms, and identities would together suggest that misogyny is the unifying factor that, regardless of other variables, exerts a powerful influence in consolidating those who support electorally legitimated misogynist leaders and their projects. There is much more work confirming this association in the United States⁹ and not enough experimental studies specifically on misogyny in the other countries. However, there are ethnographic, conceptual, or media research studies [for instance, what [Anand \(2011\)](#) terms “pornonationalism” of Modi/Sangh supporters or what [Ayata and Doğangün \(2017\)](#) study as the “regressive gender climate” in Turkey] that confirm how the supporters of these projects are mobilized through misogyny. As the leaders’ misogynist speech made transparent in the previous section of this article, these projects see women as naturally or preferably suited to certain roles in society, crucial as child-making machines, in need of protection, threatening when able to exercise autonomy over body and sexuality, valuable for their virginity, valorized when caring and supportive, disgusting when menstruating, desirable on masculine normative terms, sometimes deserving of punishments including rape, inherently irrational and controlled by emotions, and lacking in astute or worthwhile endogenous political agency when protesting. These views function intersectionally; they can be and are also internalized by women (see [Blumenfeld 2020](#)), and as I argue below, they serve to intimidate those who do not conform.

When Trump demeans female journalists asking difficult questions, Modi diminishes female politicians and stays silent on repeated incidents of violent rapes against women, Duterte name-calls women on their face and banter about the legs of female politicians, Bolsonaro says that having daughters is a product of weakness, and Erdogan calls them incomplete without children; these are not just dog whistles to their supporters. These are active political statements that circumscribe what women should do, what lines they ought not to cross, and when they are to be taken seriously, not just in personal or domestic lives, but in the political sphere—in other words, misogyny is central to what the acceptable terms of women’s political participation, political agency, political claims-making, and political identity are.

Misogyny in the online virtual world is an accelerating and powerful means of curating the digital political sphere ([Barker and Jurasz 2019](#)). These online subcultures are especially prominent among the followers of right-wing and far-right political leaders in multiple countries, where their support of misogynist authoritarians often gets exhibited through troll behavior and especially rape threats against political dissenters. The online “gendertrolling” ([Mantilla 2015](#), 21) of women, especially through violent and graphic rape threats, is a useful and coherent strategy to silence them and “keep them in their place”. There is a feedback loop between online and offline misogyny as strategy pursued by well-organized supporters of these global projects, which directly gain from what is accepted and banalized or penalized. The effects are often an increased level of both real and virtual violence, as well as the increased likelihood of success in electoral legitimation.¹⁰

It is no coincidence that misogynist remarks and abuses, both in angry outbursts and as supposed jokes, are directed against women who are asking questions and demanding accountability as politicians, rebels, activists, journalists, and citizens. Females in media in all these projects are at the sharp receiving end of such abuse ([Jane 2017](#)). Misogyny works as a political strategy to legitimize extensive

⁹ For instance, see chapter on “How do we know that Trump supporters are authoritarians?” in [MacWilliams \(2016a\)](#) or [Hochschild \(2016\)](#) or canvasser reports of intimidation of Democrat-registered wives by Republican husbands ([Solnit 2018](#)).

¹⁰ I hope that this present article contributes to provoking more experimental and data research that specifically probes how misogyny links up with existing sexist and patriarchal formations in supporters of such projects, especially outside the United States. This would confirm the existing media, speech act, experiential, and popular culture reports of how online “IT cells” (such as of the ruling party in India, see [Campbell-Smith and Bradshaw 2019](#), 3) promote a non-arbitrarily aligned understanding of women, nation, public, and private spheres to holistically provide an ideological umbrella of consonance that improves electoral outcomes.

online/digital/troll harassment and abuse which is largely sexualized and aimed at the intimidation and silencing of democratic dissent or critique, by targeting the women directly, and the men indirectly, by referring to their bodies, their identity, family, and sexuality. This latter point is crucial—women challenging power are targeted by misogynist projects as embodied women, while men challenging power are sought to be delegitimized by misogynist projects as being feminine. For instance, when Modi's opponent Rahul Gandhi is painted as effeminate, tied to his mother strings, or as the sidekick of his more assertive sister, or when Trump's followers suggest that Biden carry a "purse" along with his mask.¹¹ The prevalence of gender stereotypes in line with the devaluation of the opponents of right-wing misogynist authoritarians is such that a recent survey found that "Hillary Clinton is described in more masculine than feminine terms" (though "masculine descriptions of Clinton are associated with lower levels of support"), and "Bernie Sanders is described with more feminine than masculine traits," while Trump is overwhelmingly described as masculine (Conroy, Martin, and Nalder 2020).

Second, misogyny as a political strategy allows a pattern of useful contradictions when it comes to gender. Through these productive contradictions of policymaking, feminist and progressive gains are used to promote conservative patriarchal ends, either through policies that do not deliver in practice because they are not intended to do so or through policy institutions that are headed by people who oppose the reasons why those institutions exist. In this way, the legal and political institutions can claim to not be misogynist especially when they are held by individuals who symbolize the success of a feminist identity politics (the same case also goes for other minorities—Muslims, Dalits, indigenous, Kurds, Black, and so on), but use feminist gains for entrenching conservative patriarchal outcomes.

Many explicitly authoritarian regimes use selective references to gender and women's rights as a ruse to entrench themselves (see Tripp 2013, 530). As Errazzouki and Al-Khwaja (2013) cautioned "it becomes nearly impossible to address women's rights when social justice, equity, and basic human rights are being violated." This is especially pertinent when "dictators' wives and high-ranking female officials are presented as exemplars of these regimes honoring 'women's rights'". In a similar manner, the electorally legitimated misogynist authoritarians also enact policies and create institutions that are ostensibly meant to support women's rights but do not deliver in practice.

UN's Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is a vital forum for prioritizing and committing to gender equality and women's rights. Under Trump, the US delegation to CSW included female pro-abstinence advocate Valerie Huber, and Ambassador Nikki Haley's defense of LGBTIQI rights at the UN Security Council was coupled by hostility to women's reproductive rights on the part of the United States (Goetz 2018). In February 2019, the White House announced the Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative, a government-wide project led by its senior adviser, Trump's daughter Ivanka. Involving the State Department, the National Security Council, and other agencies, the "whole-of-government" effort aims to help 50 million women in the developing world get ahead economically over the next six years. However, simultaneously the overall foreign assistance budget was sought to be cut by the White House; the initiative does not include global health and education, does not address gender-based violence and women's disproportionate share of unpaid care work, and some data in the first annual report did not align with the effort to improving women's economic opportunities (Saldinger 2020).

Prime Minister Modi launched the "Beti Bachao Beti Padhao" ("Save the daughter, Educate the daughter") scheme in 2015 to address the declining

¹¹The understanding here is of diminishing men by feminizing them because to be a woman/feminine is seen as debased and inferior; for instance, when male Kashmiri Muslim students are sought to be humiliated in India by forcing them to wear women's clothes (Jain 2019).

child sex ratio in India and “change mindsets regarding the girl child.” Like the US whole-of-government initiative, this government-conceptualized approach involved “multi-sectoral action” through three ministries: Women and Child Development, Health and Family Welfare, and Human Resource Development. Four years later, data released by the government showed that its main aim was publicity: over 56 percent of the funds allocated under the scheme from 2014 to 2019 were spent on “media related activities,” less than 25 percent of the funds were disbursed to districts and states, and over 19 percent of the funds were not released by the government (Menon 2019).

In the case of Trump, the gender initiative led by Ivanka was set up but omitted key areas and was accompanied by a cut in the resources that would help in achieving the objectives of such a program. In the case of Modi, the scheme to save the girl child by educating her was found to have spent more than half of its budget on publicity. The idea of women’s empowerment and of having women lead organizations is used to promote agendas that enhance the prestige of the electorally legitimated misogynist authoritarians, while delivering little in practice or reversing the rights and freedoms of women and minorities.¹² The latter is achieved through the practice of appointing women and minorities to head policy institutions to safeguard their rights, but who oppose the reasons why those institutions exist in the first place.

In 2018, Bolsonaro abolished Brazil’s human rights ministry and instead created a ministry to oversee “women, family, and human rights.” A conservative evangelical pastor was appointed as the head of this ministry to promote “family values.” The Minister, Damares Alves, is a woman and opposed to abortion, saying “Women are born to be mothers,” and that “It is time for the church to tell the nation that we have come... It is time for the church to govern” (Phillips 2018). She has attacked feminism, proclaiming a new era in Brazil where “boys wear blue and girls wear pink” (Watson 2020). Likewise, in 2020, Sergio Camargo was appointed to head the Palmares Cultural Foundation, an influential government-funded institute, responsible for promoting and preserving the cultural, historic, social, and economic values of black society in Brazil. Camargo is, in his own words, “a black right-winger, an anti-victimist,” who denies the existence of racism in Brazil. In his view, there is no real racism in Brazil: “Black people complain because they are stupid and misinformed by the left” (Watson 2020). Bolsonaro has previously compared the indigenous people of Brazil to zoo animals and has also appointed Ricardo Lopes Dias (a former evangelical missionary who converted indigenous communities to Christianity) as head of the government department that protects isolated indigenous tribes from contact with non-indigenous people.

In March 2019, at an event honoring women law enforcement officers, Duterte said: “Put a (Bitch), you know, you women, you are depriving me of my freedom of expression ... You criticize every sentence or word I say, but that is my freedom to express myself ... I am doing this because I am trying to bring you to the limits of despair” (Cockburn 2019). Notably, he said this in spite of signing anti-sexual harassment ordinance and having blatantly harassed women at the press conference; having signed the Safe Spaces Act punishing sexual offences, before calling the female investigative journalist a prostitute. The law that he signed “imposes fines and, in some cases, prison sentences for sexual harassment in streets, schools and offices,

¹²This confirms Anderson’s (2015, xvi) observation that “modern misogyny offers women equality in name but then provides only narrow choices that keep male dominance in place under a veneer of equality.” See also Worth, Augoustinos, and Hastie (2016, 56) for the complex rationalization of prejudice as “fair, rational and reasonable.” Similarly, Ayata and Doğangün (2017, 611, 617) explain that while the “official gender policy” in Turkey may be in compliance with international institutions and treaties, conservative positions on gender roles and identities create a contradictory picture. Erdogan’s AKP promotes the establishment of its own NGOs “mostly led by the female relatives of party leadership” that “try to restrict women’s activism to charity work and exclude the struggle for strengthening women’s rights from the realm of civil society.”

including wolf-whistling, groping, misogynistic slurs, as well as uninvited comments or gestures referring to a person's appearance" (AFP 2019). In short, everything that Duterte himself is guilty of. There is a useful paradox in the nature of the misogynist utterances and their contradictory occurrence in the proximate neighborhood of legislative or policy frameworks, bodies, or spaces that are meant precisely to inhibit them but somehow end up managing to contain them. When these contradictions are pointed out to his spokespersons, they (Harry Roque in 2018, Salvador Panelo in 2019) repeatedly respond along the lines of—it is the feminists who are overreacting, Duterte's intention is not bad, he is just joking and trying to make people laugh (see Ellis-Petersen 2018; Go 2019). This, at a stroke, normalizes misogyny, while simultaneously presenting a facade whereby it is ostensibly punishable.

The political strategy here is to act in ways that use misogynist abuse to silence democratic dissent and also simultaneously enact legislations or policies that challenge sexism, thereby delegitimizing the critics of misogyny by accusing them of overreacting to someone who has enacted anti-sexist policy.¹³ Further, such a political strategy also legitimizes an authoritarianism within the ostensible democracy where the leader, his supporters, followers, and those like him, can not only claim to be safe from allegations of, and prosecutions for, sexism or misogyny, but also weaponize these same to get further socially sanctioned immunity from investigations on multiple issues of democratic accountability and ab/use of political power. The properly political domain of a democracy is rendered hollow and effectively anti-democratic by such misogynist authoritarians who construct a political project of achieving power in a democracy by recruiting their supporters who are enrolled into an understanding of, and commitment toward, authoritarian domination of the feminine and the feminized Others as being in itself the democratic exercise of power.

Third, it allows a gendered biopolitics of the nation which can only be protected/modernized/developed by such projects whose authoritarian leaders can restore its pride and maintain its glory. Misogyny, by maintaining and policing a hierarchic order of masculinity and femininity, thus helps the leaders entrench, defend, and sustain their policies as strong, and delegitimize challenges to it as feminine/feminist/anti-national.

The literature on authoritarian leadership confirms the key role of "threat" (and its correlates of fear and uncertainty) as a prime determinant of heightened authoritarianism; the authoritarians privilege uniformity and order, are fearful of and aggressive toward the Other, and therefore, the "finger-pointing of a fearmongering demagogue" yields public support in return for a sense of assurance (see MacWilliams 2016b, 716–17). The electorally legitimated misogynist authoritarian warns his people about the need to protect the nation from its external enemies, who are encouraged by the weaknesses within the nation caused by its internal enemies. These enemies are accused of wanting to "soften," "feminize," and destroy the nation, diminish its former glory, and undermine the traditional order of things by aligning with feminists and anti-nationals who mislead the nation's women, and occasionally men, with their care about the Others, human rights, and the environment. This is a familiar script.

These strongmen leaders present themselves as the bulwark against the destruction imminent from such changes. In other words, these leaders successfully instrumentalize a particular biopolitics of the nation whereby the nation is a gendered boundary with specific roles for embodied men and women, and with specific valorization attached to masculine and feminine attributes. The leaders themselves are a pastiche of various masculine images alternating between the

¹³ There are numerous other examples of such appointments that reflect a deliberate choice of candidate. For instance, Duterte's appointment of Roy Cimatu as the new Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) Secretary in Philippines (Greenpeace Philippines 2017); Erdogan's appointment of Aysen Gurcan, a headscarf-wearing conservative and controversial figure, as the minister in charge of family and social policies (AFP Ankara 2015).

father and the head of the family who dominates for just reasons to the heroic figure rises up at a time of need to protect the nation as its attractive son and soldier. Erdogan thus transfers the “paternalistic familial logic to the political realm” (Cindoglu and Unal 2017, 43) where the leader is the helmsman guiding the common fate of the nation. Modi becomes known to his people as a man with a “56-inch chest,” a “bachelor” leader, responsible for the “manliness of the Balakot air strike” against Pakistan, and the chief purveyor of the “main bhi chowkidar” or “I am a watchman/guard” slogan (Sen 2020). In this idea of the nation, women are seen as producers of upright citizens, nurturers of family, and transmitters of moral values, while the men protect the territorial integrity of the nation and the “honor” of its women; militarized masculinity is both prized and naturalized (Enloe 1990, 1993). The nation is to be protected by strong male leaders; its territory is often feminized as a woman and it is to be saved by its strong male sons.¹⁴ Those who critique such projects are labeled traitorous, anti-national, unpatriotic, and seeking to “destroy the image” of the country. The vilification is exacerbated when those critics are women, especially women who are prominent or able to be heard internationally.¹⁵ It is de rigueur then for such authoritarians and their followers to resort to the rhetoric that it is the outsider/global interests that want to malign the particular leader, and that the critic is somehow manipulated or remotely controlled by others (Western, Communist, Islamic interests—the labels vary depending on the geographical and geopolitical location of the country in focus).

Thus, the successful leaders of right-wing authoritarian projects are indicative of a broader political position rooted in militarized masculinity. They perform what Eksi and Wood (2019) study (in Turkey and Russia) as “political nationalist masculinity”; they present themselves as authentic and unrivalled saviors who rely on gendered signals and consciously perform masculine stereotypes—and I would add, use misogyny to delegitimize and devalue feminism and non-stereotypically feminine stereotypes—in public and visible ways so that their dominance is a function of their masculinity (and I would add misogyny). These “strong men” (Ben-Ghiat 2020), *because* they are men, are not afraid of anything; they will not be daunted by any enemies or challenges and will stop at nothing to achieve their goals: be it violent responses to parliamentary opposition in Erdogan’s Turkey or to territorial disputes in Modi’s India; Bolsonaro’s views on restricting human rights so that “a policeman who doesn’t kill isn’t a policeman” (Shukla 2019) or extrajudicial killings for a war on drugs in Duterte’s Philippines. As Saramo (2017) argues in the case of Trump, their “meta-violence” spans the spectrum from extreme emotions to social antagonisms to international tensions.

As I have noted above, misogyny works for these leaders in ways that helps them to entrench, defend, and sustain their policies as strong, and delegitimize challenges to it as feminine/feminist/anti-national. I offer a few examples here. For instance, take the case of Modi’s stance on Kashmir and Pakistan. In his first tenure, during the uprising in Kashmir in summer 2016 during which there was a widespread use of pellet firing that caused mass blinding of Kashmiris (combatants and civilians both), the head of the Central Reserve Police Force justified this by saying that sometimes wife-beating was necessary (Kaul 2018). When international concern continued to mount, in September 2016, Modi announced his “surgical strike” on Pakistan that projected him as a strong and valiant leader. He then used the same metaphor of a “surgical strike” on the economy for his disastrous demonetization policy in November 2016. None of these moves made Indians more secure, on the contrary,

¹⁴ These ideal male soldiers of the nation in some cases are deemed unable to take orders from women. For example, in a long-standing case on women getting permanent commissions and command of units in the Army, the Narendra Modi government argued that “male soldiers were not ready to accept orders from female officers” (Singh 2020).

¹⁵ Thus, for example, Gisele Bündchen is a “bad Brazilian” for criticizing the weakening of environmental protection under Bolsonaro (Kaiser 2019).

significant hardship was caused to ordinary Indians. With unemployment at a record high, his electoral fortunes as an incumbent were by no means assured in February 2019. However, after a violent incident in Kashmir where an armed forces convoy was attacked with explosives, his strongman projection became key in securing his second election victory. He was seen as the tough man who could protect and defend the nation against any and every aggressor. His “strong masculine” focus on the strategic “hard” military inevitabilities (his refrain has often been of the “soldier at the border”) and territorial cartographic concerns continues to allow the banalization of multidimensional violence against Kashmiri civilians (Kaul 2019b).

Positions that are reflective of antifeminist stances are also able to confer a useful strongman persona when shifting the political agenda and debates between other contexts. In 2012, Erdogan conflated the military airstrike and massacre of dozens of Kurdish civilians in the town of Roboski/Uludere with women’s reproductive rights, saying “every abortion is an Uludere” (Korkman 2016). Similarly, Trump’s stance on abortion, immigration, and the public health disaster of Corona was buoyed by his strongman credentials even as it made Americans less secure, more impoverished, and unwell. Bolsonaro continues to refer to Corona disease as “a little flu” and in the face of 260,000 deaths, connoting traditional stereotypes of masculine/feminine behavior, asked the people to stop “fussing and whining” and “crying” (Phillips 2021). Misogyny is useful to manage negative policy outcomes by reinforcing the roles of women as caregivers. In the Turkish case, we can see how the fallout of neoliberal schemes has been to try and restrict women to family, charity, and care (Cindoglu and Unal 2017) even as regressive gender climate means that legal changes get “socially absorbed” to the detriment of women (Ayata and Doğangün 2017).

While the association between femininity and acting from concern for others may be a constructed one, it ties into the classic associations of men with reason and women with emotion. Carol Cohn (1993, 227) recounts a white male physicist narrating his experience of being embarrassed during a meeting where he was working on modeling counterforce attacks and trying to get realistic estimates of the number of immediate fatalities from different deployments. When he heard that using slightly different assumptions there would only be 30 million fatalities rather than 36 million, everyone nodded and he blurted out “Only 30 million! Only 30 million human beings killed instantly?” At this: “Silence fell upon the room. Nobody said a word. They didn’t even look at me. It was awful. I felt like a woman.” There is a long history of associating women with care for others, and the misogyny of these leaders enables them to be seen as strong even as they wreak havoc on human security by devaluing environment or human rights concerns because they are seen as “feminine.”

The feminization of environmental concerns and issues relating to care is directly linked to the way in which the environment, care, peace, and justice are seen as “feminine” concerns. The role of misogyny can be seen at work in the link between antifeminist right-wing nationalism and climate change denialism in some countries. Anshelm and Hultman (2014) discuss how for climate change skeptics, ecological concerns are seen as a threat to an idea of industrial breadwinner masculinity; Pulé and Hultman (2019) describe how climate science is feminized in oppositional terms to the entitlements of masculine primacy. Figures such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the United States and Greta Thunberg in Europe are targeted with sustained misogyny as many men view climate activism as feminine (Gelin 2019). In their discussion of the perception of green behavior as “unmanly,” Brough and Wilkie (2017) write:

In one experiment, participants of both sexes described an individual who brought a reusable canvas bag to the grocery store as more feminine than someone who used a plastic bag—regardless of whether the shopper was a male or female. In another

experiment, participants perceived themselves to be more feminine after recalling a time when they did something good versus bad for the environment.

As the preceding discussion illustrates, misogyny means these leaders are perceived as “strong” on multiple issues, allowing them to act in brazen ways that threaten the overall well-being, and especially that of women and the marginalized groups in society. It is the espousal of violent misogyny that solidifies the appeal of such leaders when they call for strongman action on everything ranging from cleanup of the state (draining the swamp, attacking corruption, challenging dynastic rule, and so on) to violent personal attacks on opponents, to verification or rejection of human rights for all. They are seen as “capable” of carrying out “difficult” policies without compromising because they are “strong” and their strength is demonstrated by their ability to disregard “feminine” concerns—these are concerns that are “feminized” or constructed as “inferior” and of less value by such leaders—like human rights, especially for gendered and sexual minorities, critics, dissenters, and those at the direct end of receiving state violence (such as indigenous, rebel, or insurgent subjects).

Conclusion

Though misogyny is not (yet) specifically recognized as a hate crime, there are calls to do so, as its pervasive influence is increasingly in focus (Scott 2020; Gupta 2021). In addition to the arguments in this article, there is the evidential recognition that most extremists explicitly proclaim misogyny, as borne out by the professed hatred for women that domestic violence perpetrators and mass shooters have in common (Bosman, Taylor, and Arango 2019). Specifically looking at the relationship between misogyny and extremist violence, Díaz and Valji (2019, 39) highlight that the very best predictor of a state’s peacefulness is how well its women are treated.

The role of misogyny in political leadership has come to the fore in multiple ways. In 2019, dozens of female world leaders, including current and former heads of state, called for a fightback against the erosion of women’s rights, and one specifically referred to countries led by “a macho-type strongman” as part of the problem (Lyons 2019). In the Covid-19 pandemic, it became clear that the misogynist authoritarian leaders I have discussed here were unified in their deplorable mismanagement of the public health crisis. As a newspaper headline put it: “From Trump to Erdoğan, men who behave badly make the worst leaders in a pandemic” (Tisdall 2020).

These dynamics are generally highlighted in media, but it is equally vital to grow the scholarly literature to attend to them as they unfold around us in multiple countries simultaneously. This article contributes to such a literature and brings together work from different geographical contexts to argue for understanding the analytic centrality of misogyny to the exercise of political power by contemporary authoritarians. In contrast to explanations of the success of contemporary right-wing projects by perceiving them solely through the lens of “failure of the left,” I have argued that these projects also need to be understood on their own terms, for the ways in which they gain political legitimacy by weaponizing misogyny in the figures of their leaders, in the projects they build, and in the policies that they execute.

Misogyny is ubiquitous, it affects embodied men and women both, it is about the inferior status and construction of women/non-conforming feminine/feminist, it permits various kinds of violence against transgressions, and it is used as a political strategy by multiple authoritarians in contemporary democracies globally. The cult of the misogynist authoritarians in contemporary democracies can be undone by an understanding of gender and power that does not rely upon biologically rooted, hierarchical, and essentialized difference. Doing so helps to illuminate the social processes through which power is perceived and accumulated, and

has the potential to challenge the boundaries that sustain the privileges of subordinating Others. While misogyny in all its variations may be with us for a while, yet understanding and analyzing the dynamics of its use by right-wing authoritarians in contemporary democracies can at least assist us in undermining its electoral legitimation.

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