



POLICY BRIEF

Coercion and Control:

Sexual and Reproductive Health
and Rights, Decline of Democracy,
and Rise in Authoritarianism

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Photo by irontrybex

“Strajk Kobiet” translates to “Women’s Strike” from the women’s social rights movement in Poland.



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Introduction

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are essential components of human rights, gender equality, and public health. However, in many parts of the world, these rights are under threat from restrictive laws and policies, as well as social norms that stigmatize them, threatening bodily autonomy and civil liberties. Treaties and laws, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), recognize the right to make decisions about one's own sexual and reproductive health and well-being, including the right to access safe and legal abortion and contraception, as a fundamental human right. There is broad agreement that sexual and reproductive health and rights are essential to gender equality. Officials in the Biden-Harris administration have stated that "gender equality is a prerequisite for democracy"¹ and that "the status of women is the status of democracy."² Some experts have even warned that "a rollback in abortion access is indicative of backsliding democracy."³

This brief explores the connection between restrictions on SRHR, the decline of democracy, and rise of authoritarianism and provides recommendations for U.S. policymakers as they work to promote and protect these rights through U.S. foreign policy.

How Do We Define Authoritarianism and Democracy?

The United Nations' Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), states that democracy, as per the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, is "based on the freely expressed will of the people to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives."⁴ Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, opinion, and association are amongst several of its main elements,⁵ and individuals are entitled to the same treatment under the law.⁶ According to Freedom House, authoritarian states seek a "monopolistic control over political life, a one-party system organized around a strongman or military junta, and direct rule by the executive, sometimes through martial law, with little or no role for the parliament."⁷

There is an emphasis on control of key political institutions, information on subjects as well as suppression of human rights.⁸

Authoritarian Regimes and Restrictions on SRHR

Respect for human rights is an essential element of democracy, and sexual and reproductive health is a human right.

States not only have obligations under international human rights law to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights,⁹ including sexual and reproductive health and rights, but also to uplift their access to them. However, throughout history, states, particularly authoritarian regimes, have implemented restrictions on SRHR to control bodily autonomy and curb populations. There have been notable documented linkages between the coordinated backlash against sexual and reproductive health and rights and authoritarianism globally.¹⁰ Reproductive coercion has been a tool of control by authoritarian governments "to curb overpopulation" such as with China's One Child Policy, restraining population growth from 1980-2015, and in Peru in the 1990s under the Fujimori regime, where the state sanctioned forced sterilizations of Indigenous populations.¹¹ It has also been used in instances to try to repopulate the country; in Iran, when fertility rates plummeted due to family planning initiatives and the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war, the government reversed course and eliminated the budget for the health ministry's family planning program.¹² Reproductive coercion and forced sterilization has not been limited to authoritarian regimes, but it has also taken place in the U.S. targeting predominantly people of color, disabled people, and incarcerated individuals. Many U.S. states still have laws on the books permitting this.¹³

Links Between Restrictions on SRHR and Decline of Democracy

Democratic backsliding has gone hand in hand with a backlash against women's rights. Scholars have labeled the assaults on gender equality, including abortion, as assaults on democracy and have suggested that the "assault on women's rights has coincided



with a broader assault on democracy.”¹⁴ Other experts have said the undermining of abortion rights is a key sign of a troubled democracy.^{15 16 17} Trends of de-democratization have gone in parallel with increased opposition to gender equality.¹⁸ Reproductive rights have been inextricably linked to democratic institutions.¹⁹ In many instances, access to SRHR is targeted first, undermining individuals’ bodily autonomy and paving the way for repealing other rights, such as voting rights. Restrictions on SRHR can have a chilling effect on other human rights, including freedom of speech and assembly, health, and equality.

The efforts to limit and ban access to abortion in the U.S. has been underway for decades. It is now one of only a handful of countries that has rolled back access to abortion in the past 20 years, in addition to El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Poland.²⁰ The Supreme Court’s *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* decision overturned *Roe v. Wade* and took away the constitutionally protected right to abortion. This has led to states taking action to ban abortion and restricting access to SRHR. The U.S. is a case study in which we can assess the restrictions on SRHR and decline in democratic values.

Spearheaded by the Trump-Pence administration, The Geneva Consensus Declaration on Promoting Women’s Health and Strengthening the Family (GCD), the anti-abortion declaration signed by 34 countries in October 2020, is one example of a multinational declaration targeting reproductive rights under the guise of promoting women’s health and family values.²¹ This document undermined international human rights treaties yet stated that there is “no international right to abortion, nor any international obligation on the part of states to finance or facilitate abortion.”²² It is noteworthy that the majority of signatories of the declaration are authoritarian governments and do not reflect an international consensus.

The Trump-Pence administration oversaw additional assaults on SRHR as it eroded the norms and tenets of democracy. For example, it broadened the scope of the Global Gag Rule, which restricted the provision of health services and information and limited free speech and participation by civil society organizations in debates about abortion.²³ Furthermore, the administration defunded the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program, backed multiple discriminatory policies attacking the LGBTQ+ community, and appointed federal judges with anti-sexual and reproductive health and rights views. These actions occurred amidst a backdrop of the administration challenging a free and independent press and bolstering authoritarians abroad, among other actions that weakened liberal democracy globally.

This culminated in the former President and many American politicians rejecting the outcome of the 2020 elections, despite it being a fair and free election.

These are merely a few examples of anti-democratic behavior. According to various indicators, democracy in the United States has declined and has been labeled a “backsliding democracy.”²⁴ Threats to democracy were illustrated by polarization, counter-majoritarianism, and the rolling back of long-established rights²⁵ such as *Roe v. Wade*.

Recommendations:

In order to reinforce a democratic consensus and support human rights, democratic governments and international institutions must put gender equality and sexual and reproductive rights at the center of their fight against authoritarianism worldwide.²⁶

The U.S. should prioritize and promote SRHR as a human right, both domestically and internationally, and reinforce democratic principles by protecting the rights of individuals to make autonomous decisions about their bodies and lives. More specifically, the U.S. Government should do the following:

- 1. Highlight and discuss gender equality, including SRHR, and democracy: the Biden-Harris Administration should include robust discussion of promoting gender equality as a part of efforts to strengthen democracy.²⁷** The Administration must also uplift and protect SRHR access as an element of safeguarding democracy, including in follow up conversations from the Summit for Democracy and at the Generation Equality Forum’s midpoint moment.
- 2. Prioritize SRHR in foreign policy: U.S. policymakers should prioritize SRHR in foreign policy by making it a key element in diplomatic efforts and foreign aid programs.**
 - a.** For Congress, this includes supporting institutions and initiatives that promote and protect SRHR, as well as advocating for the repeal of restrictive laws and policies that restrict SRHR such as the Global Gag Rule and Helms Amendment. This would include fully funding SRHR in the State, Foreign Operations, and Related Agencies Appropriations, passing the Global HER Act to repeal the Global Gag Rule, and passing the Abortion is Healthcare Everywhere Act to repeal the Helms Amendment.
- 3. Increase funding for SRHR programs: Congress should increase funding for SRHR programs and initiatives both domestically and internationally and support the removal of abortion funding and coverage bans such as the Hyde and Weldon Amendments.²⁹**
 - a.** This includes providing funding for organizations that provide reproductive health services, such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to promote and protect SRHR globally, increasing funding for the bilateral family planning and reproductive health account, comprehensive sexuality education, and the Title X program.
- 4. Educate and inform: Further research on connections between restrictions on SRHR and decline of democracy is needed.** Civil society organizations and Departments of Health should work to educate and inform the public about SRHR and access as it relates to domestic values.
- 5. Codify the right to an abortion: To demonstrate leadership on SRHR globally, the U.S. first must ensure that access and protections are available domestically.** The U.S. must pass the Women’s Health Protection Act,³⁰ proposed federal legislation to create new legal protection for the right to provide and access abortion care, free from medically unnecessary restrictions and bans on abortion to combat the Supreme Court’s *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* decision.

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