

International incentives for women's rights in dictatorships

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Abstract

Democracy and women's rights are integrally “bundled” by the international community. This means that dictatorships can signal adherence to international norms by demonstrating progress on gender equality, often in a manner that is consistent with the perpetuation of authoritarian rule. Using a new dataset of de jure advances in women's rights, we show that dictatorships have vigorously enacted gender-related legislation, at a rate that surpasses democracies in the developing world. This pattern is shaped by international (Western) pressure: Among autocracies, foreign aid dependence and international nongovernmental organization shaming are associated with legal advances in women's rights, but not with reforms in other, more politically costly areas related to elections, political competition, and repression. Our account therefore highlights selective compliance as a form of adaptation to international pressure and underscores the role of international incentives as a complement to domestic “bottom-up” pressure for women's rights in dictatorships.

Keywords

women's rights, authoritarian politics, international norms, foreign aid, democracy promotion

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Introduction

In 2004, Laos passed a comprehensive Law on the Development and Protection of Women. It guaranteed equality in political, economic, and social rights, including progressive articles granting women priority in children's custody, an equal right to matrimonial property, and a right to equal pay. Yet, Laos' general political climate is repressive: a single-party state in which dissent is strictly prohibited, associational freedom nonexistent, and elections tightly controlled by the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party. The state-sponsored Lao Women's Union, which played a role in drafting and implementing the 2004 law, is the only recognized women's organization in the country (OHCHR 2009). Laos forms part of a cohort of post-Cold War regimes in which entrenched autocracy co-exists with increasingly progressive laws on women's rights. Other examples include Rwanda, Algeria, Morocco, Ethiopia, Malaysia, Jordan, Uganda, and tentatively Saudi Arabia, which is reforming elements of its guardian system to allow women greater mobility and legal protection. While women's movements can influence "bottom-up" policy making in autocracies (Htun and Weldon, 2012, 2018; Kang & Tripp, 2018; Tripp, 2019), the proliferation of gender reforms even in closed authoritarian regimes where civil society is repressed points to the complementary importance of "top-down" pressures. Here, we explore the role of external forces, specifically, how international pressure for democracy can translate more narrowly to progress on women's rights.

For decades, the primary focus of international democracy promotion has been on political competition and multiparty elections. Yet, women's rights are now integrally "bundled" into the democracy promotion regime. Ratings agencies evaluate states' democratic performance based in part on their respect for women's political, economic and social rights, while donors have incorporated gender concerns into their priorities, allocation decisions and even conditions for lending. This creates new strategy spaces for governments. Leaders seeking to signal adherence to the over-arching regime may choose from a menu of bundled norms, and advances in one area may serve to compensate for a lack of progress in another.

We argue that the bundling of gender equality with other democratic norms creates particular incentives for autocracies to advance women's rights, because such reforms entail relatively less political cost than reforms related to political competition, elections and repression.¹ For autocrats, we expect incentives to demonstrate progress on women's rights to be particularly high when: (a) the international costs of norm noncompliance are high (*susceptibility* to international pressure) and (b) the government is the target of public international opprobrium (*visibility* of norm noncompliance). We explore two country-specific sources of susceptibility and visibility: dependence on foreign aid, and the intensity of international shaming for political repression. We

emphasize that our theory and tests center on legal *de jure* advances in women's rights, because these are the outcomes to which international actors are most attentive.² *De jure* change may of course lead to *de facto* improvement in the longer-run, but this also depends on country-specific legal, political and societal factors.

Our analysis makes use of an original dataset on the adoption of laws pertaining to women's political, economic, and social rights in developing countries, from 1996 to 2016. We demonstrate, first, that dictatorships are actively enacting women's rights legislation, at rates that surpass democracies, and that this is not explained simply by initial disparities in gender equality across regime type. Second, we show that international incentives help explain this. Among dictatorships, international economic and social pressure are associated with more numerous gender-related laws, even after accounting for domestic civil society, women's status, and political openness. Third, we find that among autocracies, the types of reforms most responsive to international pressure relate not to women's political representation, but rather to women's economic and social equality, as well as laws related to violence against women (VAW). Though much research has focused on the adoption of legislative gender quotas, our findings underscore that opportunities for signaling adherence with Western values extend beyond the realm of descriptive political representation. Finally, we confirm that, among autocracies, aid dependence and shaming are not associated with more politically costly reforms to elections, political competition, or repression. Taken together, these findings indicate that international pressure—and governments' response to it—is an important factor explaining the growth in gender-related legislation in authoritarian regimes.

While this is certainly not the first study to explore international influences on women's rights in dictatorships, our theory of "bundled norms" generates new insights about the incentives, specific to authoritarian governments, for women's rights versus other types of reform. Empirically, our data on *de jure* women's rights reforms—which covers political, economic and social rights—also differs from studies that examine certain types of laws in isolation, such as gender quotas (Bush, 2011; Dahlerup, 2006; Edgell, 2017; Krook, 2006; Kang & Tripp, 2018; Hughes et al., 2015; Swiss & Fallon, 2017), laws on VAW and family law (Htun and Weldon, 2012, 2015). We are therefore able to assemble a comprehensive picture of the scope of gender reforms undertaken by autocracies, as well as assess which types are most closely associated with international pressure.

We also contribute to research on international norms. A large body of work examines competing norms which make opposing behavioral prescriptions,³ such as sovereignty and human rights norms (Dembinski, 2016; Donnelly, 2007; McFaul, 2004; Reus-Smit, 2001);⁴ or norms in "tension," in which the implementation of one undermines the other (Grimm & Leininger,

2012; Krook & True, 2012). Such accounts have sought to explain which norm “wins out” (Bailey, 2008; Panke & Petersohn, 2011). In contrast, bundled norms are characterized not by their opposition, but by their linkage—which allows governments to engage in *selective compliance*. Our account therefore joins those who explore how various domestic actors strategically adapt to international norms, whether activists (Hughes et al., 2015, p. 358), bureaucrats (Kelley & Simmons, 2015, p. 58), or governments (Simpser & Donno, 2012).

We proceed as follows. We first document how women’s rights have been bundled within the broader international democracy promotion regime. We present our theory of adaptation to international pressure, and derive testable hypotheses. We then introduce our dataset of women’s rights legislation, and we use these data to explore our hypotheses about the conditions under which authoritarian regimes advance *de jure* gender equality.

Women’s Rights and the Democracy Promotion Regime

The international democracy promotion regime comprises the network of organizations, both governmental and nongovernmental, that seeks to promote democracy around the world. “Democracy” is a broad construct—encompassing political competition, individual liberty, rule of law, inclusion, and equality—and different actors may emphasize different goals (Kopstein, 2006; Wolff, 2012). Yet, based on the prevailing view that elections are the bedrock of democracy, the international community’s main focus has been on advancing political competition through multiparty elections in an environment free of political repression.⁵

In parallel with this focus on elections and political competition, women’s rights have emerged as a set of bundled norms, flowing from the principles of democratic equality and inclusion (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Rizzo et al., 2007; Tremblay, 2007).⁶ More practically, an emphasis on women’s rights also flowed from donors’ desire to identify measurable and “regime-compatible” goals which dictatorships are more willing to implement (Bush, 2015). Women’s *political rights* include the right to vote, to join or lead political parties, to be represented in government, to express political views, to petition the government and to run for political office. Women’s *economic rights* include the right to freely and autonomously seek employment in an occupation of one’s choosing, to own and inherit property, to engage in economic exchange, to be free from sexual harassment, free from discrimination in hiring, and to enjoy a right to equal pay. Women’s *social and family rights* include rights to make free choices about marriage and divorce, to retain custody of children, to seek redress for domestic violence, and to be free from harmful gender-based practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM).

A milestone in the discursive linkage of women's rights with democracy was the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, whose Plan of Action boldly stated that "[n]o government can claim to be democratic until women are guaranteed the right to equal representation." Beyond representation, the Platform proclaims improvement in women's social, economic and political status as essential for achieving "transparent and accountable government" (Chapter 4, Pillar G number 7). This was a response to the perceived over-emphasis on elections as the marker of democratic progress (Moghadam, 2008). In the wake of Beijing, transnational activists, international organizations, and powerful states took steps to put these ideas into practice. Below, we briefly summarize how women's rights have been incorporated into the core functions of *performance evaluation, assistance, and conditionality* exercised by actors in the democracy promotion regime, noting how this bundling has increased in frequency and scope after 2000. For a longer description of these processes, see [Supplementary Appendix 1](#).

Performance Evaluation: A host of entities issue periodic reports in which evaluation of countries' overall democratic and human rights performance includes consideration of respect for women's rights. For example, of the 17 indexes that [Cooley and Snyder \(2015\)](#) identify for rating the quality of democracy, 10 include clear criteria for the evaluation of women's rights.⁷ This includes Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" report, the U.S. State Department's annual human rights reports, and the reports issued by international election monitors. These ratings have serious consequences for states: international performance evaluation "seeks to enact change through assessment, reporting and ranking," and "invites international intervention and management" ([Merry, 2016](#), 5–11). It "exerts normative pressures on states" and provides benchmarks for aid distribution or other policy decisions ([Cooley, 2015a, 2015b](#): 2, 7).

Assistance. The key players in foreign assistance have embraced gender equality, particularly after 2000 due to the confluence of shifting U.S. foreign policy goals and increased emphasis on gender in the Millennium Development Goals. In the post-9/11 United States, President George W. Bush viewed women's empowerment, particularly in the Muslim world, as a crucial element of a more muscular approach to democracy promotion ([Eisestein 2015](#); [Ottaway, 2004](#)). Within the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the European Union's aid arm, gender action plans and impact analyses became required elements in all assistance programs; while the OECD's creditor reporting system (CRS) tracks all aid projects that target gender equality and women's empowerment.⁸ For DAC donors, program evaluation includes explicit consideration of *de jure* progress on gender equality. Since 2011, USAID programs, for example, require evaluation of how many

gender-related laws were drafted, proposed or adopted by the country during the project period (USAID 2012, 14).

Conditionality. International donors regularly make aid conditional on “good governance.”⁹ Perhaps the most explicit example of this type of conditionality is the Millennium Challenge Corporation, established in 2004, which represents “one of the most important developments in the evolving regulatory role of ‘ratings and rankings organizations’” (Cooley, 2015a, 2015b, 19). The MCC selects recipient countries through a scoring system that includes assessments of “gender in the economy” (from the World Bank); female school enrollment rates (from UNESCO); as well as the Freedom House civil liberties indicator and State Department human rights reports, both of which include assessments of women’s economic and social rights. Germany’s Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) scores countries based on their progress on indicators, including “recognition and promotion of women’s rights” (BMZ 2009, 23). The World Bank encourages countries to adopt specific gender-related legislative reforms as conditions for lending, for example, through its focus on land law reform (Bruce et al., 2006, 23–27). For other prominent donors, like USAID and the EU, it is clear that considerations of democratic performance, women’s rights, and election observer reports have influenced their decisions to award or withdraw aid (Lu & Breuning, 2014; Woo & Parke, 2016). Consistent with this idea, research has shown that Western aid is associated with the introduction of legislative gender quotas (Bush, 2011; Edgell, 2017; UNDP 2009) and with general democratic improvements (Bermeo, 2016; Carnegie & Marinov, 2017; Dietrich & Wright, 2015).

We proceed to make two observations about the bundling of women’s rights with other democratic norms. First, progress on women’s rights can occur without concomitant progress on political competition.¹⁰ Even a brief consideration of the historical record makes clear that in many countries, efforts to advance women’s rights have been entirely consistent with the perpetuation of autocratic rule. Among communist and socialist regimes—historically among the most long-lived autocracies—the commitment to women’s economic rights, participation in the workforce, and access to child- and healthcare is well known (Gal & Kligman, 2000; Tripp, 2013). Beyond this, several other durable dictatorships have prioritized women’s empowerment as a means to advance economic modernization and bolster domestic legitimacy (Htun, 2003, Ch.3; Donno & Kreft, 2019; Lorch & Bunk, 2016; Salhi, 2010; Sater, 2007; Tripp, 2019).

Second, it follows that the domestic political costs of reforms that advance political competition and those that advance women’s rights are quite different. For an autocrat, each step toward political liberalization makes survival more difficult: Allowing opposition and holding competitive elections

increases the risk of losing power. Manipulating elections, in turn, is risky, in that success is never guaranteed, and overt fraud can backfire (Kuntz & Thompson, 2009; Tucker, 2007). And inviting election monitors—as regimes are now universally pressured to do—further increases the difficulty of manipulation.

In contrast, advancing women's rights is less politically costly. Women's core economic rights, including the rights to inherit and own property, to work and to own businesses, typically pose no direct threat to an autocrat's political survival, and may even be used as a means of coopting support (Donno & Kreft, 2019). Many stable autocracies exhibit high female economic activity. In the Maghreb, monarchies and civilian regimes alike have used women's economic and social rights—including reform to family law—to push back against more conservative opposition movements (Tripp, 2019). Another prominent area of reform sought by the international community seeks to advance women's political representation through legislative gender quotas (Bush & Zetterberg, 2020; Krook, 2006; Krook & True, 2010; Paxton et al., 2006; Swiss & Fallon, 2017). While women's representation is a valued outcome which can have positive effects on policy, the effect on autocratic survival is often minimal; quotas can be designed and implemented so as not to threaten legislative control, particularly in regimes governed by institutionalized ruling parties (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2016; Muriaas & Wang, 2012). In sum, our claim is not that advancing women's rights and representation is costless for an autocrat. Introducing laws that empower women may also empower women activists who, if not aligned with the regime, may be perceived as a political threat.¹¹ For states with institutionalized religious authority, reforms that touch upon doctrinal issues related to the family and reproductive rights may be costly indeed (Htun & Weldon, 2018, Ch. 4). Rather, our claim is a relative one: advancing women's rights is less directly costly for autocratic regime survival compared to political reforms related to elections, political competition, and repression.¹²

An initial look at the evidence reveals that dictatorships are indeed actively advancing women's rights in law, at a rate that surpasses democracies in the developing world. Figure 1 shows the smoothed average number of gender-related reforms introduced in new laws, by regime type.¹³ Here, we consider only changes that *advance* gender equality, covering a range of women's economic, political and social rights (our measure of *de jure* women's rights change, explained in the "Data" section). Among dictatorships, the average number of reforms per year was approximately 0.31. Put differently, about one-third of dictatorships enacted a gender reform each year, compared to about 26% of democracies. The picture becomes yet more interesting when we distinguish between electoral authoritarian and closed authoritarian regimes (Figure 2).¹⁴ While legislative activity for women's rights declined slightly over time among democracies and electoral authoritarian regimes, closed

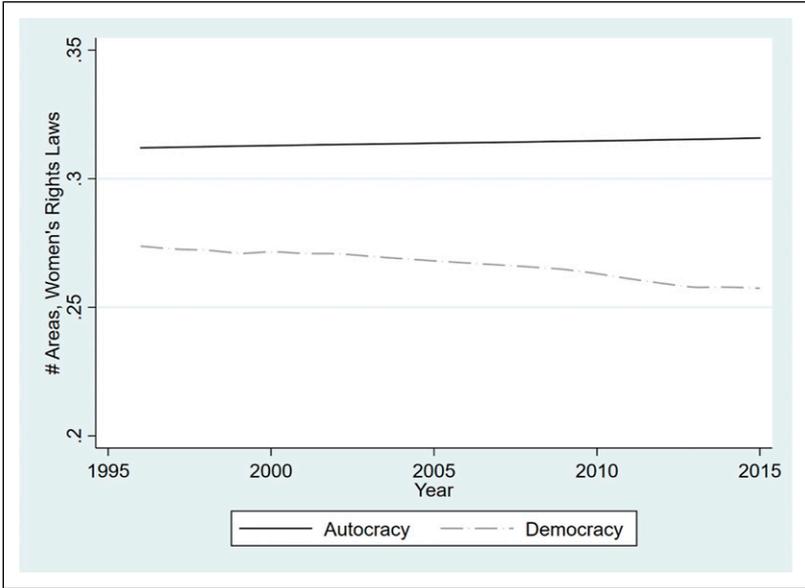


Figure 1. Number of women’s rights laws enacted over time: democracy and dictatorship.

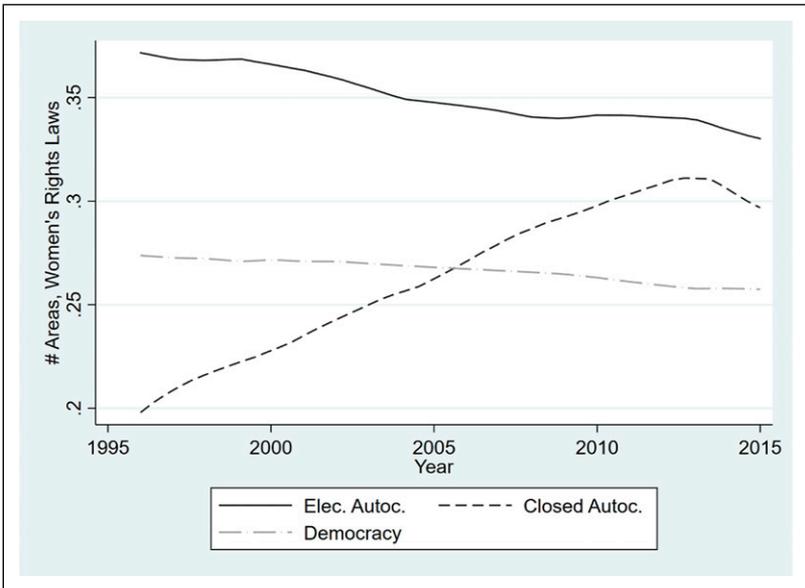


Figure 2. Number of women’s rights laws enacted over time: democracy, electoral authoritarian, and closed authoritarian regimes.

authoritarian regimes—which repress independent associational activity and do not hold multiparty elections—exhibit a steady increase over time, even surpassing the average activity in democracies around 2005. These patterns are counterintuitive if one departs from the assumption that advances in gender equality are the result of bottom-up civil society pressure. If this were the whole story, we would expect to see consistently higher performance in democracies and electoral autocracies, rather than the (eventual) clustering that we observe in [Figure 2](#).¹⁵ Rather, the activity in closed regimes is consistent with our claim that international incentives can drive a more “top-down” process of policy change.¹⁶ Advancing women’s rights may be an attractive strategy for closed regimes seeking to burnish an image of progress without having to increase political openness. To be clear, we expect international incentives to operate in closed and electoral authoritarian regimes alike, but we consider this pattern of high activity in closed regimes to provide initial support for the role of international “top-down” pressures.

To be sure, the need to project a modernizing image to the outside world can coincide with domestic incentives for advancing women’s rights, including pressure from the women’s movement or the desire to expand the coalition of regime supporters.¹⁷ Aili Tripp notes the “multiple and often competing agendas involved in the struggles over women’s rights” (2019, P. 6) of which external incentives are but one. Our account does not seek to challenge those who highlight local feminist movements ([Htun & Weldon, 2018](#); [Medie, 2013](#); [Mwambari, 2017](#); [Tripp, 2019](#)), but rather to focus attention on the complementary role of international normative pressure and the particular incentives that it creates for autocracies.

One might counter that the trends we observe in [Figures 1](#) and [2](#) are explained by different starting points in democracies and dictatorships. If authoritarian regimes have weaker legal protections for women’s rights to begin with, their increasing levels of *de jure* activity may simply reflect the fact that there are more possible reforms for them to undertake, compared to democracies. However, we find no evidence that a worse starting point on gender equality is associated with more new laws. Instead, there is a positive association: countries (both democracies and dictatorships) with higher levels of women’s empowerment tend to pass more gender-related laws, suggesting a virtuous circle (see [Supplementary Appendix Figure 1](#)). We further explore this issue in our multivariate analysis.

Adaptation to International Pressure

Rationalist accounts of international norms emphasize their influence on governments’ cost-benefit calculations, either through linking material benefits to compliance or through activating more diffuse reputational concerns. States may desire to gain international prestige or to be perceived as “modern”

(Townes, 2012). Kelley summarizes the social benefits of a good reputation as providing “states and their governments a sense of belonging, facilitates cooperation with other states, and allows them to consider themselves as upright members of the international community” (2017, 39). International ratings and performance evaluation reinforce these social judgments by comparing countries to their neighbors and regional rivals (Cooley, 2015a, 2015b, p. 21). Instrumental concerns also come into play, as a host of studies on the conditionality of aid, trade, FDI and IO membership have shown (Benassy-Quere et al., 2007; Carnegie & Marinov, 2017; Gray, 2009, 2013; Gliberman & Shapiro, 2002; Hermes & Lensink, 2001; Hyde, 2011; Nanda, 2006; Stein & Daude, 2001; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004; Pevehouse, 2002; Meunier and Nikolaidis, 2006; von Borzyskowski and Vabulas, 2019). Poor ratings from performance evaluators have real consequences for the allocation of international benefits and, thus, for state behavior (Kelley & Simmons, 2015).¹⁸

Given the range of material and social benefits attached to compliance, autocratic governments face an obvious problem: they do not comply with democratic norms. Full compliance, in the form of competitive multiparty elections in a context free from political repression, would pose grave risks to the regime’s grip on power. Instead, autocrats seek coping mechanisms as a way to adapt to international pressure. Previous research highlights *superficial compliance* and *tactical shifts* as two such mechanisms. For example, studying Serbia’s compliance with transitional justice norms, Subotic (2009) describes change that was “only as deep as domestic elites judge is absolutely necessary to maintain international good standing” (37), as Serbia reluctantly handed over war criminals to the international tribunal, but failed to reform its own judicial system to handle prosecutions domestically. Alternatively, some areas are amenable to shifting, for example, in the area of electoral integrity, governments may reduce outright ballot fraud while increasing pre-election misconduct; or they may shift fraud toward polling stations that are not visited by international observers (Asunka et al., 2019; Beaulieu & Hyde, 2009; Simpson & Donno, 2012).¹⁹

Here, we highlight a different strategy in the context of bundled norms, that of *selective compliance*. Governments that eschew compliance in one area can make progress in the other linked area, and still show movement toward international standards. In short, governments may advance women’s rights as a way to signal adherence with democratic norms without initiating reforms that increase political competition. We emphasize that this is not a form of “trickery.” Donors understand when reforms are limited in scope and are not fooled into thinking that women’s rights are equivalent to full-scale political liberalization. Rather, because women’s rights are valued as an element of democracy, such progress is lauded, rewarded, and may be accompanied by a temporary easing of pressure in other areas.

There is abundant evidence of praise by Western media and officials when autocrats advance women's rights, even in the absence of more comprehensive political reforms. For example, in May 2005, the New York Times praised Kuwait's decision to allow women to vote: "Kuwait's Parliament granted full political rights to women on Monday, making way for them to vote and run for office in parliamentary and local elections for the first time in the country's history. The surprise amendment to Kuwait's election law ...promises to redefine the city-state's political landscape." The State Department spokesman, Richard A. Boucher, also welcomed the legislation, calling it "an important step forward for the women of Kuwait and for the nation as a whole."²⁰ Summarizing Rwanda's progress on gender in 2010, a feature in *The Guardian* touted: "Women now have the right to own land and property. When they marry they can choose to pool their assets with their husband or they can keep them separate. The divorce rate is increasing as a consequence of these changes. Inheritance laws have been passed so that a man's property is split equally between his wife and both female and male children...Rwanda's progress on women is admired elsewhere."²¹

Hypotheses

We expect autocratic governments to respond to pressure for democracy and human rights by making *de jure* advances in women's rights—that is, changes in laws. Because *de jure* change is concrete and measurable, international organizations, donors, election monitors and performance evaluators focus on it. Schueth's (2015) account of how Georgia's government employed legal reform to improve its ranking in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index demonstrates this dynamic. Cooley describes this as "teaching to the test," whereby states "target the most malleable measures and indicators on which they are actually ranked," thereby improving their reputation without necessarily adopting new *de facto* standards of behavior (2015a, 2015b, p. 5).²² Similarly, Murdie and Peksen (2015, p. 1) find that governments respond to pressure from advocacy groups by promoting "only the rights that do not threaten their own power and status"; Dietrich (2011) finds that aid-recipient governments comply with donor demands primarily in sectors where "compliance is cheap"; and Risse et al. (1999, p. 25–28) show that making cosmetic change can temporarily work to stop international criticism.²³ In sum, we focus on *de jure* change. Such changes may lead to *de facto* improvements for women, but research suggests that there are often implementation lags, and that the impact of *de jure* reforms is conditional on domestic political and cultural factors, which may be outside of the government's control (Htun & Jensenius, 2020; Simmons, 2009).

For dictatorships, incentives to demonstrate progress on women's rights increase with pressure for compliance with international democratic norms.

As our discussion of the democracy promotion regime made clear, one source of pressure stems from economic conditionality. This is particularly true for countries that depend on the West. Cooley explains that “small states that depend on international donors or capital flows will care more about international rankings...” (2015a, 2015b, p. 4–5). Aid dependence is a prominent source of vulnerability, quite different from relationships of reciprocal interdependence in trade. A growing body of research does find that Western aid is held conditional on democratic performance, though this seems limited to the post-Cold War era, and to countries not shielded by a competing geopolitical interest.²⁴ Democratic aid conditionality is exercised by a wide range of Western donors, including the United States, European Union, UK, Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands (Grimm & Mathis, 2017; Kubicek, 2011; Library of Congress, 2012).²⁵ Thus, for recipient governments, the “bite” of aid conditionality is not associated with one particular donor but rather with a more diffuse sense of what is expected by the West. This has consequences for state behavior, as governments seek to “avoid opprobrium by introducing policy changes” (Kelley & Simmons, 2015, p. 58). In an in-depth study of attitudes toward gender reforms in Morocco, Barnett (2019) confirms that international expectations are perceived by both the elites and masses as a central motivation for the country’s 2004 reforms to family and labor law. She documents a sense of inevitability, of the “implicit requirements” of being part of the contemporary international (and European) community and of Morocco’s subordinate position within it (15–20).

Hypothesis 1 (*Susceptibility*): Among autocratic regimes, advances in women’s rights will be higher in states dependent on Western aid.

A second source of pressure stems from negative publicity. Shaming by international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) plays a crucial role in theories of norm socialization (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Risse et al., 1999; Simmons, 2009). Shaming provides an increased level of visibility to political repression, and offending states may change their practices to avoid the international spotlight (DeMeritt, 2012; Esarey & DeMeritt, 2017; Franklin, 2008; Hendrix & Wong, 2013; Krain, 2012; Murdie & Davis, 2012; Murdie & Peksen, 2015), though not always in an unambiguously positive direction (DeMeritt & Conrad, 2019; Hafner-Burton, 2008). Shaming works not only through direct social pressure on governments, but also via second-order effects: by encouraging other states, individuals and organizations to pressure the target-state with sticks and carrots (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Risse et al., 1999). Empirical studies of human rights shaming find, indeed, that it can be associated with fewer multilateral loans (Woo & Murdie, 2017), reduced investment (Barry et al., 2013; Bagwell & Hall, 2020), and changes in foreign aid (Dietrich & Murdie, 2017; Kahn-Nisser, 2018; Lebovic & Voeten, 2009).

We therefore expect that when faced with international criticism for political repression, dictatorships have an incentive to find a way to meaningfully respond while limiting the risks to political survival, that is, to enact laws related to women's rights.

Hypothesis 2 (*Visibility*): Among autocratic regimes, advances in women's rights will be higher as the amount of targeted INGO shaming increases.

These hypotheses predict *de jure* improvements in women's rights in response to international pressure for democracy. An additional implication of our theory is that, among dictatorships on average, we should not expect aid dependence and shaming to spur more politically costly reforms that entail liberalizing political competition, improving the quality of elections or reducing repression. In other words, our theory makes specific claims about *women's rights*, but we do not expect dictatorships to respond to international pressure by making a variety of political reforms. In the next section, we examine this. To be sure, there are some dictatorships in which international pressure ignites wholesale political liberalization, but research indicates that this occurs under quite limited circumstances.²⁶ In the main, we expect rational autocrats to favor the "low-hanging" fruit.

Dependent Variable: Women's Rights Legislation

We assess our hypotheses using a new dataset of *de jure* legal change in 14 areas of women's rights. The data cover 138 countries (of which 125 passed at least one relevant gender-related law), with yearly entries from 1996 to 2015. OECD countries are excluded. Data are coded for the entire period using the US State Department's annual Human Rights Reports. A country is coded as experiencing a change in law if (a) new legislation pertaining to women's rights is adopted; or (b) existing law (criminal or civil) is modified by legislative or judicial actors. The inclusion of judicial action is to identify cases in which laws are overturned or remanded by the judiciary, rather than being changed through direct legislative action. Examples of legislation that we code include Bangladesh's 2010 law that criminalized domestic violence; Burkina Faso's adoption of a gender quota for legislative and municipal elections in 2009; Turkey's 2014 law increasing penalties for sexual harassment and assault; The 2004 "Land Act" in Tanzania, which guaranteed women's rights to use, own and inherit land; and Pakistan's 2007 law outlawing forced marriages.

Legislation change is coded in the following thematic areas:²⁷ education, FGM, VAW, economic empowerment, political representation, civil society participation, healthcare access, domestic work, employment rights, marital rights, and property rights.²⁸ We later group these areas into four broader categories, as explained in the "Results" section. Only legislative change at the

national level is included in our coding; any laws adopted by regional governments are excluded. The number of thematic *areas* experiencing legislative change (per year) serves as our main dependent variable, however we also use a measure of the total count of laws adopted as a robustness check.

Our primary dependent variable, coded for each country-year, is:

- A count of the number of women's rights issue areas which are covered by one or more new laws. We refer to this as the *number of women's rights reforms*.

The advantage of coding the variable in this way is that it captures the scope of legal reform. Some countries may pass “omnibus” package laws that address multiple areas related to gender equality simultaneously, whereas other countries—for reasons specific to the political or legislative process—may pass pieces of legislation for each issue area. A count for the number of laws, without considering the number of covered issues, may therefore undercount the scope of reform.

Our data differ from other data sources on women's rights in three ways. First, our coding is limited to *de jure* change. We do not account for women's *de facto* social status—which may be reflected, for example, in labor market participation or fertility rates. Nor do we account for whether laws on the books are enforced, which is a more subjective judgment and difficult to code for in information-poor contexts. Our approach therefore differs from other measures, such as the CIRI index, V-Dem indicators and UN Gender Inequality Index, which consider both *de jure* and *de facto* status in their coding of women's status.²⁹ One advantage of focusing on *de jure* change is that such developments are under the government's direct and proximate control. This is useful for our purposes, since it is the government's actions that are the focus of our theory, whereas women's *de facto* status is influenced by social and cultural norms, which are slowly changing and largely outside the government's control.

Second, our coding is an event-based record of legal change that does not generate a composite rating of a country's status. This stands, again, in contrast to the CIRI index, as well as the UN Gender Inequality Index, which generates an aggregate score from component indicators. Our approach does not require subjective judgments about the importance of any given legal change. It also has the advantage of clarity, in contrast to the merging and weighting required to create composite indexes, after which it is difficult to know what may be driving an increase or decrease in the measure.³⁰ Third, compared to other indicators of *de jure* provisions, our data have substantially broader temporal and country coverage.³¹ Temporally, this allows us to identify more precise correlations between the timing of *de jure* change and our (time-varying) factors of interest.

Table 1. Legislation by Issue Area.

	Legislation
Civil society	5
Domestic workers	9
Economic empowerment	8
Education	15
Employment rights	88
FGM	23
Healthcare	20
Judicial rights	42
Marital rights	77
Parental rights	37
Political representation	48
Property rights	39
Violence	185
Other	75

Table 2. Legislation by Region.

Region	Total Laws	Laws Per Country
Post-communist states	115	4.3
Latin America and Caribbean	116	5
Middle East and North Africa	139	7
Sub-Saharan Africa	172	3.7
Asia	136	5.9

Our data collection yields 548 distinct pieces of legislation. Here, we analyze only laws that advance women's rights, excluding those that restrict women's rights. Many laws cover more than one issue area. [Table 1](#) summarizes the distribution of laws by area. The issues most often addressed are VAW (addressed in 185 country-years), women's employment rights (88), marital rights (77) and women's political representation (48).

Legislative activity is widely dispersed across regions, as [Table 2](#) illustrates. The greatest number of laws have been introduced in sub-Saharan Africa (172 laws), but when we normalize by the number of countries in the region, we see that countries in the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) have been most active overall, with an average of nearly 7 pieces of legislation per country between 1996 and 2015. They are followed by Asia (nearly 6 laws, on average), and Latin America (5 laws). There is, of course, considerable variation within these regional averages. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example,

countries such as Nigeria and Mali passed only one relevant law during the period under study, whereas Uganda and Ethiopia passed eight.

Analysis

We predict that, among dictatorships, *susceptibility* to international pressure for democracy, and *visibility* of noncompliance with these norms should be associated with increased *de jure* activity for the advancement of women's rights. To evaluate our argument, we construct a cross-national dataset from 1996 to 2015, including all dictatorships with population greater than 1 million.³² We focus on this period due to the applicability of our theory: because the 1995 Beijing Conference was a milestone in bringing women's rights to the forefront of international concern, it also marks the point at which we expect our hypotheses to hold, that is, that authoritarian governments would view women's rights as a means to signal progress toward broader democratic norms. We first employ our count of women's rights legislation as the dependent variable, estimating negative binomial models with robust standard errors clustered by country.³³ We then estimate logit models which divide the dependent variable into different women's rights issue areas, with "1" indicating that a law in that area was passed in a given year.³⁴ All right-hand-side variables are lagged by 1 year, and all models include region fixed effects, since both the baseline status of women and propensity for gender reform tends to vary by global region. Descriptive statistics for all variables are shown in [Supplementary Appendix Table 2](#). We note that our models are not designed to assess causality; rather we seek to uncover associations that are consistent with our theory and inconsistent with alternative explanations. Our base model takes the following form

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 Aid_{it-1} + \beta_2 Shaming_{it-1} + \beta_n Controls_{nit-1} + \beta_4 Region_i + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

To operationalize *susceptibility* and *vulnerability*, we identify two measures that capture pressure for democracy in general terms, that is, pressure that is not specific to women's rights. In this way, we seek to capture whether autocrats favor gender-related reforms out of a potentially wider range of reforms that would signal norm compliance. Our first measure captures economic pressure: for *susceptibility*, we use a variable for official development assistance from OECD countries, as a percent of recipient country GDP. We average over 3 years ($t-4$ to $t-1$) to smooth year-on-year fluctuations due to political or budgetary factors within the donor states.³⁵ As discussed above, many have documented that Western aid is conditional on democratic performance, making this a good summary measure of the extent to which a government faces economic incentives to conform to international (Western) expectations. (In

robustness tests, we explore whether results hold for US aid specifically.) There may be reciprocity in the relationship between foreign aid and women's rights legislation (see, for example, [Edgell, 2017](#)); indeed, this is consistent with our theory about the benefits of advancing women's rights. We are therefore careful to interpret our results in correlational terms. And by examining the 3-year lagged average of aid as a *percent of GDP*, we capture dependence in a structural sense, which is different from tracking annual aid commitments.

Our second measure captures international social pressure: we measure the *visibility* of norm noncompliance using [Murdie and Peksen's \(2015\)](#) variable for INGO shaming of political repression. This is the yearly count of the number of times a country was negatively targeted by a human rights organization for their practices involving physical integrity rights, which include torture, political imprisonment, extrajudicial killing and politically motivated disappearances. Respect for physical integrity rights is fundamental to political competition ([Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005](#)), and violations of these rights are widespread among autocracies, although to varying degrees ([Vreeland, 2008](#)). We employ a cumulative measure: the logged sum of the total number of shaming incidents that targeted the country in question over the previous 3 years ($t-4$ to $t-1$). We emphasize that this measure of shaming is different from a variable that measures actual rights violations, and purposefully so. Our goal is to capture the intensity of negative publicity, which may vary across otherwise similar regimes.³⁶

Next, we create measures of regime type. To identify the sample of authoritarian regimes, we use Geddes, Wright and Frantz's (GWF) (2014) dichotomous coding of regime type.³⁷ They define democratic regimes as those which come to power using "direct, reasonably fair competitive elections," and autocratic regimes as those which come to power via other means, for example, via hereditary succession, military coups, single party elections, or elections that are otherwise not competitive enough to meet the democratic threshold.³⁸ Among dictatorships, we then distinguish between electoral authoritarian (EA) and closed authoritarian (CA), which are mutually exclusive categories. Following [Donno and Kreft \(2019\)](#), we consider a regime to be EA if it held a minimally competitive multiparty election within the previous 6 years under that regime.³⁹ We employ [Hyde and Marinov's \(2012\)](#) three-part criteria for classifying elections as minimally competitive, that is, when multiple political parties are allowed, at least one of these parties is an opposition party, and the ballot contains a choice between more than one party/candidate. All other dictatorships are coded as closed authoritarian. Closed regimes include unelected military juntas (e.g., Mali in 2012); regimes elected without opposition on the ballot (e.g., Egypt 2018); unelected monarchies (e.g., Saudi Arabia); and single-party regimes (e.g., China). In models run on the sample of dictatorships, we include the dummy variable for *closed authoritarianism* as a control (EA regimes are the omitted category.)

Our base model includes two controls: *GDP per capita* (logged), on the logic that economic development is associated with greater capacity for legal reform, and that modernization generates greater societal demand for gender equality. To more directly capture the potential for domestic mobilization for women's rights, we include the V-Dem measure of *civil society freedom* ("v2csreprss"), where higher values indicate better performance, that is, less repression of civil society.

We then estimate models with additional controls. First, because *post-conflict periods* are often catalysts for women's empowerment and legal change (Hughes & Tripp, 2015; Webster et al., 2019), we include an indicator for the 5 years that follow the termination of civil conflict.⁴⁰ We then include two variables that capture the country's baseline or "starting point" with respect to women's status in law and society, on the logic that this may influence the degree to which further legislation is needed. These are (1) the V-PDem index of *women's political empowerment* ("v2x_gender"), which captures women's *de facto* opportunities for civil society participation, open and equal discussion of political issues, and their descriptive representation in formal political institutions. (2) A cumulative count of the *previous number of women's rights laws* that were passed in the country since 1996, which is the year our data begin. Note that it is not clear *a priori* whether these variables should exhibit a positive or negative sign: On the one hand, we might expect countries with more space for women's civil society participation to enact more laws, just as countries with stronger track records of passing legislation may exhibit more favorable conditions (and momentum) for further advances. On the other hand, it may be that more gender-unequal societies have greater opportunity (and need) for new women's rights legislation.

Finally, we include two variables to capture other sources of international and domestic pressure for progress on women's rights. First, we control for whether the country has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (*CEDAW*), which should trigger heightened scrutiny from both international and domestic women's groups.⁴¹ To capture diffusion effects, we include a measure of *global women's rights legislation*, measured as the (lagged 1-year) proportion of states in the world that passed at least one law related to women's rights, excluding country *i*. Research on the diffusion of human rights and democracy notes the reputational costs of failing to adopt a norm which most other countries have adopted (Gleditsch & Ward, 2006; Htun & Weldon, 2018; Hughes et al., 2015; Przeworski, 2009, Ch. 2). For example, Simmons and Elkins discuss the "intangible costs of nonconformity" if a state resists implementing policies around which there exists a growing global consensus (2004, p. 173).

Results and Discussion

Table 3 presents results from our core models predicting women's rights laws in dictatorships. In models 1–2, the dependent variable counts the number of *women's rights areas* addressed in new legislation. Models 3–6 break things down by issue area. We generate indicator variables for new laws in the following categories: (1) women's *political representation*, encompassing laws

Table 3. Women's Rights Laws in Dictatorships.

	Count models		Logit models			
	# legislative reforms		Econ./ soc. equality	Violence	Representation	Health
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Aid % GDP, 3 year avg.	4.03* (1.57)	3.65* (1.45)	3.54* (1.72)	-0.57 (2.63)	-1.09 (4.71)	-7.40 (7.79)
INGO shaming, 3 year avg. (ln)	0.08* (0.03)	0.09** (0.03)	0.12** (0.04)	0.15** (0.05)	0.09 (0.10)	0.08 (0.11)
Closed auth. regime	-0.19 (0.28)	0.00 (0.28)	0.32 (0.30)	-0.79 (0.52)	0.45 (0.67)	-0.46 (0.63)
GDP per capita	0.06 (0.12)	0.01 (0.12)	-0.08 (0.12)	-0.15 (0.18)	-0.36 (0.27)	0.00 (0.21)
Civil society freedom	0.37** (0.13)	0.32* (0.12)	0.15 (0.14)	0.23 (0.17)	0.65* (0.29)	0.46 (0.29)
Post-conflict period		-0.15 (0.20)	-0.37 (0.30)	0.29 (0.28)	-0.01 (0.55)	-0.09 (0.72)
Women's empowerment index		0.88 (0.86)	1.29 (1.05)	3.75* (1.38)	4.04 (2.41)	1.26 (2.38)
Previous WR leg.		0.08 (0.04)	0.15** (0.04)	-0.06 (0.09)	0.11 (0.09)	-0.12 (0.16)
CEDAW		0.33 (0.22)	0.04 (0.30)	1.40** (0.46)	0.23 (0.81)	-0.16 (0.47)
Global WR laws		0.98 (2.75)	-0.17 (3.69)	3.52 (5.12)	4.26 (5.08)	-1.09 (6.28)
Region dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	-3.88** (1.21)	-5.08** (1.29)	-6.06** (1.56)	-9.60** (2.03)	-7.62 (4.28)	-5.91 (3.43)
Inalpha	1.48** (0.18)	1.43** (0.19)				
Observations	898	880	880	854	729	690

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

that introduce or modify a gender quota for national or local legislative bodies, or for public administration;⁴² (2) *legal equality in economic and social rights*, including employment, inheritance, property, marriage/divorce, judicial matters (the right to testify in court and to bring lawsuits), and the right to participate in civil society associations; (3) laws related to *violence against women* (VAW), including rape and domestic violence; and (4) laws related to *health*, encompassing access to reproductive health care and laws against FGM.

This classification therefore distinguishes between different ways of advancing female empowerment. Affirmative action in political representation differs from promoting legal equality in the economic and social spheres, as does the goal of guaranteeing women's physical health and safety. This categorization also links to prior research on political representation and on VAW—both areas that have received particular scholarly attention.

Examining models 1–2, which predict the frequency of new laws across all issue areas, we find robust support for our hypotheses that international pressure is associated with *de jure* women's rights reforms in dictatorships. All else equal, legal reforms are more numerous in states that are dependent on Western aid (and therefore vulnerable to economic pressure), as well as when regimes are targeted by high levels of INGO shaming (indicating that the visibility of norm noncompliance is high).⁴³ Table 4 reports the substantive size of these effects, showing the predicted number of gender-related legal reforms per year, in dictatorships, at low and high levels of aid dependence and INGO shaming. “Low” and “high” are defined as the 10th and 90th percentile of those variables in our sample of dictatorships. Estimates are derived from Model 1 (Table 3). Moving from low to high aid dependence while holding shaming at a low level, increases the predicted number of annual reforms from 0.16 to 0.23, or, in other words, from about one reform every 6.5 years to one reform every 5 years. The effect of an increase in INGO shaming is even greater. Holding aid dependence at a low level, a move from low to high shaming increases the predicted number of reforms from 0.16 to 0.4. Countries that are both highly aid dependent and highly targeted by shaming campaigns have an annual prediction of 0.54 reforms, an average of

Table 4. Predicted Number of Women's Rights Legal Reforms.

	INGO shaming		
	Low	High	
Aid dependence	Low	0.14	0.33
	High	0.20	0.47

Note: The table shows the average predicted number of legal reforms, per year, at the 10th and 90th percentiles of the Aid and Shaming variables. All other variables held at their means.

one reform approximately every 2 years. To illustrate which types of countries this represents, dictatorships that are aid dependent and targeted by intense shaming include Cote d'Ivoire (early 00s), Jordan, Afghanistan (post-2001) and Cambodia since the late nineties. Regimes that are highly shamed but less aid dependent include Venezuela during the later years of Chavez's tenure, Morocco, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Zimbabwe, and Kenya throughout the 1990s. Regimes that are highly aid dependent but targeted by relatively less human rights shaming (at or below the median) are found mainly in sub-Saharan Africa—such as Mozambique, Tanzania and Central African Republic—but also include countries such as Laos in Southeast Asia.

Notably, our results do not support the idea that the country's initial level of women's empowerment is associated with legal reforms one way or the other (The variable for *women's political empowerment*). Countries where women are worse off to begin with are not introducing significantly more legal reforms. If anything, the bivariate association between starting point and legal change is moderately positive (see [Supplementary Appendix Figure 1](#)), as is the relationship between *prior women's rights legislation* and current reforms, which is positive and marginally significant at $p = 0.06$. While women's political empowerment is not an important driver of gender-related reforms in dictatorships, the measure of *civil society openness* is. Interestingly, this variable is more significant than the variable distinguishing between closed and electoral authoritarian regimes. This therefore supports the idea that in autocracies with relatively greater civil society freedom, these groups—and the women's movement in particular—can have an impact on policy outcomes. Such differences are apparent if one compares a country like Egypt, which is highly repressive of civil society, to Morocco or Tunisia, which have longer traditions of allowing and accommodating nongovernmental movements. In sum, we interpret this as evidence that there is a clear role for international pressure *in concert with domestic political factors* in pressing for *de jure* progress on women's rights in dictatorships.

Models 3–6 ([Table 3](#)) predict the adoption of laws by issue category. Because we do not derive hypotheses in this regard, we consider this an exploratory analysis that should inform future research. Recall that the dependent variables are dichotomous, coded as “1” if the country adopted at least one law in that category, by year. Right-hand-side variables are identical to models 1–2. We find the following: (1) aid dependence and human rights shaming are both significant predictors of laws related to *legal equality in economic and social rights*; (2) shaming (but not aid) is associated with laws related to *violence against women*; and (3) neither form of international pressure is associated with laws related to women's *health* or, more notably, women's *political representation*. These results are depicted graphically in [Figure 3](#), which shows the change in predicted probability of a legal reform in response to a move from low to high levels of aid and shaming.

These findings suggest at least two lessons. First, the “menu” of gender-related reforms that autocrats can choose from to signal adherence with international norms encompasses far more than legislative gender quotas, which have received a disproportionate amount of scholarly attention. Research on quota adoption across regime types has shown the importance of transnational activism, diffusion, and international norm effects (c.f., [Krook, 2006](#); [Krook & True, 2012](#); [Paxton et al., 2006](#); [Swiss & Fallon, 2017](#)), but it has also shown that quotas tend to be adopted during periods of political transformation, particularly during post-conflict reconstruction, when institutions and ruling coalitions are built anew ([Anderson & Swiss, 2014](#); [Bush, 2011](#); [Hughes & Tripp, 2015](#)). The literature is less clear on how we should understand quota adoption in non-transitional authoritarian regimes. For durable closed autocracies or for autocracies governed by a strong ruling party, studies indicate that quotas can be designed in such a way so as not to threaten the regime’s hold on power ([Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2016](#); [Donno & Kreft, 2019](#), [Muriaas and Wang, 2012](#)). Yet, for others, advancing women’s representation may disrupt support coalitions that delicately balance competing ethnic or ideological factions ([Arriola & Johnson, 2014](#); [Beiser-McGrath & Metternich, 2021](#); [Nyabola, 2016](#)). Perhaps for this reason our findings indicate that among dictatorships *on average*, advancing women’s political representation is not a favored policy response to international economic and social pressure. Second, our analysis highlights *economic and social rights* and *violence against women* (VAW) as areas that are more closely associated

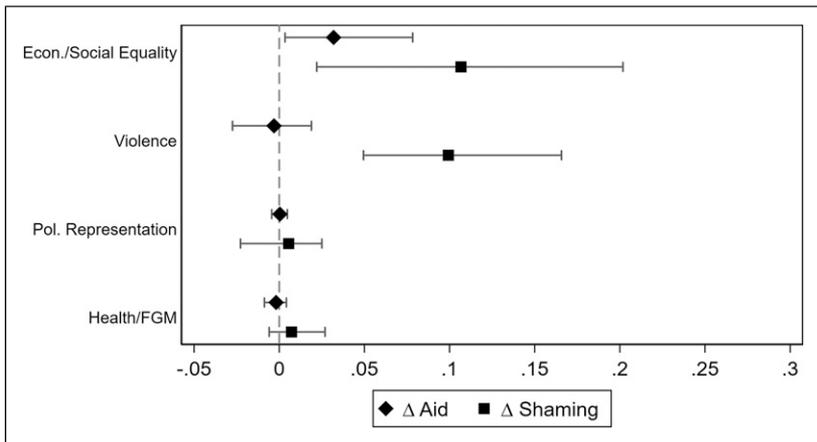


Figure 3. Change in probability of women’s rights legal reform, by issue area, in dictatorships. Note: Point estimates represent the change in predicted probability in response to a shift from the 10th to 90th percentile of the Aid and Shaming variables, respectively. Bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

with international pressure. Both areas present opportunities to introduce laws that are of high international salience, and which carry the prospect for meaningful societal change, but are also removed from the realm of formal politics—and therefore from the near-term risk of redistributing political power. For most authoritarian regimes, laws advancing women’s economic and social equality garner international praise while posing few immediate political threats, particularly if they can be leveraged to shore up women’s support for the regime. In the longer-term, of course, if such laws are implemented, they may contribute to societal transformation that does have political consequences, as newly empowered women demand a greater voice in politics. Similarly, in their study of VAW laws, [Htun and Weldon \(2012, p. 548–550\)](#) emphasize the growing international consensus that VAW is a violation of human rights, meaning that potentially weighty rewards and punishments are now attached to performance in that issue area.⁴⁴

Exploring a final implication of our theory, we move beyond women’s rights to examine whether dictatorships respond to international pressure by making reforms in other areas related to political competition, elections, and repression. This can be loosely thought of as a placebo test: if our theory is correct, among dictatorships, we should find an association between international pressure and women’s rights reforms, but not with all manner of other political reforms. For breadth, we selected six outcome variables from the V-Dem project that capture *de jure* reforms in a range of areas, making them comparable to our *de jure* measure of women’s rights changes: (1) a measure of whether, and to what extent, opposition political parties are banned (variable *v2psparban*), (2) the extent of the government’s legal control over the entry and exit of civil society groups (variable *v2cseeorgs*),⁴⁵ (3) the autonomy of the election management body, namely, whether it is legally empowered to apply election laws impartially and independently (variable *v2elembaut*), (4) whether the formal powers of the judiciary were reformed to provide more control over the arbitrary use of state authority (*v2jureform*), (5) freedom from torture (variable *v2cltort*), and (6) freedom from political killings (variable *v2clkill*). Taken together, these variables capture various aspects of the political and electoral context, including the extent of political pluralism, the quality of election management, checks on executive power, and respect for physical integrity rights. All variables are measured such that higher values represent better performance.

[Table 5](#) summarizes findings from a series of OLS regressions that predict the year-on-year change in these outcome variables (therefore comparable to our [Table 3](#) models, which predict yearly changes with respect to women’s rights legislation). The key right-hand-side variables are our lagged measures of *aid dependence* and *INGO shaming*.⁴⁶ Of note are the null results: among dictatorships, international aid dependence and INGO shaming are not associated with increased *de jure* political pluralism, improved election

Table 5. De Jure Reform in More Politically Costly Areas, Dictatorships.

	Party ban (1)	Civil society control (2)	EMB autonomy (3)	Judicial reform (4)	Torture (5)	Killings (6)
Aid % GDP, 3 yr avg	-0.21* (0.09)	-0.17 (0.11)	-0.01 (0.19)	4.38 (2.53)	0.13 (0.18)	-0.01 (0.23)
INGO shaming, 3 yr avg. (ln)	3.93×10^{-3} (2.87×10^{-3})	-2.64×10^{-3} (2.35×10^{-3})	2.69×10^{-6} (3.01×10^{-3})	-0.02 (0.03)	-2.36×10^{-3} (3.10×10^{-3})	-1.09×10^{-3} (3.14×10^{-3})
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lagged DV	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Region dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.14 (0.08)	0.08 (0.05)	0.04 (0.09)	-0.98 (0.97)	-0.13 (0.09)	-0.14 (0.11)
Observations	850	850	850	850	850	850

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

management, judicial reform or respect for physical integrity rights.⁴⁷ If anything, aid dependence is negatively associated with party pluralism (model 1). These results therefore provide further support for our theory. In dictatorships, international normative pressure is associated with legal changes in women's rights, but not other types of political reform.

Robustness

We undertake additional checks to probe the robustness of our findings. We first consider the implications of selection into and out of the sample of dictatorships. One issue relates to unobserved heterogeneity: Countries may exit the sample of dictatorships, and it may be that liberalizing dictatorships—those approaching a democratic transition—are driving our finding that international pressure is associated with *de jure* women's rights reforms. We re-run our main models excluding (a) observations in which the country experienced a democratic transition within 5 years and (b) countries that experienced a democratic transition at any point since 1970. In both instances, our results for aid dependence and shaming hold, indicating that transitional/liberalizing autocracies do not drive the results ([Supplementary Appendix Table 3](#)). A different concern may be that unmeasured factors, such as the leader's charisma, ideology, or particularities of the regime's coalition, are associated with both dictatorship and a propensity to undertake women's rights reforms (our dependent variable). We run a Heckman selection model in which the first stage predicts dictatorship, employing the percent of democracies in the region (excluding country *i*) as the excluded instrument ([Supplementary Appendix Table 4](#)). We find that our key results hold, and the coefficient *rho* is not significant, indicating that unobservables predicting selection into the sample are not correlated with the dependent variable. This analysis also mitigates the concern that levels of aid dependence and shaming (our explanatory variables) may be correlated with entry or exit from the sample of dictatorships (see, e.g., [Escriba-Folch & Wright, 2015](#)).

We next take steps to address non-random assignment of our key variables. It may be that common factors predict both aid dependence/shaming and women's rights reforms. We use coarsened exact matching to mitigate imbalance in observable factors across treatment and control groups ([Iacus et al., 2012](#)). Matching also helps ensure that results are not driven by extreme observations with no counterfactual in the data. We perform the analysis first for aid dependence and then for shaming, where treatment and control groups are defined as those falling above or below the median on aid and shaming, respectively. We confirm in both cases that matching improves balance (with only a moderate loss of observations) and that our findings for the significance

of aid dependence and shaming hold. These analyses are described in [Supplementary Appendix 5](#).

We explore how our results fare with different dependent variables. In addition to the areas of women's rights covered in our main dependent variable, we also collected information on laws related to human trafficking.⁴⁸ While trafficking has become a global priority in its own right (see [Kelley & Simmons, 2015](#); [Kelley, 2017](#)), and the international architecture for combating human trafficking is mostly separate from women's rights, it could plausibly be considered a "women's issue" for our purposes, since the majority of trafficking victims are women and girls.⁴⁹ We therefore generate a new count variable that includes human trafficking reforms. Replicating our models using this variable yields mostly consistent results ([Supplementary Appendix Table 6](#)): findings for aid dependence hold, while the coefficient for shaming remains positive but loses marginal significance. We then ensure that our findings are not driven solely by VAW laws, since this represents an area of growing international importance; when we exclude VAW laws from the count, results are robust ([Supplementary Appendix Table 7](#)). Next, as a preliminary exploration of *de facto* women's empowerment, we re-run our models using the V-Dem women's empowerment index as the dependent variable (*v2x gender*). We find that aid and shaming are not associated with year-on-year changes in this index, which lends initial support to our intuition that *de jure* and *de facto* gender-related change are governed by different logics ([Supplementary Appendix Table 8](#)). At minimum, this may be due to a lag between *de jure* and *de facto* change. But it is possible that in a number of countries laws are not effectively enforced. As we discuss in the conclusion, this is an area ripe for further research.

We then re-run our models with alternative independent variables. As a different measure of international NGO influence, we replace our INGO shaming variable with a count of the number of women's INGOs in which the country has members (taken from [Cole, 2013a, 2013b](#)). This measure captures the extent to which the international women's movement has a foothold in the country, and the strength of the transnational linkages between domestic and global groups. We find that results for this measure are of similar significance as the shaming measure ([Supplementary Appendix Table 9](#)). Next, to check the robustness of our measure of external economic vulnerability, we substitute our aid dependence measure for the V-Dem indicator for states that rely primarily on "external sources of funding (loans and foreign aid)" (taken from the *v2stfiscap* variable), and we find that our results are robust, though this aid variable is marginally significant in one model ([Supplementary Appendix Table 10](#)). We next confirm that our results for aid dependence are not driven by the United States, which is the largest single donor. When we include a separate variable for dependence on US foreign aid (as a lagged 3-year average), results for total aid dependence—that is, aid from all DAC donors—

remain positive and significant, whereas US aid is not independently associated with greater women's rights legislation ([Supplementary Appendix Table 11](#)). This is also true if we examine the effect of US aid specifically after 9/11, when women's rights became more of a priority. Overall, this implies that the effect of economic leverage on developing countries is not necessarily connected to a specific donor or instance of conditionality, but rather tied to a diffuse—perhaps even implicit—understanding among autocratic governments about what kinds of policies are expected and rewarded by the West.

We explore an additional source of heterogeneity among dictatorships: a history of communism, which is known to be associated with higher levels of women's economic activity, as well as with ideological commitments to gender equality. But when we exclude communist and post-communist regimes from our analysis, our results are unchanged ([Supplementary Appendix Table 13](#)). Finally, we confirm that results are fully robust to the inclusion of year fixed effects ([Supplementary Appendix Table 12](#)), which would account for any system-wide temporal trends.

Conclusion

Analysts, and critics, of democracy promotion have noted that international actors face a number of conflicting objectives in their efforts to promote political transformation abroad, including the trade-off between stability and democracy; and the potentially anti-democratic consequences of power-sharing and state-building.⁵⁰ We draw attention, instead, to the interplay between the promotion of women's rights and political competition—two areas that are increasingly bundled together by donors, lenders and performance evaluators. Because advancing women's rights entails relatively less political risk, many autocracies undertake gender reforms with gusto but forgo more dangerous moves toward political and electoral liberalization. Our findings from a comprehensive sample of dictatorships reveal that international (Western) economic and social pressure is indeed significantly associated with the enactment of *de jure* women's rights reforms, but not with reforms related to political pluralism, elections or repression.

The use of women's rights as a response to international pressure appears to be a strategy that is particularly favored by dictatorships. This is not to say that domestic political factors play no role; our results in fact point to the importance of civil society openness in promoting women's rights in dictatorships. But due to autocrats' relative insulation from societal pressure, leaders retain more discretion as to the depth and timing of reforms than in democracies, and external "top-down" forces therefore play an important role. Saudi Arabia's recent reforms illustrates this dynamic, in which pressure from the women's movement certainly drew out negative publicity but does not

appear to be the proximate or primary cause of Mohammad bin Salman's decision to take steps toward modernizing gender relations. Nor, it must be noted, is Saudi Arabia an aid-dependent regime—which is one of the factors highlighted in our theory. But it has been subjected to quite intense international human rights shaming (consistently falling in the 80–90th percentile of our shaming measure), which supports the idea that international reputational concerns are a motivation for the regime's reforms. Our claim is not that international democracy promoters are naive or are “fooled” into thinking that countries like Saudi Arabia are democratizing; rather, because women's rights are genuinely valued, progress toward gender equality is met with praise, rewards, and an easing of pressure. Further work in this research agenda will explore the preferences and beliefs of policy makers working in foreign aid and democracy promotion more directly. Do they view progress on gender equality as progress toward democracy? Do they support rewarding legal advances in women's rights in dictatorships? Might this willingness to reward—if present—differ for closed versus electoral authoritarian regimes?

This article has established a set of cross-national patterns which we hope will spark further research into scope conditions and causal processes. One promising avenue would be to explore why certain women's rights issues are more readily pursued by autocrats than others. We found that international aid dependence and shaming are associated with laws related to women's economic and social rights, but not to laws related to political representation. We speculate that this may stem from autocrats' calculations of short-term political cost, as policies unrelated to politics carry few immediate consequences for patronage networks and political survival. But future work should probe this issue by examining whether patterns vary by region, over time, or by the nature of the authoritarian regime coalition. It may also be that leaders anticipate that international audiences attach greater value to reforms related to women's economic and social rights, because these carry greater prospects for societal transformation—a possibility currently under study by [Bush, Donno & Zetterberg \(2021\)](#) using a survey of international development professionals. Another avenue for research will be to consider the relationship between *de jure* and *de facto* change in women's rights. Here we have focused on *de jure* change, because we expect governments to favor those steps that will be immediately noticed and rewarded, and ample evidence indicates that donors, lenders and foreign governments pay the most attention to changes in laws. More complex—and longer-term—outcomes relating to implementation, enforcement, and the actual status of women in society have less impact on the immediate allocation of international economic benefits. This is perhaps why critics deride the impact of international conditionality as being superficial. Yet, such criticism may be short-sighted. While legal change is not a panacea for gender inequality, it can set long-term processes of mobilization and enforcement in motion. It creates an opportunity structure

more favorable for women to press their claims by pointing to the government's own commitments (Englehart & Miller, 2014; Kimani, 2007; Simmons, 2009). It can spark processes of “spiraling” transnational pressure (Risse et al., 1999, 2013). Future work will do well to examine the relationship between *de jure* and *de facto* change for women in dictatorships, including whether factors such as rule of law, state capacity or feminist mobilization mediate the relationship between changes in law and *de facto* improvements in women's lived experience.

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Supplemental Material

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Notes

1. Sometimes progressive stances on gender may even strengthen an autocrat's domestic support (Donno & Kreft, 2019). Bush (2015) refers to this as the “taming” of democracy assistance, as donors seek regime-compatible outcomes that will ensure their continued partnership with autocratic governments.
2. Changes in laws represent a measurable focal point for donors, and it is an outcome that is under the government's direct control.
3. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998, p. 897) discuss the process whereby emerging norms must “compete with other norms and perceptions of interest.” In their seminal work on world society, Meyer et al. (1997, p. 172) note the “rampant inconsistencies and conflict within world culture itself,” such as those between “equality versus liberty, progress versus justice...”
4. See also Buitelaar and Hirschmann (2020) on how the emerging norm of international criminal accountability challenges traditional peacekeeping norms.
5. The fixation on elections has been both defended and criticized (Carothers, 2007; Kalandadze & Orenstein, 2009; Karl, 1986; Mansfield & Snyder, 2007; Seligson & Booth, 1995.) Electoral milestones include (1) the transition to a multiparty

- system; (2) the holding of multiparty elections; followed by (3) ensuring the quality and integrity of these contests (Norris, Frank and Martinez i Coma 2014).
6. Hughes et al. (2015) refer to this as the “new global norm of women’s political inclusion” (see also Ramirez et al., 1997; Paxton et al., 2006).
 7. See Supplementary Appendix Table 1.
 8. See <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=crs1>, accessed April 2021.
 9. For an example of the rewards of improved governance ratings, see Schueth’s (2015) account of Georgia under president Mikhael Saakashvili.
 10. In a sequencing analysis, Wang (2017) finds that women’s civil liberties may be a precondition for democracy in the long term, but this does not imply a causal relationship.
 11. For example, Hughes et al. (2015) find that global pressure for quotas is less effective in states with transnationally linked women’s movements.
 12. Moreover, women’s rights may be unique in this regard. Consider other governance-related reforms that are promoted by the international community, such as enhancing workers’ rights or reducing corruption, both of which can have a direct (negative) impact on autocratic survival by empowering collective action and limiting access to private goods for patronage
 13. Status as a democracy or dictatorship is coded using Geddes et al. (2014). The figure includes all non-OECD countries with a population greater than 1 million.
 14. Electoral authoritarian regimes are those that hold multiparty national elections, whereas closed regimes either do not hold elections or hold single-party elections. We coded the multiparty status of elections using the criteria outlined in Hyde and Marinov (2012).
 15. In dictatorships, women’s movements are sometimes affiliated with or controlled by the government (Donno & Kreft, 2019; Lorch & Bunk, 2016), and, compared to democracies, policies such as gender quotas more rarely result from independent civil society action (Dahlerup, 2006; David & Nanes, 2011; Howard-Merriam, 1990; Tripp & Kang, 2008).
 16. Where women’s movements are weak, international incentives may be the primary motivation for gender reforms, as research on Jordan suggests (Bush & Jamal, 2015; Htun & Weldon, 2019, p. 44–47).
 17. On the role of civil society for gender reforms, see Gelb and Palley (1996), Htun and Weldon (2012), Kang (2015), Kang and Tripp (2018), Krook (2009), Randall and Waylen (1998), Weldon (2002). On the role of legislation and policy change for bolstering elite support coalitions in dictatorships, see Gandhi, Noble, and Svolik (2019) and Magaloni and Williamson (2020)).
 18. Cooley (2015a, 2015b, p. 31) documents, for example, how Kyrgyzstan’s deputy prime minister complained that MCC funding was withheld due to a poor Freedom House rating in 2013.
 19. See also research on shifting human rights abuses in response to international shaming (Conrad & DeMeritt, 2019; Hafner-Burton, 2008).

20. Fattah, Hassan M. May 17, 2005. "Kuwait Grants Political Rights to Its Women." *The New York Times*.
21. Boseley, Sarah. May 28, 2010. "Rwanda: A revolution in rights for women." *The Guardian*.
22. See also [Kelley and Simmons \(2015\)](#) for a defense of de jure measures of response to international pressure.
23. See also [Shor \(2008\)](#).
24. [Bermeo \(2016\)](#); [Carnegie and Marinov \(2017\)](#); [Dunning \(2004\)](#); [Donno and Neureiter \(2018\)](#); [Edgell \(2017\)](#); [Girod \(2011\)](#); [Hazelzet \(2005\)](#); [Hyde \(2011\)](#); [Kreutz \(2015\)](#); [Wright \(2009\)](#).
25. Rather than cut aid entirely, dissatisfied donors may shift toward channeling aid through local nongovernmental organizations ([Dietrich, 2013](#))—an outcome that is also undesirable from the government's perspective.
26. [Escriba-Folch and Wright \(2015\)](#), for example, show that international pressure induces democratization only when the regime's support coalition is large and the ruling party is well-institutionalized. [Levitsky and Way \(2003\)](#) emphasize high levels of international economic and social linkage as the only path to democracy for competitive authoritarian regimes; otherwise, international pressure tends to produce unstable authoritarianism.
27. These 14 issues map closely onto areas of women's rights addressed in CEDAW, grounding them in international law and suggesting their relevance to the signatories of the convention.
28. A team of 6 research assistants were trained to review the State Department human rights reports, focusing on the following sections: the *Introduction*, *Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Religion, Disability, Language, or Social Status*, which includes the primary section devoted specifically to women's rights; and *Respect for Political Rights* which also contains information related specifically to women. In addition, for each report, research assistants conducted targeted searches on a list of keywords. The reports sometimes mentioned policies and legislation without being clear about when they were adopted. In cases where the first year of a policy or piece of legislation was unclear, it was excluded; only cases in which a change to the status quo could be clearly assigned to a specific year were included. In cases where subjective assessments were required, researchers were asked to identify the legislative change in question, provide context, and include a reference to its location in the report. One of the authors would then review the observation in question and decide whether to include it.
29. [Cingraneli et al. \(2014\)](#); [Coppedge et al. \(2015\)](#); <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/gender-inequality-index-gii> (accessed January 2018).
30. For such a critique of the democracy indicators, see [Vreeland \(2008\)](#) and [Gunitsky \(2015\)](#). As [Merry \(2016, p. 15–16\)](#) explains, all indicators are informed by implicit theories about how to categorize phenomena and are therefore subjective to some extent, but composite indicators are more problematic in that they require the

- greatest theoretical elaboration and “are farther from the underlying data than either counts or ratios.” See also [Cooley \(2015a, 2015b, p. 28–29\)](#).
31. The UN Global Gender Equality Constitutional Database is cross-sectional only (see <http://constitutions.unwomen.org/en>). The Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) from the OECD presently includes only two snapshots over time (<https://www.genderindex.org/>). [Htun and Weldon \(2018\)](#) code for policies related to violence against women, employment rights, and family law for 70 countries at 5-year intervals, from 1975 to 2005. The World Bank’s Women, Business and the Law project records women’s legal status in a time-series cross-sectional format from 1960 to 2010 but does not record which (or how many) laws are introduced in a given year, which is important for capturing the government’s level of effort toward complying with international norms.
 32. Replication data and code for all Tables and Figures is at [Donno et al. \(2021\)](#).
 33. We opt for the negative binomial model, because the dependent variable exhibits overdispersion. We nevertheless check our results using OLS and Poisson, which show that our key findings for the effect of aid dependence and shaming hold.
 34. Once we divide our count variable into issue areas, the number of laws per country declines such that a count is less informative.
 35. Our data in constant US dollar are for gross aid commitments, and come from AidData (www.aiddata.org).
 36. NGO shaming is a politicized process that is influenced by considerations of target country size, alliances, geopolitical importance and colonial status ([Hendrix & Wong, 2014](#); [Hill Jr. et al., 2013](#); [Kahn-Nisser, 2019](#); [Stroup & Murdie, 2012](#)).
 37. We use GWF’s updated global case list, which provides a classification of dictatorships and democracies through the year 2018. As a robustness check, we employ [Magaloni et al.’s \(2013\)](#) coding of dictatorship, and confirm that our results are robust.
 38. Failed states, countries under foreign occupation, and regimes governed by provisional governments are not given a regime coding by Geddes, Wright and Frantz. Such cases represent only 66 country-year observations (5%) in our sample.
 39. If one regime is replaced by a different autocratic regime, the variable is reset to “0” until a competitive election is held under the new regime. The 6-year window is wide enough to capture the 4- to 5-year electoral cycle employed by countries that hold regular elections. Regimes in which elections are not held for more than 6 years because they are indefinitely or repeatedly postponed by autocrats are therefore excluded as electoral regimes by our measure, but the coding re-sets to “1” in the year in which an election is eventually held.
 40. Conflict termination is identified using the UCDP/PRIO armed conflict dataset ([Gleditsch et al., 2002](#); [Pettersen & Oberg, 2020](#)). We also investigate whether results are driven by post-conflict years. When we exclude the 5-year post-civil conflict period from our sample, results remain robust, see [Supplementary Appendix Table 14](#).
 41. On the importance of CEDAW to women’s movements in the Middle East and North Africa, see [Tripp \(2019, Chapter 1\)](#) and [Htun and Weldon \(2018, p. 44–48\)](#).

42. We emphasize that this variable includes, but is not limited to, cases of initial gender quota adoption. In fact, of all the instances among dictatorships that this variable is coded as “1,” in 58% of cases it is in countries that already had a legislative gender quota. Modifications of quotas are therefore common.
43. We also explore whether there is a significant interactive effect between aid dependence and shaming, but find that there is not.
44. See also Merry (2003).
45. Note that this is different from the V-Dem measure of civil society openness featured in Table 3, which relates to the government’s use of (*de facto*) physical force and intimidation against civil society groups.
46. Following models 1–2 in Table 3, other controls (not reported) are GDP per capita, civil society openness (*v2csvreprss*, which measures *de facto* government repression), an indicator for closed authoritarianism, and region dummy variables.
47. The coefficient for aid dependence approaches significance in the model predicting judicial reform, at $p=0.09$.
48. We found 321 pieces of legislation related to human trafficking between 1996 and 2016 in our global sample of democracies and dictatorships.
49. <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2016/12/report-majority-of-trafficking-victims-are-women-and-girls-one-third-children/>
50. See the special issue of *Democratization*: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13510347.2012.674355>

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