

# Women Empowerment, Populism, and Inclusiveness: A Complex Nexus

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## ABSTRACT

In today's globalized world, the nexus of women empowerment, populism, and inclusiveness forms a complex and often contentious terrain impacting societal norms and political landscapes. This article examines how these interrelated elements interact, presenting challenges and opportunities for gender equality and inclusive development. Women empowerment initiatives aim to dismantle barriers and enhance women's agency and opportunities, yet populist movements can simultaneously exploit gender-related issues while promoting exclusionary policies that undermine progress. Inclusiveness, crucial for sustainable development, seeks to ensure equal participation and rights for all but faces obstacles from populist rhetoric and policies perpetuating societal divisions. By exploring these dynamics across global contexts and proposing strategies for navigating them, this article underscores the imperative of informed policies, inclusive practices, and collaborative efforts to advance women's rights and foster equitable societies worldwide.

**Keywords :** Women empowerment, Populism, Inclusiveness, Sustainable development, Democracy

## INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of global politics and societal norms, the intersection of women empowerment, populism, and inclusiveness has emerged as a critical and multifaceted nexus. Each of these elements significantly influences the pursuit of gender equality, social justice, and inclusive development worldwide. Women empowerment initiatives seek to enhance women's agency, opportunities, and rights across various spheres of life, challenging long-standing barriers and promoting equal participation in decision-making processes. However, the rise of populism introduces complexities, as political movements capitalize on societal discontent, often by simplifying complex issues and promoting exclusionary policies that can undermine progress in gender equality. Inclusiveness, crucial for sustainable development, emphasizes creating environments where all individuals, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or

socioeconomic status, have equitable access to opportunities and resources. Yet, populist rhetoric and practices often foster division and resistance to inclusive policies, posing challenges to efforts aimed at fostering diverse and participatory societies. This article explores these dynamics, examining their global implications, and regional variances, and proposing strategies to navigate this complex nexus. By analyzing the interplay of these forces, this article aims to deepen understanding and highlight pathways toward promoting women's empowerment, countering populist influences, and advancing inclusive development in a rapidly changing world.

### Understanding Women's Empowerment:

Women's empowerment encompasses a broad spectrum of efforts to enhance women's agency, opportunities, and rights across economic, political, social, and cultural spheres. At its core, women's empowerment

seeks to dismantle historical and systemic barriers that have limited women's participation and leadership in society. Key dimensions include:

**Economic Empowerment:** Ensuring equal pay, access to economic resources, and opportunities for women in the workforce.

**Political Empowerment:** Increasing women's representation in decision-making processes and leadership roles.

**Social Empowerment:** Challenging societal norms and stereotypes that perpetuate gender inequality.

**Legal Empowerment:** Strengthening legal frameworks to protect women's rights and combat gender-based discrimination and violence.

Efforts in women's empowerment aim to create inclusive societies where women have equal opportunities to contribute to and benefit from social, economic, and political advancements.

Understanding women's empowerment through a theoretical lens involves key thinkers like Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, who focus on expanding women's capabilities and freedoms so they can lead lives they value. Amartya Sen's capability approach emphasizes expanding freedoms and agency for all individuals, viewing development as the enhancement of substantive freedoms beyond economic metrics (Sen, 1999). Martha Nussbaum extends Sen's framework by detailing essential human capabilities necessary for a dignified life, advocating for justice through equal access to these capabilities, specifically focusing on gender equality and social justice (Nussbaum, 2001). Connell's theory of gender and power examines how power structures affect women's empowerment within relationships and society at large (Connell, 1987). Intersectional feminism, as advocated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, emphasizes considering how factors like race, class, and sexuality intersect with gender to shape women's experiences of empowerment and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991). This framework helps us see that women's empowerment isn't just about individual choices but also about changing societal norms and structures to ensure all women have equal opportunities and rights to thrive.

### **Exploring Populism: Origins, Characteristics, and Impacts:**

Populism is a political ideology that typically emerges during times of perceived crisis or discontent among the population. It often portrays a divide between "the people"

and "the elite," positioning itself as the voice of the former against the latter. Populist leaders or movements often emphasize direct democracy, claiming to represent the true will of the people and promising to address their grievances.

More specifically, using the identical approach, "we define populism as a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'The pure people' versus 'The corrupt elite,' and they argue that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). This definition goes beyond the lack of scholarly agreement on the characteristics of populism, agreement in general that all forms of populism involve some sort of appeal to 'The people' and a denunciation of 'The elite'. However the issue with this approach, according to Cas Mudde and Kaltwasser, is that it is too general and may apply to all political actors, movements, and parties. In order to appeal to the interests and concerns of the broader public, populism, as a political strategy, frequently positions itself as the representative of the working class against the ruling class or establishment. Alternatively, populism is defined by academics such as Wayland as a "political strategy" whereby a charismatic leader seeks or uses authority from the government by direct, unmediated, noninstitutionalized support from a sizable number of often disorganized followers. A socio-cultural definition of populism, which grounds it in society and cultural dynamics, is another often-used definitional strategy. It highlights how social, cultural, and identity aspects shaped the populist movement and its allure. Muller defines populism as having two necessary and jointly sufficient dimensions: anti-pluralism and anti-elitism. They contend that only they can speak for the people (Muller, 2019). In contrast, Ernesto Laclau views populism as both an emancipatory force and the essence of politics, believing it promotes a "democratization of democracy" by allowing the demands of marginalized sectors to come together (Laclau, 2005). The definition of populism as the identical approach and political strategy approach has several elements in common with the understanding of populism adopted in this article.

### **Populism exhibits several key characteristics that distinguish it as a political phenomenon:**

**Anti-Elitism:** Populism often portrays a strong opposition between "the people" and a corrupt or out-of-

touch elite. Populist leaders or movements claim to represent the interests and values of ordinary citizens against powerful elites, whom they accuse of benefiting unfairly at the expense of the people.

**Charismatic Leadership:** Populist movements are typically led by charismatic figures who appeal directly to the emotions and grievances of the populace. These leaders often use simple and emotive language to connect with their supporters and convey a sense of authenticity and connection with ordinary people.

**Simplistic Solutions:** Populism tends to offer straightforward and sometimes overly simplistic solutions to complex socio-economic or political issues. This can include promises to restore national pride, protect cultural identity, or tackle economic inequality through measures that may lack detailed planning or feasibility.

**Nationalism and Identity Politics:** Populist movements frequently emphasize nationalism and identity politics, often drawing distinctions between “us” (the true citizens) and “them” (outsiders, immigrants, or minorities). They may promote nativist policies and appeal to national unity or a common cultural heritage.

**Anti-Establishment Sentiment:** Populism thrives on discontent with established political parties, institutions, and traditional political processes. It often portrays these as corrupt, ineffective, or indifferent to the concerns of ordinary people, promising to “drain the swamp” and bring about fundamental change.

**Direct Appeal to the People:** Populist leaders often bypass traditional political channels and directly appeal to the public through rallies, social media, and other forms of mass communication. This direct engagement can reinforce their image as champions of the people’s interests.

**Authoritarian Tendencies:** While not inherent to all populist movements, some exhibit authoritarian tendencies, seeking to concentrate power in the hands of the leader or centralize decision-making authority to enact their agenda swiftly.

Understanding these characteristics helps to recognize and analyze the dynamics of populist movements and their impact on political landscapes and societies.

Populism can have a dual impact on societies, depending on how it unfolds in different contexts. On the positive side, populist movements often energize segments of society that feel marginalized or disengaged from politics, encouraging broader participation and holding

leaders accountable. They can also drive reforms that address pressing issues like inequality and corruption, advocating policies that prioritize the interests of ordinary citizens. In some cases, populism challenges entrenched political elites, fostering calls for greater transparency and responsiveness in governance, which can strengthen democratic institutions. Additionally, populist leaders may resonate with concerns about national sovereignty and cultural identity, appealing to those wary of globalization’s effects. However, populism’s negative impacts include fostering polarization through divisive rhetoric and undermining democratic norms by concentrating power and attacking independent media. Economic instability can result from protectionist policies, and international relations may be strained by nationalist agendas. Moreover, populist movements sometimes spread misinformation, eroding trust in institutions and hindering informed public discourse. Overall, while populism can address legitimate grievances and spur change, its effects vary widely and necessitate careful consideration of both its benefits and drawbacks in shaping societal and governance outcomes.

### **The Intersection of Women’s Empowerment and Populism: Complexities and Contradictions:**

The intersection of women’s empowerment and populism reveals a complex landscape filled with contradictions. On the one hand, populism can amplify women’s voices and mobilize them within political movements, potentially addressing gender inequalities and advocating for policies that benefit women. Populist rhetoric often promises to empower the marginalized, including women, by challenging established elites and promoting a more inclusive political agenda. Chakrabarti and Bandyopadhyay, in their analysis of *The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act* (MGNAREGA) as a populist measure, argue that this scheme has had positive effects on food and non-food consumption, calorie and protein intake, as well as savings (Chakrabarti and Bandyopadhyay, 2019). Other studies have also indicated that this scheme benefited the most vulnerable populations in rural India, including women, Adivasis, and lower castes. In another case study, they discuss the flagship scheme *Amma Unavagam* (Mother’s Canteen) launched by the late J. Jayalalitha’s government and how this initiative positively impacted the lives of common people, particularly women. This scheme not only helped in mitigating food insecurity but also generated

regular employment and provided remunerative wages to Self-Help Group (SHG) members (Chakrabarty and Bandhopadhyay, 2019).

However, this narrative can be superficial, as some populist leaders may also reinforce traditional gender roles or prioritize nationalistic agendas that restrict women's rights. Moreover, populism's polarizing tactics and anti-establishment rhetoric can undermine efforts to achieve genuine gender equality by perpetuating divisions and neglecting systemic issues such as gender-based violence and economic disparities. Therefore, while populism may initially engage women in political processes, its impact on women's empowerment ultimately hinges on how inclusive, sustainable, and rights-focused its policies and actions are in practice.

In sum, populist leaders may adopt rhetoric supportive of women's rights to mobilize support, but their policies and actions can undermine progress in several ways:

***Backlash Against Gender Equality:*** Rollbacks on reproductive rights, healthcare access, and protections against gender-based violence.

***Reinforcement of Traditional Gender Roles:*** Promoting conservative social values that restrict women's autonomy and opportunities.

***Exclusionary Practices:*** Scapegoating marginalized groups, including women, for societal problems or economic hardships.

These dynamics underscore the tension between populist agendas and the pursuit of gender equality and inclusiveness, posing challenges to sustainable development and social cohesion.

### **Inclusiveness: Ensuring Equal Participation and Opportunity:**

Inclusiveness is fundamental to advancing women's empowerment and achieving sustainable development goals. It entails creating environments where all individuals, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic status, have equal opportunities to participate in economic, political, and social spheres. Key aspects include:

***Intersectionality:*** Addressing overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalization faced by women, including race, ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation.

***Policy Frameworks:*** Implementing inclusive policies that protect rights, promote diversity, and reduce inequalities.

***Community Engagement:*** Empowering local communities and civil society to advocate for inclusive practices and social justice.

***Global Cooperation:*** Collaborating across borders to exchange best practices, resources, and knowledge for promoting inclusiveness and gender equality globally.

Inclusiveness strengthens societies by harnessing diverse perspectives and talents, contributing to economic growth, peace, and stability.

### **Challenges to Inclusiveness in Populist Contexts:**

In populist contexts, challenges to inclusiveness often stem from rhetoric and policies that prioritize national identity and sovereignty at the expense of diversity and minority rights. Populist leaders frequently employ exclusionary rhetoric that divides society along ethnic, cultural, or political lines, marginalizing minority groups and stifling their voices. Economic protectionism, a common populist policy, can exacerbate inequalities and limit opportunities for global cooperation, further isolating marginalized communities. Attacks on democratic institutions and independent media undermine checks and balances crucial for protecting minority rights and fostering inclusive governance. Additionally, populist agendas may undermine progress on gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights by reinforcing traditional values and restrictive social norms. Addressing these challenges requires promoting policies that uphold human rights, diversity, and inclusiveness while safeguarding democratic principles and fostering dialogue across societal divides. Populist movements can pose significant challenges to inclusiveness by exacerbating societal divisions, promoting exclusionary practices, and undermining democratic principles. Key challenges include:

***Political Polarization:*** Dividing societies along ideological lines and reducing space for dialogue and compromise.

***Cultural Backlash:*** Resisting progressive social norms and values that promote gender equality and inclusiveness.

***Nationalism vs. Diversity:*** Populism often emphasizes national identity and sovereignty, which can clash with the principles of diversity and multiculturalism. Policies promoting nationalism may neglect the rights and needs of minority communities, hindering their integration and participation in society.

***Economic Inequality:*** Widening gaps between rich and poor, exacerbating disparities in access to resources

and opportunities.

**Threats to the Rule of Law:** Undermining independent institutions and legal protections that safeguard rights and freedoms.

**Gender and Social Issues:** Populism's focus on traditional values and gender roles may hinder progress on gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights. Policies influenced by conservative social agendas could restrict reproductive rights, undermine protections against discrimination, and limit access to healthcare and education for marginalized groups.

**Attacks on Institutions:** Populist movements sometimes target democratic institutions, including independent judiciary, free press, and civil society organizations. This erosion of institutional integrity can weaken checks and balances that protect minority rights and uphold inclusiveness.

Addressing these challenges requires robust strategies to protect and promote inclusiveness, uphold human rights, and counteract regressive policies that threaten progress in women's empowerment and gender equality.

### **Global Perspectives and Regional Variances:**

The nexus of women empowerment, populism, and inclusiveness varies across regions and countries and is influenced by historical, cultural, and political contexts. While some regions have made significant strides in promoting gender equality through inclusive policies and legal frameworks, several countries with populist tendencies have implemented progressive gender equality policies. Iceland, while not traditionally populist, has consistently led in global gender equality rankings and notably elected the world's first female president in 1980 (ILO, 2020). Sweden, known for its strong gender equality traditions across different administrations, including those with populist elements, focuses on gender-neutral policies in education, parental leave, and workplace equality (ILO, 2020). In Spain, governments under populist-leaning parties like Podemos have pushed for increased women's representation in politics and corporate boards, contributing to gender equality initiatives (Podemos, 2019). In Mexico, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's administration has taken steps to combat violence against women and enhance women's economic empowerment, reflecting a populist approach to gender equality (Obrador, 2021). Similarly, populist parties in Italy have supported measures such as reducing the gender pay gap and

promoting greater female participation in politics, showcasing diverse populist efforts to advance gender equality alongside their broader political agendas.

Others face resistance and backlash from populist movements seeking to roll back progress. Populist governments in several countries have rolled back gender equality policies, often aligning with conservative agendas. In the United States during Donald Trump's presidency, policies were enacted to rescind Obama-era guidelines protecting transgender students and restrict access to reproductive health services. Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has implemented measures criticized for undermining gender equality, including restricting abortion access and limiting gender studies programs in universities (Orban, 2018). Similarly, Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro has been accused of reducing funding for women's health services and opposing gender equality initiatives (Conniff, 2012). Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) party has implemented policies to restrict abortion access and diminish support for gender equality advocacy organizations (Law and Justice Party, 2018). Under Vladimir Putin's leadership, Russia has faced criticism for decriminalizing domestic violence and promoting conservative stances on gender roles and LGBT rights, illustrating how populist governments in diverse contexts have rolled back strides in gender equality. International organizations, civil society groups, and feminist movements play crucial roles in advocating for women's rights, monitoring policy impacts, and promoting inclusive practices that empower women globally.

### **Strategies for Navigating the Complex Nexus:**

Navigating the complex nexus of women empowerment, populism, and inclusiveness requires strategic approaches and collaborative efforts at multiple levels:

**Policy Advocacy:** Advocating for inclusive policies that protect women's rights, promote gender equality, and address intersecting forms of discrimination.

**Public Awareness:** Raising awareness about the impact of populist rhetoric on gender equality and inclusiveness, fostering informed public discourse, and countering misinformation.

**Capacity Building:** Strengthening institutional capacities to implement and enforce gender-responsive policies and programs.

**Partnership and Collaboration:** Building partnerships between governments, civil society,

academia, and private sectors to mobilize resources, share knowledge, and support grassroots initiatives.

By prioritizing women's empowerment within inclusive frameworks, societies can advance towards achieving sustainable development goals and creating environments where all individuals, irrespective of gender or background, can thrive and contribute equitably.

### Conclusion:

In examining the complex interplay between women's empowerment, populism, and inclusiveness, it becomes evident that while populism can initially energize marginalized voices, including women's, its impact on inclusiveness is multifaceted and often contradictory. Populist movements, with their emphasis on national identity and anti-establishment rhetoric, can mobilize support by tapping into grievances and promising change. However, this often comes at the expense of inclusiveness, as populist leaders may employ exclusionary tactics that deepen societal divisions and marginalize minority groups.

One of the primary challenges lies in populism's tendency to prioritize national sovereignty and cultural homogeneity, which can undermine efforts toward gender equality and minority rights. By promoting traditional values and often neglecting intersectional issues, populism risks reinforcing existing power structures that perpetuate inequalities. Moreover, attacks on democratic institutions, independent media, and civil society weaken the checks and balances necessary for inclusive governance, further threatening the rights and representation of marginalized communities.

Nevertheless, the nexus between women's empowerment and populism also presents opportunities for meaningful dialogue and change. Populist movements, when inclusive and rights-focused, can amplify the voices of women and advocate for policies that address systemic barriers to equality. By engaging with diverse perspectives and promoting policies that uphold human rights, including gender equality and social justice, populism can potentially contribute to more inclusive societies.

Moving forward, it is crucial to navigate this complex terrain with a critical eye towards inclusiveness and social justice. Efforts should focus on strengthening democratic institutions, safeguarding minority rights, and promoting

policies that ensure equal opportunities and representation for all individuals, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or background. By fostering inclusive governance and empowering women within populist contexts, we can strive towards societies where everyone has the opportunity to participate fully and equally in social, economic, and political life.

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