

Doing Business with Misogynists

How we sacrifice our values for profit and normalise violence against women worldwide

By Edit Schlaffer and Rafael Kropiunigg

The global war on women is becoming visible once more. South Africa has just declared a state of emergency in response to escalating gender-based violence, following nationwide protests across urban centres organised by the NGO Women for Change. In France, the government has unveiled a comprehensive bill against violence targeting women and children, developed jointly with feminist organisations. The catalyst was a sharp rise in sexual violence and femicide, particularly within the home. The United Kingdom's Foreign Secretary, Yvette Cooper, views the issue as a universal global challenge and is “determined that we must renew that global focus and ambition around women, peace and security and put it at the heart of UK foreign policy.”

These protests and political initiatives constitute a response to a global misogynistic wave—or indeed tsunami. A new UN Women report shows that in 2024 approximately 83,300 women and girls were deliberately killed worldwide. Around 60 percent of the victims were murdered by an intimate partner or family member. Women and girls are least safe in their own homes. Violence is further reinforced “from above.” An estimated 71 per cent of the world's population now lives under patriarchal-authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes—and this trend is on the rise. Women are increasingly targeted, particularly in states where “strongmen” shape the everyday realities of women and girls. Much like the discourse around climate change, structural and physical violence against women is increasingly questioned or treated as a luxury that can no longer be afforded.

Even progressive governments that demonstrate and translate solidarity into action silently recast women's rights as a negotiable commodity when political or economic pressure demands it. As it goes: democracies proclaim their values, companies publish ethics statements—and simultaneously they conduct business with governments and tech giants that systematically devalue women or normalise violence against them. Even alleged rapists who, as democratic officeholders, openly propagate misogyny are accommodated with wilful blindness. Many companies practise anticipatory obedience and gradually abandon their support for DEI.

Commitment to human rights ends where oil, power, or algorithmic reach begins. Saudi Arabia is a striking example of this paradoxical dynamic. For decades, the state restricted women's freedom of movement and participation in public life; today it is a strategic partner for energy supplies, arms exports, sporting events, and digital mega-projects. Within the country, gender-based violence remains largely unpunished, and reforms are driven more by geopolitical calculations than by goals of equality. The West's muted response is also an unequivocal message: women's rights matter, but trade and defence contracts take precedence.

A similarly contradictory pattern can be seen in relations with Putin's Russia. In 2017, domestic violence was largely decriminalised. For a first offence, a blow causing a broken bone or concussion is considered a mere administrative violation. NGOs are branded "foreign agents," and state rhetoric denounces any form of gender policy as a threat to the nation. Nevertheless, Europe's energy trade with Russia was so extensive for decades that even after the annexation of Crimea scarcely any moral consequences followed. Democracies condemned political violence while largely overlooking the trivialisation of private violence against women.

In Western democracies, tolerance of misogynistic power structures remains astonishingly high. Donald Trump was found liable for sexual abuse in a civil case. Numerous women have accused him of harassment or assault. And yet business continues as usual—from corporate donations to unrestrained social media amplification that guarantees reach. When polarisation generates profit, moral considerations become secondary.

Misogyny produces oppression, domination, and diminishes the rights of women and girls. This hostility towards the female sex is a core ingredient of extremist ideologies, which have gained significant momentum in recent years through accelerated digitalisation. In many extremist movements, misogynistic messages function both as an entry point and as connective tissue strengthening anti-democratic worldviews. The tech sector illustrates this dynamic vividly, and the rapid transfer of online misogyny into offline daily life is particularly alarming. The so-called tech bros knew this early on, but profit reigns supreme. Many of them continue hyper-charging algorithms while often keeping their own young children away from screens. The real paradox is this: violence against women is met with rhetorical expressions of solidarity while the very systems and platforms that enable and amplify such violence enjoy broad resonance. Words are value-driven, but actions are primarily driven by self-interest. If resistance to patriarchal power and violence is genuinely a societal consensus, symbolic outrage and campaigns such as the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence are insufficient.

Fundamental questions are at stake. What kind of society do we want to live in, and what compromises are we willing to make? With whom do we do business, and what do we legitimise as a result? For as long as misogyny is tolerated and practised—whether in a desert kingdom, the White House, or Silicon Valley—violence against women will continue to escalate. The normalisation of violence against women at every level is a warning sign of the disintegration of our fragile democratic architecture. Dare we say it is often the first warning sign of democratic decay and burgeoning misogynist authoritarianism.

If we are truly to take the global rise in violence against women seriously, we must finally recognise that misogyny is not merely a social problem but a political, economic, and digital instrument of power. It links authoritarian regimes, opportunistic democrats, and "tech-aocrats" that profit from hatred and division. As long as democracies collaborate unreservedly with misogynistic rulers, as long as companies court these powerholders who openly devalue women, and as long as algorithms reward those who demean women, every expression of solidarity remains moral posturing. The price of this complicity is steep: we normalise violence, weaken equality, and erode the democratic structures that protect us. The question is therefore not whether we condemn misogyny (we long do) but whether we are prepared to act on that condemnation. A world that does business with misogynists inevitably produces more violence. A world that stands up for and behind women lays the foundations for global security and justice.

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