More Compliance in the Middle: Women's Rights and Civil Society in Anocratic Regimes

Grayson McCord
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Introduction

At the tail end of a political transition, Tunisia passed one of the most comprehensive laws on violence against women in the Arab world, criminalizing not only physical abuse but also psychological, economic, moral, and political violence. Championed by domestic civil society groups like the Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD) and backed by international actors like UN Women, the 2017 law marked a major step forward for gender rights in a transitional regime (UN Women, 2017). It reflected years of sustained local advocacy and built on Tunisia's post-revolution legal reforms, signaling a serious commitment to women's rights. By contrast, Nigeria, a similarly classified open anocracy, passed the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act in 2015, but implementation has been limited. Despite civil society efforts and international praise, the law remains unenforced in much of the country, hindered by a lack of institutional framework for its enforcement, low levels of violence awareness in Nigeria, and a general cultural resistance (Shajobi-Ibikunle & Kassim, 2023).

Both regimes fall into the category of semi-open, transitional systems. Yet their commitments to women's rights norms have diverged sharply, illustrating a broader puzzle: what drives this variation in women's rights norm adherence among anocracies?

Formally articulated in instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and reinforced by UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820, women's rights norms refer to state obligations to eliminate discrimination, ensure legal equality, guarantee women's equal participation in public and private life, and protect them from violence and structural exclusion (United Nations, 1988; UN Security Council, 2000; 2008). However, in states all across the political spectrum, women's rights are often the first to go. Their intersection with cultural hierarchies, domestic power structures, and limited international enforcement complicates their uptake. This makes women's rights norm internalization especially susceptible to strategic manipulation, and thus more heavily dependent on local actors. Unlike some other human rights that may carry stronger international enforcement mechanisms (e.g., conventions against torture or arbitrary detention), women's rights, such as gender quotas, anti-discrimination laws, or protections against gender-based violence, tend to be subject to more discretion in domestic implementation. Whether this leads to curtailing through the rollback of gender equality laws or the hollow implementation of anti-violence protections, women's rights are particularly vulnerable to symbolic adoption; promoted on paper to appease international audiences but neglected in practice. As such, women's rights norms offer a uniquely revealing lens into how states comply under uncertainty, especially in regimes marked by institutional instability and contested legitimacy.

To this point, the theoretical focus of this study is anocracies: hybrid regimes that combine democratic and authoritarian traits and are characterized by fluctuating power dynamics, weak institutions, and semi-open civil society spaces. Often overlooked or grouped with authoritarian systems in norm compliance literature, anocracies are promising contexts for examining partial, albeit substantive, norm adherence. Their hybrid, and often unstable, nature

allows international pressure and domestic mobilization to interact in different ways than in other regime types. In anocratic environments, local women's rights civil society organizations (CSOs) may play a larger role in shaping government behavior, pressuring leaders to adopt international norms through tools such as coalition-building, public protest, and media campaigns.

Despite their global rise after the Cold War, anocracies remain understudied in both the norm diffusion and compliance literatures, particularly concerning how local actors influence women's rights adherence in these semi-open regimes. Most existing research prioritizes either consolidated autocracies or democracies, overlooking the fluid dynamics that make anocracies distinct. This leaves open important questions about whether meaningful rights-based reforms can emerge in these grey-area regimes and, if so, what drives them.

While much of the existing literature emphasizes top-down explanations for norm compliance, whether driven by international organizations or binary regime type, this study turns attention to the domestic actors operating in local contexts. Building on audience cost theory and contrary to strategic ratification literature, this study argues that women's rights CSOs in anocracies are uniquely positioned to generate significant pressure for women's rights norm adherence, even in the absence of full ratification or immediate institutional reform. When well-organized and embedded in national discourse, these groups can exploit the regime instability and reputational sensitivities common in anocracies to elicit forms of incremental adherence, including treaty signing, legislative debates, and official statements from government officials.

To test this theory, this research employs a large-N quantitative design covering 1985-2025 to test how CSO presence and coordination capacity shape norm adherence across a global sample, with the country-year as the unit of analysis. In doing so, this study contributes to ongoing scholarly debates by re-centering norm diffusion on domestic agency within hybrid regimes. It also provides actionable policy insights for international actors seeking to support rights-based reform in these increasingly common hybrid contexts; not through top-down conditionality alone, but by empowering the local actors already mobilizing change.

Literature Review

Scholars contributing to broader norm compliance literature have long explored the variance in adherence to international norms. Early rationalist approaches emphasize incentives, coercion, and strategic calculations, while constructivists focus on persuasion, norm internalization, legitimacy, and norm entrepreneurs (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Checkel, 2001; Börzel & Risse, 2001). As this literature largely frames international organizations (IOs) as the primary drivers of norm diffusion (Thomson, 2017; O'Rourke, 2020), it often overlooks the role of local actors—particularly in shaping women's rights norms—and frequently lacks theoretical grounding or empirical testing of their influence (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Conversely, emerging literature highlights the influence of rational calculations, policy diffusion, and domestic politics on the compliance behavior of IO member states (Underdal, 1998; Risse et al.,

2013). Sikkink and Kim (2013) propose an "international justice cascade" of norm diffusion, linking compliance to leaders' political survival strategies (Conrad & Ritter, 2013). Parallel to this literature is Fearon's (1995) definition of commitment problems, where states renege on human rights agreements, as a key factor in non-compliance, particularly in contexts with low enforcement (Mearsheimer, 1994; Simmons, 2009; Matanock, 2020; Tallberg et al., 2020).

Because women's rights often lack strong enforcement mechanisms and are shaped by deeply rooted cultural and institutional resistance, they are especially vulnerable to symbolic adoption and are frequently among the first to be curtailed during periods of instability. Within the broader compliance landscape, recent scholarship has turned attention to this strategic adoption of women's rights norms (Htun & Weldon, 2010). Many scholars operate under the assumption that democracies naturally comply with women's rights treaties, shifting scholarly focus to non-democratic regimes (Wyndow et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2017; Hill & Watson, 2019). Scholars argue that international political contexts shape norm adherence, with authoritarian regimes adopting symbolic gender reforms, such as CEDAW, to enhance international reputations or respond to external pressures (Goldsmith & Posner, 2006; Htun & Weldon, 2010; Comstock & Vilán, 2023). Goldsmith and Posner (2006) term this "strategic ratification," when non-democratic regimes exploit low compliance costs to project progressiveness, a tactic often used to appease opposition groups (Donno & Kreft, 2018). Bush et al. (2024), building on Levitsky and Way (2010) and Donno and Kreft (2018), argue that post-Cold War democratic incentives prompt authoritarian regimes to adopt reforms that secure international rewards without risking political survival.

A key concept of strategic ratification is the use of gender quotas or tokenism to signal international legitimacy without enacting meaningful reform (Bush, 2011). Bush and Zetterberg (2020) find that quotas boost autocratic regimes' reputations and access to aid, as Western donors often favor higher female representation. Other scholars similarly note that autocratic Rwanda and Tanzania use quotas to appear progressive under Western pressure (Bauer & Burnet 2013; Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2016; 2022; Donno et al., 2022). While this literature links binary regime type to strategic versus substantive compliance and highlights women's rights norms, it remains centered on reputational incentives and formal ratification. As full compliance is often symbolic, limited attention to local actors and informal adherence overlooks the incremental steps regimes may take when full implementation is not feasible. Studying this dynamic in authoritarian settings is further complicated by opacity and the low salience of women's rights due to minimal domestic audience costs. In contrast, anocracies offer a crucial middle ground: local actors occupy a more ambiguous but potentially influential space due to these regimes' hybrid institutional features.

Much of the previous literature focuses on fully fledged autocracies or democracies, often grouping anocracies as a "non-democracy" and overlooking their uniqueness (Frantz, 2017). However, due to an increasing number of anocracies worldwide, an emerging collection of works is dedicated to defining these regimes and studying what makes them different (Fuller 2016). Burnell (2006) and Sternberg and Fischer (2022), among others, provide a useful framework for

distinguishing between democracies, autocracies, and a range of hybrid regimes that are often blurred by the proliferation of terms like "less hard types of authoritarianism" and "diminished forms of democracy". Anocracies are thus defined as hybrid regimes with both autocratic and democratic traits, fall mid-range on the Polity index, and are marked by high instability (Burnell, 2006; Vreeland, 2008; Regan & Bell, 2010; Jones & Lupu, 2018; Pate, 2020). This unpredictability creates opportunities for both progress and regression in rights adherence, making anocracies a crucial yet understudied category. Fein's (1995) seminal work exploring the idea of "more murder in the middle" posits that regimes in the middle of the regime-type spectrum are, due to their instability, more prone to human rights violations than others. Other scholars add that anocracies exhibit higher rates of human rights and civil liberties abuses than consolidated regime types, a pattern that aligns with "more violence in the middle" hypotheses and is most strongly supported in cases of civil conflict (Slinko et al., 2017; Jones & Lupu, 2018; Walter, 2022; Teodorescu, 2024).

Although these studies have examined hybrid regimes' volatility in terms of civil conflict and broader human rights violations, very few directly link anocratic institutional inconsistency and women's rights norm adherence. Women's rights are often among the earliest casualties in times of political instability, a frequent condition in anocracies (Hudson, 2012; Obradovic, 2015; Mueller-Hirth et al., 2023). Understanding how these regimes approach women's rights can provide insight into their broader patterns of norm adherence and institutional commitment. Despite the link between instability and the rollback of women's rights, anocracies' occupation of the "muddy middle ground" may allow local actors within these regimes to foster partial compliance that reflects a more genuine commitment to women's rights progress.

Theory and Hypotheses

To address these gaps, I propose a theory that centers on the presence of women's rights CSOs in shaping adherence to international norms on women's rights in the context of transitioning regimes. Contrary to prevailing assumptions that non-democratic regimes uniformly exhibit weak adherence to international women's rights norms, I argue that anocracies create unique opportunities for local women's rights groups to exert influence due to their hybrid political nature. While previous literature often categorizes anocracies alongside fully authoritarian regimes, I pull from transitional regime literature to contend that anocracies occupy a paradoxical middle ground, blending elements of both democracy and authoritarianism in ways that merit independent study and create a variation among anocracies within the broader regime spectrum (Jones & Lupu, 2018). This combination of institutional instability and partial democratic openness creates fertile ground for local-level women's rights CSOs to pressure the volatile government into adhering to women's rights policies, though this may not manifest in full ratification. My theory also draws from audience cost literature while diverging from existing norm compliance and hybrid regime literature, positing that women's rights norm

adherence in anocracies can surpass that of fully authoritarian regimes and even rival that of some stable democracies, particularly when local CSOs are active and strategically mobilized.

A defining characteristic of anocracies is their political instability, marked by weak institutions and unstable or fluctuating power dynamics. However, unlike fully authoritarian regimes, anocracies often retain elements of democratic governance such as political pluralism, semi-competitive elections, or decentralized decision-making. These traits create openings for domestic actors and civil society to organize and advocate for change. This blend of instability and openness amplifies the influence of present grassroots women's rights CSOs. While CSOs take diverse forms, I focus more on the non-state, locally anchored coalitions advocating for a broad spectrum of women's rights. These may range from well-established and coordinated coalitions to newly emerging or decentralized networks. While all grassroots CSOs operate at the local level, their capacity and internal organization vary, differences that significantly shape their ability to influence regime behavior. As much of the existing norm adherence literature explains, non-democratic regimes are often motivated by reputational factors, and I do think this rings true for anocracies to a certain extent in that it amplifies internal audience costs. I posit that the greater permeability of anocratic regimes allows CSOs to exploit windows of opportunity where these governments seek to bolster their domestic legitimacy or improve their international standing. In short, this theory positions grassroots CSOs not as peripheral actors but as central drivers of women's rights norm adherence in transitional contexts.

A key concept of my theory is the idea that these CSOs use audience costs as a mechanism to influence adherence in anocracies. Audience costs refer to the domestic and international penalties that governments incur when they publicly commit to certain policies but fail to follow through (Fearon, 1994; Tomz, 2007). While this concept has traditionally been applied to democracies and is increasingly applied in the context of autocracies, I argue that it holds particular salience in anocracies, where political accountability mechanisms are evolving and governments are often highly sensitive to both domestic discontent and international scrutiny (Weeks, 2008). In these regimes, women's rights CSOs leverage social mobilization, media campaigns, and coalition-building to elevate women's rights as public priorities. By publicly framing women's rights as central to national development or social justice, CSOs amplify public demands for accountability and signal to both domestic and international observers that the vulnerable regime is under pressure to meet its human rights commitments, thus increasing the reputational risks of non-compliance. This dynamic creates a feedback loop where governments, seeking to maintain legitimacy and avoid unrest, are compelled to substantially align with the women's rights norms advocated by these CSOs.

Moreover, the ability of politically active CSOs to generate audience costs in anocracies is heightened by these regimes' inherent vulnerabilities. Anocracies often lack the severely repressive instruments that characterize fully autocratic states, which I argue makes them more susceptible to the semi-organized domestic pressure of CSOs. The presence of semi-independent media outlets or opposition parties common in anocracies further facilitates the diffusion of women's rights discourse. Even under conditions of increased repression in anocracies, like

democratic backsliders or states transitioning to autocracies, local women's rights groups often operate via decentralized networks, making them more resilient and difficult to suppress. These bottom-up coalitions play a crucial role in shaping the political agendas of anocracies, especially when they align their demands with larger socio-political movements such as democratization or civil rights campaigns.

This leads me to another core tenet of my theory, the meaning of "norm adherence." Unlike previous research that emphasizes official ratification or de jure commitments to these norms, I adopt a process-oriented approach to defining adherence that moves beyond formal ratification. I identify three pre-ratification proxies for this de facto norm adherence: treaty signing, legislative debate, and official statements. Each proxy reflects a different mechanism of CSO influence in anocracies, capturing incremental yet significant shifts toward policy alignment with international women's rights standards and showing how adherence can manifest well before ratification. Though frequently dismissed as symbolic, I argue that treaty signing in anocracies is not as seemingly performative as it is in other non-democracies, as it often involves significant political capital and administrative investments that may be costly for the already-unstable anocratic government. This action involves CSOs leveraging domestic grievances or transnational partnerships to shape protest dynamics and international attention, putting the regime in a position where treaty signing is a politically expedient form of commitment that spurs preliminary policy change for leaders wanting to avoid domestic or international turmoil. Therefore, treaty signing represents a substantive commitment, requiring governments to navigate both domestic and international consequences while aligning with CSO expectations, signaling partial compliance and deflecting pressure. The second proxy, legislative debates, often emerge from grassroots mobilization and coalition-building. As CSOs frame women's rights as pressing domestic priorities and affiliate them with broader movements, they compel regimes to discuss adherence to avoid domestic audience costs. I argue that this is another substantive proxy, seeing as during legislative debates, lawmakers go through multiple rounds of discussion and deliberation of proposed policies in a process that requires a wider support base and can lead to more deliberate policy engagement or tangible solutions reflecting the specific needs of CSOs. The third proxy, official statements, often occur in response to heightened visibility due to CSOs' ability to shape narratives with media campaigns and international pressure. Although this proxy represents a lower-cost gesture signaling adherence, it can foreshadow future commitments or trigger provisional changes in governance practices.

By emphasizing pre-ratification mechanisms of adherence, this theory challenges the existing binary distinction between strategic and substantive norm adherence. While much of the literature treats symbolic commitments as evidence of strategic adoption, I argue that even low-cost actions like official statements can reflect meaningful shifts toward substantive women's rights reform when driven by domestic mobilization. This distinction is especially important in anocracies, where weak institutions and fluctuating leadership often make incremental changes the primary pathway to reform. Rather than dismissing partial adherence, this framework highlights how locally rooted women's rights CSOs can exploit the unique

vulnerabilities of transitional regimes, where a blend of authoritarian control and democratic openness creates opportunities to generate tangible, albeit incremental, policy shifts in favor of women's rights norms (Carothers & Press, 2022).

While I acknowledge that this effect may be moderated by the prior level of democracy or the extent of current democratic traits, I control for these factors and expect the effect to remain constant, though potentially less severe depending on existing cultural or religious norms, institutional capacity of the regime, and the broader makeup of the anocracy. I recognize that official statements and legislative debate may not always be with the intent to expand women's rights reform, instead with the intent to oppose or even reverse women's rights norms. Therefore, official statements and legislative debate won't always lead to positive reform, but could still be impactful by bringing the regime and the public's attention to the topic and encouraging further debate. Despite these possible counterarguments, I believe my general theory will hold that grassroots women's rights CSOs consistently exploit hybrid regimes' instability to push for incremental women's rights norm adherence.

However, CSO capacity is not constant across anocracies—some may have more ingrained organizational systems, while others may lack the infrastructure for sustained mobilization. The political volatility and weak institutions inherent in anocracies compounded with the differences in CSOs' internal capacity, including their ability to coordinate activities, maintain networks, and mobilize resources, can complicate their influence on women's rights norm adherence. More organized, resourceful CSOs that existed before the regime transition and ensuing instability can better sustain pressure and push for tangible treaty signing or policy discussions. These pre-existing groups are likely to be seen as more legitimate by the regime, as they are better equipped to overcome coordination problems and maintain consistent advocacy over time. By framing women's rights issues within broader agendas or having the ability to collaborate with other civil society actors, these well-established CSOs can compel the regime to engage in more substantive mechanisms as a means of addressing domestic demands. Contrastly, in more fragmented or newly emerging CSO networks, coordination problems may limit their ability to generate audience costs or sustain pressure on the regime. This effect means these groups are less likely to achieve deeper policy changes due to capacity constraints and lower perceived legitimacy. While high coordination problems may prevent sustained pressure, I argue that fragmented CSOs can still leverage short-term mobilization efforts to exert influence and extract lower-cost adherence behaviors from the regime. Even though these actions may appear largely symbolic, they can still generate de facto adherence practices within anocracies by creating temporary policy shifts or establishing new bureaucratic procedures, particularly when regimes seek to deflect international scrutiny or quell domestic unrest.

This intervening dynamic leads me to the following hypotheses:

H1: The presence of local women's rights CSOs increases the likelihood of treaty signing or legislative debate of women's rights norms in anocracies if the CSOs are pre-existing and experience low coordination problems.

H2: The presence of local women's rights CSOs increases the likelihood of official statements around women's rights norms in anocracies if the CSOs are newly emerging/highly fragmented and experience high coordination problems.

Research Design

To test my theory and hypotheses regarding the role of women's rights CSOs in driving adherence to international women's rights norms in anocracies, I adopt a large-N quantitative research design. Countries are included in the sample for each year from 1985 to 2025, a forty-year period marked by a rise in anocracies as many states transitioned toward democracy near the end of, and after, the Cold War. Providing forty years of data allows me to observe regime transitions and long-term CSO activity across varying political and geographic contexts, while isolating the specific capacity conditions under which CSOs are most influential. I classify regime type using Polity IV scores, with country-years categorized according to standard thresholds: autocracies (–10 to –6), anocracies (–5 to +5), and democracies (+6 to +10). While my theory centers on women's rights norm adherence in anocracies, this empirical analysis will include all regime types to allow for cross-regime comparison and broader generalizability. This full-sample approach enables both in-sample analysis of anocracies and out-of-sample comparisons with democracies and autocracies.

At the core of this study are the three observable proxies of norm adherence I mentioned earlier in this paper: (1) treaty signing, (2) legislative debates, and (3) official government statements. Treaty signing will be measured dichotomously (1 = occurred, 0 = not occurred), but I propose a more granular coding strategy for the other two proxies. Legislative debates and official statements will be measured on ordinal scales from 1 to 5, where 1 reflects negative or dismissive mentions of women's rights norms, and 5 reflects positive engagement, such as legislative debate with intent to ratify or statements indicating commitment to adopt international standards. Scores in the mid-range (2–4) represent degrees of neutral or mixed discourse, general references to gender equity, or discussion on the validity of the norms without clear commitment. These scales will be constructed using bibliometric text analysis to identify pre-defined sets of keywords. Examples include references to treaties like CEDAW, thematic terms such as "gender-based violence," "economic empowerment," "women's rights," "gender equality," "access to land," "reproductive rights," "political participation," and "women's rights legislation," as well as procedural language like "ratify," "adopt," "implement," or "in line with international standards." These keywords will be drawn from UN treaty language, UN Women policy briefs, civil society advocacy toolkits (AWID), and past studies that categorize rights-based discourse (Raja, 2023). In legislative debates, a level 5 would correspond to a debate explicitly linked to treaty ratification or reform bills.

I will draw data for these dependent variables from multiple sources: the United Nations Treaty Collection database for treaty signatures; national legislative records or IPU Parline database summaries, which will be scraped and coded for relevant legislative debates using

gender equality keyword matching and frequency analysis; and LexisNexis, media archives, and government websites for official statements, which will similarly be scanned for policy-relevant language, tone, and stated intent. Where possible, automated bibliometric methods (e.g., TF-IDF, dictionary matching) will be supplemented with my coding to verify sentiment and intent. I chose these sources for their credibility, global coverage, and their ability to capture both formal institutional behaviors and informal signals of policy alignment over time.

The independent variable I explore focuses on the presence of CSOs, including those engaged in a wide range of women's rights issues, from socio-economic concerns like education and access to land, to more politically or culturally contested areas such as reproductive rights and political participation. Capturing this full range of issue areas enables a more comprehensive assessment of how CSOs operate in varied normative environments, some of which may be more prone to cultural or religious resistance. These contextual factors are accounted for through relevant controls in the model. This approach also speaks to longstanding debates in the literature about the challenges of gender norm reforms that are deeply embedded in social and cultural systems (Englehart & Miller 2014). Because V-Dem does not disaggregate CSOs by issue area, I will generate an original issue-area classification through content analysis of CSO mandates and reported activities, using regional NGO databases (AWID, CIVICUS), official websites, and advocacy documents. To measure CSO presence, I use the V-Dem dataset, drawing from indicators in the Civil Society Index and Women's Civil Society Participation variables. These include "CSO entry and exit," "CSO repression," "CSO structure," and "CSO women's participation." These indicators are coded on ordinal scales (0 to 4 or 0 to 5), with higher values indicating more open environments, greater participation, or less repression, as defined by V-Dem's methodology. The dataset's cross-national structure makes it especially valuable for assessing civil society strength across diverse regime types.

The study also includes a moderating variable to account for variation in CSO historical presence and organizational capacity. To capture this variation, I further distinguish between pre-existing groups—those formed before a regime transitioned into an anocracy—and newer or more fragmented groups that emerged in the aftermath. I also assess the degree of coordination problems among CSOs (coded as low vs. high), using V-Dem indicators related to network structure (CSO participatory environment), collaborative activity (CSO consultation), access to resources (CSO financial support), and longevity (CSO entry and exit). CSOs that exhibit a strong presence of these indicators will be coded as having low coordination problems, whereas groups that lack these characteristics will be coded as having high coordination problems. Where necessary, I will supplement V-Dem with regional databases (e.g., CIVICUS, AWID), media archives, and NGO reports.

The statistical analysis will be conducted using three models, one for each proxy of norm adherence. Treaty signing will be modeled using logistic regression, with legislative debates and official statements modeled using ordered logistic regression. To test my core hypotheses, I will include an interaction term between CSO presence and coordination capacity to assess whether CSO impact on women's rights norm adherence increases when coordination problems are low.

Additionally, to examine how anocratic political context shapes CSO influence, I will include interaction terms between CSO presence and each regime type. On top of that, a three-way interaction term will assess how the effect of CSO presence on norm adherence is conditioned by both regime type and CSO coordination capacity. This adds another layer to my study, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of whether CSOs are more effective in anocratic regimes with institutional volatility, or whether their influence diminishes in more consolidated or repressive systems.

To better isolate these relationships and avoid potential confounders, I include a set of control variables. Prior and current levels of democracy (measured using Polity IV scores lagged by two years to account for democratic conditions before and during anocratic transition) may influence both CSO presence and government responsiveness to women's rights norms. Institutional capacity, captured through World Governance Indicators such as "government effectiveness" and "rule of law," affects a state's ability to implement reforms and may also determine how effectively CSOs generate audience costs. Cultural and religious attitudes toward gender equality, drawn from the World Values Survey, shape baseline societal receptiveness to women's rights. Reliance on international aid, based on OECD aid flow data in sectors linked to gender equality or civil society development, may create external incentives for states to signal compliance. Finally, conflict presence may disrupt civil society operations, and is accounted for using the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset, which defines conflict as contested incompatibility over government or territory involving at least 25 battle-related deaths per year (Davies et al., 2024; Gleditsch et al., 2002). I rely on UCDP's type of incompatibility and actor identity codes to identify cases where violence may intersect with CSO activities or shape the political salience of women's rights.

However, I recognize that there are still potential issues of endogeneity that may link my study too closely to previous works on strategic adherence, such as regimes only allowing CSO activity because they already intend to comply with women's rights norms. To address these concerns, I will explore instrumental variable analysis. Possible instruments include external shocks to CSO capacity (e.g., funding changes, international CSO bans), historical CSO donor funding, or the presence of global advocacy campaigns, which may influence CSO development independently of state compliance intentions. I also anticipate several other empirical challenges. First, in operationalizing CSO influence by distinguishing between pre-existing and newly formed groups, there is a risk of overrepresenting new organizations in states transitioning from autocracy. This may conflate regime openness with CSO emergence, rather than isolating the independent effect of grassroots mobilization on norm adherence. On the other hand, informal or decentralized CSOs may be underrepresented in the data, especially in more repressive anocracies. To address this, I will draw on media sources and conduct bibliographic analysis to systematically code mentions of grassroots women's rights organizations, their activities, partnerships, advocacy strategies (protests, petitions, educational outreach), and any evidence of government engagement or response. This qualitative coding will help construct binary or scaled indicators of CSO activity in country-years that may otherwise appear missing or null. A

mixed-method approach will thus provide a more comprehensive and context-sensitive account of CSO dynamics. Additionally, the internal dynamics of anocracies are heterogeneous: some may lean more democratic, while others approach full authoritarianism. In this case, incorporating continuous measures of regime openness or disaggregating anocracies by subtype may be appropriate. Finally, validating audience cost mechanisms poses challenges, as direct indicators of reputational or political costs are limited. I will rely on indirect measures and pattern matching to assess these effects.

Policy Implications and Conclusion

This study makes important contributions to both scholarly debates and real-world policymaking on women's rights norm adherence. At the scholarly level, it challenges dominant compliance theories that center international organizations or binary regime types as the primary drivers of norm diffusion and compliance. Instead, I foreground the role of local women's rights CSOs, particularly in the transitional environments of anocracies—regimes too often treated as residual categories in the existing literature. By drawing from audience cost theory and process-oriented adherence through treaty signing, legislative debates, and official statements, my study introduces a more nuanced framework for analyzing norm compliance in contexts where full ratification may be politically unfeasible. Anocracies represent a "dangerous hour" for norm implementation—marked by volatility, institutional weakness, and contested authority—which I theorize creates unique obstacles to full de jure realization of women's rights. However, this is not to say that de facto change is impossible within these regimes. Instead, the process-oriented approach developed in this study not only contributes to the growing literature on hybrid regimes but can also help deepen our understanding of how incremental reforms can emerge from below, driven by domestic actors navigating volatile institutional landscapes. In doing so, it advances the norm diffusion literature by integrating the role of domestic civil society under conditions of institutional instability, filling a major gap in existing research on women's rights in semi-authoritarian contexts.

The policy implications of this study are equally significant. Strategies that assume top-down change, whether through diplomatic pressure, aid conditionality, or treaty monitoring, frequently overlook the informal mechanisms by which rights norms begin to take hold. For international organizations, donors, and transnational advocacy networks, this research highlights the need to move beyond state-centric strategies that overemphasize ratification and elite buy-in. If partial compliance in anocracies is often initiated by domestic CSOs, especially those that are pre-existing and well-organized, then policy frameworks must prioritize long-term investment in these actors' capacity and protection. This includes funding for institutional development, coalition-building support, legal aid, and access to transnational networks, particularly in politically fluid environments where new or fragmented CSOs may face high coordination costs but still drive lower-cost forms of adherence from the anocratic regime. My theory and expected findings suggest that, even in regimes where full policy transformation is unlikely, the

groundwork for future reform is laid through these smaller but cumulative acts of compliance, which gradually reshape state behavior and discourse.

This study also has implications for monitoring bodies and how they can revise progress assessments. Rather than relying exclusively on binary indicators like treaty ratification, compliance metrics should include softer, process-based signals of adherence such as sustained legislative discussions or high-level official statements. These acts, when produced under pressure from domestic actors, often serve as precursors to more substantive and longer-lasting policy change. Integrating these metrics would allow policymakers and aid donors to better identify regimes that are trending toward genuine reform and allocate resources accordingly.

Lastly, this study suggests that regional organizations and global advocacy campaigns can amplify CSO influence by generating dual pressure from below and above. By elevating local demands into international forums, these networks can help create feedback loops that increase non-compliance's reputational and political costs for anocratic regimes seeking increased international legitimacy. This builds on the strategic ratification literature by digging deeper into the domestic mechanisms that make symbolic commitments politically useful, showing how local CSOs can convert surface-level gestures into pathways for more meaningful adherence.

Ultimately, further research is needed to more exactly map the causal pathways and scope conditions under which CSOs exert influence, but the implications are compelling. This research reorients norm adherence debates by showing how domestic CSOs, not just states or IOs, drive women’s rights reform in anocracies. Its policy contribution highlights a path forward: empowering the very actors who mobilize pressure from within. In highly unstable political environments, sustainable reform is less likely to come from formal commitments alone. Instead, it begins with resilient, organized actors embedded in the communities they serve, leveraging every institutional opening to push for rights-based changes for women. These efforts are critical not only for legal or symbolic progress, but also for improving the lived realities, safety, and dignity of women who are often the first to bear the costs of weak institutions and fragmented protections.

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