

# The Effect of Protesters' Gender on Public Reactions to Protests and Protest Repression

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**T**his study examines how protesters' gender shapes public reactions to protests and protest repression. Using an original survey experiment, I demonstrate that protests involving extensive participation by women are perceived as less violent and meriting of repression than male-dominated protests. But perceptions of female protesters vary. Patriarchy-defiant female protesters like feminists are deemed more deserving of repression despite being perceived as equally likely to be peaceful as female protesters who emphasize patriarchy-compliant femininities, such as women who highlight their roles as mothers and wives. This, I show, is because patriarchy-defiant women are viewed as more immoral, which renders their protest accounts less trustworthy when they clash with government propaganda seeking to legitimize repression. These findings underscore the value of disaggregating the binary category of man or woman when examining sentiments toward political agents and of considering stereotypes when studying perceptions, and ultimately the risks and effectiveness, of protest movements.

## INTRODUCTION

**P**rotests are an important catalyst for sociopolitical change (Ayoub, Page, and Whitt 2021; Beisinger 2007; Wasow 2020). To thwart such changes, governments in both democracies and non-democracies can—and often do—use repression to break up protests. Yet regimes face a paradox when employing repression: as helpful as repression may be for stifling dissent, it can also backfire (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Hess and Martin 2006). Namely, when the public finds it hard to justify or tolerate forceful repression being directed at their fellow citizens, instead of curtailing protests, repression could end up propelling throngs of erstwhile bystanders to join the protest movement (Aytaç, Schiumerini, and Stokes 2018; Pearlman 2018).

But what factors determine whether the public will tolerate repression of protesters? Here, I answer this question by developing and testing using a survey experiment in Russia<sup>1</sup> a theory of how protesters' gender affects citizens' likelihood to believe protesters are violent and, in turn, to condone a government's decision to repress the protest.

Building on the literature about gender stereotypes (Bauer 2015; Eagly and Karau 2002), I argue and find that, compared to male-dominated protests, protests that feature extensive involvement by women are perceived as less violent which, in turn, lowers the public's likelihood to tolerate protest repression. Yet, the role of gender is more complex. Drawing upon insights from

research on subtyping and diverse femininities (Glick and Fiske 2001; Hamilton et al. 2019), I explore how different expressions of feminine identity affect public tolerance for repression of female-dominated protests and show that the public is especially averse to repression when protesters are *patriarchy-compliant women*, by which I mean women who highlight their investment in patriarchal ideals of femininity, such as wifehood and motherhood. Conversely, I demonstrate that *patriarchy-defiant women*<sup>2</sup>—women who resist patriarchal conceptions of femininity and gender relations, for example by identifying as feminists or by emphasizing qualities like independence and strength—do not benefit from the “gender shield” effect in repression tolerance. Patriarchy-defiant and patriarchy-compliant female protesters, I find, are perceived as equally likely to be peaceful. But patriarchy-defiant women are perceived as more immoral which, in turn, renders their protest accounts less trustworthy when they clash with government propaganda and makes it easier for public audiences to stomach repression against them.

In demonstrating the impact of protesters' gender in shaping public attitudes toward protest repression, this paper contributes to a growing literature on identity and repression (Conrad, Hill, and Moore 2018; Edwards and Arnon 2021). Recent experimental works have shown that Americans view Black protesters as significantly more violent and deserving of repression than white protesters and that Arab protesters are perceived as more aggressive than Jewish Israelis (Manekin and Mitts 2022; Valentino and Nicholson 2021). I extend this

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<sup>1</sup> The survey's pre-registration can be found at: [https://osf.io/sqktm/?view\\_only=8dee881a26e941c7b9984faf84b4c2a2](https://osf.io/sqktm/?view_only=8dee881a26e941c7b9984faf84b4c2a2).

<sup>2</sup> In my pre-registration, I categorized women as “traditional” and “non-traditional.” I adopted the “patriarchy-compliant” and “patriarchy-defiant” labels because they more closely align with the combined theoretical insights from the literature on ambivalent sexism, gender subtyping, and multiple femininities (Glick and Fiske 2001; Schippers 2007). I thank peer reviewers for calling my attention to the nuanced distinction between “traditional” and “patriarchal” ideals of womanhood.

research by centering gender as salient identity that might also affect how public audiences react to protest repression. Namely, despite the fact that many of the most impressive nonviolent movements around the world have involved extensive participation by women (Chenoweth 2019), past experimental studies on public perceptions of protests only compare attitudes toward white versus non-white *male* protesters (Edwards and Arnon 2021; Manekin and Mitts 2022). This paper, therefore, breaks new ground by causally documenting the effect of protesters' gender identity on public reactions to protests and protest repression.

Second, my findings contribute to our understanding of how citizens navigate through competing narratives about the conduct of protesters and authorities. Existing experimental studies on how citizens perceive protest (repression) present respondents with a single point of view—one that respondents are supposed to take for granted—about protesters' use of violence (Valentino and Nicholson 2021). My experimental design, on the other hand, pits activists' and authorities' accounts of the protest against one another, allowing me to assess the effect of activists' identity on their potential to counter repression-justification propaganda.

Third, I uncover a new mechanism through which protesters' identity may affect repression tolerance: perceived morality. Past work on the role of protesters' identity in shaping public attitudes toward protest repression has focused on stereotypes of violence while largely ignoring the dimension of morality, which social psychologists have identified as central to people's appraisal of others (Brambilla and Riva 2017; Goodwin 2015). This research brings morality stereotypes into the conversation about what mechanisms underpin the relationship between protesters' identity and public reactions to protest repression. My findings offer a key takeaway for scholars of collective action: even when protesters are not initially stereotyped as particularly violent, if the identities of these protesters evoke stereotypes of immorality—as is the case with patriarchy-defiant female protesters—then the public might be more receptive to government propaganda against protesters and, consequently, more inclined to rationalize protest repression.

Finally, this research offers two analytic shifts to the study of gender and politics. First, quantitative scholarship on gender and politics has centered on political candidates and officeholders (Barnes and O'Brien 2018; Bauer 2015; Saltzer and McGrath 2024; Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018). By investigating the implications of gender stereotypes for protesters, this research helps expand the field's focus from studying politicians to investigating reactions toward a wider range of female political agents. Similarly, by discussing how different *subtypes* of female protesters elicit different responses by the public, this research adds to the growing calls for political scientists to take gender more seriously, which includes readjusting our analytic lenses from being fixed on the binary category of man or woman to considering the role of subgroups and alternative femininities (Schneider and Bos 2019; Sjoberg, Kadera, and Thies 2018).

## PROTESTERS' GENDER AND REPRESSION TOLERANCE

Recent protests around the world illustrate the power of women to mobilize against injustice and drive significant sociopolitical change. In Sudan, for example, Alaa Salah's recital of revolutionary poetry from atop a car mesmerized the world and inspired thousands of fellow protesters, many of whom women, to demand and deliver the end of Omar Bashir's 30-year rule. Similarly, Belarusian women were the driving force behind the largest anti-government protests in their country's history—filling the streets day after day to demand an end of Alexander Lukashenko's decades-long regime.

Episodes like these, where women join protests in droves, although numerous, are not the norm. Many social movements around the world continue to sideline women, but much to their detriment—as recent cross-national analysis by Chenoweth (2019) demonstrates, civil resistance campaigns involving large-scale participation by women in peak demonstrations have been significantly more likely to succeed than other primarily nonviolent campaigns that have marginalized or excluded women.

One important factor underpinning the exceptional power and legacy of women's activism to drive change concerns widespread public opposition to repression of female protesters (Codur and King 2015). Public audiences, scholars often assert, are especially averse to repression of women, making governments more reluctant to squelch protests that include large numbers of women for fear of sparking public backlash (Chenoweth 2019; Principe 2017).

But despite frequent claims that female participation in protests heightens public opposition to repression, this argument remains causally unidentified and undertheorized, regularly invoked by social movement scholars as “a universal fact” (Codur and King 2015, 434; see also Principe 2017, 6). The goal here, therefore, is to submit this popular and consequential claim linking protesters' gender and public reactions to repression to the theoretical and methodological rigor it warrants. Central to my theory is the mediating role of public beliefs about protesters' propensity for violence. Next, therefore, I elaborate on how (perceived) protest violence—or the absence thereof—bears on public tolerance of repression.

### Nonviolence and Repression Tolerance

There are few actions activists can take that are more likely to antagonize the public than use of violence. Protest violence undermines protesters' perceived legitimacy (Wang and Piazza 2016), erodes public support for protests and protesters' cause (Muñoz and Anduiza 2019; Simpson, Willer, and Feinberg 2018), and decreases public approval for negotiations with activists (Huff and Kruszewska 2016). Nonviolent tactics, on the other hand, boost the perceived injustice of the status quo (Thomas and Louis 2014) and strengthen feelings of identification with the protesters (Simpson, Willer, and Feinberg 2018).

This overarching pattern of public preference for peaceful forms of dissent suggests that citizens will be more willing to justify repression of protesters that they see as violent. And, indeed, social movement scholars have long argued that government crackdowns on nonviolent resistance activities, such as peaceful protests, are especially likely to backfire because rough treatment of peaceful protesters would be seen by the wider public as unjust and unacceptable (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Hess and Martin 2006; Opp and Roehl 1990). Conversely, when a repressive response is directed at protesters who deploy violence, public audiences are more likely to regard authorities' attempts at quelling protests as legitimate and in line with the government's mandate to protect citizens from threats (Lupu and Wallace 2019; Williamson and Malik 2021).

### Protesters' Identities, Perceived Propensity for Violence, and Repression Tolerance

Compelling evidence thus demonstrates that considerations regarding protesters' conduct—whether they are peaceful or violent—play a crucial role in determining how the public reacts to a government's decision to repress protests. However, much of this literature fails to distinguish meaningful differences in the actual degree of violence a protest movement employs and how violent the public perceives a protest to be.

As a handful of recent experimental works show, perceptions of protest violence and, in turn, public tolerance of repression, can be influenced by factors outside of protesters' actual behavior, a key one being the identity of protesters. Valentino and Nicholson (2021), for instance, find that both liberal and conservative Americans were more likely to associate protests against officer-involved shootings with violent tactics when exposed to Black as compared to white demonstrators. Similarly, Manekin and Mitts (2022) show that Arab protesters in Israel and Black protesters in the United States tend to evoke stereotypes of aggression regardless of their objective choice of tactics. This cognitive bias to see violence by ethnoracial minorities, even when violence has not occurred, makes the public more willing to support government crackdowns on protests by non-whites (Manekin and Mitts 2022).

The focus of these experiments has been limited to the role of racial and ethnic identities in shaping public reactions to protests. In fact, past experimental works have only compared attitudes toward protesters who are white or non-white *males*, ignoring perceptions of female protesters entirely (Manekin and Mitts 2022; Valentino and Nicholson 2021).

I argue, however, that stereotypes associated with protesters' gender identity can also alter the public's perception of protesters' propensity for violence and, thus, their willingness to tolerate government repression. Specifically, extant work in social psychology demonstrates that, across nations, women tend to be seen as kind, weak, gentle, and sympathetic (Williams and Best 1990), while men are frequently seen as tougher and more confident and aggressive (Eagly

and Karau 2002; Heilman 2001). In fact, unlike stereotypes of many other historically marginalized groups, such as racial or sexual minorities, people tend to hold more positive stereotypes about women as compared to men (Eagly and Mladinic 1989). However, this “women are wonderful” effect is largely due to people's tendency to perceive women as superior in “warmth” qualities, such as sincerity and compassion, while still seeing them as inferior to men with regard to agentic qualities, such as confidence and competence (Eagly and Mladinic 1989).

Stereotypes of warmth and relative incompetence can be a bane for women in leadership roles, such as politicians (Anzia and Bernhard 2022; Bauer 2015; Holman, Merolla, and Zechmeister 2022), but may be a boon for female protesters. Because women are typecast as kinder and gentler than men, but as weaker and less confident (Eagly and Karau 2002; Heilman 2001), people should view a crowd of female activists as less driven by hostile and violent motives and as less capable of successfully carrying out violent intentions, such as harming security forces.

Therefore, I hypothesize that public audiences should be less willing to condone repression of female-dominated, as compared to male-dominated, protests (H1). Moreover, I expect this aversion will be driven by female stereotypes of nonviolence: protests featuring extensive participation by women will be perceived as less likely to be violent than male-dominated protests (H2). Stated in statistical terms, I expect that respondents' perceptions about protesters' propensity for violence will mediate the effect of protesters' gender on public tolerance for protest repression.

### Gender Subtypes, Nonviolence Stereotypes, and Repression Tolerance

Yet the role of gender identity is more complex. The tendency for survey respondents to view women as “wonderful” (Eagly and Mladinic 1989) largely ensues because the prototype for most people when they evaluate “women” are women who approximate “hegemonic” femininity—that is, women who instantiate patriarchal ideals of womanhood, such as mothers and housewives (Haddock and Zanna 1994; Hamilton et al. 2019). However, in day-to-day interactions, people tend to stereotype women at the level of subtypes such as “housewives,” “businesswomen,” “feminists,” or “lesbians” as opposed to the overarching category of “women” (Six and Eckes 1991). Crucially, not all subtypes of women are perceived as wonderful; women who adopt alternative forms of femininities that challenge patriarchal norms of male dominance, such as feminists and sex-positive women, are viewed as competent but cold and deceitful (Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick 2007; Schippers 2007).

The subtyping of women relates to Glick and Fiske's (2001) concept of “ambivalent sexism” that distinguishes between hostile sexism and subjectively “benevolent” sexism. Namely, sexist ambivalence serves to divide women into two general categories: those seen as conforming to patriarchal ideologies,

such as homemakers, and those, like feminists, who challenge a patriarchal status quo (Glick and Fiske 2001). The first type of women tends to encourage benevolent sexism characterized by protective paternalism—women are to be cherished and protected, and their “weakness” and “innocence” oblige men to fulfill their protector-and-provider role. The latter group, however, elicit hostile sexism, which often entails (support for) violent punishment (Glick et al. 2016).

It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that female protesters around the world have habitually enlisted patriarchal ideals of femininity in service of a social cause. As Codur and King note in their account of women’s involvement in civil resistance campaigns, history bears powerful examples of female activists “striking back at regimes of oppression by consciously leveraging their customary roles in patriarchal cultures ... as good wives and devoted mothers” (2015, 216–9). In the 1970s and 1980s in Argentina, for instance, hundreds of women assembled at Plaza de Mayo to protest the political disappearance of their sons, wielding their status as suffering mothers to galvanize domestic and international revolt against the country’s military dictatorship (Bouvard 1994). In other cases, including prominent democracies like the United States, social movements have deployed discourses of concerned mothers to mobilize protests about issues ranging from environmentalism to gun violence to racial disparities in policing (Sanchez 2020)—often complementing this “motherhood” discourse with attention-grabbing performances of tailored femininities, such as offerings of flowers or even kisses to security forces.

Implicit in this protest strategy is the idea that activists’ avowal of patriarchal femininities increases public disapproval of protest repression; and, conversely, that were these women to enact femininities that challenge patriarchal conceptions of womanhood and gender relations—for instance by identifying as feminists—that public audiences would be more susceptible to viewing repressive government actions as appropriate. These are intuitions that scholarship on gender in sociology and social psychology as well as qualitative accounts of women’s involvement in nonviolent resistance (Hamilton et al. 2019; Mason 2005) suggest are well-founded but ones that this work is the first to begin testing quantitatively.

In sum, I hypothesize that the public will be less likely to condone repression directed at protests with predominantly patriarchy-compliant female participants, compared to repression of protests dominated by men or patriarchy-defiant women (H3). Once again, I expect stereotypes of nonviolence to mediate the causal effect of protesters’ gender identity on public tolerance for repression. Because protests featuring extensive participation by patriarchy-compliant women will be perceived as less likely to be violent than male-dominated protests or protests marked by extensive involvement of patriarchy-defiant women, the public should be least likely to tolerate repression against them (H4).

## Protesters’ Identities and Competing Narratives of Violence

Finally, protesters’ gender identity may indirectly affect public tolerance for protest repression by affecting a protest movement’s potential to counter government narratives about the legitimacy of repressive action against (violent) protests.

Namely, in order to delegitimize protest movements and justify their repressive response, governments often describe nonviolent protests as violent and disruptive (Edwards and Arnon 2021). Moreover, to weaken public support for protesters and provide legal and moral justification for repression, governments frequently hire agent provocateurs that infiltrate peaceful demonstrations and instigate violence (Marx 2013). Even without agent provocateurs, however, nonviolent movements often constitute a large network of participants, a small subset of whom might sporadically employ violent tactics such as throwing rocks at the police. In an attempt to legitimate forceful repression of protesters and avert public backlash, governments in both democracies and nondemocracies often emphasize these isolated incidents of breakdowns in nonviolent discipline and label demonstrators as hooligans or even terrorists (Williamson and Malik 2021).

Activists, however, are not defenseless in the face of government propaganda accusing them of violence. As recent protests in Iran and Belarus illustrate, even in some of the most iron-fisted regimes, activists have the capacity to publicize their claims and grievances (Anderson 2021; Reuter and Szakonyi 2015). As such, to convince the public that protest repression is unjust and inspire mass revolt, activists tend to strategically characterize their movement as peaceful (Chong 2014; Hess and Martin 2006), and when breakdowns in nonviolent discipline do occur, demonstrators often take pains to pin the blame for the escalation on security forces (Davenport, Soule, and Armstrong 2011; Williamson and Malik 2021).

Activists, then, may leverage gender stereotypes to win the public relations battle between the government and protesters. Who citizens are inclined to believe in this public relations battle is pivotal for determining whether the public will rationalize or rally against a government’s move to clamp down on protesters (Chong 2014; Hess and Martin 2006). Yet, despite how critical these competing narratives are for shaping public reactions to protest repression, past experimental studies have only presented respondents with a single account—one that respondents should presume as objective and uncontested—about protesters’ conduct (Edwards and Arnon 2021; Manekin and Mitts 2022; Valentino and Nicholson 2021). There is limited empirical understanding, therefore, about how and whether the (gender) identity of protesters affects a movement’s potential to counter repression legitimization propaganda that (falsely) portrays protesters as violent.

However, based on the previously-cited literature on gender subtypes and stereotypes (e.g., Eagly and Mladinic 1989; Haddock and Zanna 1994), I hypothesize

that patriarchy-compliant female protesters will be especially effective at countering repression-justification propaganda. Because these women are stereotyped as innocent, gentle and weak, the public should be less likely to believe government narratives that paint such protesters as violent or worthy of repression (H5).

## METHOD

I test my hypotheses using a preregistered survey experiment. The experiment was administered online to 1,350 Russian citizens<sup>3</sup> recruited by Qualtrics in October, 2021. The sample closely approximates the Russian population on demographic dimensions such as education, religion, and income but it is slightly biased toward younger and female respondents (for sample characteristics see Supplementary material S1). In practice, however, these differences between sample and population characteristics are relatively small and there is no reason to expect that the population average treatment effects would considerably differ from the sample average treatment effects (Miratrix et al. 2018). And, indeed, results from weighted analyses, shown in Supplementary material S5, are consistent with the findings presented in the main body of the paper.

## Case Background

Despite the risk of repression, protests have been a common part in the repertoire of political action in Russia. In 2021, for example, thousands of protesters took to the streets in dozens of Russian cities to demand the release of Alexei Navalny, a prominent opposition leader. Likewise, in 2022, Russian activists staged several mass demonstrations to decry the war against Ukraine. Overall, throughout the past decade, Russia has witnessed thousands of protest events (Robertson 2010; Tertychnaya and Lankina 2020).

With each new mass protest, however, the Kremlin's response has grown steadily more repressive. The number of arrests during peak protest events, for example, has increased from several hundred during the 2011–2012 vote-fraud protests to almost two thousand amidst the 2017 anti-corruption and the 2019 Moscow election protests—numbers that surged even higher during the 2021 pro-Navalny protests, when single-day protest arrests reached four thousand on several days (for more precise protest arrest estimates, see Supplementary material S10).

The vast majority of those subjected to beatings and detainment in these protests were male activists (OVD-Info 2022). Still, it is authorities' handing of female activists that often ignites the most significant public backlash. One recent example is a widely-circulated video from the 2021 protests showing an officer violently kicking a female protester—an incident that

triggered a public outcry, compelling a rare apology from the Russian authorities.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, if ever there were protest activities that have elicited a relatively restrained police reaction, it has been when demonstrators were predominantly women. For example, in 2021, when several hundred female activists formed a human chain in Moscow's city center on Valentine's Day in solidarity with Navalny's wife, Julia Navalnaya, their protest was met with a surprising level of tolerance by Russian authorities, especially given the extreme police brutality during the pro-Navalny protests just days earlier.<sup>5</sup> Arguably, even in the context of anti-war activism, which has practically been made illegal,<sup>6</sup> public criticism of Putin's war-mongering by some women's movements, such as the Council of Wives and Mothers, has often been more ignored than forcefully repressed.<sup>7</sup>

This is not to say that Russian authorities are always or necessarily inclined to go easy on female activists. The protest activities of Pussy Riot, an all-female punk group, for example, have garnered worldwide attention as much for their boldness as for the brutal response they customarily elicit from Russian authorities (Sharafutdinova 2014). Similarly, members of the Anti-War Feminist Front, one of Russia's first and most active anti-war movements that emerged in response to the invasion of Ukraine, have faced recurrent harassment and arrests (Krivobokova 2023). And, in fact, those detained in the 2022 anti-war protests were predominantly women (OVD-Info 2022).

No dissident in Russia is safe. However, my theory suggests that repression of female-dominated protests—or, more specifically, of protests that showcase women who instantiate patriarchy-sanctioned femininities—would be harder to swallow for the Russian public.

## Experimental Design

In the experiment, I present respondents with fictitious newspaper articles describing a protest, where I randomly vary the identity of most protesters. There are four experimental conditions, each condition showcasing a protest dominated by men, generic women, patriarchy-compliant women, or patriarchy-defiant women. Experimental conditions are balanced with respect to various demographic characteristics (see Supplementary material S3).

<sup>4</sup> Roman Goncharenko, "Russian Police Officer Apologizes to Protester," *Deutsche Welle* (Bonn), January 26, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/russian-police-officer-apologizes-to-protester/a-56342804>.

<sup>5</sup> "Women Form Human Chains in Russia in Support of Navalny's Wife," *The Guardian* (London), February 14, 2021, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/14/navalny-supporters-to-defy-kremlin-and-hold-candelit-protests-russia>.

<sup>6</sup> The Kremlin has enacted a law imposing up to 15 years in prison for spreading dissenting information about the Ukraine war.

<sup>7</sup> "Russian Soldiers' Mothers Accuse Putin of Avoiding Them," *The Moscow Times*, November 24, 2022, [www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/11/24/russian-soldiers-mothers-accuse-putin-of-avoiding-them-a79493](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/11/24/russian-soldiers-mothers-accuse-putin-of-avoiding-them-a79493).

<sup>3</sup> Sample size was determined via pre-registered power analysis using DeclareDesign (Blair et al. 2019). This sample size ensures adequate power (>0.80) to detect an effect size as small as  $d = 0.20$ .

To ensure that the gender manipulation is not easily missed, the vignettes signal extensive female participation (or its absence) at multiple junctures. For instance, the gender identity of most protesters is noted in the article's title (see Figure 1). Likewise, later in the news article, respondents are informed that over 20 men/women were hospitalized following protesters' clash with the police. Additionally, given that the gender of most protesters is typically reflected in the movement's leadership—for instance, virtually all post-1945 resistance campaigns where women comprised the majority of participants during peak protests also featured women in leadership roles (Chenoweth 2019)—to further prime (lack of) extensive protest involvement by women, I quote a statement by either a male or female protest leader.

I use this statement, in addition to a protest chant, also to differentiate between protests dominated by patriarchy-compliant versus patriarchy-defiant women. Motherhood and wifehood remain central features of patriarchal norms of femininity (Hamilton et al. 2019); thus, my experimental condition cueing a protest dominated by patriarchy-compliant women features female protesters emphasizing their identity as mothers and wives. On the other hand, rejection of patriarchal ideals of womanhood often entails the adoption of a feminist identity and qualities like strength and sexual confidence that challenge norms of feminine subordination (Schippers 2007). As such, patriarchy-defiant female protesters in my vignettes present themselves as (strong) feminist women (see Figures 1 and 2). Results from the manipulation check, reported in Supplementary material S4, confirm that my experimental manipulation was successful and that no significant difference exists between conditions in terms of correctly identifying the identity of most protesters.

There may be concern that the manipulation of protesters' gender identity might lead respondents to update their perceptions about the motive for protesting—and that protesters' motive, rather than their identity, could drive differences in public reactions to protest (repression). Yet, in practice, differentiation between identity and motive is problematic because marginalized communities tend to have group grievances that inspire action (Simmons 2019) and, in any event, it would be somewhat trivial to argue, for example, that citizens are comfortable with repression against feminist protesters not because they identify

as feminists *per se* but because they are calling for gender equality. Nevertheless, protesters' identity and motive are analytically distinct and to minimize concerns about information equivalence (Dafoe, Zhang, and Caughey 2018), I keep the issue behind the protest constant—Russia's worsening economy. This ensures most respondents regardless of treatment (over 80 percent in all conditions) correctly identify what the protest is about.

I present each respondent with two vignettes. The first vignette is aimed at ascertaining respondents' perception of protesters' propensity for violence and their *preemptive* toleration for protest repression (support for repression before knowing how the government has responded). As such, the first vignette does not discuss authorities' reaction to the protest. Following the vignette, I measure perceptions of protesters' propensity for violence by asking respondents on a 7-point scale how likely they think the protest will become violent. Similarly, on a 5-point scale, I ask respondents about the extent to which they view the protesters as immoral. Finally, to measure preemptive tolerance for repression, I use an index composed of four indicators ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ). I ask respondents about the extent to which the following police actions would be justified (1—entirely unjustified; 7—entirely justified): i) arresting protesters; ii) using teargas to disperse protesters; iii) striking protesters with a baton; iv) shooting protesters with rubber bullets.

Citizens often align their attitudes with the position of their preferred political elites (Slothuus and De Vreese 2010; Brader et al. 2020). As such, respondents could exhibit different views on repression before and after authorities move to suppress dissent. The second vignette, therefore, aims to ascertain the effect of protesters' identity on the public's *reactive* repression toleration, that is on respondents' willingness to justify protest repression once repression has occurred.

Following the vignette, I ask respondents how violent they believe protesters were (1—completely non-violent; 7—completely violent). This allows me to investigate the effect of protesters' gender on citizens' likelihood to believe government propaganda accusing protesters of violence. To measure reactive tolerance for repression, I gauge respondents' agreement with a series of statements (1—strongly disagree; 7—strongly agree), such as “Police responded to the event appropriately” and “Protesters got what they deserve.”

**FIGURE 1. Vignette 1**

**In Moscow, [Men][Women][Mothers][Feminist Women] Take to Streets Over Worsening Economy**

Approximately 10,000 protesters marched in Moscow on Friday, complaining about economic decline. [men + generic women: “Citizens Unite,,”] [patriarchy-compliant woman: “Mothers Unite,,”] [patriarchy-defiant woman: “Feminists Unite,,”] protesters chanted. “We deserve a better government—one that cares for and respects [men + generic women: its citizens] [patriarchy-compliant woman: our children] [patriarchy-defiant woman: women]” [all women:Elena Ivanova] [men:Igor Ivanov], one of the protest leaders, said.

FIGURE 2. Vignette 2

**In Moscow, Protesters and Police Clash**

Approximately 10,000 protesters took to the streets in Moscow on Friday. Protesters chanted [**men + generic women:** "Citizens Unite,") [**patriarchy-compliant women:** "Mothers Unite,") [**patriarchy-defiant women:** "Feminists Unite,") and complained about economic decline.

Police detained over 40 protesters and at least 20 [**men:** men] [**all women:** women] were hospitalized following clashes with the police.

According to the government's spokesperson, "law enforcement officers had no other choice but use force against protesters. Protesters were violent and disruptive, hurling defiant taunts at the riot police, who responded in kind."

On the other hand, protesters say that the police brutally attacked them for no reason. They say the demonstrations were peaceful. "We [**patriarchy-compliant:** are mothers and wives who] [**patriarchy-defiant:** are strong feminist women who] want a better future for this country. The government should be ashamed for beating us up and for detaining us. We weren't violent." [**all women:** Elena Ivanova] [**men:** Igor Ivanov], one of the protest leaders, said.

I compute an overall "repression tolerance" score by averaging over the items ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

### Analytical Strategy

The main hypothesis tests involve pairwise differences in means between the relevant experimental conditions using ANOVA with post hoc Tukey HSD Test.<sup>8</sup> To avoid post-treatment bias, I do not condition my analysis on the manipulation checks (Montgomery, Nyhan, and Torres 2018). Similarly, given that demographic characteristics are balanced across conditions, I do not control for demographic covariates. However, as shown in Supplementary materials S3 and S4, adding pretreatment covariates or manipulation check responses to my models does not affect the results. Finally, for my mediation analyses, I estimate the *average causal mediation effects* (ACME) and the *average direct effects* (ADE) with 95% confidence intervals obtained via nonparametric bootstrap with 1,000 resamples (Imai et al. 2011).

## RESULTS

### Protesters' Gender Influences Citizens' Tolerance of Repression

Simultaneous pairwise comparisons offer support for my theory that protesters' gender influences the public's likelihood to tolerate protest repression. As shown in Figure 3, and in line with H1, I find that respondents exposed to the generic female protesters condition were less likely to preemptively justify protest repression compared to respondents exposed to a protest dominated by men, with a mean difference ( $MD$ ) of  $-0.313$  ( $p = 0.002$ ). However, once respondents learn that authorities chose to suppress the protest, the difference in citizens' willingness to justify repression of

male- versus female-dominated protests remains in the expected direction, but the effect fails to reach statistical significance ( $MD = -0.181$ ,  $p = 0.335$ ).

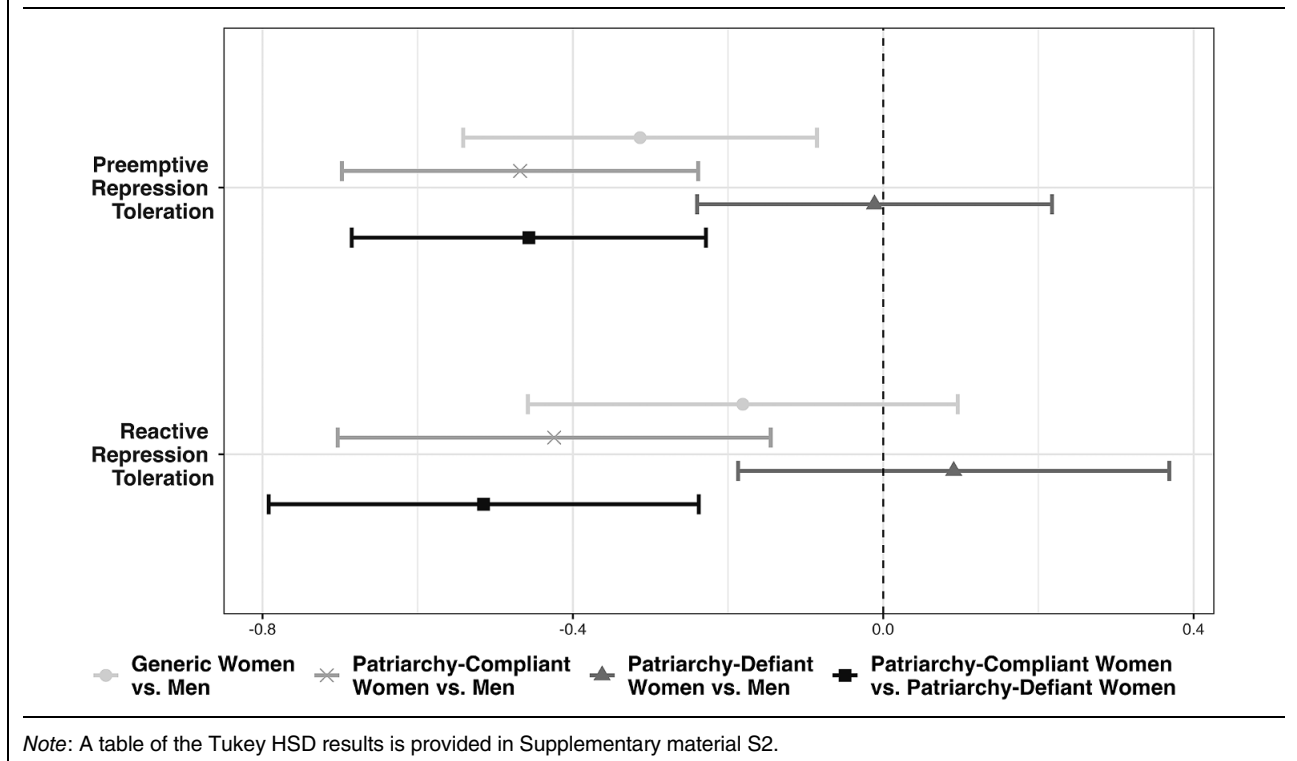
Furthermore, as Figure 3 shows, citizens are especially unwilling to tolerate repression of protests featuring extensive participation by patriarchy-compliant women. In support of H3, I find that, compared to respondents exposed to a male-dominated protest, respondents exposed to a protest dominated by patriarchy-compliant women exhibited both lower preemptive ( $MD = -0.468$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) and reactive ( $MD = -0.424$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) tolerance for protest repression.<sup>9</sup>

But the "gender shield" effect does not extend to all protests involving meaningful participation by women—citizens appear equally likely to tolerate repression of protests dominated by male and patriarchy-defiant female protesters (*Preemptive Repression Tolerant*:  $MD = -0.011$ ,  $p = 0.999$ ; *Reactive Repression Tolerant*:  $MD = 0.091$ ,  $p = 0.835$ ). Furthermore, in line with H3, I find that citizens have different repression tolerance for protests by patriarchy-compliant and patriarchy-defiant women. Both before ( $MD = 0.457$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) and after ( $MD = 0.515$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) learning how authorities responded to the protest, respondents are more willing to justify repression of protests showcasing patriarchy-defiant, as opposed to patriarchy-compliant, women. These effects are further exacerbated by respondents' sex—while both male and female respondents view repressive tactics as more justifiable when exposed to a protest by patriarchy-defiant as compared to patriarchy-compliant women, this bias is considerably larger for male respondents ( $MD_{men} = 0.79$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ;  $MD_{women} = 0.21$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ).

Thus, I find evidence that protesters' gender presentation exerts a significant impact on citizens'

<sup>8</sup> The effects remain the same when using t-tests (see Supplementary material S6).

<sup>9</sup> These differences regarding the perceived justifiability of repression directed at a protest by generic or patriarchy-compliant women versus one dominated by men are not moderated by respondents' sex or other demographic characteristics (see Supplementary material S3.3 for treatment heterogeneity analyses).

**FIGURE 3. Differences of Means for Repression Toleration (Tukey Simultaneous 95% CI)**

likelihood to condone repression of protesters. In the next section, I investigate whether extensive protest involvement of (patriarchy-compliant) women increases public impressions of the protest as nonviolent and assess the extent to which respondents' perception of protesters' (non)-violence mediates the effect of protesters' gender on public tolerance for protest repression.

### The Role of Perceived Protest (Non-)Violence

How does the gender of protest activists shape perceptions of movement violence? In line with H2, I find that protests involving extensive participation by women are, indeed, perceived as less likely to be violent than an identical protest dominated by men ( $MD = -0.463, p = 0.008$ ). This difference in perceptions of protesters' propensity for violence becomes even more notable when we compare protests dominated by men with protests dominated by patriarchy-compliant women. Namely, in accordance with H4, I find that compared to respondents in the "male protesters" condition, respondents exposed to a protest by patriarchy-compliant women evaluate the protest as less likely to be violent ( $MD = -0.959, p = 0.000$ ).

In fact, *all* female-dominated protests, including those attended mostly by patriarchy-defiant women, are perceived as having lower propensity for violence when compared to a male-dominated protest

( $MD = -0.768, p = 0.000$ ). And, contra expectations, I find that respondents do not perceive a protesting crowd of patriarchy-defiant women as any more violent than a group of patriarchy-compliant female protesters ( $MD = -0.191, p = 0.552$ ).

Yet, despite no significant difference between patriarchy-compliant and patriarchy-defiant female protesters with regard to how respondents perceive their propensity for violence, as I showed in the previous subsection, citizens are more inclined to support repression of protests featuring extensive participation by patriarchy-defiant women (see Figure 3). Similarly, although all female-dominated protests are seen as more likely to be peaceful when compared to a male-dominated protest, only protests by patriarchy-compliant women benefit from the "gender shield" effect in repression toleration and the public seems equally likely to justify repression of protests dominated by men and patriarchy-defiant women.

These results suggest that the effect of (perceived) protest nonviolence on public sentiments regarding protests and protest repression might be less clear-cut than the effect proposed by much of the literature on social movements (Feinberg, Willer, and Kovacheff 2020; Manekin and Mitts 2022; Opp and Roehl 1990). In fact, as Figure 5a illustrates, I find little evidence of respondents' perception of protest violence transmitting the effect of protesters' gender on public tolerance for repression.



## The Role of Gender in Countering Government Narratives

Once the government paints protesters as violent, however, respondents are especially willing to update their perceptions of protest violence in accord with the government's frame if the protest showcases patriarchy-defiant women. This updated perception of how violent protesters are emerges as a significant causal mechanism linking protesters' gender and public tolerance for repression.

Namely, despite there not being a significant difference in initial perceptions of propensity for violence between patriarchy-compliant and patriarchy-defiant female protesters, once respondents are informed of authorities' claim that protesters were violent, they are significantly more likely to endorse the government's narrative if they are exposed to patriarchy-defiant as opposed to patriarchy-compliant female protesters ( $MD = 0.619, p = 0.000$ ). Furthermore, while respondents stereotype a crowd of patriarchy-defiant female protesters as significantly less violent than male protesters before receiving elite cues, I observe the opposite effect after respondents read about both the protesters' and authorities' accounts of protesters' use of violence, although the latter effect fails to reach statistical significance (see Figure 4).

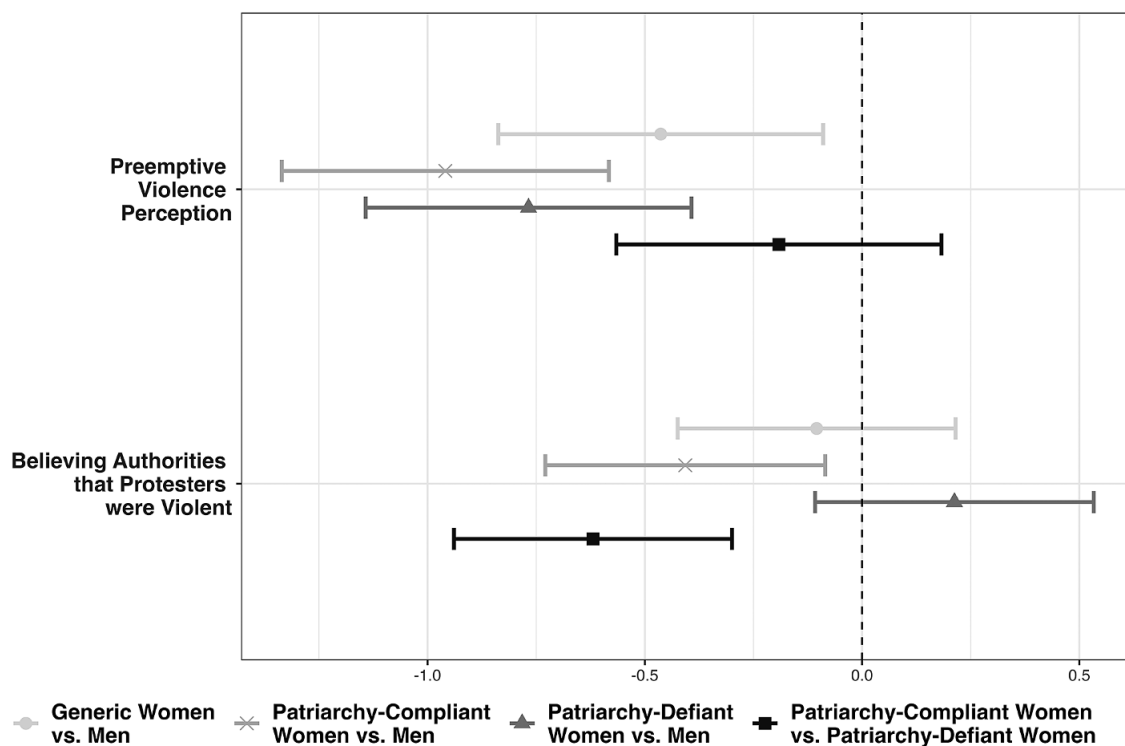
Patriarchy-compliant female protesters, on the other hand, emerge as particularly powerful agents to contest

government propaganda that (falsely) portrays protesters as violent. Specifically, in support of H5, I find that respondents exposed to a protest involving large-scale participation by patriarchy-compliant women were less likely to believe authorities' account of the protest compared to respondents exposed to a male-dominated protest ( $MD = -0.407, p = 0.006$ ).

As Figure 5b shows, unlike initial perception of protest (non-)violence, respondents' perception of protesters as (non-)violent upon receiving elite cues significantly mediates the observed differences in tolerance of protest repression based on protesters' gender. I find that, on average, being exposed to patriarchy-compliant female protesters as opposed to patriarchy-defiant or male protesters increases respondents' level of trust in protesters that they were peaceful despite government propaganda suggesting otherwise, which then increases opposition to repressive state response. When comparing a protest marked by extensive involvement of patriarchy-compliant women to protests dominated by men or patriarchy-defiant women, reactive perception of how violent protesters are mediates about 45% and 62% of the total causal effect of protesters' gender on respondents' tolerance of repression, respectively.

The results of a postestimation sensitivity analysis lend further credence to the hypothesis that reactive perception of protest violence mediates the causal effect of protesters' gender expression on citizens' support for

**FIGURE 4. Differences of Means for Perception of Protest Violence (Tukey Simultaneous 95% CI)**



Note: A table of the Tukey HSD results is provided in Supplementary material S2.

**FIGURE 5. The Mediating Effect of Perceived Violence on Citizens' Tolerance of Repression**

Note: Differences in both reactive violence perception and reactive tolerance of repression between respondents exposed to male versus generic female and male versus patriarchy-defiant female protesters were not significant (see Figures 3 and 4). As such, no mediation analyses were conducted. Mediation analysis results are provided in table form in Supplementary material S7.

a government's decision to repress the protest. Namely, for the mediation effect to be zero, I find that the correlation between the residuals of the mediator and the outcome models would need to be greater than 0.6. Similarly, I find that my ACME estimates are robust to confounding if the unobserved confounder explains less than about 34% of the variance in the mediator and outcome. Plots of the sensitivity analysis for both the sensitivity parameter  $\rho$  and the model  $R^2$  values can be found in Supplementary material S8 but, overall, these results indicate a high degree of robustness when compared to other studies in political science (Imai et al. 2011).

### The Role of Perceived Morality

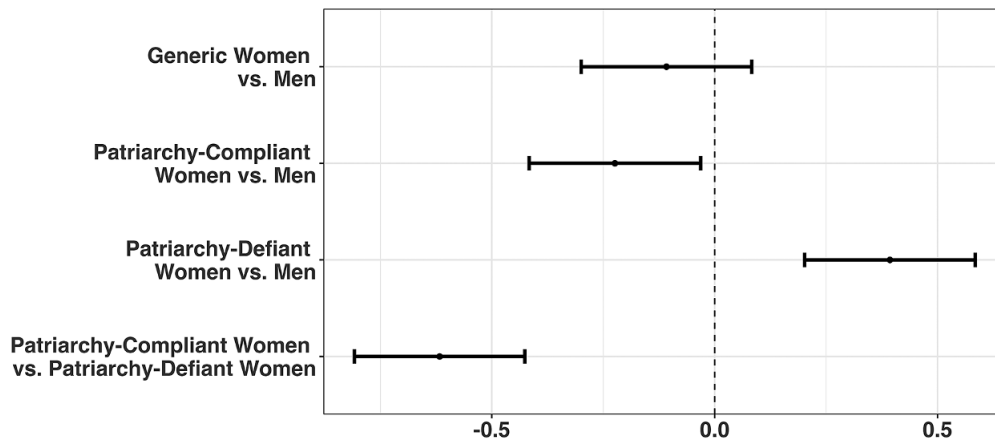
Altogether, I find evidence that protesters' gender identity exerts a meaningful impact on citizens' reactions to protests and protest repression. Yet, the unanticipated discovery that individuals are more willing to support repression against patriarchy-defiant female protesters *despite* viewing them as equally likely to be peaceful as other female demonstrators prompts two important questions: Why might the public support repression of some protesters but not of others if both groups are perceived as nonviolent? Furthermore, why might the identity of protesters influence citizens' susceptibility to repression legitimation propaganda that accuses protesters of violence even in cases where the two groups of protesters are initially perceived as equally nonviolent? To begin answering these

questions, in this section, I move beyond my preregistered hypotheses and turn to a factor that social psychologists have determined to be key in forming intergroup impressions: perceived morality.

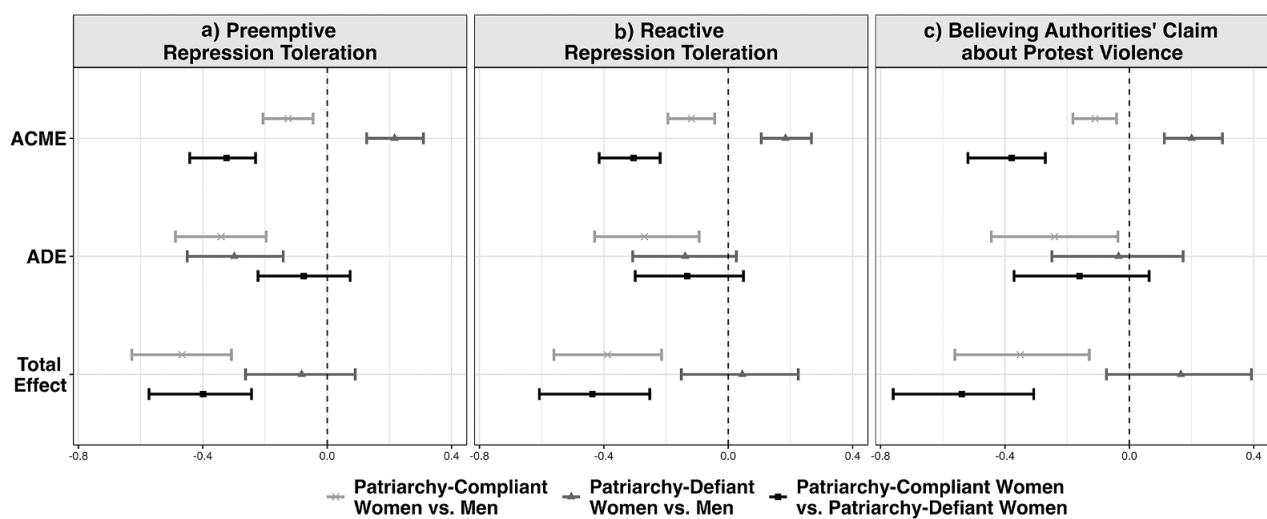
Namely, research in social psychology has demonstrated that perceived morality is a critical factor people use when making sense of individuals and groups (Brambilla and Riva 2017). In fact, perceptions of morality are so central to group impressions that some scholars consider morality to be a distinct fundamental dimension that, together with warmth and competence, undergirds all group stereotypes (Goodwin, Piazza, and Rozin 2014; Stellar and Willer 2018).

Therefore, just like the identity of protesters can influence citizens' perceptions of how violent protesters are, protesters' identity also likely affects the extent to which citizens perceive protesters as (im)moral, regardless of their choice of tactics. In the context of gender, considering that patriarchal ideologies shape the power structures and moral codes of most contemporary societies (Pateman 1988), patriarchy-defiant female protesters are likely to be typecast as immoral. And, indeed, as Figure 6 illustrates, I find that patriarchy-defiant female protesters are perceived as noticeably more immoral than patriarchy-compliant female protesters ( $MD = 0.617, p = 0.000$ ).

Being perceived as morally deficient carries important consequences. For instance, viewing a person or group as immoral impedes the perceiver's perspective taking abilities, emotional connection, and social identification with them (Brambilla and Riva 2017).

**FIGURE 6. Differences of Means for Immorality Perception (Tukey Simultaneous 95% CI)**

Note: A table of the Tukey HSD results is provided in Supplementary material S2.

**FIGURE 7. The Mediating Effect of Perceived Immorality on Repression Tolerance and Belief in Government Propaganda**

Note: Mediation analysis results are provided in table form in Supplementary material S7.

Crucially, research in psychology has shown that seeing a group as morally deviant makes it easier to rationalize harm against them (Bandura 1999; Opatow 1990).

In line with this research, I find that respondents' perception of protesters' morality significantly mediates the effect of protesters' gender expression on public tolerance for repression (see Figure 7a and 7b). Specifically, I find that being exposed to a protest dominated by patriarchy-defiant as opposed to patriarchy-compliant women increases perceptions of protesters' immorality, which then transmits over 70% of the total effect of protesters' gender on support for protest repression both before and after the government has decided to pursue that route. Results from sensitivity analyses, reported in Supplementary

material S8, indicate that these findings exhibit high levels of robustness to the sequential ignorability assumption (Imai et al. 2011).

Thus, my evidence suggests that perceived protesters' morality mediates the effect of protesters' gender expression on public tolerance for repression, as does (mis)trust in protesters' claims of nonviolence in context where the government accuses them of violence. These two causal mechanisms, however, are unlikely to be independent. In fact, given that morality stereotypes are inherently tied to perceptions of sincerity (Leach, Ellemers, and Barreto 2007), perceived morality of protesters likely impacts respondents' inclination to trust protesters that they were peaceful in the face of government propaganda alleging otherwise. Put

differently, viewing a group as immoral entails perceiving them as dishonest and untrustworthy (Brambilla et al. 2012), suggesting that when protesters evoke stereotypes of immorality, the public will be more likely to distrust their attempts at countering the government's repression legitimization propaganda.

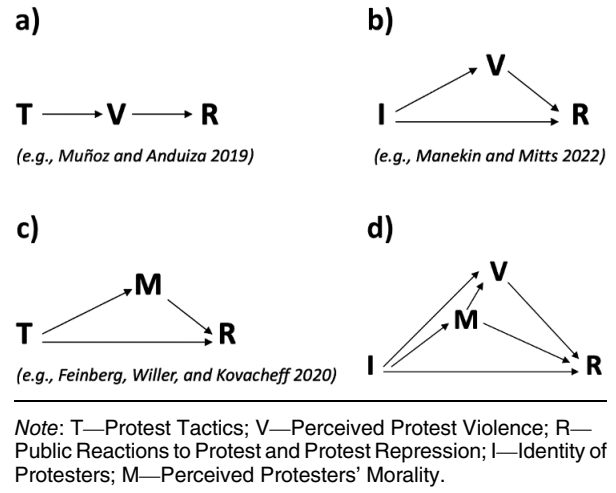
The results of a mediation analysis, displayed in Figure 7c, suggest that perceived protesters' immorality, indeed, transmits the causal effect of protesters' gender identity on respondents' likelihood to believe government narratives painting protesters as violent. Namely, I find that the heightened perception of protesters' immorality evoked by the exposure to a protest showcasing patriarchy-defiant as opposed to patriarchy-compliant women fully mediates the effect of protesters' identity on respondents' likelihood to be convinced by the government narrative that protesters were violent.

Jointly, these findings help uncover a new causal link between stereotypes associated with protesters' identity and public tolerance for protest repression. Even though protests by patriarchy-defiant women are initially deemed to be equally nonviolent as protests by patriarchy-compliant female protesters, they are viewed as especially immoral, which renders their claims to nonviolence untrustworthy when pitted against accounts by authorities insisting protesters were violent. This increase in individuals' proclivity to believe government propaganda about protesters' use of violence as a result of perceiving patriarchy-defiant female protesters as immoral in turn increases citizens' tolerance for repression of protests marked by extensive involvement of patriarchy-defiant women.<sup>10</sup> Generally stated, these results suggest that perceiving protesters as immoral makes citizens more receptive to government narratives that vilify protesters as violent which, in turn, makes it easier for citizens to stomach state repression.

To be sure, while this section highlights the importance of perceived morality for explaining differences in tolerance of repression toward patriarchy-compliant and patriarchy-defiant female protesters, stereotypes of morality have a broader reach in linking protesters' identity with how the public reacts to protest repression. Being exposed to male as opposed to patriarchy-compliant female protesters, for instance, also heightens perception of immorality ( $MD = 0.224, p = 0.015$ ) which, in turn, increases respondents' likelihood to believe propaganda about protest violence ( $ACME = 0.11, p = 0.000$ ) and to deem repression against protesters as appropriate ( $ACME = 0.12, p = 0.000$ ), although the proportion mediated in this case is about 31%.

Finally, morality stereotypes associated with activists' identity also help explain why citizens might be equally willing to justify repression of two groups of protesters even when they deem one of the groups as more likely to be violent than the other, as is the case

**FIGURE 8. Diagrams Representing Prominent Theories on Public Reactions to Protest and Protest Repression**



with a group of male versus patriarchy-defiant female protesters. Tellingly, I find that, compared to a male-dominated protest, exposure to a protest dominated by patriarchy-defiant women increases perceptions of protesters' immorality ( $MD = 0.393, p = 0.000$ ), which induces greater comfort with protest repression ( $ACME = 0.217, p = 0.000$ ). At the same time, however, patriarchy-defiant female protesters are stereotyped as less violent than male protesters ( $MD = -0.768, p = 0.000$ ), which pulls citizens in the opposite direction with regards to acceptance of protest repression ( $ACME = -0.034, p = 0.13$ ). My finding that individuals are equally likely to condone repression of protests dominated by men and patriarchy-defiant women, therefore, likely reflects a tug of war between countervailing stereotypes of violence and morality.

## DISCUSSION

These findings offer two major refinements to the scholarship on social movements. Namely, a large body of social science research (Figure 8a) maintains that reliance on nonviolent protest tactics increases popular support for the movement and heightens public opposition to protest repression (Muñoz and Anduiza 2019; Lupu and Wallace 2019; Wasow 2020). A handful of recent works (Figure 8b), however, reveal that public perceptions of how violent protests are—and, in turn, public support for protest (repression)—are not necessarily grounded in objective reality and can be influenced by stereotypes associated with the racial identity of protest participants (Manekin and Mitts 2022; Valentino and Nicholson 2021). My paper extends these insights to examine the role of protesters' gender in shaping public reactions to protests and protest repression. This is the first paper to furnish causal evidence that protesters' gender identity can shape a movement's

<sup>10</sup> Results from a multiple mediation analysis reported in Supplementary material S7, where both reactive perceptions of violence and perceived morality are entered as mediators, provide additional evidence for this path.

potential to counter government propaganda that paints protesters as violent and, in turn, affect citizens' likelihood to condone protest repression.

But my findings also signal a need to move beyond (perceived) protest violence as a determinant of public sentiments to protest repression and suggest a value in considering the role of perceived morality. Namely, while social psychologists have identified perceptions of morality as crucial in forming impressions of others (Brambilla et al. 2012), quantitative scholars of collective action have thus far largely ignored the potential role of perceived morality in shaping public tolerance for protest repression. In fact, to the extent that social movement scholars have examined the impact of perceived morality (Figure 8c), they have treated it as an upshot of protesters' choice of tactics, finding that reliance on more violent tactics heightens perceptions of immorality and, in turn, adversely affects public support for protests and protest repression (Feinberg, Willer, and Kovacheff 2020).

This paper, however, provides both theoretical and empirical evidence for an alternative path, depicted in Figure 8d. Under this framework, even when protesters are not initially stereotyped as particularly violent, if the identities of protesters evoke stereotypes of immorality—as is the case with feminists—then the public will be more inclined to distrust them and believe government propaganda accusing protesters of violence. This, in turn, makes citizens more likely to tolerate protest repression.

While the empirical evidence that this paper puts forward for this path is limited to protesters' gender identity, one can easily envision other instances where stereotypes of morality—not violence—associated with the identity of protesters might be key in driving public reactions to protests and protest repression. For instance, even though gay men are often stereotyped as effeminate and weak (Steffens et al. 2019), because homosexuality is often viewed as immoral, protests associated with the queer community might be vulnerable to government propaganda framing protests as violent—and, consequently, protests showcasing involvement by the LGBTQ community will likely be seen as more deserving of repression regardless of protesters' choice of tactics. Religion and partisanship, too, influence perceptions of target morality (Clifford and Gaskins 2016; Finkel et al. 2020). Future research, therefore, should investigate the extent to which these likely differences in perceptions of immorality based on protesters' religion or partisanship translate into differences in citizens' inclination to justify police brutality against protesters.

In taking up these questions, scholars should also consider developing more granular operationalizations of protest participation that are sensitive to more nuanced levels and types of involvement by a social identity group. What, for example, is the minimum threshold of protest attendance by patriarchy-compliant women that needs to be achieved for their involvement to increase public sensitivity to protest repression? What if this threshold cannot be attained: to what extent can social movements compensate for lack of large-

scale female attendance by placing patriarchy-compliant women in especially prominent roles—as protest leaders, spokespersons, or even as symbolic embodiments of the movement's genesis and cause? And what about the role of allies and coalitions (Einwohner et al. 2021)—does protest participation by patriarchy-compliant women increase public opposition to repression only when they constitute a majority of protesters? Or can patriarchy-compliant women heighten the costs of repression when they participate as allies too, in protests otherwise-dominated by men or “morally deficient” women—perhaps as hijab-wearing women in Iran have tried to do recently by mobilizing in solidarity with women burning their headscarves to protest the morality police's arrest and subsequent murder of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini because she failed to cover her hair modestly enough?<sup>11</sup>

Another avenue for future research is examining contextual moderators of the effect of protesters' identity on citizens' likelihood to tolerate state-sanctioned repression of the protest. For instance, given that my findings are based on data from Russia, there is some degree of uncertainty surrounding the extent to which these findings apply to democratic contexts. Although my experiment was fielded in a nondemocratic regime, however, I derived my theory on general principles that should apply across democratic and nondemocratic contexts. In fact, compared to democratic regimes, Russia likely presents a more difficult case for testing my theory because citizens in autocracies are arguably especially desensitized to overt repression and more motivated to believe government propaganda or engage in preference falsification when they do not (Conrad, Hill, and Moore 2018; Kuran 1997)—factors that should increase respondents' propensity to defend state-sanctioned repression regardless of dissidents' identity. Nevertheless, in addition to replicating this study in Russia and other autocracies, future research should investigate the extent to which my findings travel across different political regimes.

Further, when replicating this study scholars should consider how specific forms of social desirability bias related to the treatment might affect individuals' responses in different contexts. For example, in liberal societies, it could be that preference falsification by survey respondents in autocracies to feign support of government decisions (Blair, Coppock, and Moor 2020) is counteracted by self-presentation bias to inflate opposition to repression of female-dominated protests due to social norms proscribing violence against women (Htun and Weldon 2012). Yet, whatever the socially desirable response might be, it is unlikely that the observed results here are a product of preference falsification because self-presentation concerns are significantly reduced in online, self-administered surveys, such as the one used here (Atkeson, Adams, and Alvarez 2014). Using

<sup>11</sup> Farnaz Fassihi, “Their Hair Long and Flowing or in Ponytails, Women in Iran Flaunt Their Locks,” *The New York Times*, February 25, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/25/world/middleeast/iran-women-hijab-hair.html>.

behavioral questions as outcomes also abates social desirability bias (Krumpal 2013); thus, at the end of the survey, I offered respondents with the option of signing a petition denouncing authorities' repression of protesters. This behavioral measure further confirms that protesters' gender presentation influences citizens' genuine reaction to protest repression: compared to the male or the patriarchy-defiant female protesters condition, I find that being exposed to a protest dominated by patriarchy-compliant women increases the odds that a respondent signs the petition by 27.8 and 26.8 percent respectively ( $p < 0.05$ ).

It is also possible that these findings only extend to a limited number of countries that are especially patriarchal or gender inequalitarian. This, however, is unlikely for at least two reasons.

True, my finding that Russian citizens consider feminist activists immoral and worthy of repression does connote a patriarchal society. Moreover, misogynistic newspeak of Putin's protection against the threat of "gay propaganda" and "gender ideology" has been increasingly used by the Kremlin to create moral panics that have not only helped Putin enact legislation that rolls back women's rights and enfeebles queer and feminist movements but have also deflected attention from issues of corruption and his evisceration of democratic institutions at large (Sharafutdinova 2014). Yet, while unmistakably patriarchal, neither Putin nor ordinary Russians appear especially misogynistic in a comparative perspective. Strongmen as far afield as Brazil, India, Hungary, and the United States have harnessed morality politics and language of protective paternalism to mount a simultaneous attack on women's rights and democracy (Chenoweth and Marks 2022; Grewal 2022). And turning to the general public, World Values Survey (WVS) data suggest that gender-related attitudes among Russians have remained stable over the past decade and that, if anything, the average Russian might be more gender egalitarian compared to the average person worldwide (see Supplementary material S9).

Still, Russia ranks 25th out of 56 countries for which data are available in the most recent WVS wave and it is conceivable protesters' gender would become irrelevant for how the public views protest repression in countries with most gender egalitarian citizens, for example Germany or the United States. Nonetheless, sexism and anti-feminism remain prevalent in relatively egalitarian societies as well and have been emboldened by the global rise of authoritarian populism (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Ocen, Valentino, and Wayne 2023). Populist politicians in Europe and the Americas regularly valorize and promise to protect women and what they claim a host of culturally harmful "others"—immigrant men, transgender women, liberal elites and so forth—threaten: feminine purity, the "natural" gender binary, and the value of "traditional" family that permits women to perform their essential biological and patriotic role of motherhood (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Grewal 2022; Vachudova 2021). And this exaltation of patriarchal ideals of womanhood has allowed populists to, under the guise of protecting women, rebrand egalitarian norms as "political correctness"

or "gender ideology"—"wokism" that they and their supporters have sought to counter with misogynistic rhetoric and with laws that restrict women's autonomy and reproductive rights (Chenoweth and Marks 2022). Thus, while acknowledging that the results observed here should be most evident in deeply patriarchal cultures, I expect that even in societies we consider relatively egalitarian, many citizens will exhibit less sympathy for female activists that enact patriarchy-defiant femininities, such as participants in the MeToo or the SlutWalk movements. This hypothesis, however, should be empirically tested in future studies.

## CONCLUSION

As the discussion on generalizability beyond Russia shows, (aspiring) authoritarians across the globe routinely politicize the "traditional" family and appeal to patriarchal notions of feminine purity and vulnerability to legitimate their assaults on women's rights and democracy. Yet, though strongmen's reliance on patriarchal values and stereotypes might very well be their Thor's hammer, it may also be turned into their Achilles' heel. A key implication of this paper is that female activists can employ patriarchal values to their strategic advantage and challenge strongmen by emphasizing their identity as devoted mothers and wives, thereby leveraging the very "family values" that authorities promise—but fail—to protect. Put differently, when a protest draws crowds of women, activists can weaponize the cultural value placed on motherhood and exploit stereotypes of feminine innocence and weakness to increase public opposition to, and thus the regime's cost of, protest repression—ultimately hoisting patriarchal strongmen on their own petards.

It is important to recognize, however, that women's embrace of patriarchal ideals of femininity as a strategy to heighten public disapproval of protest repression might not be foolproof. Given existing research on race-specific gender stereotypes (Harris-Perry 2011; Rosenthal and Lobel 2016), it may be that appealing to motherhood or "feminine" stereotypes would not be as effective for female activists from ethnoracial minorities. Moreover, this strategy could entail significant costs. For instance, protesters' decision to ground claims in motherhood-centered discourses could risk alienating feminists and younger women, thereby impeding the movement's ability to benefit from the organizational resilience and tactical innovations that these groups are known to bring (Chenoweth 2019; McCammon 2003). Additionally, reflecting on insights from the literature on respectability politics (Cohen 2009; Jefferson 2023; Strolovitch and Crowder 2018), social movements' strategy of coopting rather than confronting claims to moral authority from a place of compliance with patriarchal values may reinforce demarcations between "worthy" and "deviant" women and contribute to the policing and marginalization of patriarchy-defiant femininities.

A crucial question for researchers and activist alike then is whether such costs are inevitable. Or, can they

be mitigated under certain conditions—for instance, in circumstances where groups of patriarchy-compliant women use their privilege as allies to amplify the voices of activists who cannot or do not wish to adhere to patriarchal prescriptions of appropriate gender expressions (Einwohner et al. 2021)? These questions fall outside the focus of this paper, but are ones that scholars and activists would do well to carefully consider as they assess, advocate, or adopt gendered strategies of resistance.

Ultimately, the key lesson from this research is that those seeking to grasp public reactions to protests and repression must seriously consider the stereotypes associated with the gender, and more generally the identity, of protesters. This work offers causal evidence that extensive protest involvement by women can help social movements galvanize public opposition to protest repression. Yet, the findings of this study also reveal that understanding the effectiveness and risks of peaceful protesting requires recognizing the different stereotypes provoked not only by activists across different superordinate, state-ascribed groups—such as men versus women—but also by differently positioned members within the same census-style identity category, such as differently situated female protesters based on the forms of femininity they choose or are able to adopt. Furthermore, underscoring the importance of considering the influence of morality stereotypes, this paper documents that because female protesters who defy patriarchal ideals of femininity are typecast as more immoral than patriarchy-compliant female protesters—and despite initial public perceptions of both groups as equally likely to be nonviolent—protests marked by extensive involvement of patriarchy-defiant women are regarded by public audiences as more deserving of repression. I hope future work leverages these insights to further refine our understanding of the protest strategies and the contextual, demographic, and psychological factors that affect the salience of protesters' (gender) identity in determining how the public responds to protests and protest repression.

## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055424000133>.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the American Political Science Review Dataverse: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/KJBFTT>.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

## ETHICAL STANDARD

The author declares the human subjects research in this article was reviewed and approved by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and certificate numbers are provided in the appendix. The author affirms that this article adheres to the APSA's Principles and Guidance on Human Subject Research.

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