

Insights Series #151

# Predicting Support for Women's Autonomy in the Americas

Estelle Shaya  
Vanderbilt University

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## Key Findings:

- Support for women's autonomy—measured as disagreement with the notion that women need to ask permission to see friends and family—varies significantly across countries
- Those who are more educated and wealthier are more supportive of women's autonomy
- Those who are older—on average—hold more traditionally conservative views on women's autonomy
- Support for authoritarian leadership correlates with lower support for women's autonomy
- Belief that domestic violence is a family matter also correlates with lower support for women's autonomy, as does the experience of marriage



On March 8, 2022, thousands of women across Latin America marched for women's rights<sup>1</sup> and against gender violence and femicide.<sup>2</sup> These International Women's Day marches are part of a regional movement to protect and empower women. The #NiUnaMenos movement, started in 2015, has led to mass mobilizations to ensure women's basic right to safety.<sup>3</sup> One measure that can help us understand perceptions of women's rights and gender roles is belief in women's autonomy. Women's autonomy is a multi-dimensional concept that includes the ability to participate in economic and familial decisions, be involved in a community, and be free from actual or threatened violence.<sup>4</sup> Under this definition, protests against femicide functionally demand greater women's autonomy. This *Insights* report seeks to understand key predictors of support for women's autonomy to better understand the context in which protests for greater autonomy occur.

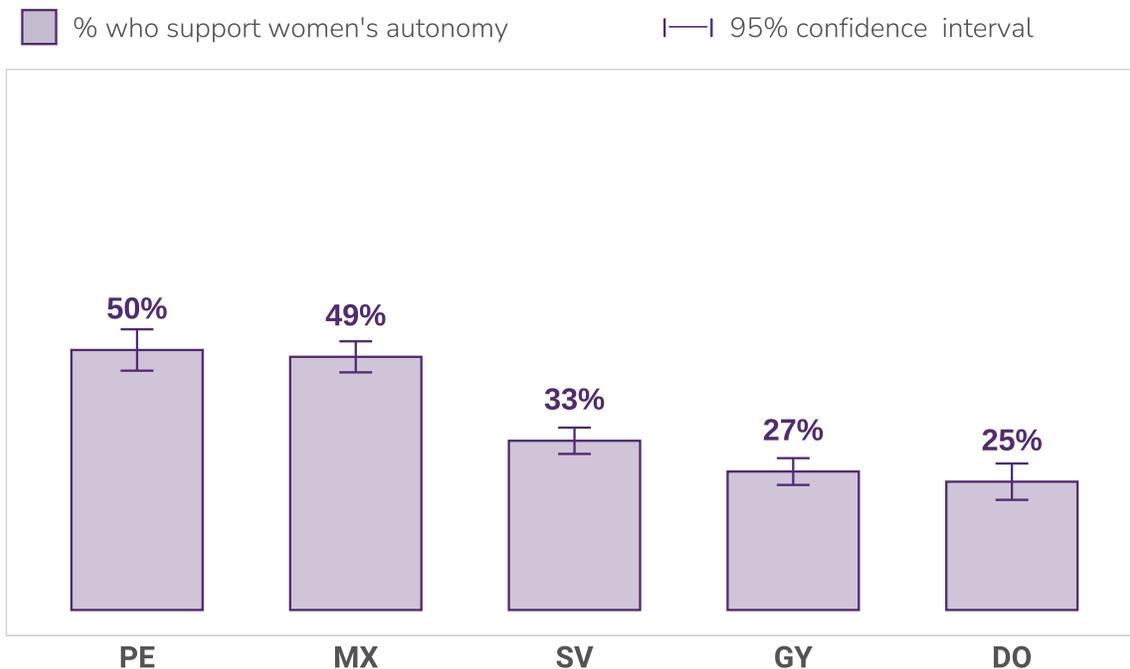
This report describes and analyzes public opinion regarding individuals' belief in women's autonomy. The 2021 round of LAPOP's AmericasBarometer survey included a question that can be used to generate a proxy measure of attitudes on one dimension of women's autonomy:

**GENOR2:** If a woman wants to go see her family or friends, she needs her partner's permission. Do you strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree?

In all, 6,292 individuals were asked this question<sup>5</sup> across five countries: Mexico, El Salvador, Peru, the Dominican Republic, and Guyana. I consider disagreement with this statement to be evidence of support for women's autonomy.

## Support for Women's Autonomy Varies across Countries

Figure 1 shows the percentage of citizens who express support for women's autonomy. The values are based on grouping together those who responded negatively to the survey question—that is, they indicated that they “disagree” or “strongly disagree” with the notion that women should ask permission to leave the home (versus “neither agree nor disagree,” “agree,” or “strongly agree”). Peru has the highest percentage of individuals who express support for women's autonomy (50.5%), while the Dominican Republic has the lowest percentage of individuals who express this support (24.9%). Despite this question only being asked in five countries, belief in the statement varies by 25.6 percentage points across these countries. Mexico is similar to Peru in the number of individuals who express support for women's autonomy (49.1%), while fewer express support in El Salvador (32.8%) and Guyana (26.9%).

**Figure 1.****Support for Women's Autonomy in Five LAC Countries**

Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021

LAPOP

**Women, and Individuals Who Are Younger, Wealthier, and More Educated Are Supportive of Women's Autonomy**

To understand who is more likely to support women's autonomy, I first evaluate key<sup>6,7</sup> socioeconomic and demographic characteristics: gender, age, wealth, and education. Existing research indicates that all four of these variables have significant impacts on support for women's autonomy. In what follows I note an expectation for each, based on my review of relevant scholarship.

I expect gender to be a substantial predictor of support for women's autonomy. Scholars argue that women, especially as they gain more opportunities, show greater support for their own autonomy than men.<sup>8</sup> However, when women have children, their attitudes toward gender roles become more traditional.<sup>9</sup> This child-rearing effect may only matter for women, leaving male attitudes on women's autonomy unaffected by parenthood. Unfortunately, I cannot account for parenthood in the analyses here (because the question was not asked in the survey), but I can assess the relevance of gender on its own.

I expect education and socioeconomic status—specifically, household wealth—to be positive predictors of support for women’s autonomy. Higher levels of education tend to predict more egalitarian attitudes on gender roles for men and women.<sup>10</sup> Socioeconomic status also often correlates with more egalitarian attitudes on gender roles,<sup>11</sup> although unlike education, some argue that this effect may be gendered. Specifically, research has shown that higher socioeconomic status correlates with higher belief in women’s autonomy among women,<sup>12</sup> but among men, the difference in earnings between partners may matter more than mere level of wealth in the household. That said, the effects of economic equality between men and women on gender norms may take years to change norms at a societal level.<sup>13</sup> Due to the confounding dynamics between socioeconomic status and attitudes toward women, I expect education will show a more positive relationship with support for women’s autonomy than will wealth.

I expect older cohorts to report lower support for women’s autonomy. This is because research indicates that older age is associated with support for more traditional gender norms due to differences in early socialization combined with resistance in moving toward more egalitarian gender norms.<sup>14</sup>

To test these expectations, I use an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model. The dependent variable is coded from 1-5, where higher values indicate more support for women’s autonomy; all independent variables are scaled from 0 to 1. Figure 2 shows the estimated effects of the four socioeconomic and demographic variables—when moved from their minimum (0) to maximum (1) value—on belief in women’s autonomy. The analysis includes country fixed effects to account for differences between countries, but the figure does not display these effects.<sup>15</sup> The dots in Figure 2 represent the estimated coefficients for the independent variables, while the bars that intersect the dots represent the 95% confidence interval around each estimate. If the bar for a variable intersects with the line in the center of the graph, the coefficient of this variable is not a statistically significant predictor. Non-intersecting error bars to the left of the line represent significant negative relationships, and non-intersecting error bars to the right of the red line represent significant positive relationships. Variables with filled circles are statistically significant while unfilled, white circles are not. All the variables in this analysis are statistically significant.

**Figure 2.**

**Demographic and Socioeconomic Predictors of Support for Women's Autonomy**



Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021



The results of the analysis reflect expectations drawn from scholarship on gender norms and attitudes about women’s autonomy. Women, compared to men, express a preference for autonomy that is 0.49 points greater on a five-point scale. Higher wealth and education also predict greater support for women’s autonomy, respectively showing positive coefficients of 0.49 and 0.73 points. Education is the strongest predictor among the variables considered in the figure. Age has a negative association with support for women’s autonomy: those who are oldest, compared to those who are youngest, are 0.47 points less supportive of women’s autonomy.

**Support for Women's Autonomy Is Connected to Marital Status, Attitudes toward Domestic Violence, and Authoritarian Attitudes**

In this section, I consider the relevance of marital status, belief that domestic violence is a family matter, and authoritarian attitudes. These variables are selected in line with scholarship on attitudes toward women’s autonomy.

First, I consider whether a respondent is married.<sup>16</sup> I analyze marriage since the dependent variable, whether a woman should ask permission from her partner to leave the home, considers marriage or long-term partnership in its wording. Thus, I believe marriage will be important to this attitude. I expect that unmarried respondents will exhibit greater support for women's autonomy, especially female, unmarried respondents. The AmericasBarometer survey allows respondents to select among several options for marital status. I code "Single" as unmarried and "Married," "Common law marriage," "Civil Union," "Divorced," "Separated," and "Widowed" as married. While the latter three categories indicate the person is no longer married, I include them in order to capture all individuals who have been married at some point.<sup>17</sup>

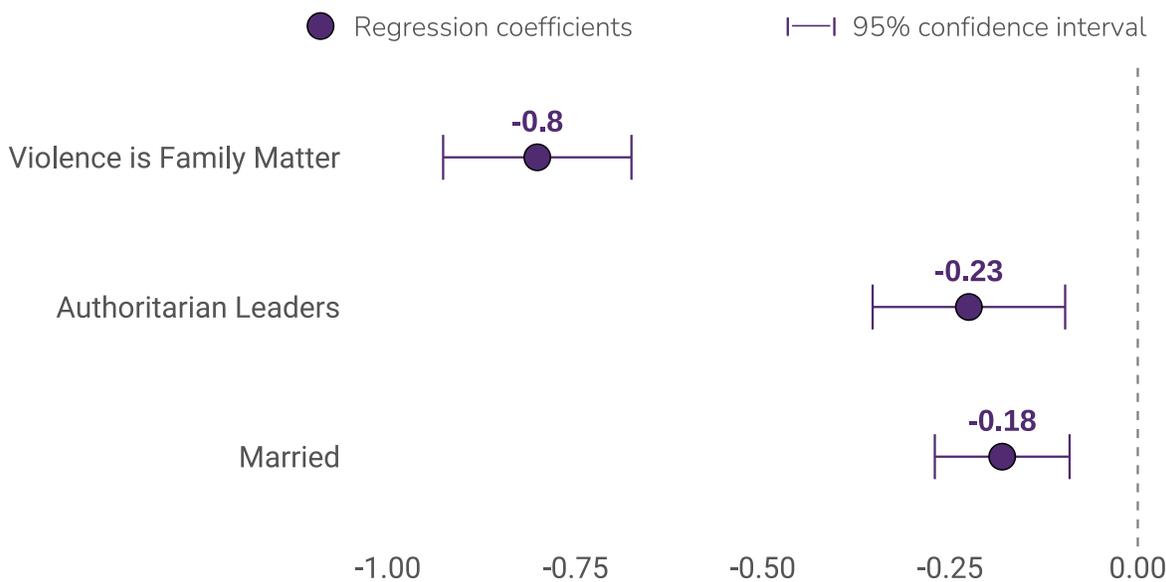
Second, I consider the belief that domestic violence is a family matter.<sup>18</sup> Scholarship finds that condoning interpersonal violence correlates with less belief in women's autonomy among women.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, women expect nonviolence as they gain greater autonomy.<sup>20</sup> Hence, I expect that more lenient views on intimate partner violence, as captured by a variable that asks if physical violence should be kept private and handled between partners, will correlate with greater belief that women should ask permission to leave the home.

Third, I analyze the predicted effect of authoritarian beliefs on attitudes regarding women's autonomy in the private sphere. Generally speaking, authoritarianism positively correlates with more sexist attitudes and the imposition of a gender binary on society.<sup>21</sup> People with more authoritarian attitudes tend to support maintaining the status quo, including status quo patriarchal gender roles.<sup>22</sup> In line with scholarship that asserts those ideas, I expect more support for authoritarianism to correlate with lower support for women's autonomy. I measure authoritarianism with a question that asks: "Having a strong leader in the government, even if the leader bends the rules to get things done. Would you say that it is very good, good, neither good nor bad, bad, or very bad as a form of government for our country?"<sup>23</sup> I consider this a measure of authoritarian tendencies because it captures a belief that the leader is (or is not) beholden to the rule of law. I reverse and scale this variable from 0 to 1 so that higher values represent the belief that a strong leader is good for a country.

Figure 3 presents results from an analysis that incorporates marriage, domestic violence as a family matter, and support for authoritarian leadership into the model, while continuing to control for education, wealth, age, and gender (as well as country fixed effects).<sup>24</sup> The estimated effects in Figure 3 are predicted with an OLS regression analysis, and once again all independent variables are scaled 0 to 1.<sup>25</sup>

**Figure 3.**

**Predicted Effects of Marital Status, Support for Authoritarian Leadership, and Opinion on Domestic Violence on Support for Women's Autonomy**



Violence as a family matter is the most significant predictor of attitudes toward women's autonomy, decreasing support by 0.80 points on the 1-5 dependent variable scale. Authoritarianism and marriage also have a negative association with support for women's autonomy with respective coefficients of -0.23 and -0.18. Each of these findings is in line with scholarship on the topic, as discussed above.

**Discussion**

This *Insights* report uses belief that women should ask permission to see friends and family as a measure of support for women's autonomy. With that variable as a proxy, I test the variables that predict individual support for women's autonomy. There is significant variation in attitudes toward women's autonomy in the five countries where this question was asked. However, although I find country-level effects explain part of the variation in support for women's autonomy (see endnote 15), several other factors also matter.

Gender, age, wealth, and education all significantly predict support for women's autonomy. Of these variables, education exerts the most influence and it is positively correlated with support for women's autonomy. Women are more likely to support their own autonomy than men, and wealthier individuals show greater support for women's autonomy. Age exerts a negative effect: older individuals are more conservative on issues of women's autonomy than are those who are younger.

Support for authoritarian leadership correlates with lower support for women's autonomy, as does being married. The strongest predictor of support for women's autonomy is belief that domestic violence should be handled only by close family and friends, which has a very sizeable and significant negative effect.

Increasing support for women's autonomy is relevant to broader efforts to generate cultural shifts that prioritize reducing violence against women and providing equal opportunity across gender. The findings in this report suggest that increasing access to education and raising wealth are a means to foster greater support for women's autonomy. Additionally, the finding that support for authoritarian leadership correlates with lower support for women's autonomy suggests that building support for democratic governance may benefit women's autonomy.

## Notes

1. BBC (2022).
2. Miller (2022).
3. Piatti-Crocker (2021).
4. Agarwala and Lynch (2006).
5. There were 6,213 responses to the question: 35 people responded that they did not know and 44 did not respond (yielding an item non-response rate of 1.26%).  
All figures in this report use the following AmericasBarometer dataset version: 2021 v.1.2\_w
6. The United States and Canada are not included in analyses in Figures 2 or 3. Gender is measured with the variable **Q1TB**: For statistical purposes, could you please tell me what your gender is? (1) Man/male (2) Woman/female (3) Other. Age is measured with the variable **EDAD** where responses are then sorted into the following age cohorts: 16 (or voting age in the respondent's country)-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56,65, and 65+. Education is measured with the variable **EDR**: What is the highest level of education you have reached? (0) None (1) Primary (incomplete or complete) (2) Secondary (incomplete or complete) (3) Tertiary or university or higher (incomplete or complete). The responses "None" and "Primary" are combined as (1) before the variable is rescaled. Wealth is measured with the variable **WEALTH**: which ranks wealth on a 1-5 scale from Less Wealthy (1) to More Wealthy (5) using ownership of household items.  
All independent variables in the model for Figure 2 are recoded to a 0-1 scale, where "0" represents the lowest value and "1" represents the highest. Gender is coded so that "0" represents "Male" and "1" represents "Female" and "Other." In order to avoid excluding non-binary respondents from the analysis, we recode the gender variable to include non-binary respondents with women. In the 2021 AmericasBarometer survey, 0.24% of respondents identified as a gender other than man or woman.
7. A note about urban/rural place of residence: The urban/rural divide may account for some differences in opinion on gender roles. Women in more rural areas are more likely to support patriarchal gender norms than women in urban areas (Bott et al. 2012). This indicator is self-reported in the AmericasBarometer survey as the variable **UR1NEW**, but since this variable is self-reported there is significant room for interpretation on the respondent's part and it may not accurately reflect the rural/urban divide.
8. Orgill and Heaton (2005).
9. Boehnke (2011).
10. Heaton et al. (2005), Hanmer and Klugman (2016), Boehnke (2011).
11. Heaton et al. (2005).
12. Hanmer and Klugman (2016).
13. Campaña (2017).
14. Covre-Sussai (2013).

15. When only country effects are included in the OLS analysis, the R2 value is 0.05. This indicates that while county effects are a significant variable in explaining support for women's autonomy, the other variables in Figure 2 are more significant explanatory variables (the R2 value with all demographic variables in Figure 2 is 0.19).
16. I use the variable **Q11N** in the AmericasBarometer survey, which asks: "What is your marital status? (1) Single (2) Married (3) Common law marriage (living together) (4) Divorced (5) Separated (6) Widowed (7) Civil union.
17. I also tried coding "Divorced," "Separated," and "Widowed" as single. Doing so reduced the negative effect of married from -0.17 to -0.14. Removing "Divorced" alone reduces this effect from -0.17 to -0.16.
18. I measure this belief with the **GENOR4** variable in the AmericasBarometer, which asks: "Physical violence between members of a couple is a private matter and should be handled by the couple or close family. Do you (1) Strongly agree (2) Agree (3) Neither agree nor disagree (4) Disagree (5) Strongly disagree." I reverse this variable and scale it from 0-1 for my OLS analysis, so that higher values represent greater support for the statement.
19. Hanmer and Klugman (2015).
20. Agarwala and Lynch (2006).
21. Peterson and Zurbriggen (2010).
22. Peterson and Zurbriggen (2010).
23. Variable **CSES6N** in the AmericasBarometer survey.
24. In addition to the analyses depicted in Figure 3, I tested several other variables that—in theory—could impact attitudes on women's autonomy. I considered that concerns over Covid and neighborhood safety could impact attitudes on family members leaving the home without directly reflecting attitudes on women's autonomy. Concerns over safety might reflect restrictions on all members leaving the home, not specifically women. In analyses not shown here, concern over Covid is an insignificant predictor of the dependent variable. I then tested the individuals' perceptions of insecurity with respect to being assaulted or robbed in their neighborhood. I find this concern over safety is a statistically significant and positive predictor. However, when I test this measure of safety alongside the authoritarian leadership variable, the former is no longer statistically significant. I therefore assume that part of the impact of the neighborhood safety variable is captured in authoritarian attitudes.
25. The number of individual responses included in Figure 3 is 4,303, while in Figure 2 it is 6,005. The decrease in individual responses is due to the removal of the Dominican Republic from the analysis; in that country's survey, the question about women's autonomy and the question about whether domestic violence is a private matter were not asked of the same individuals (due to a split in the questionnaire).

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**Estelle Shaya** ([estelle.c.shaya@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:estelle.c.shaya@vanderbilt.edu)) wrote this report as a third-year undergraduate student at Vanderbilt University. She is a double major in Latin American Studies and Earth and Environmental Science and is hoping to pursue international human rights law.

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As a charter member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Transparency Initiative, LAPOP Lab is committed to routine disclosure of our data collection and reporting processes. More information about the AmericasBarometer sample designs can be found at [vanderbilt.edu/lapop/core-surveys](http://vanderbilt.edu/lapop/core-surveys).

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@LAPOP\_Lab 

[lapop@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:lapop@vanderbilt.edu) 

+1-615-322-4033 

230 Appleton Place, PMB 505, Suite 304, Nashville, TN 37203, USA 