

The Body Politic: How Classical Ideas of the Female Body Shape Modern Politics and State Governance

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Abstract

Women's bodies are a political necessity and an inconvenience. Paradoxically, women's reproductive work is necessary for the continuation of the modern state and state power, power from which women themselves have historically been excluded. Women's own bodily sovereignty disavows and threatens the State, ideas rooted in our western imaginations through classic texts. From Hippocrates and Aristotle to Galen, the male obsession with managing and policing the female body, denying its full humanity and autonomy, continues to inform modern patriarchal governance and the political processes it supports. States know that only by policing the female body, considering her body to be half a male body, can they solidify their imperialist, transnational power and authoritarian agendas. Political and social opposition to the existence of the female body both as a political corpus and an individual person, to the value of woman beyond her physical body, are rooted in the medical, scientific and cultural values that still draw blood from the ancient Mediterranean world. Dictatorial and even democratic governments gain oxygen through compulsory heteronormativity and heterosexuality, and the denial of the full bodily autonomy and sexuality of women. This paper examines how classical ideas of women's bodies support the current body politic, establishing hierarchical political structures through biological analogy. Without facing and reworking our unexamined learning from classical texts, we will continue to embolden threats to democracy and those State actors whose imperial power grabs insist on the relegation of the female body to the home.

Keywords: body politic, classics, populism, gender, misogyny

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Introduction

Many of the entrenched sexist ideas populist leaders hold about the bodies of women stem from those of powerful ancient men. Philosophers like Aristotle, ancient physicians like Galen and Hippocrates, whose ideas about the nature of the body of women, though long debunked, continue to inform the political projects of populist leaders, which restrict and police the bodies of women for political gain. Simply because of their biological sex, men continue to enjoy privilege from their embodied existence, ideas rooted in classical antiquity. Men's bodies are beholden only to men, while women's bodies continue to be public property: contested, restricted, legislated, politicized, shamed, hidden, silenced, harassed, beaten, and killed.

Authoritarian leaders such as Trump, Erdoğan, Orbán, Modi and Putin utilize and benefit from ancient ideas about women's bodies to further a body politic – the ancient idea that the human body is a metaphor for the health of the state – that harms women. The underexamined ancient ideas of women's bodies support the current body politic, the idea of the state as an integrated organism with a head that dominates and coordinates its subordinate parts (citizens or subjects), establishing hierarchical political structures by suppressing women's rights and insisting their biological inferiority justifies the harm. I attempt to yolk these leaders' patriarchal power structure to the misogyny of these ancient thinkers. The issue I address here is not only to underscore populist leaders' intent to limit the bodily autonomy of women (Dalvie, 2025; Kaul, 2021; McLean, 2011) but to unpack how their overlooked misogyny encourages a culture in which the value of the women is always second to the value of a man.

My question is: To what extent do the ancient medical and philosophical doctrines of Hippocrates, Aristotle, Galen, and Soranus continue to inform and justify contemporary authoritarian political decisions that limit women's rights and bodily autonomy? Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship spanning classical philosophy, feminist political theory, and gender studies, my analysis reveals three key findings: (1) bodily metaphors from Greek and Roman thought continue to structure modern assumptions of women's place in the state; (2) ancient medical and philosophical theories about female reproduction persist in contemporary reproductive policy debates; and (3) classical frameworks that position women's bodies as objects of political control rather than political subjects remain embedded in modern governance structures. I first provide an overview of Hippocrates, Aristotle, Galen's, and Soranus's treatises about the purposes of the bodies of women and then look at how contemporary authoritarian leaders weaponize these ancient ideas for their regimes.

Authoritarians need the bodies of women to remain sanctioned as weaker, less important than and therefore less worthy than men's bodies to fuel the misogyny central to their political projects. They find the rationale for their projects in Galen, Hippocrates, Aristotle, and Soranus, who convinced entire generations of occidental medicinal practitioners that the male body was the measure of everything, the only natural human form. Without facing and reworking these unexamined learning from classical texts, that her body stems from his body and is therefore less than, we will continue to embolden threats to democracy and those state actors whose imperial power grabs insist on the relegation of the female body to the home. By reducing women's bodies to their ability to reproduce, these populist leaders are moving us closer to accepting authoritarianism.

Literature Review

Mercer (2018) in her work *the Philosophical Roots of Western Misogyny* reconstructs how learned men in the ancient world offered what they considered to be “cutting edge” and sound arguments for the inferiority of women to men and how they have buttressed the patriarchy’s current survival (p. 184). Many modern medical decisions, practices and pieces of legislation supporting the patriarchy stem from these ancient suppositions about women’s bodies: dark, cold, and wet, irrational vs. men’s bodies: hot, dry, and rational. Mercer underscores this point by noting that “centuries of sexism and its accompanying misogyny were built” by these philosophers and medical theorists to provide evidence that men are superior to women, concluding that the two thousand years of sexism “enshrined” in ancient Greece “are difficult to shrug off” (pp. 184–185). These ideas about women’s and men’s bodies have created what she calls a “hierarchical difference” (HD), making it easy to justify that women need to be treated differently than men and that the health of western society depends on this different, lesser treatment (p. 185). Similarly, Kaul (2021) in *The Misogyny of Authoritarians in Contemporary Democracies* argues that populist leaders “instrumentalize misogyny” to demonize the female as weak and inferior (p. 1625), ideas that originate from Aristotle, Hippocrates, Galen, and Soranus. Populist leaders support HD, powerful men whose political projects demean, marginalize, ridicule, and dismiss women, especially women who ask questions or women in power.

The misogyny of world leaders such as Erdoğan, Orbán, Modi, Trump and Putin are central to the exercise of their political power (Kaul, 2021). In fact, a growing body of recent literature demonstrates how modern states have operationalized misogyny to maintain their political legitimacy. As Manne (2018) defines it, the support system that upholds the patriarchy consists of two muscles: sexism (“the justifier”) and misogyny (“the enforcer”), both which modern authoritarians use to delegitimize women’s speech, limit their access to positions of power in both public and private spheres, and justify their own political projects that limit women’s rights to, quite literally, everything, all while encouraging motherhood, diminishing abortion access and demeaning women who do not have children.

In 1975, anthropologist Gayle Rubin offers a theory of women’s oppression they call the “sex/gender system”, a system through which society arranges itself by transforming human sexual biology into “products of human activity” (Rubin, 1975, p. 159). They argue that the domestication of women is not a natural but a political process, through which the capitalist machine of churning out commodities for profit fulfills its only goal: more capital. Almeida (2025) agrees with Rubin that women’s bodies have been “commodified” in the United States, where in one case a medically declared brain dead woman was kept alive on life support because she was pregnant at the time of death, and the abortion laws in the State of Georgia kept her alive on machines until at 25 weeks the woman’s body could no longer support the fetus, and the fetus was delivered via C-section. Rubin’s focus on women’s bodies exploited as surplus labor for capital further emboldens my argument that the goal of authoritarian states is in part to ensure that women’s bodies are never their own. Further, these authoritarians ignore and chastise the non-heterosexual woman and demand “compulsory heterosexuality” in their political projects (Rich, 2003). These populist leaders easily reduce women’s bodies to their biological utility for the material of the patriarchy.

These axioms about women’s bodies have transformed into gender myths, stories about women that have easy and wide-reaching purchase value for populist policy makers: women are caretakers at home and do not require a political voice; women’s destiny is in their biology, as

child bearers and homemakers. They are the weaker sex and therefore less intelligent than men, a belief that one policy maker recently shouted out at the European Union parliament.¹ To these populist leaders, women are not oppressed, they are protected; they do not suffer inequality because by nature and divine law, men's and women's bodies are not equal. Therefore, any stress women feel because of deeply rooted systematic injustice can be dismissed, since systematic injustice to authoritarian leaders does not exist. It was these ancient male thinkers who have for millennia ensconced us in their male-centric world view, using women's bodies as political tools, prioritizing only the part of women's bodies that serve men, and dismissing women's rights to live as full humans.

The Female Body in the Ancient Mediterranean World

Hippocrates of Kos 460–375 B.C.E. – Cold and Weak vs. Hot and Strong

Though they differ on some points, Hippocrates², Aristotle, Galen, and Soranus, who were all writing before the advent of dissection, agreed that the human body is made up of different types of fluids, and these fluids are hot or cold and moist or dry. They believed that the human body was at its most healthy when these fluids were in balance (Hippocrates, ca. 400 B.C.E./1931, *Nature of Man* 4.29).³

Many of the Hippocratic medical treatises concern the health and diseases of women. There are two features of a woman's body that convinced the Hippocratic authors of a crucial difference between men's and women's bodies: women have menses and a womb or "jar". The wandering womb theory purports that the womb or jar would remain in its proper place only when a woman's fluids were in balance. If a woman did not menstruate monthly, the Hippocratic physicians held that the menses would build up, causing the womb to dislodge and wander around the body, affecting different organs (liver, lungs, even brain), causing all sorts of medical ailments (constipation, violent pains, fever, back pain, teeth grinding; lack of appetite) (Hippocrates, ca. 400 B.C.E./2018, *Diseases of Women I*, 1.18–19).

A woman is more "porous and softer than a man" and she absorbs more fluids than men do (Hippocrates, ca. 400 B.C.E./2018, *Diseases of Women I*, 1.13). Thus, because of its excess fluids, the female body is naturally imbalanced. On the other hand, men, whose flesh is firmer and "densely woven" (Hippocrates, ca. 400 B.C.E./ 2018, *Diseases of Women I*, 1.13) do not need to menstruate because their bodies' fluids are in balance and they only need to emit semen (Mercer, 2018, p. 189). So, Hippocrates believed that the excess blood of women can drive them to depression and even suicide. A woman who does not menstruate regularly and who has also never given birth will suffer from a painful illness of the flesh, unless she has intercourse (Hippocrates, ca. 400 B.C.E./2018, *Diseases of Women I*, 1.15–16). Because one of the primary cures for these "ailments" was sexual intercourse, for the Hippocratic physicians, the goal of the bodies of women was only reproduction.

¹ A far-right Polish MEP Janusz Korwin-Mikke who said women "must earn less than men because they are weaker, smaller and less intelligent" was given an unprecedented punishment by the European parliament, cf. Rankin, J. (2017).

² Hippocrates was an ancient Greek physician who lived during the classical period and is traditionally regarded as the father of medicine. Yet, the Hippocratic Oath that bears his name and the 60 or so medical writings attributed to him, were written by various authors over a span of two centuries.

³ The Hippocratic corpus was written in the 4th and 5th centuries B.C.E., the earliest period for which we have written detailed accounts of women's bodies.

The Hippocratic authors insistence on the superiority of the male form cannot be overstated: they believed that male semen was the cure for women's supposed ailments. By placing women's bodies squarely in the context of their ability to reproduce, Mercer argues that "the Hippocratic authors placed women in bondage to their procreative powers and so (given cultural commitments to heterosexual marriage) to their husbands, initiating a long-standing strategy in western thought of using women's bodies as a means to justify differential treatment" (Mercer, 2018, p. 191).

Aristotle 384–322 B.C.E. Chalcis, Euboea – On Women's Natural Inferiority

Aristotle⁴ has not left us with a description of the female body, as it interested him little. Yet, he was very interested in generation and believed that women produce "material" that serves as nutrients for the embryo (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2004, 729a12–14). As far as women's contribution to reproduction was concerned, he believed that women's bodies were contributors of the "material" means for reproduction, while men contributed the "formal and efficient" means for reproduction (Bonnard, 2014). Aristotle's teleology, his notion that all living things serve a directed purpose and are searching for the good, insists that the female form is just a deformed male (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2004, *Generation of animals* 737a27–29). So, the human female body serves a purpose and contributes to this good, but her contribution, because of her mutilation, is drastically inferior to that of man's (Mercer, 2018, p. 193). Because a woman's body is too cold to heat up the blood that could create semen, Aristotle insists that the true contributor of genetic material in reproduction is the man; therefore, women did not contribute any seed to human reproduction (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2004, *Generation of animals* 727b7–12).

Interestingly, for Aristotle, two biologically sexed bodies do not exist: there was only one body – the male body. The adult free-born male will always remain *the* normal human body; women are defunct and inferior forms of the male form. Laqueur (1990) argues that Aristotle did not need the facts of sexual difference to support the claim that woman was a lesser being than man; "it followed from the a priori truth that the material cause is inferior to the efficient cause" (p. 151). As regards the sexes, Aristotle argues, "the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male the ruler and the female the subject" (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1932, *Politics* 1254b13–14). Given women's inferiority, it is natural that men oversee and regulate the lives of women. As we will see, by reducing the significance of women's role in reproduction, Aristotle gives license to centuries of physicians and leaders to legitimize reproductive-political control of women's bodies.

Galen 129–216 C.E. Pergamum, Mysia, Anatolia – On the One-Sex Body

In the second century, Galen⁵ constructed one of the most powerful and enduring medical treatises. Galen interpreted the female body in light of the male body and held that women had the same genitals as men, except theirs were on the inside and men's were on the outside. Also a proponent of the one-sex model, he convinced the world for two millennia that the vagina was an internalized penis, the labia foreskin, the uterus a scrotum and the ovaries, testicles. Women's reproductive organs had to stay on the inside because they lacked vital heat

⁴ Aristotle was an ancient Greek philosopher and scientist, one of the greatest intellectual figures of Classical antiquity and Western history. His ideas have endured in Western thinking, even after the intellectual revolutions of the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment.

⁵ Galen (129 B.C.E.–216 CE) was a Greek physician, writer, and philosopher and was very influential until the mid-17th century, in the Western, Byzantine and Near Eastern worlds.

(Bonnard, 2014). “Now just as mankind is the most perfect of animals, so within mankind the man is more perfect than the women, and the reasons for his perfection is his excess of heat, for heat is Nature’s primary instrument” (Galen, ca. 165–175 C.E./1968, Vol. 2, p. 301). Because women do not have enough heat for her parts to escape outside, Galen argued that they have a “hollow instrument” to receive the “perfect semen”. So, the human race is mutilated by the body of women, but Galen believes this mutilation is divinely necessary, emphasizing “the sublime wisdom of this hierarchy” (Mercer, 2018, p. 195) and seeing in it the design of nature: to permit the assurance of reproduction.

Soranus of Ephesus 98–138 C.E. – On Rape and Pregnancy

And yet, not all ancient medical practitioners agreed. Soranus of Ephesus writing in the 1st to 2nd centuries C.E. and practicing in Alexandria and Rome wrote an extant treatise, *Gynecology*, arguably “the most the most substantial and important surviving gynecological work from antiquity” (Gellar-Goad, 2023, p. 246). In it, he attempted to convince the Greco-Roman world that women’s uteri did not move once month, and he denied that women’s physiology was chaotic; he refuted that all women menstruate at the same time according to lunar cycles, and noted that though pregnancy was natural, it was not always healthy (Galeski, 2023). Soranus was, in some ways, more progressive than his earlier peers.

Yet sadly, Soranus, like some modern authoritarian leaders, downplays the severity of rape, claiming that a woman could not become pregnant through rape unless something in her body allowed it. He says that it was not possible for sperm to be conceived by females without desire: “For even if some women conceive after being raped, for them there’s this to say: that even in these women the quality of desire was present at any rate, but it was overshadowed by the judgement of the psyche” (Soranus, ca. 138 CE/2023, p. 247). Similarly, as Gellar-Goad (2023) reminds us, Todd Akin, a former US congressperson, implied in his 2012 Senate campaign that the female body has a way to reject a pregnancy incurred after rape.

The Body Politic

The body politic – the ancient idea that the human body is a metaphor for the health of the state – endures. The metaphor deems women to be subhuman, inferior to men in health and dominance, important only for their procreative capacity, less intelligent, and certainly unfit for political aspirations. As a concept, the “body politic” provides crucial insight into why women's bodies and rights become central battlegrounds in populist politics. The metaphor of the city (and the State) as a living body links the body and politics in a new way (Castelli, 2018). “The body turns into a metaphor for the political hierarchy, and, as a body, power is exposed to illness and disease, sometimes to death. Power has now an anatomy, and needs therapies against pathologies” (Castelli, 2018, p. 170).

Unsurprisingly, this political body is a male body, rational and disciplined, positioned as the “universal and neutral image” for all of humanity (Castelli, 2018, p. 170). Castelli (2018) agrees that male bodies

...are sovereign subjects, and they control nature, necessity, and passions. They are subjects of power. Female bodies will stay in the margins, excluded from the official political representations, since they are still seen as irrational, animal, passionate, and unpolitical. They are objects of power. Even when femininity seems to play an

important role in political discourse, women's bodies are erased and normalized. (Castelli, 2018, p. 170)

So, because the female body and its reproductive power pose dangerous threats to the male political body and its sovereignty, certain arrangements of power have been created, excluding woman from *her own* political power while demanding her body as fodder for *their* political power.

The body politic metaphor has since been used to justify unity and hierarchy (head and members), and naturalized authority.⁶ As feminist political theorists have long established, the body – particularly the female body – serves as a fundamental site where political power is both naturalized and contested. Populist leaders frequently invoke the need to protect the nation's demographic and cultural integrity by positioning women's reproductive capacity as essential to national survival (Almeida, 2025; Patavardhan & Nakshathra, 2024). Later critiques (Cavarero, 2002) observe that the body politic metaphor usually assumes hierarchies that marginalize women in particular, revealing how it also carries the normative and exclusionary implications of patriarchal thinkers who cast women into the realm of the corporeal as nonpolitical (Cavarero, 1995). Consequently, the ancient association of women's bodies with irrationality, reproductive necessity, and apolitical nature – regularly informs contemporary political discourse and populist governance structures.

Authoritarianism and Male Dominance

So why are we interested in the precocious pretensions of ancient men? Mainly because the contemporary authoritarians rely on the continuation of these ideas to justify the subservience and inferiority of women to this day. Recent research shows that as of 2026, 72 percent of the world's population now lives under autocracy, with women's rights serving as a primary battleground for authoritarian consolidation (Human Rights Watch, 2026). Current misogynist authoritarians, Donald Trump (United States), Viktor Orbán (Hungary), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Türkiye), and Narendra Modi (India) use women's bodies as a battle ground to consolidate their authority. These "leaders" deploy remarkably similar strategies to advance their sexist projects: they advance anti-feminist and anti-gender discourses to galvanize their support base, dismantle institutional safeguards for women, curtail access to abortion services, and subvert women's economic and political engagement. Their assaults on women's rights are not mere isolated policy decisions but are the keystones of their endeavors to roll back any progress the feminist cause has made. By targeting the autonomy of women's bodies, populists endeavor to resolidify what they perceive as the "natural" patriarchal hierarchy, allegedly jeopardized by feminist advancements (Bielska-Brodziak et al., 2020; Gwiazda, 2021).

The Bodily Sovereignty of Women

So it goes that the bodily sovereignty of women disavows and threatens their "modern" states. If women's purpose is only procreative, a mode of reproduction, and women are inherently weaker than men, then women cannot be trusted to make choices over their own bodies. In the United States on 24 June 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in its *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision, ending the 50-year-old federal constitutional right to an abortion. The legal right for women to have an abortion was left up

⁶ The transmission of these metaphors through Medieval theology and later to early modern thinkers, e.g., Hobbes *Leviathon*, is outside of the scope of this paper.

to the States, many of which had “trigger laws” in effect, partially or totally banning the right to an abortion in their state upon the overturning of Roe. State-level abortion restrictions, mandatory waiting periods, and requirements for medically unnecessary procedures reproduce ancient patterns of positioning women as incapable of rational decision-making about their own bodies.

Reproductive politics in other national contexts demonstrate how ancient frameworks for controlling female bodies have been adapted to serve modern political projects. In Russia and Türkiye, Putin and Erdoğan have shifted towards creating an environment of discomfort for anyone pursuing an abortion. President Putin has consistently articulated a vision of women’s roles centered on motherhood and family, framing reproduction as a patriotic duty and national security imperative. In his 8 March 2024 Women’s Day message, Putin declared that “the most important thing for every woman... is family” and “taking tireless care of children,” explicitly positioning childbearing as women’s primary purpose (The Moscow Times, 2024). Putin has also imposed mandatory waiting periods before the ability to have an abortion. In Türkiye, the government uses a system that tracks women who visit any type of maternity services. “Since 2008, the Turkish government has used a surveillance system to record and track all pregnant women who visit maternity services” (Genç, 2023).

And women are not safe. Not safe in their homes and not safe in the streets. In India, one official in Modi’s party, mirroring the words of Soranus of Ephesus, has said that rape is “a social crime” that is “sometimes right and sometimes wrong” (Kaul, 2021, p. 1627). The *Human Rights Watch World Report* (2026) demonstrates that security forces in Manipur and other conflict zones have committed atrocities including sexual violence against women from minority communities. Narendra Modi’s government has failed to hold perpetrators accountable, offering impunity for offenders of gender-based violence in India, particularly when victims are from marginalized religious or ethnic groups. In the United States, the Trump administration in June of 2018 overturned asylum protection for domestic violence for women. In 2016, Erdoğan initiated a “marry your rapist” bill, to protect men who rape underage girls if they marry their victims (The Advocates for Human Rights, 2021).

Misogyny Solidifies Authoritarian Agendas

One of the most nefarious ways populist leaders, Trump, Modi, Erdoğan and Orbán attack women’s rights and bodily sovereignty is by employing misogyny in their everyday language to marginalize and dismiss women as people. These leaders succeed *because* of their misogyny (Kaul, 2021). Manne (2018) concurs that misogyny “is most productively understood as a political phenomenon”, the system that “operates within the heteropatriarchy to police and enforce women’s subordination and uphold male dominance” (33).

Take the United States as an example: Donald Trump has won two political elections while grossly disparaging and dismissing women who are prominent in public life using abusive commentary about their bodies. He calls competent women “crooked” and still won two elections after saying he could “grab them by the pussy” (Kaul, 2021, p. 1626). In the 2020 election campaign, Trump referred to the Democratic Presidential candidate Kamala Harris as a monster and his son tweeted the word “whorendous” about her (Kaul, 2021, p. 1627). Yet, many United States voters still see the hypermasculinity and misogyny of Trump as a pretext for strength and competence (Kaul, 2021). They not only exonerate him but *reward* him for his misogyny.

In India, Modi has consistently used misogyny to delegitimize women leaders and ridicule women in public life who challenge his policies. Women are best fit to be mothers and sisters, he has said, but when men rape women or Muslim girls in India, Modi remains silent. In Türkiye, Erdoğan has said that: “A woman who rejects motherhood, who refrains from being around the house, however successful her working life is, is deficient, incomplete” (Kaul, 2021, p. 1627). In Hungary, women who speak out against the actions of prime minister Viktor Orbán’s government face vicious misogynistic attacks online, and women leaders and activists who stand up for human rights and champion democracy are also denigrated as “unqualified”, “stupid” and “unfit for office” (Di Meco, 2023).

Conclusions

The influence of Greek and Roman thought on western politics is not in question, yet how these ideas continue to influence authoritarians, reproductive governance, and state power remain underexamined. The male-dominated patriarchy and its oppression of women is sadly on the rise and is directly connected to democratic decline around the globe. Their endless attacks on women’s bodies, freedoms, autonomy, are a symptom of the enormous backlash of populist governments against the progress of feminism, as seen in Hungary, India, Türkiye, Russia, and the United States. Yet, many of us miss how intrinsically the genesis of our belief in the biological inferiority of women stems from those of ancient powerful men. The implications from classical ideas of women’s bodies support the current body politic, establishing hierarchical political structures through biological analogy that are profound: by linking women to procreative necessity and irrationality, ancient thinkers provide a conceptual foundation for the political exclusion and oppression of women that has persisted for millennia. Why do we continue to support authoritarians who fear the bodily sovereignty of women? It is time “to spit on Hippocrates,” (PIENA, 2025) and oust those in power who cannot evolve past the ancient desire to control the bodies of women.

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