BRIEFING

Grasping Patriarchal Backlash: A brief for smarter countermoves

Nearly three decades ago the UN World Conference on Women at Beijing appeared to be uniting the international community around the most progressive platform for women's rights in history.[1] Instead of steady advancement, we have seen uneven progress, backsliding, co-option, and a recent rising tide of patriarchal backlash (Faludi et al. 2020). The global phenomenon of 'backlash' is characterised by resurgent misogyny, homo/transphobia, and attacks on sexual and reproductive rights. It is articulated through new forms of patriarchal politics associated with racialised hyper-nationalist agendas, traditionalism, authoritarianism, and alterations to civic space that have become all too familiar both in the global North and South (Edström, Greig and Skinner, forthcoming). A wide range of actors and articulations are involved and influenced by underlying drivers and dynamics. A clearer view of the patriarchal nature of current backlash is a prerequisite for building a cohesive movement to counter it, strategically engaging researchers, activists, policymakers and donors in development.

KEY MESSAGES

- The current tide of patriarchal backlash is no mere reaction to progress for women's rights, but rather a complex array of proactive political forces responding to threats and opportunities wrought by multiple global crises.

- Anxieties about crises and dark futures are exploited for divisive 'othering', forcing binary choices, and to mobilise support and identification with backlash politics.

- Whilst about 'more than gender', backlash is still patriarchal and 'gendered', and racialised and classed. Gender is itself politicised to create divisive narratives about 'bodies', 'families' and 'nations', to 'fix' these sites down and create order amidst crises.

- Fraught with contradictions, backlash is; nostalgic and nihilistic, framed as local (against the global/foreign) but transnationally connected, and as united (against 'gender ideology') whilst occluding contradictory interests of different supporters.

- Comprehending backlash better is a prerequisite for the critical awareness required for uniting to counter it effectively; for waking up – becoming smarter and reclaiming being 'woke'!

> " The global phenomenon of 'backlash' is characterised by resurgent misogyny, homo/transphobia, and attacks on sexual and reproductive rights

Jerker Edström

Ayesha Khan

Alan Greig

Chloe Skinner

WHAT IS BACKLASH?

Activists and researchers often analyse backlash as a reactive response to gains made by gender justice movements (Piscopo and Walsh 2020; Mansbridge and Shames 2008). The rollback of gains, such as this year US court action to restrict women's right and access to abortion, exemplify such an episodic reaction to progressive change and the use of coercive power to restore patriarchal interests and values. It is viewed by others as about more than gender alone, as it often represents an effort by elite groups to resist equitable change more broadly (Ranchod-Nilsson, Sita 2008). It is interconnected with other forms of polarising and right-wing politics that seek to reproduce and maintain hierarchies of inequality, including race, class, nationality, sexuality and coloniality (Datta, Neil 2021; Nash 2008). Some argue that gender functions within this opportunistic politics as a type of symbolic but 'empty signifier' allowing diverse protagonists with disparate aims to unite within broader divisive politics, and precisely because of its supposed 'populist emptiness' (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017., p 15).

In some countries, governments have adopted gender equality policies, but backlash is expressed through inaction, implementation, or a quiet rollback of gains. In Uganda, the ruling National Resistance Movement made policy reforms for women's rights initially in a possible effort to consolidate their political support, while over time becoming sufficiently influenced by the church pass new legislation against homosexuality. In Kenya, too, despite significant progress on legislative reforms and addressing sexual and gender-based violence, a closer examination of the laws regulating marriage, domestic violence and sexual violence reveals they retain discriminatory provisions and are weakly implemented. The patriarchy inherent in the state and its institutions remains resilient and violence against women in politics is becoming an increasingly recognised issue.

In countries where progress on gender justice is historically slow or severely constrained, backlash is analysed not as a reaction to gain but as a structural phenomenon within systems facing protracted crises. In Lebanon, for example, researchers argue it is "embedded in the very systems that make up families, communities, and the state, and is pervasive, thus permeating all spheres" (Mendelek and El Rahi, forthcoming). The concept of women as citizens of the state remains elusive as 'religious sect' together with 'sex' are key categories used to manage political difference and thus the assertion of Lebanese sovereignty (Mikdashi, 2018). Backlash here refers to forms of "structural discrimination and exclusion that are fed, incubated and fuelled by the sectarian system; and that not only fight and obstruct advocacy for rights, but more importantly, impede the possibility of progress." The impact is inter-generation and cuts across institutions of the state, civil society and family.[2]

To understand backlash, we must recognise its structural embeddedness, historical trajectories and contemporary elements and manifestations. This allows us to observe that it may be motivated by the interests of a diverse set actors, with apparent overlapping goals. Some actors proactively construct alternative futures that seeks to resurrect or even reshape new hierarchies, such as passing laws to ban homosexuality or restrict women's dress codes. Other phenomena are reactions to progressive change, such as the right-wing backlash to the 2010 Women Empowerment Bill in Bangladesh. Yet, we see this politics as inherently patriarchal in both its modes of operation and ideological underpinnings, and thus as always gendered in ways which are already racialised and classed.

This current politics and discourse exploits anxieties generated by a perceived confluence of interacting crises. Multiple crises operate on different timescales and vary across countries, but also interact. These have recently generated increased volatility in gendered social orders, as they are seen to threaten existing patterns of privilege, entitlement, elite rule and the dominant modes of unfettered capitalist accumulation.

WHO ARE THE MAIN PROTAGONISTS?

The articulations of backlash that we see in today's patriarchal 'crisis management' are broader and deeper than a mere reactive pushback on progressive social change. They also involve concerted moves by actors playing a long game of power – not unlike like chess – aiming to re-secure or advance their interests within a changing and volatile world. Typical actors are illustrated in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1

Backlash chessmen

Pawns, foot-soldiers: Men's rights groups, manosphere, communities, illberal CSOs

Kings and Queens: Patriarchal populist authoritarian leaders, aspiring dictators

Bishops/Mullahs: Religious fundamentalists, aspiring theocrats

Knights: Ethno-nationalist, mythopoetic neofascists and racist movements

Towers/Rooks: Private wealth, hyper-capitalists, aristocrats and economic elites

Whilst the 'pawns', or foot-soldiers, amongst the protagonists comprise a bewildering array of groups and actors reacting within such divisive politics, they are effectively protecting

interests of powerful others. Triggered by anxiety, fear or resentment, they are often manipulated and made to feel threatened by the current confluence of crises. More powerful players in the back row engage in longer term strategies for securing positions of power, even if with diminishing speculative horizons. They include fundamentalist and conservative religious actors, ethno-nationalist and authoritarian political groups, and neo-conservative or hyper-capitalist interests (Datta 2021, p 18).

The actors engaged in backlash politics may live locally in different contexts, but they often have broader national, regional and international connections. They form alliances amongst themselves, with opportunistic politicians and other protagonists, to broaden their support bases. Thus, their networks are also transnational, mobilising ideas, tactics and significant funding (ibid). Between 2013-17 the 'anti-gender movement' received $3.7 billion, over three times the funding for LGBTI movements (Global Philanthropy Project 2020, 4).

HOW DOES BACKLASH WORK?

Powerful interest groups coalesce organically to exploit and manage anxieties provoked by systemic crises through 'spatial fixes' of highly symbolic spatial 'sites'. These form key battlegrounds for contested oppositional narratives and symbolic tropes to reshape them, in particular:

- The individual space of the sexed '**body**' – as binary, heteronormative and reductive.

- The privatised space of the traditional '**family**' – as patriarchal, hierarchical and hallowed.

- The bordered, ordered space of the ethnic '**nation**' – as homogenous, othering and exclusive.

Examples of different backlash protagonists and articulations of their 'fixing' these sites down are shown in Table 1 on page 4.

CONTRADICTIONS OF 'BACKLASH' POLITICS

As Table 1 suggests, the politics of backlash is also rife with contradictions. Thus, countering backlash will need to expose these systematically. Some contradictions include:

1 **Diverse actors coalesce in opposition to gender equality, but their aims and interests are sometimes contradictory**
Example: Backlash protagonists mobilise coalitions with diverse interests, using 'anti-gender ideology' and nationalist rhetoric along these spatial fixes to consolidate support amongst groups whose interests they often undermine

(e.g., poor black women who supported former president Bolsonaro in Brazil or working-class American communities who voted for Donald Trump).

Example: Certain capitalist interests promote free flow of global trade and finance yet resist regulations and taxation which would enable redistributive and welfare policies.

Example: Some faith-based groups and major faith institutions condemn gender justice activists for attacking the family and cultural values, yet they collude with conservative capitalist interests whose policies undermine social protection.

2 **It portrays 'gender' as 'political', yet itself politicises and weaponises gender**
Example: Backlash protagonists accuse feminists and gender activists of politicising gender by making the role of women in the family a matter of public policy debate. Yet backlash politics mobilises transnational finance and networks in service of local actions to prevent progress on gender justice, restrict sexual and reproductive rights, and limit the language of global bodies such as the United Nations to affirm these rights (Sanders et al., 2021).

Example: Backlash protagonists use highly gendered, patriarchal discourse to mobilise political support by positioning themselves as tough and masculine, against feminism or 'anti-gender ideology' and in defence of 'the nation' (effectively nationalist/elite interests).

3 **It appeals nostalgically to past 'orders', but is often nihilistic**
Example: The conscious, deliberate acceleration of burning fossil fuels despite knowing their role in the climate crisis. This is described as "a knowingly violent…. Reassertion of white masculine power on an unruly planet" (Daggett 2018, p. 34).

Example: The cynical absence of effective governance of social media platforms by corporate interests, disguised as a concern for 'freedom', despite their role in fuelling backlash, violence and misogyny (Seymour 2019, 171).

Example: The calculated appropriation of scientific language and rights-based discourse for regressive purposes, such as using pseudo-scientific studies to condemn LGBTQI groups.

4 **It is anti-global, but always transnationally linked**
Example: Although criminalisation of homosexuality in Uganda was motivated by appeals to 'African values', mobilisations for this has been supported transnationally by faith-based organisations and networks (esp. in the USA) promoting Christian 'family values'.

Table 1. Sites, protagonists and articulations of fixing

Site	Protagonists	Articulations
Body	• Conservative and faith-based groups (e.g. Vatican) • Conservative, illiberal NGOs (inc. Christian and Muslim) & transnational networks • Men's rights actors & on-line 'manosphere' communities • Anti-feminist groups • Right-wing parties & leaders • Militant religious & far-right groups	• Criminalise LGBTQI+ sexuality (Uganda, Russia), or portraying it as immoral (Egypt, Turkey) • Enduring power of religious doctrine over personal status laws affecting women (Lebanon, Pakistan, India) • Privilege some rights over others ('right to life' for unborn vs bodily and socio-economic rights of women) • Increased gender-based violence, normalising domestic violence • Cultural promotion of racialised hyper-masculinity and femininity, incl. in digital spaces • Popular mobilisation against feminism within the body politic ('Feminism is Cancer' Facebook group in Bangladesh) • Pushback against sexual and reproductive bodily rights (eg new restrictions on abortion in USA & some EU countries; 'gag rule' reducing access to contraception in global South; special provisions in child marriage act in Bangladesh) • Media content supporting patriarchy, machismo, transmisogyny, biological essentialism (Latin America)
Family	• Certain faith-based groups, fundamentalist networks and religious institutions • Conservative/ traditionalist/right-wing political parties & leaders • Certain illiberal, libertarian & 'neoliberal' capitalists	• Accuse 'gender ideology' of destroying nuclear family, and as violating 'divinely ordained' order & social hierarchy. • Target sexual minority rights in name of 'family values.' • Restrict or criminalise female sexuality outside of marriage (South Asia) • Resist or roll back legislation on domestic violence & same sex marriage • Backlash to feminism: as a 'western', colonial, atheist, & anti-family ideology • Privatisation of the welfare state, social protection, other policies increase the burden on family and women's unpaid care work to bear social costs (Lebanon)
Nation	• Right-wing political parties & populist authoritarian leaders • Ethnonationalists & neofascists • Military interests & paramilitary organisations • Right-wing media • Specific hyper-capitalist & traditional elites	• Rise in authoritarianism/democratic backsliding w/ restrictions on civil society and rights-based discourse • Promoting racialised forms of white/Hindu/Slavic/Ottoman/etc. male supremacy, denying ethnic or religious diversity. • 'Revival' of national identity, (e.g., 'Africanism') to counter the legacy of colonialism, or to rebuild (e.g., Slavic/Hindu) empires • Strengthen national boundaries & increase militarisation & use hyper-masculine nationalist rhetoric • Appeal to idealised patriarchal national past with anti-global discourse • Dismantling multi-lateral regulation of global economy (e.g., taxation, worker and environmental protection or rights)

HOW DOES THIS PERSPECTIVE HELP?

This perspective helps us to see the contradictions, discussed above. It enables us to see linkages between the different kinds of actors, and how the politics is playing out at all levels.

We recognise that backlash is not simply a response to loss of power, but part of a disruptive shit in the on-going evolution of capitalism and patriarchy and their articulation in diverse contexts. Social, economic and political relations are being readjusted to extend the lease of inequality and expropriation in new forms, deploying these spatial fixes through resonant playbooks as discussed above to retain – or build new – power.

Any effective response for social and economic justice in this context requires a strategic approach. To counter backlash holistically we need understand the bigger problem and the actors involved. We must address gendered backlash within the broader complexity of the multiple crises and interests at play.

WHAT WOULD PROGRESS LOOK LIKE?

- **Reduced levels of anxiety:** Backlash protagonists rely on this anxiety to win public support for backlash. Understanding it and exposing the contradictions reduces their power. Action research is critical to inform, engage and communicate.

- **Refusal to engage in binary thinking:** This will allow us to transcend the polarisation in discourse, society and politics, and take the power out of divisive politics and ideologies. Informed discussion and debate, guided through tested capacity building modules and documented methods, taking place in a proliferation of safe spaces in our varied contexts, will build bridges and new allies in support of social justice outcomes.

- **Nurturing of intersectional alliances:** More intersectional alliances between social justice movements and actors will revitalise national, regional and global debates. Shared experiences of countering backlash can build knowledge of practical strategies used in different contexts. For example, the MenEngage Alliance together with feminist groups can share practical strategies used in different contexts and collectively consider concrete steps to build on and link with efforts from other gender justice movements.

- **Strengthened open and inclusive civil society:** Open, safe spaces are needed for activists and citizens to interact, debate and strategize for resistance to restrictive ideals of the family, our bodies and identities and social and institutional forces that perpetuate and sustain "structural disempowerment" (Hasan & Menon, 2006).

STRATEGIC COUNTERMOVES

Here are recommendations for researchers, activists, policymakers and donors based on the current research.

Researchers

- Excavate histories: How have the gendered legacies of colonialism, politics of neoliberalism, and the impacts of recent phenomena such as the 'war on terror' contributed to 'backlash' within and across contexts?

- Generate new narratives: How do we best build coherent counter-narratives to unfix the symbolic sites of body, family and nation? What would a just, sustainable, decolonised, post-hyper-capitalist and post-patriarchal world look like?

Activists

- Build new kinds of leadership capacity: Equip new leaders at the local and global levels with knowledge and tools to detect backlash, improve analyses behind strategies and goals.

- Build alliances: Strengthen voice through coalition-building across gender justice contestations over the key sites, and across classes, genders and ethnicities.

Policymakers

- Develop analytical capacity on backlash within decision-making bodies and processes, focused on key spatial sites of contestation.

- Nurture open spaces (political, media, civil society) for debate on crises and give marginalised groups a voice.

Donors

- Global funding in support of backlash activities is highly organised and potentially growing. External actors must respond with substantial increase in resources to support feminist and LGBTQI+ movements.

- Develop coordinated responses, across like-minded donor agencies and the philanthropic community, to progressive organisations globally, and sustain local groups in under-resourced countries and communities.

All stakeholders

- Coordinate programmes and engagement towards a common goal across stakeholder groups.

- Network to expand and strengthen the constituencies for countering backlash politics.

- Collaborate to act strategically, build capacity and share evidence to achieve impact.

REFERENCES

Crenshaw, Kimberle. (1991). 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color'. Stanford Law Review 43 (6): 1241. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039.

Daggett, Cara. (2018). 'Petro-Masculinity: Fossil Fuels and Authoritarian Desire'. Millennium 47 (1): 25–44

Datta, Neil. (2021). Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe 2009 – 2018. European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights

Denkovski, Damjan, Nina Bernarding, and Kristina Lunz (2021) 'Power Over Rights: Understanding and Countering the Transnational Anti-Gender Movement Volume I', Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy: Berlin https://static1.squarespace. com/static/57cd7cd9d482e9784e4ccc34/t/60c865e5f8c3ce53222039e3/1623746023308/PowerOverRights_Volume1_ web.pdf

Edström, Jerker; Alan Greig and Chloe Skinner, forthcoming 2023. 'Patriarchal (Dis)Orders: Re-Reading Backlash as "Crisis Management".' Signs: Journal of Journal of Women in Culture and Society.

Faludi, Susan, Shauna Shames, Jennifer Piscopo and Denise Walsh (2020) 'A conversation with Susan Faludi on backlash, trumpism, and #MeToo', Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 45(2): 336–345 https://doi.org/10.1086/704988

Global Philanthropy Project. (2020). Meet the Moment: A Call for Progressive Philanthropic Response to the Anti-Gender Movement. Oakland, CA.

Hasan, Z., & Menon, R. (2004). Unequal citizens: A study of Muslim women in India. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Joseph, S. (1997). The public/private—The imagined boundary in the imagined nation/state/community: The Lebanese case. Feminist Review, 57(1), 73-92.

Kuhar, Roman, and David Paternotte. (2017). '"Gender Ideology" in Movement: Introduction'. In Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality, edited by Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte, 1–22. London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield International.

Mansbridge, Jane, and Shauna L. Shames. (2008). 'Toward a Theory of Backlash: Dynamic Resistance and the Central Role of Power'. Politics & Gender 4 (4): 623–34. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X08000500.

Mendelek, Miguel and Nay El Rahi. Forthcoming. "Understanding Backlash in Lebanon" Draft Paper, Countering Backlash, Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and the Arab Institute for Women, Lebanese American University (AiW/LAU).

Mikdashi, M. (2018). Sextarianism: Notes on studying the Lebanese state. The Oxford handbook of contemporary Middle Eastern and North African history. Oxford University Press, Oxford UK. https://doi. org/10.1093/ oxfordhb/9780199672530.013, 24.

Nash, Jennifer C. (2008). 'Re-Thinking Intersectionality'. Feminist Review 89 (1): 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2008.4.

Piscopo, Jennifer M., and Denise M. Walsh. (2020). 'Introduction. Symposium Backlash and the Future of Feminism'. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 45 (2): 265–78. https://doi.org/10.1086/704950.

Ranchod-Nilsson, Sita (2008) 'Gender Politics and Gender Backlash in Zimbabwe', Politics & Gender 4(4): 642–652 https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X08000524.

Sanders, R., Jenkins, L. D., McManus, S. G., Hirao, D., Hoctor, L., Lamačková, A., Thomasen, K., Griffon, L., Clough, L., Pruth, C. and M. Johansson. (2021). Power over Rights: Understanding and countering the transnational anti-gender movement Volume II: Case Studies. Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy.

Seymour, Richard. (2019). The Twittering Machine. London, UK: The Indigo Press.

Townsend-Bell, Erica. (2020). 'Backlash as the Moment of Revelation'. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 45 (2): 287–94. https://doi.org/10.1086/704952.

ENDNOTES

1. https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/01/beijing-declaration

2. As defined by feminists who participated in a session convened by the Arab Institute for Women in Beirut as part of the "Countering Backlash" project.

FURTHER READING

Kandiyoti, Deniz. (2016). 'Locating the Politics of Gender: Patriarchy, Neo-Liberal Governance and Violence in Turkey'. Research and Policy on Turkey 1 (2): 103–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/23760818.2 016.1201242.

Walia, Harsha, Robin D. G. Kelley, and Nick Estes. (2021). Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

AWID. (2021). Rights at Risk: Time for Action, Observatory on the Universality of Rights Trends Report 2021, Association of Women's Rights in Development (AWID).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DOI: 10.19088/BACKLASH.2023.002

CONTACT

counteringbacklash.org

@CounterBacklash

COUNTERING BACKLASH
RECLAIMING GENDER JUSTICE

Hosted by

institute of development studies

Funded by

Sida