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UNDERSTANDING GENDER BACKLASH: SOUTHERN PERSPECTIVES

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Virulent Hindutva, Vigilante State: Situating Backlash and its Implications for Women's Rights in India^{*†}

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Abstract India is facing a period of seismic backlash against feminist and progressive politics and the pace of change, particularly over the last ten years, has been breakneck with serious consequences for women's equality and human rights. Drawing on an examination of the reversals and pushbacks against women's rights in three areas – the citizenship rights of Muslim women, the rights of domestic workers, and the impacts of restrictions on foreign funding on women's rights organising – this article seeks to contribute not just to an understanding of the nature of the backlash faced by women's rights in India, but also to the wider debates on backlash from global South feminist perspectives.

Keywords backlash, India, Muslim women, domestic workers, funding laws, women's rights, women's rights organising, shock therapy, global South, feminist perspectives.

1 Introduction

Feminist and democratic politics in India is facing a period of intense and sustained assault with serious consequences for women's equality and human rights. The ascendance of a virulent and exclusionary dominant-caste, Hindu-supremacist nationalism, combined with an increasingly authoritarian, hyper-masculine state in thrall to a neoliberal capitalist agenda, have shaped the social, political, and economic contexts of the country over the last eight to ten years. Drawing on the concerns of vigilante and dominant-caste Hindu groups, a 'vigilante state' has brazenly and unabashedly targeted and punished Muslims and dissenters (Verma and Mander 2020), giving rise to the spectre of an 'impending genocide' of Muslims (Al Jazeera 2022; Khan, Sudeeti and Zainab 2022).

There has been a closure of civil society spaces and a massive crackdown on dissent (CIVICUS 2022), even as an increasingly

corporatised, complicit, 'delegitimised and co-opted' media has ceded 'narrative control' (Ninan 2023). Epistemic communities have characterised the ongoing phenomenon of sustained attacks and the attendant backsliding and retrenchment of rights as an 'undeclared emergency' (Narain 2022) and a 'full-blown fascism' (Roy 2023). At the same time, there has been a crisis of increasing inequalities fuelled by neoliberal economic policies and intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic and government responses to it. This confluence, intensification, and consolidation of systemic forces over the last several years has set the country on a regressive, anti-feminist trajectory.

One of the concepts that has paid attention to the phenomenon of systematic dismantling of women's rights, and which has remained in circulation in the global North, particularly since it was popularised by Susan Faludi (1991), is that of 'backlash'. It has since re-emerged as a significant conceptual framing to analyse the backsliding of rights in contemporary times – dominated as it is by authoritarian populist regimes across several parts of the globe. Locating her analysis in the United States, Faludi characterised backlash as a 'powerful counterassault on women's rights' that sought to undermine and 'retract the small and hard-won victories' of the feminist movement, whether such gains were 'actual' or 'perceived'. While emphasising its 'periodic' and 'episodic' nature, she differentiated backlash from 'society's long-standing resistance to women's rights' and positioned it as an 'acute stage' of hostility, marked by 'reactive' responses to women's perceived advancements (*ibid.*: 13–16).

Some of these interrelated themes have formed the focus of more recent discussion and contestation amongst feminist researchers (Piscopo and Walsh 2020; Nazneen and Okech 2021). This has provided fresh impetus for us, as feminist researchers working in the global South, to both draw on the concept of backlash to reflect on the nature and contours of the phenomenon of the backsliding of rights in our own context in India, as well as to shape and imbue the category with a dynamism that ensures that it is grounded in diverse women's experiences and perspectives.

In this article, we draw our analysis of the backsliding of women's rights in India from three broadly conceptualised areas – the citizenship rights of Muslim women, domestic workers' rights, and the impacts of funding laws on women's rights organising (section 2). While not all the assaults in each of the areas that we examine are directly targeted at women's rights, we argue that the reversals and pushbacks in each area have significant gender dimensions that detrimentally impact the rights, particularly, of disadvantaged and marginalised women. We also disambiguate the concept of backlash from a global South feminist lens by evaluating a few of the interrelated features of backlash, such as its reactionary and episodic nature, based on a contextual

analysis of the backlash against women's rights and women's rights organising in India (section 3).

In addition to an analysis of these themes, we also draw on the concept of the shock doctrine (Klein 2007; Sarkar 2017; Narrain 2022), to elucidate how these framings offer deeper insights into the nature and impacts of backlash against women's rights and women's rights organising in India (section 4). By engaging with these frameworks across the three areas, we hope to contribute to the wider debates on backlash from global South feminist perspectives. Section 5 concludes.

2 Situating backlash across the three areas

In this section, we examine the backlash against women's rights in the areas of citizenship rights of Muslim women, domestic workers' rights, and the impacts of funding laws on women's rights organising in India. We argue that the nature of the backlash against women's rights and women's rights organising across the three areas takes the shape of an incessant, unrelenting assault. This is experienced by women and women's rights organisations in the form of going backwards, of a loss of rights from a previous, already precarious situation. We would also like to reiterate that not all the assaults in these three areas are necessarily directly targeted at women's rights, though some are. However, as we contend in this section, most of these assaults, both individually and cumulatively, have gendered impacts. We would in fact argue that it is vital to engage with the gendered impacts of even the seemingly non-gendered interventions, without which it may not be possible to have a fuller understanding of the nature of backlash against women's rights in India.

2.1 Citizenship rights of Muslim women

In recent years, and particularly since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government came to power in 2014, there have been countless attacks on the rights of Muslim communities, many of which have centred on several recurring themes that have loomed large in the Hindutva imaginary (Sarkar 2017; Jaffrelot 2007). There have been multiple direct assaults on the citizenship rights of Muslim women, such as the proposed action on the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) or the recent law criminalising triple *talaq*³ or through the hijab bans in educational institutions in Karnataka. This period has also been marked by sharp escalations in the violence and vilification of Muslim women, as evidenced by the unchecked calls for their rape to avenge purported hate crimes by Muslim men (during so-called *Dharam sansads* or 'religious parliaments'), staged online auctions of transgressive Muslim women ('Sulli Deals', 'Bulli Bai' cases)⁴ or actual violence visited on Muslim women (Jain 2022).

On the other hand, there are assaults such as those on political citizenship (through the Citizenship Amendment Act, CAA) or the increasingly stringent beef or meat bans or efforts to

regulate interreligious relationships through the bogey of 'love jihad' that are targeted at the Muslim community as a whole.⁵ Bulldozer politics combined with an 'institutionalised everyday communalism' has compounded the humiliation, vilification, and demonisation of Muslim communities through acts of economic and social boycotts, moral policing, and vigilante violence (Khan *et al.* 2022: 9–15; also see Pai and Kumar 2018). Taken cumulatively, these incursions, although not targeted only at Muslim women, do constitute a relentless and intense assault on the rights of Muslim women, as they have the effect of terrorising Muslim women into a state of 'fear and hypervigilance' (Khan *et al.* 2022: 20–22).

These assaults have had attendant impacts on Muslim women's voice and mobility. The policing of Muslim women in every aspect of their lives – what they wear, who they love, what they eat, the spaces they occupy – each of these have come under intense scrutiny, by the state, community, and family, with the effect of reversing hard-won rights. For instance, the ban on the hijab in educational institutions in Karnataka, rather than enabling young women to take informed decisions on what they wear, have had devastating impacts on the education of Muslim girls and young women, in a context where they were already facing significant barriers in accessing education (PUCL Karnataka 2022). It is this sense of going backwards, or a loss of rights, even if many of these rights remain only partially recognised or realised, that we argue constitutes a backlash against the citizenship rights of Muslim women.

2.2 Domestic workers' rights

Another group of women that are facing serious crises and upheavals in their lives are domestic workers, who form a significant component of informal women workers in urban India. Since the 1980s, along with the feminisation of domestic work in India, there has been a steady growth in the numbers of domestic worker organisations demanding their rights as workers over this period (Neetha 2013). Despite sustained claims-making over the decades, domestic work continues to be systematically devalued, with domestic workers barely seeing any gains in the recognition of their rights as workers.

Moreover, domestic workers have experienced a further sense of going backwards in the wake of the pandemic and the subsequent prolonged lockdowns. This is seen in the devastating and widespread losses of livelihoods, increased levels of work for those who remained or have since returned to work, decreased wages, increased levels of discrimination, high levels of economic vulnerability including increased indebtedness, food and housing insecurities, as well as worsening physical and mental health (Gender at Work Consulting India 2023; Neetha 2021). In the wake of these losses, domestic workers and domestic worker organisations have also experienced further reversals in their collective bargaining and negotiating power, which has set back

their struggles by several years. It is this sense of going backwards in an already precarious context that we would argue constitutes a backlash against their rights.

2.3 Impact of funding laws on women's rights organising

Foreign funding has long been a contentious issue in independent India, with frequent use of the law to target non-governmental organisations (NGOs) by limiting their access to overseas funding. However, since the BJP came to power in 2014, there has been an intensified and systematic targeting of civil society organisations (CSOs) and dissenting voices. Amongst other administrative and funding regulations, the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act has been used to stifle NGO voices (Swart 2020). There has been a rapid increase in the number of NGOs that have lost their registrations under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) 2010 with 6,677 organisations losing their licences between 2017 and 2021 (Ministry of Home Affairs, GoI 2022). In 2020, even stricter funding restrictions were imposed on NGOs through a further amendment to the Act including through bans on sub-granting, and limits on administrative costs that, according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, have had a 'detrimental impact on the right to freedom of association and expression of human rights NGOs' (OHCHR 2020). As a consequence, the CSO sector is increasingly finding itself unable to 'hold the government, business, and media accountable, amplify voices at the margins, or ensure that policies are inclusive and democratic' (Srinath 2022b).

While the recent amendments to the FCRA are not explicitly targeted at women's rights organisations, they have been severely impacted as many of them rely heavily on foreign donors. This is because domestic funders have always shown limited interest in the issues of gender equality; programmes focused on advancing gender equality receive only 1 per cent of domestic philanthropic and corporate social responsibility funds (Bain & Company and Dasra 2020). Furthermore, very few domestic philanthropies address structural inequalities that cause gender inequality across their programmatic interventions (Sridhar, Aggarwal and Bhattacharjee 2021). Moreover, based on our conversations with nearly 120 women's rights organisations across India between December 2022 and June 2023, we find that many women's rights organisations that had limited resources to begin with have in fact experienced significant loss, both potential and actual, in the form of financial sustenance of their organisations. This has forced them to scale back operations, close programmes, and lay off staff, while taking on more service-delivery initiatives. It is this loss in the form of an inability to sustain feminist organising that advances women's rights, which we argue constitutes a backlash.

Moreover, the deliberate targeting of foreign donors has disproportionately affected marginalised women, including those who are poor, Dalit, Muslim, or from lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex+ (LGBTQI+) communities (Bishop 2017; Srinath 2022a), who get little support from domestic funders. Furthermore, the retraction of the 'policy space', which is a specific requirement of the 2020 FCRA amendment, has also had an impact on women's rights. The engagement between women's rights organisations and the state was critical to influence the enactment of key legislations on domestic violence and sexual harassment. This space now no longer exists. Overall, this backlash on CSO spaces is having a chilling effect on feminist movement-building, the long-term consequences of which are yet to be fully understood.

3 Disambiguating backlash from a global South feminist lens

In this section, we interrogate and critically evaluate some of the interrelated features of backlash, such as its reactionary and episodic nature, to locate the points of convergence and departure from the literature based on the specificities of our context.

3.1 Backlash as episodic and continuous?

In the literature on backlash, we see a tension between binary conceptions of backlash as either periodic and episodic or continuous and every day (Piscopopo and Walsh 2020; Rowley 2020). We would argue that it is important to straddle these difficult binaries and engage with backlash as both episodic and continuous, that it is both 'an extraordinary and unprecedented response' (Piscopopo and Walsh 2020: 2) and that it emerges from a 'long history... of institutionalized discrimination' (*ibid.*). One way of contending with this binary has been to understand backlash as 'cyclical', to locate the long arc of backlash, and to recognise it as 'more than just episodic' (Chopra 2021: 481).

We see that there are clearly long and variegated histories of Hindutva, of neoliberal capitalism, and of authoritarian state action, which provide the structural scaffolding for the continuous and embedded nature of the backlash against women's rights and women's rights organising in India. At the same time, we would argue that at the current moment in India, there has been an intensification, consolidation, and confluence of these systemic forces that drive the backlash against women and women's rights.

If, as we argue in this article, backlash is a form of going backwards in relation to their rights, an experience of loss, of suffering shocks, then we would also argue that for women, especially those who experience intersecting forms of oppression, such as Muslim women and domestic workers, there have been continual efforts to dismantle and/or disavow their rights. To exemplify, despite persistent collective claims-making on their rights over the decades, domestic workers have experienced

a sustained pushback, disavowal, and non-recognition of their rights as workers, which has left them in a state of perpetual limbo in relation to their rights (Chigateri, Zaidi and Ghosh 2016). At the same time, the recent labour law reforms not only spectacularly failed to recognise the rights of domestic workers, but they also proved to be a serious escalation of erosion of rights, pushing women's rights at work even further back (Mazumdar and Neetha 2020; Chigateri 2021), highlighting the episodic nature of the backlash.

In this context, we would also argue that the episodic nature of backlash presents itself as the 'moment of revelation' of backlash (Townsend-Bell 2020). Taking the case of domestic workers again, the pandemic and government responses to these workers reveal the persistent and systematic devaluation and non-recognition of their rights that enabled the callous and shoddy response to them by employers and the state. In this sense, we think it is important to surface that such a 'backlash-as-spectacle' is always 'preceded and consolidated by intersecting microscapes of harm' (Rowley 2020: 284). This understanding allows us to look anew and refocus our gaze onto the 'quotidian violence' (*ibid.*) experienced, especially by disadvantaged groups of women.

For example, with Muslim women, while the escalating Islamophobia in the country serves as the spectacle of backlash, it also brings a sharp focus back onto the multiple forms of systemic discrimination and marginalisation that has continually hindered the realisation of their rights (Prime Minister's High Level Committee 2006). Similarly, in relation to women's rights organising, the spectacle of the pandemic and the FCRA restrictions exposed the meagre financial support that had so far been made available by both the state and philanthropic community for rights-based and movement-building work, especially to support women from marginalised groups such as Dalit, Muslim, and transgender communities who experienced severely compromised access to livelihoods, sexual and reproductive health, and referral services for violence (Satija, Purkayastha and Rajan 2021).

3.2 Backlash as counter-assault against perceived gains

The understanding of backlash as a 'counter-assault' against gains made by women's rights evokes a sense of the reactionary nature of backlash as well as a sense of its immediacy. However, drawing on insights from across the three areas, we would like to complicate this understanding of backlash by interrogating the gains, the reaction to those gains, as well as the temporality that inheres in such reactions.

While backlash can be understood as an extraordinary reaction to a gain (perceived or actual), it is better analysed as an extraordinary reaction against a loss (whether this is perceived or actual). As we recounted in the previous section, across the

three areas, backlash has been experienced as (an actual) loss to even the limited realisation of rights, by Muslim women, domestic workers, and women's rights organisations. However, there is another sense in which we understand backlash as an extraordinary reaction against a (perceived) loss, and this is from the perspective of the perpetrators of backlash.

One of the drivers of backlash is a sense of 'aggrieved entitlement', with backlash being structured around a 'desire to return to an idealised past in which structural inequality was normalized' (Flood, Dragiewicz and Pease 2018: 14–15). Backlash, in this sense, can be viewed as 'the defence of privilege' (*ibid.*). In relation to the rights of Muslim communities, therefore, what drives the backlash is an aggrieved patriarchal entitlement of the Hindu right, stemming from a perceived historical injury and a sense of 'Hindu victimhood' – that in the social and political compact of a newly independent India, it was not rightfully recognised as a 'Hindu nation'.

However, the perceived loss of power in this context is an illusory one, as it relies on an imaginary 'Hindu Rashtra', a mythical pre-Mughal, masculinised homeland, that is built on the construction of the 'Muslim other', who is also always already 'anti-national' (Sarkar 2017). One of the modes of realising this imagined Hindu Rashtra, grounded as it is on a 'belligerent and aggressive masculinity' (Kapur 2006: 336), has been to wreak violence and vengeance against the Muslim polity, which has frequently played out on Muslim women's bodies, as we have illustrated in section 2.

What is interesting to note is that in this form of backlash, the sense of loss is predicated on a longer time horizon – it is neither imbued with an immediacy, nor is it a reaction per se. This complicates conceptualisations of backlash that conceive of it as a 'reaction to women's "progress"' (Faludi 1991: 13) and which 'presume that backlash is time bound' (Piscopo and Walsh 2020: 269). We would argue that while backlash can indeed take the form of an immediate reaction or reprisal against perceived gains (as with reprisals against Shaheen Bagh or any such protest movements) 'proximate triggers' only 'partly explain the timing and presence of backlash politics' (Alter and Zürn 2019: 573).⁶ In such a context, backlash is better understood as a form of 'remedial backlash' that is indeed 'motivated by attempts to reclaim (potentially) lost power' (Townsend-Bell 2020: 291) but which does not always have the same sense of immediacy.

This conceptualisation of the backlash experienced by women and women's rights organising as remedial backlash, however, does not preclude an understanding of their experiences as 'pre-emptive backlash' (*ibid.*). For instance, with women's rights organising, we would argue that while there is clearly an immediacy to the reprisals for which there are now numerous

examples (Pandey and Mishra 2021), the government's actions can be also perceived to be of a pre-emptive nature. In particular, women's rights organisations that have received funding from international sources are perceived to be instruments of foreign power, conspiring to turn Hindu women against their culture and traditions through their feminist mobilisations, posing a potential threat to the Hindu nation. As one pro-Hindutva commentator puts it, 'Perhaps one of the bigger successes of this global Left-NGO nexus is how *lakhs*' of young Hindu women have turned against their own culture and society. The long-term consequences of this demonic project cannot be underestimated' (Balakrishna 2020). Seen in this light, the pre-emptive nature of governmental action can be seen to prevent radical gender transformations that have been championed by women's rights organisations from the women's movement, who are now at risk of being completely marginalised in favour of instrumental and depoliticised liberal versions of gender equality.

With domestic workers, while there has been some 'progress'/'gains' in discursive terms, viz. the increased visibility of claims-making by domestic worker groups as well as in substantive terms through a (severely) limited recognition of domestic worker rights, the backlash has not necessarily come through a 'counter-assault' or 'reaction' to this limited progress made by domestic worker rights.⁸ As we have argued in section 3.1, domestic workers instead experience backlash in the form of sustained inaction despite persistent claims-making. This is evidenced by not just the numerous failed attempts to regulate the sector over the decades but also by the exclusion of domestic workers (for the most part) from much of the new labour codes, despite promises to include and extend labour rights to them (Mazumdar and Neetha 2020).

In this sense, domestic workers experience a form of 'pre-emptive backlash' that centres and privileges the grievances of employers, and 'forestalls power loss' (Townsend-Bell 2020). Viewed in this way, attempts to recognise the rights of domestic workers can be seen as a threat to traditional gender norms and existing power structures. This is because, amongst other things, they reframe the hierarchal relationship between domestic workers and their employers from one of familial patronage to one of employment with attendant labour rights; they open the invisibilised workplace of the domestic worker up to scrutiny; and they throw renewed attention to the inequalities that inhere in the gendered division of labour within the employer household.

4 Backlash as shock therapy

Across the three areas, we find that Naomi Klein's 'shock doctrine' (Klein 2007) provides another useful conceptual framing to illuminate the nature of backlash in India. While marginalised women, especially those such as domestic workers, have experienced the pandemic and the lockdowns-induced crisis

itself as a shock, the framing of shock therapy is particularly useful to highlight the range of ways in which this crisis has enabled the government to drive its Hindu-supremacist, neoliberal, and authoritarian agendas (Sarkar 2017; Narrain 2022). Drawing on Klein's arguments on the 'shock doctrine', we find that the shock of the pandemic has been used deliberately by the government to escalate threats against Muslim women's rights and women's rights organising and retrench labour rights. This is evidenced, amongst others, by the passing of three out of four labour codes in the name of 'the ease of doing business' as well as the FCRA amendment without adequate parliamentary oversight or stakeholder consultations; the vilification of Muslims and domestic workers as carriers of the Covid-19 virus; as well as the closing down of protest sites and the imprisonment of women human rights defenders during the pandemic.

Engaging with the concept of shock therapy also enables us to engage more deeply with the unrelenting and incessant nature of backlash and its disorienting impacts. In the context of the rising Islamophobia, for example, the BJP-led government has used 'shock and awe' to deliver one blow after another in rapid, quick succession, to wreak radical transformative changes to the body politic, which have had the effect of both blocking a full understanding of the changes and subsequent opposition to it, as well as consistently raising the threshold of tolerance and expanding the horizon of what constitutes the new normal (Sarkar 2017). For Muslim women, this new normal represents a renewed battle to claim their rights in the face of ever-increasing restrictions, ever-increasing thresholds of what is tolerated as hate speech against them, and ever-changing conceptions of what counts as justice for them even when confronted by incredibly savage violence. As a bewildered Bilkis Bano, survivor of the Gujarat pogrom, asked when the perpetrators of the horrifying violence against her and her family were prematurely released, 'How can justice for any woman end like this?' (The Wire Staff 2022).

In the context of women's rights organising, the instruments of backlash against women's rights organisations have been diverse and numerous; they have been both legal and extra-legal, and they have come thick and fast, often entangling women's rights organisations in a bureaucratic web.⁹ This is well illustrated by the case of the Lawyers' Collective, a leading feminist legal rights organisation, that in 2019 was charged with multiple violations that included criminal charges as well as charges of corruption, in addition to violations of the FCRA, further debilitating their operations (CIVICUS 2019). The brazenness, ferocity, and arbitrariness with which these instruments have been used have 'shocked and awed' women's rights organisations. Based on our interviews and discussions, we know that women's rights organisations are under constant surveillance and face the ever-present threat of being raided with the effect of seeding

fear and creating a state of hypervigilance. For those women's rights organisations advocating for the citizenship rights of Muslim women or domestic workers or other disadvantaged groups (such as Dalit or Adivasi women), who were already in a precarious situation, this has presented an existential threat and a further sense of marginalisation, especially those whose FCRA registrations have been cancelled.

5 Conclusion

The framework of backlash has not had much engagement within feminist epistemic communities in India. In our limited way, we have sought to engage with some salient and recurring features of the concept of backlash to locate how the concept may be used to explain the intense backsliding of women's rights in India. Additionally, we have also attempted to inform and shape understandings of backlash from contextually grounded experiences of diverse groups of women in India.

Engaging with backlash in the Indian context, particularly in terms of its impacts on marginalised or disadvantaged women, has enabled us to analyse it as both continuous and episodic. As we have argued, backlash for Muslim women, domestic workers, and women's rights organisations at this present moment is experienced as a spectacle in terms of its intensity and acuity, even as such 'backlash-as-spectacle' is built on myriad continual 'microscapes of harm' or systemic inequalities. What marks this moment in time is the ascendance of the BJP at the seat of government which has enabled an unfettered pursuit of a hyper-masculine, Hindu-supremacist nationalism that seeks subordinated status for Muslim communities, the control of women's bodies, and a complete suppression of all forms of dissent. It is therefore the confluence, consolidation, and intensification of the forces of an unchecked Islamophobia and a strident authoritarianism combined with that of neoliberal capitalism that provide the structural scaffolding for the backlash against women's rights and women's rights organising in India.

Furthermore, shedding light on backlash as loss – from the standpoint of those who perpetrate backlash (perceived loss) and the reversals of rights from already precarious contexts for women and women's rights organisations (actual loss) – has enabled us to expand our conceptualisation of backlash as reactions to gains (whether perceived or actual). In addition, the conceptual framing of shock therapy has enabled us to examine the use of crisis to advance government agendas, as well as the intense and disorienting nature of the backlash in India.

The assaults against women's rights and women's rights organising that we have examined in this article are not all directly targeted at women but are driven by systemic forces. We would argue that analysing backlash only in terms of the direct assaults on women's rights overlooks the intricate web of

interconnected ideologies and social constructs that perpetuate gender backlash and limit the potential for developing effective counter-backlash strategies. We hope that our multifaceted analysis of the complex nature of backlash on women's rights and women's rights organising in India will inform and shape understandings of backlash and enable the formulation of effective strategies to counter the backlash.

Notes

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- † We would like to acknowledge the collective insights and analysis of the wider Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice programme community led by IDS, as well as those of our partners, Bebaak Collective and the Shehri Mahila Kamgar Union that have informed this article. We have also benefited from the wisdom of several other women's rights organisations in India.
- 1 Shraddha Chigateri, independent feminist researcher and consultant, Gender at Work Consulting Ltd, India.
- 2 Sudarsana Kundu, Research and Project Director, Gender at Work Consulting Ltd, India.
- 3 Triple *talaq* is a unilateral form of instantaneous extra-judicial divorce given by Muslim men either through a single irrevocable pronouncement usually done in writing, or through three pronouncements/utterances of *talaq* at one go (see Soman and Niaz 2015).
- 4 The 'Sulli Deals' and 'Bulli Bai' cases involved the use of online tech tools/apps to humiliate and vilify women Muslim public figures by 'auctioning' them online, employing doctored images, and publicising their personal details without their consent. 'Sulli' and 'Bulli' are derogatory slurs often used by the Hindu right to refer to Muslim women.
- 5 'Love jihad' is a conspiracy theory of the Hindu right that invokes the idea of Muslim men targeting Hindu women through 'love and marriage' with the purpose of converting them to Islam. For details, see Sarkar (2018).
- 6 Although see Chopra (2021), who argues in relation to retaliatory action against protestors at Shaheen Bagh that there continue to be cycles of repression of dissent and that there is a longer-term arc to the repression of dissent. While we agree with this assessment, we also argue that the drivers of backlash have a much longer-term arc going back to mythologised time and that they are not just proximate to Shaheen Bagh.
- 7 One *lakh* is equivalent to a hundred thousand.
- 8 Over the years, there have been some substantive gains, albeit patchy and piecemeal, with some states including domestic

- workers in minimum wages notifications, and setting up welfare boards, and a recognition of the right to social security and the protection against sexual harassment at the central level.
- 9 This has been through the enactment and use of multiple laws (FCRA Amendment Act 2020, successive Finance Bills (particularly those of 2017 and 2023), National Investigation Agency (NIA) Amendment Act 2019, the Prevention of the Money Laundering Act 2002 (and their amendments)). It has also been through the use of a range of administrative machineries such as the Enforcement Directorate, Local Intelligence Bureau, Income Tax Authorities, and Central Board of Investigation.

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