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UNDERSTANDING GENDER BACKLASH: SOUTHERN PERSPECTIVES

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Voice: A Useful Concept for Researching Backlash and Feminist Counter-Actions?*

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Abstract Voice is central to claims-making and contestations around gender equality. This article engages with a diverse set of literature, social and feminist movement theory, and gender and development scholarship, to foreground voice in the analysis of the discursive strategies of backlash actors and the counter-actions by feminist coalitions. Drawing on rich discussions with feminist academic-activists based in the global South and the UK, the article unpacks the various conceptual and methodological challenges that emerge in researching feminist collective voice in countering backlash, particularly on matters such as intersectionality and building collective feminist voice; intra-movement backlash and fragmentation of voice; capturing subtler forms of expressions of agency; and the cyclical nature of backlash.

Keywords political agency, voice, backlash, countering backlash, counter-movements, feminist agendas, performative strategies.

1 Introduction

In recent years, gender equality policies, feminist and queer rights activists, and feminism have faced a very public backlash from various oppositional actors in many countries. The contemporary backlash as a phenomenon is not yet fully understood.

Scholars have started documenting how backlash unfolds as a mobilising tool to oppose broader social change (Kováts 2018; Krizan and Roggeband 2018; Goetz 2019). In many contexts, anti-gender equality backlash also overlaps with increasing polarisation in politics (Verloo and Paternotte 2018), the rise of right-wing populism (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018), and democratic backsliding and autocracy (Goetz 2019).

The term 'backlash' was coined by Faludi (1991) to explain the counter-assault on women's rights and feminism in the cultural sphere in the United States in the 1980s. Building on this

definition, scholars have defined backlash as an acute reaction against perceived or actual gains made by women and queer communities (Mansbridge and Shames 2008; Jordan 2016). Manifestations of backlash vary. Depending on the configuration of oppositional actors, backlash ranges from virulent attacks on feminists and feminism to the deliberate use of disinformation and networked misogyny to maintain the current gender power structures (Verloo and Paternotte 2018; Piscopo and Walsh 2020). Scholars have debated the interpretation of backlash as time-bound and episodic (Townsend-Bell 2020), drawing attention to its cyclical nature and historical surges. But they all agree that there is an urgent need to understand the current backlash – particularly the drivers, nature, and actions of the oppositional actors and what strategies work to counter this pushback.

Voice is a much-used concept in development and international policy discourse; identified as a key pathway towards attaining rights, citizenship, and empowerment. In gender and development literature, voice is conceptualised as a key component of women's agency (Kabeer 2016), particularly political agency (Nazneen 2023; Goetz and Nyamu 2008) and collective empowerment (Agarwal 2010). It is also central to contestations and claims-making around gender equality and women's rights issues.

In this article, I attempt to foreground voice in the analysis of the discursive strategies of backlash actors and the counter-actions by feminist groups by engaging with a diverse set of literature – social movement theory, feminist movement and gender and development literature, and writings on anti-gender equality backlash. This approach is shaped by my work and experience as a strand lead on the workstream 'Voice' for the Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice programme. The workstream explores how contemporary backlash has affected feminist agendas and organising in the global South. My attempt to foreground voice has been shaped by multiple engagements with colleagues based in Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Lebanon, Uganda, and the UK, and our collective questioning of whether a concept like voice, primarily used in development discourse, adds value to understanding the contemporary backlash and attempts to counter backlash. I have drawn on these rich discussions and my previous work on feminist activism in transitional contexts, political settlements, and gendered political economy analysis of policy processes to develop this article.

I discuss the various conceptual and methodological challenges that emerge in my endeavour to place voice at the centre of analysing actions of backlash actors and feminist coalitions. This required conceptualising voice to include what is being said (content), how it is being said (performance), and strategies used by feminist advocates for framing agendas, the kinds of support

needed for amplifying voice, and contextual conditions that lead to being recognised as claimants.

In section 2, I define voice and discuss its gendered nature. I then move on in section 3 to explore how oppositional actors use voice against gender equality gains. The remaining sections focus on how voice features in feminist movement-building literature (section 4) and the kinds of conceptual and methodological challenges that need to be considered when foregrounding voice in research on countering backlash (section 5). Section 6 concludes.

2 What is voice and how is this gendered?

Voice is used as a 'metaphor for powerful speech... associated with acts or arguments that influence public decisions' (Goetz and Nyamu 2008: 4). The notion of 'voice' refers to the ability to articulate one's views, opinions, demands, ideas, and claims (Nazneen and Sultan 2014). The ability to voice is a component of individual or collective agency (Gammage, Kabeer and Van der Meulen Rodgers 2016) and refers to advocating to secure one's interests. A focus on public decision-making and empowerment means that the agency literature in development studies and political science emphasises how individuals or collective groups advocate their interests. However, the act of voicing may not always aim to secure one's own interests. The mere act can be cathartic, particularly for marginalised groups or survivors of violence. Voice may be used to persuade other actors to take specific positions *vis-à-vis* an issue. The way voice is used to persuade others is different from direct advocacy to secure one's interests.

Voice incorporates two aspects: (1) the substantive aspect or what is said, and (2) the performative aspect or how things are said (Goetz and Nyamu 2008). Both these aspects and **where** and **when** issues are voiced, **and by whom**, influence its effectiveness in being heard by others and acted upon (Gammage *et al.* 2016). This reading of effectiveness of voice leaves out the fact that acts of articulation can be internally transformative for those articulating issues, even if it is not acted upon by others.

Voicing is a gendered act. Ability to voice is influenced by formal rules, social norms, and gender power relations. What may be said is influenced by gendered rules and norms around what is acceptable for men, women, and non-binary people to discuss or demand. For example, survivors of domestic violence may decide not to seek help if norms dictate that public discussion of such matters is inappropriate. Sometimes what can be voiced requires specific names or frames through which it can be articulated. For example, the labelling of workplace sexual harassment helped it to enter public discourse.

The performative aspect of how and where matters are voiced is mediated by norms of what is gender-appropriate behaviour. Female or non-binary bodies may be excluded from specific places, such as clan meetings or places of worship. The repertoire used to express views and demands may be framed using 'gendered codes'. For example, in contexts where gender norms limit women's collective action in public spaces, women's protest strategies may draw attention to their particular social roles in the private sphere – such as being mothers, daughters, and wives. The act of voicing may require the use of non-verbal expressions or deployment of bodies in gender-specific ways (Butler 2015). For example, Hazara women activists in Pakistan protesting violence against Hazara men inflicted by the state and extremist groups threw bangles (usually worn by women and not men) at the main gate of the provincial legislative assembly. This gendered gesture or performance was to voice that the male legislative assembly members are impotent as they have failed to stop the violence against the men of the Hazara community (Khan, Jawed and Qidwai 2021). Voice can also be heard through its absence or acts of silence. In 2023, indigenous groups in Australia called for a week of silence and mourning after a referendum to give the community more political representation was rejected (Karp and Butler 2023).

3 Oppositional actors and how they use voice against gender equality agendas

For backlash actors, voice is key to shaping agendas that oppose gender equality policies, women's rights, and sexuality rights. What is striking is that the current backlash goes beyond mobilised misogyny via hate speech to conveying a backlash agenda. The backlash actors exercise voice to downplay, delegitimise, and undermine many of the established institutional norms around rectitude, honesty, and fair play through the blatant denial of truth, data, expertise, and science. For example, in Brazil under the Bolsonaro regime, the Ministry of Health released a manual that distorted information on access to legal abortion and reinterpreted norms and the Brazilian Penal Code by stating that every abortion in Brazil was a crime (Sardenberg *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*).

The strategies and tactics backlash actors use for exercising collective voice also help to build counter-movements in the formal policy, media, and civic spaces. In fact, we can use social movement theory to argue that oppositional groups to gender equality organise themselves as a particular type of social movement through a 'sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organisations, networks, traditions, and solidarities' (Tilly and Tarrow 2015: 11). But does the way these counter-movements exercise voice and operate differ from feminist and queer movements or other social movements? Answering this question requires building an evidence base, but the following observations can be made from the literature.

Table 1 Backlash strategies and their manifestations, and how they affect feminist/queer voice

Backlash strategy	Manifestations	Example	Implications for feminist/queer voice (agenda and ability to act)
Discursive strategies	Stigmatise/vilification	Abortion rights activists are 'baby killers'	Undermine legitimacy of activists' voice
	Disavowal/delegitimise claims	Poor women are lazy and do not deserve state assistance	Trivialise claims made
	Re-traditionalise gender roles	Only heterosexual marriage counts	Undermine legitimacy of alternative claims
	Pit one set of rights against another set of rights	The foetus' right to life trumps mother's health and choice	Co-opt rights language to pushback
Direct attacks/overt strategies	Violence	Online threats, intimidation/physical attacks	Silencing of activists
	Dismantle gender equality programmes/institutions	Slash funds/close down units supporting survivors of gender-based violence	Limit sites of action for activists
	Use regressive laws to limit activism	Use security acts/ICT laws to limit contestations	Silencing of/limiting sites of action for activists
Indirect strategies	Hollow out policy/programmes	Decriminalise domestic violence, remove gender equality elements from existing laws/policy	Make claims made on state ineffective
	Deliberate inaction/foot dragging by the state	Non-implementation of laws/policy deliberately	Claims on duty bearers become ineffective

Source: Author's own.

As a movement, anti-gender equality groups voice 'contrary claims' (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996: 1631) to those espoused by the feminist and queer rights movements. Corredor (2019) points out that anti-gender equality counter-movements emerge under the following conditions: (a) when the women's/queer rights movements show signs of success; (b) when the oppositional groups feel threatened by the goals espoused by feminist and queer groups and voice threats to articulate grievance (Almeida 2018); and (c) when political elites are willing to support the claims of the oppositional group, and these groups are able to mobilise resources (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996).

Lewin's (2021) article provides a typology of 'discourse capture' strategies used by anti-gender equality and anti-queer rights groups to co-opt progressive feminist and gender equality agendas. She draws attention to how frames, symbols, and

slogans of the pro-choice movements in the US and Argentina were co-opted by anti-abortion rights coalitions. Lewin details how the rainbow symbol of gay rights movements was appropriated by anti-homosexuality coalitions in Uganda. In fact, these examples of discourse capture show how backlash actors twist and reinterpret the language used by feminist and queer activists and attempt to silence their claims. A major task in countering backlash then is reclaiming back the feminist and queer rights frames, symbols, and language that have been co-opted.

Other scholars working on sexuality, sex education, and related issues have drawn attention to how 'gender ideology' movements in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and international policy spaces have sought to counter understandings on sex, gender, and sexuality in international policy frames (Corrêa, Paternotte and Kuhar 2018). Anti-gender equality and anti-queer rights movements have operated by creating a moral panic (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018), and by stigmatising and vilifying feminist and queer rights groups, and through 'delegitimising or disavowal of their claims' (Flood, Dragiewicz and Pease 2018) on bodily autonomy and sexual rights. These oppositional groups also use discursive strategies to 're-traditionalise' sex roles (i.e. men as income earners, protectors, and providers) and to pit one set of rights against another (Phillip 2023). These discursive strategies are a form of silencing of feminist and gender equality claims.

Backlash actors also use other strategies that aim to limit or silence feminist and queer voices, obstructing these groups' access and presence in different sites and undermining the legitimacy of their claims. These include direct attacks on activists through law and coercive force. They also deploy indirect means that limit the support for implementing progressive gender equality policies. Table 1 shows the strategies used by backlash actors and their effects on the feminist/queer agenda and voice.

4 How does voice feature in the discussion on building gender equality agendas and mobilisations?

Feminist and queer rights groups around the world aim to build constituencies and create collective voice(s) to claim gender justice. The process of building constituencies and alliances requires 'raising, negotiating, and legitimising feminist [collective] voice' (Nazneen and Sultan 2014: 2). Existing national, regional, and ethnic gender narratives may constrain this process of negotiation and legitimation. In framing their claims, feminists and queer movements must make strategic choices, taking into consideration the nature and level of opposition to these gender equality claims (Hobson 2003).

Framing is one of the key strategies for countering backlash for feminist and queer activists as they (re)articulate and communicate their claims. Framing refers to ways through which

an issue is interpreted, represented, and reshaped to gain wider support for the types of changes needed or sustained. Political opportunity structures, such as openness in the political space for dissent and/or shifts in the balance of power between key actors, particularly if sympathetic elites and allies within the state gain more power (Benford and Snow 2000), facilitate feminist and queer activists being able to place demands that may be deemed as countercultural (Nazneen, Hickey and Sifaki 2019). Conservative or socially progressive values about gender roles and sexuality may facilitate or constrain feminist and queer activists' voices and actions.

At times, consideration for the political opportunity structure may mean that feminist coalitions need to change their claims to focus on less controversial issues or frame their demands in a way that gains wider public support. For example, the feminist coalition pushing the Sexual Offences Bill in Uganda left out potentially controversial issues such as sex work and marital rape from the draft of the proposed bill (Mwiine and Ahikire, this *IDS Bulletin*). A consideration for less controversial frames may translate into leaving out concerns that affect the most marginalised groups, particularly along matters of race and sexuality, if these are deemed too politically charged.²

In addition, feminist scholars have drawn attention to how gender equality coalitions draw on informal networks to push agendas and amplify their voice in formal political and policy institutions (Waylen 2017). These informal networks play a key role in accessing allies within different spaces – including policy sites and the media (Waylen 1998; Nazneen *et al.* 2019). These scholars also draw attention to policy institutions as sites for channelling feminist voice and women's mobilisation (Katzenstein 1998; Waylen 1998). They particularly highlight how gender machineries can act as 'movement institutions', providing valuable informational material and network resources for mobilisation (Katzenstein 1998; Waylen 1998). While gender machineries can serve as movement institutions, evidence on anti-domestic violence policymaking shows that women and gender ministries have not always done so in Bangladesh, Ghana, and Uganda (Nazneen *et al.* 2019; Sultan and Mahpara, this *IDS Bulletin*), and the level of space and support they provide can be compromised. Anti-gender equality actors have gained access to state gender machineries and are claiming this space (Roggeband and Krizsan 2019). There is a need to further investigate how anti-gender equality actors make claims in formal policymaking processes and the implications for feminist and queer rights agendas and voice in these spaces.

5 Foregrounding voice in research on countering anti-gender equality backlash: conceptual and methodological challenges

Contemporary backlash and feminist responses to the opposition to the gender equality agenda requires a critical engagement with how gender equality coalitions can articulate, reframe

demands, and reclaim feminist agendas. It also requires an investigation of how feminist coalitions can shape public discourses and counter co-optation of feminist claims. With respect to reclaiming and reframing agendas, how does the notion of voice help to understand ways feminists have countered backlash? This requires examining how feminist voice is exercised, amplified, and compromised in the act of countering.

The act of collectively voicing to counter pushback against gender equality gains has two underlying ambitions: that of being heard and that of being represented with respect to feminist agendas (in other words, the content of voice). The agential aspect or the performative aspect of exercising collective voice requires an examination of the ways of organising, i.e. both strategies and tactics used by gender equality coalitions and alliances to exercise voice, and the sites and spaces where feminist voice is exercised. The types of strategies and tactics gender equality coalitions use to exercise voice needs to be analysed through identification of silences, compromises, and trade-offs in setting gender equality agendas. An analysis of the agential aspect of feminist voice also requires a consideration of how power operates along intersectional lines within feminist coalitions and unpacking the nature of political opportunity structures. In other words, an analysis of how collective voice is articulated and exercised, and how agendas are reframed or compromised in countering backlash, requires grappling with both conceptual and methodological issues.

First, the issue of representation of gender equality agendas, and how agenda setting is connected to intersectional disadvantages and power within feminist coalitions, is critical for conceptualising and countering backlash. Townsend-Bell (2020) points out that if backlash is conceptualised as a 'moment of revelation' that signals a particular group has crossed a line, the research on understanding backlash will need to pay close attention to how class-race-gender orders marginalise different groups on the multi-nodal race-misogyny spectrum in different ways. The experience of backlash differs among women, racial minority groups, and other non-normative groups based on their position along this spectrum.

Conceptualising backlash this way means considering that some members of these marginalised groups may occupy positions where they are both a recipient of backlash but also contributors to other forms of backlash. This means that integrating an intersectional approach in researching strategies and actions for countering backlash is critical. Intersectional analysis of the acts of countering by feminist coalitions requires paying particular attention to the silences and exclusions within the gender equality coalition-building processes and compromises that are made with respect to agendas for countering backlash. It requires paying attention to the following: what are the difficulties

that members who have intersectional disadvantage face from other members in placing their claims within the gender equality coalition? Do contestations over these claims lead to further marginalisation of agendas and fragmentation of collective voice?

Second, methodologically tracing voice, both agenda and performative strategies, requires going beyond snapshots of contemporary contestations and capturing the cyclical nature of backlash. For extremely marginalised groups and agendas, tracing the cyclical nature and actions to counter backlash poses a challenge, especially in determining what constitutes 'moments of counter-assault' and how these are distinguishable from structural violence. For example, how does one identify 'moments of counter-assault' on the rights of domestic workers in India? Domestic workers' rights have been repeatedly excluded from policy discussions in India, and there has been sustained inaction despite workers' demands (Chigateri and Kundu, this *IDS Bulletin*). The workers experience a violation of their rights every day as they operate within a gender-caste-class-based order. Given the intense and continuous nature of the violations experienced by these workers, identifying backlash as 'moments of counter-assault' in this case is a challenge. In addition, tracing counter-acts against backlash by feminists is not straightforward. This requires clear identification of what elements/kinds of actions constitute acts that have led to effective reclaiming of the agenda.

Third, the agential aspect or voicing to counter backlash may take different forms in different political settings and requires a deeper analysis. In autocracies with a strong conservative culture and regressive gender norms, the space for contestations may be very limited for women and queer rights groups. Their voices may be expressed in codes or remain clandestine, and research in these contexts may require a focus on understanding the subtle ways gender equality actors express political agency (Nazneen 2023). This, of course, raises methodological challenges about how we are able to read and interpret these codes.

Lastly, for feminist agendas to be reclaimed implies that the women's rights and queer rights agenda has been co-opted by anti-gender equality oppositional actors and is now being contested by feminists. While how the issue is reframed and rearticulated by feminists and strategies for communicating these in different sites can be easier to capture, methodological challenges arise in determining **when** an issue has been successfully reclaimed and what counts as success. In most cases, contestations do not have hard endpoints. This means having to make decisions about **what** would count as watershed moments and artificially set limits on time periods studied. It also requires operationalising how success in reclaiming agendas can be identified, which remains deeply contested.

6 Conclusion

I started by asking whether voice is a useful concept for researching countering backlash actions by feminist and queer rights activists and coalitions. Foregrounding voice in the actions of backlash actors not only helps in exploring the different manifestations of backlash but also their impact on the legitimacy and scope for gender equality claims. A focus on building collective feminist voice to counter backlash helps to bring together different elements that are used in social movement, feminist movement, and backlash literature. A focus on collective feminist voice also illuminates the various conceptual and methodological challenges that researchers grapple with, particularly on matters such as intersectionality and building collective feminist voice; intra-movement backlash and fragmentation of voice; capturing subtler forms of expressions of agency; and the cyclical nature of backlash. Deeper engagement with, and analysis of, all these challenges will enrich our understanding of what works to reclaim gender equality agendas and sustain gains made.

Notes

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- 1 Sohela Nazneen, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- 2 The Countering Backlash programme has evidence from contexts where homosexuality is criminalised that issues with respect to gender diversity are deliberately left out of policy demands on sexuality education and redressal of violence by feminist coalitions. Out of concern for the safety of coalition members, neither the countries nor the policies involved will be named.

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