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## UNDERSTANDING GENDER BACKLASH: SOUTHERN PERSPECTIVES

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# Queering Gender Backlash\*

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**Abstract** This article 'queers' the concept of gender backlash – troubling some of its assumptions and drawing attention to the centrality of heteronormativity to an anti-gender worldview. It argues that backlash is both episodic and continuous, and that the focus on 'gender' in anti-gender politics tends to eclipse the affective importance of sexuality in backlash politics. It argues, also, for a less binary approach to (counter-backlash) activism – that recognises survival as a form of resistance. Finally, it suggests the potential of leveraging intersectionalities to forge counter-backlash solidarities.

**Keywords** gender backlash, heteronormativity, LGBTQI+, counter-backlash activism, sexuality, intersectionality.

## 1 Introduction

The contemporary reversals, violations, and erosions of gender rights, against a global backdrop of socioeconomic austerity, suggest a landscape in which the visible restriction of gender and sexuality is a central feature of attempts to secure and maintain political power (Rodríguez, Tuzcu and Winkel 2018). In Hungary, for example, we have seen the banning of gender studies by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in 2018; in the United States, the overturning of *Roe v Wade* in 2022;<sup>2</sup> in Iran, new, stricter legislation to control how women dress (2023);<sup>3</sup> and in Uganda, the introduction of legislation that criminalises homosexuality (2023).<sup>4</sup>

There are several adjacent terms used to describe these politics, each with their own epistemologies – anti-gender politics (Graff and Korolczuk 2022), anti-feminist politics (Cupać and Ebetürk 2020), pro-family politics (McEwen and Narayanaswamy 2023), heteroactivism (Nash and Browne 2020) – but concerned with 'essentially similar phenomena' (Edström, this *IDS Bulletin*: 73). Very little gender backlash scholarship to date comes from global South contexts; analyses tend to be situated in the global North where gender backlash plays out within different social and historical contexts, and where the gender backlash forces are experienced no less, but differently (Nazneen and Okech 2021).



Gender backlash most simply can be conceptualised as an attack on gender equality, its institutions, and those that seek to advance gender justice. This attack is accompanied by a nostalgic and atemporal appeal to imaginaries of a 'traditional' family in which heterosexual men and women occupy 'natural' (restrictive/normative) gender roles (Buss and Herman 2003; McEwen 2020). Gender backlash actors (re)assert a binary and essentialist understanding of gender expression and sexual orientation that harmfully restricts diversity (Martinez, Duarte and Rojas 2021).

In this article, I draw on my previous theoretical engagement with queer scholarship, together with multiple conversations with colleagues in the Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice programme located in the UK and those in Bangladesh, Brazil, Lebanon, India, and Uganda, contexts where the (post)colonial power dynamics embodied in development aid have been complicit both in challenging and reinforcing gender inequalities (Jolly 2011: 18), and where some aid actors are now seeking effective ways to counter the erosion of gender justice agendas, among them, our programme.

Very loud in conversations with colleagues from the global South has been the questioning of the utility of the term 'backlash'. They interrogate its fit with the everyday realities in which they work, and they express concern that a focus on the risk of backlash may pre-emptively constrain gender justice activists. Their concerns suggest that if we are to use the term 'gender backlash', then we need to think carefully about our conceptualisations of it. Here, whilst acknowledging that this term affords a useful lens to highlight a global trend of attacks on gender justice, in the spirit of much queer and post-structural scholarship (Hennessey 1993; Halperin 1995; Hall 1996; Sullivan 2003), I try to queer the term itself. By 'queering' I mean both to trouble some of its existing conceptualisations, including some of the assumptions and binaries that underpin it, and to draw attention to the importance of heteronormativity to an anti-gender worldview. I do so against the simplistic and harmful reassertion of binary conceptions of gender and sex insisted on by gender backlash actors, and the binary bias inherent in the increasing polarisation of politics into rigid and diametrically opposed ideological positions (Verloo and Paternotte 2018; Grant 2021: 165).

Following this introduction, there are four sections to this article. Section 2 contests the temporal division of gender backlash into either episodic or continuous; section 3 highlights the centrality of heteronormativity to anti-gender politics; section 4 troubles the tendency for a focus on gender to elide the affective importance of sexuality in backlash politics; and finally, section 5 argues for a less binary approach to (counter-backlash) activism – that recognises survival as a form of resistance. Section 6 concludes.

## 2 Queering the (temporal) nature of backlash

One of the significant debates about the nature of gender backlash has centred on whether it is episodic or continuous. Susan Faludi, in her 1991 book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, first defined backlash as 'flare-ups' of acute opposition to women's rights and feminist goals, 'caused **not simply** by a bedrock of misogyny but by the specific efforts of contemporary women to improve their status' (1991: 13, my emphasis). Her work drew on Lipset and Raab's definition of backlash as a 'reaction by groups which are declining in a felt sense of importance, influence, and power' (Faludi 1991: 261). Mansbridge and Shames (2008), like Faludi, characterise backlash both as timebound and as an extraordinary response to feminist gains (Piscopo and Walsh 2020: 266–7).

But Faludi's conception of backlash, while characterised as episodic (Piscopo and Walsh 2020), is arguably more nuanced than that, inviting further theorisation. It has been usefully contested and extended by several scholars (including Townsend-Bell 2020; Rowley 2020; Murib 2020). These scholars argue that advancing gender equality is a perpetual struggle, a permanent state of contestation and resistance, in which episodic manifestations of backlash are layered on top of everyday struggles. Rowley, analysing backlash from a racial perspective, describes it as a mechanism 'built into the system, allowing the piece of machinery to run as intended'; one that kicks in when the 'the system needs to "right" itself' (2020: 281–2). In other words, backlash is integral to the perpetuation of an existing unequal social order.

Townsend-Bell (2020: 288) sets out a scale from 'maintenance of the status quo' at one end to backlash at the other, conceived following Faludi as 'various acts of explicit violence and/or hostility in response to women and people of colour's attempts, or perceived attempts, to claim power they **should not** have' (2020: 290, emphasis in original). In the middle of the scale is 'pre-emptive backlash', working to prevent changes to the status quo by delimiting those who should not even consider a claim to power: 'a group's mere existence in particular spaces is the infraction' (2020: 390). For Murib (2020), backlash is the always-present policing of who belongs in the polity and the public space (p.298), 'at once an explicit threat of violence and a revelation of the long-standing oppositions faced by marginalised groups' (p.300).

In two respects, then, the lenses through which Rowley (2020), Townsend-Bell (2020), and Murib (2020) explore backlash enhance our understanding. First, they are explicitly intersectional, going beyond Faludi's analysis to articulate gender with other marginalities such as those based on race, religion, and sexuality. Second, they reveal the systemic norm as (hetero)patriarchal.

Alongside the analyses that recognise backlash as an endemic feature of an unequal (and gendered) social order are those that link backlash (re)assertions in local or national contexts to events, such as populist electoral campaigns, constitutional upheavals, or perceived threats to sovereignty. And others that suggest that local or national-level gender backlash (re)assertions may be driven by, or connected to, episodic events taking place outside these contexts, such as the current process of 'norm-spoiling' (Sanders 2018: 272) happening at the international and transnational levels, in which existing standards of 'appropriate behaviour' (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 891) are challenged in order to weaken and undermine global human rights frameworks.

Thus, gender backlash is **both** episodic **and** continuous at the same time: an ongoing status made visible and legible through episodes of accentuation. The episodic alerts us to the continuous; women's, girls', and gender rights advocates' everyday experience of systemic hierarchical discrimination and (structural and direct) violence along patriarchal, class, race, and religious lines. Butler (2021) writes about gender backlash plugging into existing social and economic anxieties; returning to a slightly different reading of Faludi's 1991 text, we can also think about backlash as plugging into existing misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, racism.

### 3 The centrality of heteronormativity to backlash

Rose (2021: 1), writing on gender-based violence, and specifically on the impact of Trump's 2017 signing of the 'Global Gag Rule',<sup>5</sup> notes that 'the most insidious forms of violence are those that can't be seen'. In a passage that strongly resonates with debates on gender backlash's episodic or continuous nature, she goes on to write about the 'tension between the increasing visibility and the invisibility of violence' (2021: 361). Rose understands gender-based violence as (male) entitlement but also (drawing on Arendt and Butler) as not so much an expression of male power than as a recognition of its limits. Rose's work draws on a Foucauldian understanding of normative power (Foucault 1978) as structured through social systems that require constant maintenance; and, more specific to gender, Butler's argument in 'Gender Trouble' (1990) that 'our polarised gender identities are as unstable as the performance we must muster to sustain them' (Rose 2021: 19).

If we understand gender as one such system (Bond Stockton 2021: 14), foundational to this system is heteronormativity. It celebrates certain subjects, practices, and relationships as 'natural' or 'normal' or morally correct, and others as deviant or 'troublesome and inconvenient' (Rubin 1984; Weeks 1981; Berlant and Warner 1998; Gammon and Isgro 2006: 173). And it is heteronormativity, its assumed hierarchies, and its violent policing of sex/gender binaries, that connects struggles for women's rights, and for LGBTQI+ rights, precisely because it is

at the centre of an anti-gender worldview. Steyn and van Zyl (2009: 3) define heteronormativity as 'the institutionalisation of exclusive heterosexuality in society', arguing that this rests 'on the assumption that there are only two sexes and that each has predetermined gender roles'. This definition of heteronormativity alerts us to the restrictions that it places on **all** men, women, and non-binary people, regardless of their sexuality, sexual orientation, gender expression, or gender identity. Whilst not using the language of heteronormativity, Rose (2021) argues that this system is invisible – not least to itself – precisely because it presents as 'natural'. Those privileged by this system, are (blindly) entitled by it.

#### 4 Queering the object of gender backlash

If the 'targets' of anti-gender mobilising are 'LGBTIQ+ rights, reproductive rights, sex and gender education in schools' (Antic and Radačić 2020: 7) as well as 'the very notion of gender' (*ibid.*), much of what is being rejected by anti-gender activists is not just to do with gender equity but also sexuality (Petchesky 2005: 302). Bond Stockton (2021: 11) writes that 'gender is made of things that are not gender'; she is referring to race and money, but building on her argument would suggest that focus on 'anti-gender actors' or 'gender backlash' risks occluding that which is not gender. Development actors, in focusing on gender, have a long history of ignoring sexuality (Dowsett 2003; Cornwall, Corrêa and Jolly 2008), despite a rich scholarship that evidences the ways in which contemporary gender and sexuality (and race) were co-constructed through colonialism (McClintock 1995; Stoler 2002; McEwen 2020; Evang 2022).

A significant feature of sexuality long commented on by queer and feminist scholars is the anxiety and moral panic it can invoke (Weeks 1981; Rubin 1984; Pereira and Bakare-Yusuf 2014). In writing that reads as uncannily contemporary, Rubin wrote in 1984 that 'disputes over sexual behaviour often become vehicles for displacing social anxieties and discharging their attendant emotional intensity' (1984: 100). It is precisely sexuality's imbrication with gender that anti-gender actors are adept at harnessing in both manufacturing and mobilising this moral panic (Goetz 2020; Martínez *et al.* 2021: 10) and in capitalising on its affect (Hemmings 2022). Writers on political homophobia (Weiss and Bosia 2013; Schäfer and Range 2014) note its use as an intentional and purposive political strategy, and one invoked in response to 'public criticism of abuses of power' or 'excessive corruption' (Schäfer and Range 2014: 1), or as a central component of state-making (Weiss and Bosia 2013: 2).

As well as noting the political and material **gains** that can be made from mobilising existential anxieties, Cupać and Ebetürk (2020: 708) note the need to pay attention to what each of the diverse members of anti-feminist groups stand to lose if women's rights succeed. It is here that an intersectional and historical

perspective is vital. The normative social and political structures being (re)asserted by anti-gender activists, with their particular raced, classed, gendered hierarchies, are not timeless; they were developed to serve colonial and imperial power (McEwen 2020: 17). Multiple scholars suggest that gender backlash is about the defence of privilege; a 'response to actual or perceived challenges to existing hierarchies of power' (Flood, Dragiewicz and Pease 2018: 8); about 'maintaining or promoting social and political hierarchies in the face of their (perceived) decline' (Denkovski, Bernarding and Lunz 2021: 9).

If we see gender as one part of the complex architecture of social and political hierarchies, then maintaining its status in that hierarchy is essential to the structure or system as a whole. Audre Lorde recognised the entanglements of this architecture in her article 'There Is No Hierarchy of Oppressions', when she wrote:

I cannot afford the luxury of fighting one form of oppression only. I cannot afford to believe that freedom from intolerance is the right of only one particular group. And I cannot afford to choose between the fronts upon which I must battle these forces of discrimination, wherever they appear to destroy me. And when they appear to destroy me, it will not be long before they appear to destroy you.  
(Lorde 1983: 9)

This writing alerts us to the importance of gender to social justice more broadly. Here, again, the links between gender and sexuality are vital because of what they reveal about broader structural hierarchies and interdependencies.

Petchesky (2005: 301), writing about the new social movements that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s around rights of the body and bodily integrity, notes that these movements

of People with AIDS [*sic*], ... sex workers, LGBT youth, transvestites and intersexed people represent **economically as well as culturally marginalised populations**. For this reason, they tend to **practice a politics of intersectionality** as a matter of survival, not academic or legal theory.  
(Petchesky 2005: 307, my emphasis)

Antic and Radačić (2020) link the move of anti-gender politics from the international policy space to becoming a transnational movement, in the 2010s, to the articulation in international human rights law of 'the more radical meaning of gender' (*ibid.*: 7), where gender equality is explicitly connected to both the SOGI (sexual orientation and gender identity) agenda and intersectionality.

This understanding of gender's entanglements, together with its affect, helps explain gender backlash; a backlash that both detracts from systemic oppressions, while simultaneously reinforcing them (Reynolds 2010: 14).



## 5 Queering counter-backlash activism

Colleagues have suggested that counter-backlash activism is far better conceptualised along a spectrum than through a binary of counter-backlash activism vs capitulation, an insight that connects to a more complex understanding of backlash as both episodic and continuous. Anna Stielau's (2022) writing on visual activism is particularly resonant with this idea. She comments on the ways in which activist discourses

risk reproducing the hard binaries by which political activity has historically been assessed, including success/failure and resistance/passivity – in other words, they can unintentionally reinforce a racialized and gendered dichotomy between those who do things in the world and those who are simply undone. (Stielau 2022: 1)

This understanding recognises, for example, survival as a valid counter-backlash response and one that may require significant resources.

This recognition might help us broaden our conceptions of what constitutes activism, and perhaps 'to define gender in an inclusive manner, in a way which would be able to capture gendered harms – the harms which patriarchy produces to all gendered beings' (Antic and Radačić 2020: 7). This move strongly resonates with Cathy Cohen's (1997) writing on the radical potential of queer politics, as one that recognises the potential of leveraging intersectionalities to forge solidarities. A politics that unites those who will not benefit from the reassertion of entrenched inequalities that benefit only existing elites.

## 6 Conclusion

This article began with two assumptions: the first, that 'gender backlash' as a term provides a useful lens to highlight a contemporary global trend of attacks on gender justice; the second, that it is a concept worth queering – both in terms of troubling its use and in drawing attention to the centrality of heteronormativity to an anti-gender worldview. The temporality of backlash can be understood as **both** episodic and continuous; and one's experience of this might depend on where one is positioned in the social order. The restrictions of heteronormativity promoted by backlash actors are experienced by all men, women, and non-binary people, but a focus on gender often occludes its imbrication with sexuality, which is precisely the source of the affective power being harnessed by backlash actors. Therefore, we need to think in a more nuanced way about counter-backlash activism, recognising that often survival may in itself be a form of resistance.

### Notes

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- 1 Tessa Lewin, Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- 2 *Roe v Wade* was the United States Supreme Court case that legalised abortion in the US in 1973; see '**Roe v Wade: What is US Supreme Court Ruling on Abortion?**'.
- 3 See '**Iran Approves Stricter Hijab Bill Targeting Those Who "Mock" Dress Code**'.
- 4 See '**Uganda's President Signs Repressive Anti-LGBT Law**'.
- 5 The Global Gag Rule bans non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that receive financial support from the United States from providing legal abortion services, referrals, information, or advocacy. Evidence shows that this has not decreased rates of abortions but instead has increased the number of unsafe abortions (McGovern *et al.* 2020).

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