

# IDS Bulletin

Transforming Development Knowledge

Volume 55 | Number 1 | March 2024

## UNDERSTANDING GENDER BACKLASH: SOUTHERN PERSPECTIVES

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# Introduction: Understanding Gender Backlash Across Regions\*

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with Tessa Lewin<sup>4</sup> and Sohela Nazneen<sup>5</sup>**

**Abstract** Whilst international policy between the mid-1990s and mid-2010s gave some hope for progress on gender equality, events since then – including conflicts, climate change, the pandemic, and an increasingly insecure world – have thrown these hopes into doubt. Far from steady progress on gender equality, we now face backlash against gender and sexual rights. This article introduces our *IDS Bulletin* which explores understandings of backlash from a primarily global South perspective. Articles from Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Uganda, and the UK detail examples of anti-gender backlash in different contexts, and the actors, interests, and tactics involved. This introduction groups the issues into three themes: voice and tactics, framings and direction, and temporality and structure. It also briefly touches on the tactics gender activists have used in countering backlash. In conclusion, the article calls for an increased analysis of backlash from more diverse settings to develop better strategies for resistance and reclaiming gender justice.

**Keywords** gender equality, countering backlash, gender justice, anti-gender, backlash, authoritarianism, backlash tactics, insecurity.

## 1 Introduction

We are fast approaching both the thirtieth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted by United Nations (UN) Member States in 1995, and the tenth anniversary of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) being adopted. The latter, for the first time, recognises gender equality as central to the entire framework, along with peace, justice, and strong institutions. While the broad trajectory since the early 1990s may be said to represent some progress at the level of international policy, events over the last decade have thrown hopeful notions of steady gradual progress towards gender equality and 'leaving no one behind' into serious doubt. Indeed, far from 'progress',



we are currently witnessing significant backlash against gender, sexual, and social justice more broadly.

It is this 'backlash' that this issue of the *IDS Bulletin* explores, presenting a range of perspectives and emerging evidence on backlash against gender justice and equality, as such phenomena manifest locally, nationally, and internationally. Contributions come from a range of actors in diverse locations: Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Uganda, and the UK who collaborate in the Institute of Development Studies (IDS)-led six-year programme *Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice*, funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). As a collection, this *IDS Bulletin* addresses the urgent question of how we can better understand the recent swell of anti-gender backlash across different regions, exploring different types of actors, interests, narratives, and tactics for backlash in different places, policy areas, and processes. Each article – and the collection as a whole – thus presents critical perspectives for framing and interpreting a global phenomenon not yet well understood. In this introduction, we first contextualise the *IDS Bulletin* issue, before discussing its specificities and exploring the question, where next?

## 2 Context

At the turn of the millennium, critical analysts were already noting a growing disaffection with 'gender and development', or what Maxine Molyneux (2004) termed '**gender ennui**'. This '*ennui*' included disaffection with trends such as a depoliticisation of 'gender mainstreaming', and with a growing neoliberal co-option of women's empowerment through the World Bank's notion of gender equality as smarter economics. This was also linked to a reductive stereotyping of women in development policy (Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead 2007), and a lack of attention to the role of gendered power relations, masculinities, and structurally embedded patriarchal inequities (Edström, Das and Dolan 2014).

At the same time, the spectre of 'gender ideology' was already being framed as a threat against which various actors began to mobilise in international fora at least as far back as the 1990s (Antić and Radačić 2020; Corredor 2019). By the time of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo (1994) and the Beijing Conference in 1995, a diverse collection of state, religious, and neo-conservative actors, led by the Vatican, began to coalesce around their resistance to so-called 'gender ideology' and the alleged threat it posed to the sanctity of 'sex' and the 'traditional family' (Cupać and Ebetürk 2020).

This appeared to be a reaction to the rise of the social constructionist understanding of gender in international discourse, conventions, and the human rights system, and the related subsequent adoption of the sexual orientation and

gender identity (SOGI) concept (Antić and Radačić 2020). While 'anti-abortion, anti-homosexual, and anti-reproductive rights agendas... have always been at the heart of right-wing anti-gender practice' (Hemmings 2022: 606), 'genderism' was constructed and framed as a nihilistic threat and a form of ideological colonisation, which provided common, yet malleable, ground for a transnational movement to emerge (Corrêa, Paternotte and Kuhar 2018; Corredor 2019).

While development workers and policymakers were negotiating a progressive and ambitious global framework at the UN in New York a decade ago in the run-up to the SDGs being adopted in 2015, a deep shift in the zeitgeist of politics was already underway there and in many regions across the globe. In 2014, the later self-proclaimed pussy-grabber Donald Trump (*New York Times* 2016) tweeted that he would not stand for New York State Governor after all, since he had 'much bigger plans in mind – stay tuned, will happen!' (BBC 2017). Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin was increasingly suppressing dissent, criminalising sexual minorities and persecuting feminist punk bands, while invading Ukraine to annex Crimea in March 2014.

Elsewhere, President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda defied Western aid donors and approved a controversial 'anti-gay law' stipulating life imprisonment for 'aggravated homosexuality' (Al Jazeera 2014). By May 2014 in India, Narendra Modi's populist Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) broke the pluralist Congress Party's hold on power in a landslide victory (Burke 2014), as the prime minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan consolidated his hold on power by winning the country's first direct presidential election in August (Letsch 2014).

At the same time, a relatively unknown Congressman in Brazil's Lower House, Jair Bolsonaro, caused shock by standing up to heckle Congresswoman Maria do Rosário. After her speech about the earlier dictatorship's abuses, torture, and rapes, he shouted 'I would not rape you. You don't merit that' (Greenwald and Fishman 2014). Thus, these and many other overtly misogynist, homophobic, racist, and nativist leaders were being elected to power across the globe, while others were consolidating their grip on power.

It is important to note that backlash is not a unique or purely contemporary phenomenon. Different forms of resistance, pushback, and violence have long oppressed the majority world, and social movements struggling for justice on various fronts have long been suppressed in a broader context in which systems are failing to protect those most vulnerable. Yet over the past decade, those fighting for gender and social justice have again come under increasing attack from diverse actors and new alliances. Limited and hard-fought gains for some are being reversed, co-opted, and dismantled in an array of attacks that

range from the overt to the subtle, the material to the discursive – as we evidence in this *IDS Bulletin*. Meanwhile, precarity, polarisation, and insecurity are now being mobilised by the growing wave of authoritarian populist leaders – and regressive social movements – as multiple and entangled protracted crises grip the world (Edström, Greig and Skinner 2024).

We thus find ourselves facing a rising tide of divisive and toxic misogyny, heterosexism, racism, xenophobia, and transphobia, as feminists and gender scholars have returned to exploring the concept of patriarchal or anti-feminist 'backlash', earlier introduced by Susan Faludi (1991) to analyse pushback against feminist ideas in the United States of the 1980s. These academic debates restarted with a focus on the global North and gradually expanded to Latin America and Eastern Europe (Biroli and Caminotti 2020; Norocel and Paternotte 2023).

Yet a singular focus on the most obvious populist leaders and politicians and their typically misogynist, heterosexist, and jingoist rhetoric can pull attention away from the impacts of how anti-gender politics plays out on the ground in diverse settings and overlook what is happening in most of the global South. The more recent expansion in focus has also revealed a deeper complexity to these phenomena. Anti-gender actors and movements across the globe are diverse and context specific, and within this, Paternotte and Kuhar (2018: 8) argue, there are 'cross-border patterns of mobilisation, which include a common discourse, a traveling repertoire of action, and similar strategies'. Moreover, beyond these similarities and common playbooks, there is also increasing recognition of the transnational character – alliances, organisation, and resource flows – driving the expansion and proliferation of backlash movements (Datta 2018, 2021).

Many questions beg further investigation, however. They might be grouped into three themes, on (1) 'voice and tactics', including whose voices are being heard, and what tactics are being used; (2) 'framings and direction', including how ideologies are spread, and how we can understand attitudes to change; and (3) 'temporality and structure', including what is 'back' about backlash; what and who drives it, and how it is imbricated in broader trends and crises. Finally, there is the project of 'countering backlash', and in this introduction, we also ask what the articles in this *IDS Bulletin* suggest for feminist movements and other gender and social justice defenders countering backlash. These are big questions, but they call for answers with variegated and contextualised nuance, as well as cross-contextual coherence.

This *IDS Bulletin* thus extends and joins up these conversations on backlash, centring its analysis on perspectives from the South.

### 3 Multiple perspectives on backlash

In this section, we introduce the articles in this *IDS Bulletin*, grouping them around the themes outlined in section 2 – i.e. voice and tactics, framings and direction, and temporality and structure. Given the complexity of backlash across regions and the paucity of established research on this from the global South, these articles come from a diverse range of contexts: Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Uganda, and the UK. Whilst the articles are loosely grouped around the outlined themes, most touch on several themes and we recognise that the contexts interconnect in many ways.

#### 3.1 Voice and tactics

Starting on the theme of voice and tactics, Nazneen (this *IDS Bulletin*) focuses on voice as a concept for researching backlash in the first article after this introduction. Drawing on a diverse set of literatures, she foregrounds voice in an analysis of backlash strategies and counter-backlash actions. She points out how anti-gender equality and anti-queer rights movements use voice to oppose gender equality, often playing on anxieties heightened in a fragile world and 'creating a moral panic' (*ibid.*: 20). She outlines the set of tactics and strategies backlash actors use against voices supporting a feminist/queer agenda. These include discursive tactics such as stigmatising or delegitimising claims and retraditionalising gender roles, indirect strategies including deliberate inaction, and direct attacks, which include dismantling gender equality programmes and even violence. Nazneen concludes that voice is an important lens for examining backlash actors and actions, not only to gauge their diversity but also their impact on gender equality.

The three articles which follow Nazneen – Sardenberg *et al.*, Sultan and Mahpara, and Ahmed *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) – provide context for how these backlash tactics play out on the ground, particularly in the reinforcement of traditional gender norms. Sardenberg *et al.*, for example, focus on the retrenchment of abortion rights on Bolsonaro's accession to power in Brazil. Bolsonaro used the narrative of valuing the family to further restrict women's access to abortion, reintroducing police involvement in abortion cases. The case study that Sardenberg *et al.* outline, of an 11-year-old who had been raped and denied access to abortion, also demonstrates another of the tactics Nazneen (this *IDS Bulletin*) mentions – namely, pitting one set of rights against another – in this case, the rights of an unborn foetus against those of a raped girl. Sardenberg *et al.* highlight how the court attempted to bully the girl into following through with the pregnancy, regardless of the impact on her. It was only when activists publicised what was happening in court that the girl was allowed the freedom to access abortion services.

Focusing on Bangladesh, Ahmed *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) highlight direct backlash strategies undertaken by senior students – both men and women – in the moral policing and harassment of young female students in public universities, reinforcing a view of how women are expected to behave. The public university space in Bangladesh is a context where 'patriarchal gender norms are intertwined with systems of power and dominance', and harassment is normalised through a combination of calls for protection from Western ideas, and patriarchal attitudes (*ibid.*: 57). Faludi (1991) defines backlash as a pushback against real or perceived threats to a current power system and, in the context which Ahmed *et al.* describe, the perceived threat to patriarchy is women moving from the private to the public space.

As Sultan and Mahpara (this *IDS Bulletin*) note in their article, this perceived threat is heightened by the political context in Bangladesh, which has moved from a multiparty democracy towards a dominant party rule. Their article, which analyses the implementation of the Bangladesh Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010, provides insight into yet another backlash strategy outlined by Nazneen (this *IDS Bulletin*) – namely, indirect strategies – in this case, deliberate inaction. Sultan and Mahpara show that without state commitment, getting pro-gender policies enacted or implemented is near impossible; a lack of institutional ownership, deprioritisation, and even trivialisation of domestic violence has led to the law's implementation being severely impeded. Both Sultan and Mahpara and Ahmed *et al.* show, in these examples, that another (very effective) tactic used by anti-gender actors is silencing women's voices, for instance, through victim blaming.

### 3.2 Framings and direction

Several articles in this *IDS Bulletin* consider questions of framings, drivers, and the use of narratives by backlash protagonists, as well as how this works and how men, masculinities, and patriarchy feature in such politics. Some articles show how right-wing authoritarianism has encouraged the spread of anti-gender actions (see Sardenberg *et al.*; Edström; Das *et al.*; and Chigateri and Kundu, this *IDS Bulletin*). As Das *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) note, 'Populist politics worldwide has now made acceptable certain beliefs and emotions such as fear, hatred, and contempt for certain groups' (p.87).

In his article, Edström (this *IDS Bulletin*) shows how broader crises are used to exploit such fear and contempt to secure and normalise updated patriarchal orders – not only through reactive strategies but also pre-emptive, proactive, and opportunistic ones. Insecurity is played upon during these periods particularly to stoke angst around identity, and in so doing, different backlash actors employ rhetoric of the 'good old days' and 'normality' as a comfort blanket, or of deserved destinies as incentives. Using the frame of body, family, and nation, Edström shows how

backlash then plays out in terms of reifying formal sciences to make a racialised, classed, and sexualised gender order normal – anybody who is different and does not fit homogenised binary identities is othered as dangerous. This is later echoed by Lewin (this *IDS Bulletin*) exploring how binaries in narratives naturalise heteronormativity, discussed further below.

Das *et al.* and Chigateri and Kundu (this *IDS Bulletin*) pick up on the theme of a rigid patriarchal gender order that solidifies in times of crisis when they explore the context of India and the pervading authoritarianism that uses Hindutva ideology to normalise violence against minorities. Das *et al.* explore how populist politics draw on emotions and crises of masculinity – particularly fear in times of insecurity – to strengthen the argument for a single identity and way of being. Chigateri and Kundu exemplify backlash on the body in their case study of Muslim women in India. The Hindutva ideology targets Muslims as outsiders, but it is the women in particular who are policed in what they wear and where they go, and their bodies are the battlefield as violence is meted out to Muslim women for alleged Muslim male transgressions. Lewin (this *IDS Bulletin*) later explores how the binary feature of narrative framings centred on ideas of the cis-gendered heterosexual body naturalises a broader heteronormative system othering dissident sexuality and various minorities.

Chigateri and Kundu also examine two cases of what they see as pre-emptive backlash. One case study is about how domestic workers have been excluded from reforms on labour rights, as recognising such workers' rights would threaten traditional norms and open up the private space of the family to employment law and regulation. At the national level, their other case study is on how recent changes to funding laws in India have been justified in the name of controlling malign foreign influence, thus suppressing women's organising which had hitherto benefited from overseas funding.

Otieno and Makabira (this *IDS Bulletin*) focus on Kenya, a country that has previously made some progress on policies supportive of gender equality, yet they show that the government's framing of identity and playing on fears of 'non-Africanism' is being used to discredit support for gender rights. Again here, as in the Indian context, security is linked with 'tradition', and nativism is used to legitimate violence against minorities. As in Brazil and India, religion plays a key part in the backlash framing with the current Kenyan government reaffirming the church's place at the centre of governance. The government's distancing of itself from gender rights has manifested in election promises on more equal gender representation in parliament being quietly forgotten, and battles being played out within policy on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and intersex+ (LGBTQI+) rights.

Mwiine and Ahikire (this *IDS Bulletin*) focus on inaction – or strategic resistance – around the Sexual Offences Bill in Uganda as a form of backlash. The passing and implementation of the bill has repeatedly been dealt with in an evasive manner, with procedures not followed or delayed. The bill supporters sought to avoid potential contention by framing marital rape within the bill as seeking consent, but instead, this provided ammunition for backlash actors within parliament to delegitimise the bill through ridicule and trivialising sexual offences. These backlash actors subsequently hijacked the bill by inserting additional clauses around criminalising sex work and homosexuality, ultimately causing schisms amongst the bill activists – between those who wanted to progress the bill as something being better than nothing, and those who would prefer to ditch it because of these additions. In their conclusion, Otieno and Makabira (this *IDS Bulletin*) provide an important warning related to the progression of backlash in Kenya. They note that as backlash rhetoric has moved to the mainstream – significantly helped in the last decade or so by social media – inertia and resistance have transformed into proactive backlash.

### 3.3 Temporality and structure

Several articles contemplate questions of whether anti-gender backlash is new, permanent, or recurring, and to what extent it is driven by individuals and organisations, and/or whether and how it is more systemically embedded. This focus becomes stronger as we progress through this *IDS Bulletin*, and as we reach the last two articles, our understandings of the dynamics of backlash are complicated further. Earlier in the issue, Chigateri and Kundu (this *IDS Bulletin*) point to how the Indian context provides a 'structural scaffolding' (p.106) for continuous and embedded backlash with frequent intensification. Lewin (this *IDS Bulletin*) takes this further by emphasising the universal and ongoing struggle for gender equality and how backlash can be seen in this context as both episodic and continuous. She shows how backlash is focused on binary understandings of gender and that, in this, sexuality is often overlooked, as are the multiple other forms of oppression that many minorities face.

Lewin lays out Townsend-Bell's (2020) view that backlash operates on a spectrum – from individually reactive violence (for the daily maintenance of the status quo) to highly proactive and often organised full-on aggressive strategies, to reveal a line having been crossed (and with a systemically embedded and pre-emptive mode at the mid-point of that spectrum). As Lewin suggests, these complex modes of backlash with dynamic interdependence between individual and collective agency, structural constraint, and systemic adaptation also link to – and may partially explain – its layered and episodically peaking nature.

Linked to this temporality, many of the articles speak of major societal crises as providing the enabling context, as well as the

utility to backlash actors of identity crises and 'angst' for their divisive populist politics. In India, we hear of the oppressive outcomes of ethnonationalist authoritarianism driving national politics (Das *et al.*; and Chigateri and Kundu, this *IDS Bulletin*), whilst anxious authoritarian politics is also a feature in Uganda (Mwiine and Ahikire, this *IDS Bulletin*) and elsewhere.

This brings us to the last article in the issue which explores the context of Lebanon. As El Rahi and Antar (this *IDS Bulletin*) posit, Lebanon is faced with extreme economic collapse and inherent systems of oppression, where sectarian structures form the fragile framework of a crisis-prone patriarchal order. They suggest that backlash in this context is represented by systemic violence littered with more overt acts cementing this. However, we also see some similarities to the other articles in this *IDS Bulletin*, particularly in terms of tactics. Here, again, tactical backlash against minorities is used as a distraction ploy, but we also see what El Rahi and Antar term 'atomised backlash' with acts against individual politicians who are feared for attempting a change agenda.

#### **4 Countering backlash**

While the focus of this *IDS Bulletin* is to better understand backlash in today's context from diverse vantage points, some articles also discuss and reflect on implications for feminist movements and gender justice actors in countering backlash. Nazneen (this *IDS Bulletin*) looks at voice as power for gender rights groups and explores how they can use this in strategies to counter backlash. An important example of this is 'framing' and Sardenberg *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) show how women's rights groups in Brazil framed the abortion issue as one of sexual violence to resist attempts to obstruct legal abortion rights. Sultan and Mahpara (this *IDS Bulletin*) who explore the role of backlash in the implementation of the domestic violence prevention act in Bangladesh, show how activists framed domestic violence as a rights violation to shift ideas around domestic abuse, which is generally seen as a private family matter. These Brazilian and Bangladeshi cases demonstrate other tactics used by gender rights groups, including constituency building, particularly within national government, consciousness raising, and media coverage – which was particularly significant in achieving a more positive result in the case of abortion rights for the 11-year-old girl in Brazil.

In considering the role of men and masculinities in this, Das *et al.* (this *IDS Bulletin*) pick up on how the personal and emotive force employed by backlash actors can also be used in a different way by counter-backlash actors as a strategy to bring different communities back together to face down the division caused by identity-based politics. They show how researching shared heritage and fraternity can bring communities together to celebrate events across religions – emphasising what unites rather than what divides. Lewin (this *IDS Bulletin*) concludes her article on queering backlash by looking at the spectrum of

activism and suggests that in contexts of insecurity, increasingly now becoming the norm, activism should not just be defined as doing or not doing, but that in these spaces, even survival can be a crucial form of activism.

## 5 Conclusion

This *IDS Bulletin* sets out to better understand and describe backlash against gender justice from various specific vantage points. We read about a range of voices, actors, tactics, and spaces for contestations across the articles, such as how gains made over the last decade in Uganda or Brazil have now been pushed back, and progressive legislation is blocked or co-opted. Many articles refer to victim blaming as another tactic, and several point to common discursive framing tactics where gender equality is presented as an 'alien' or Western import threatening the nation and its 'traditional' family. We gain multiple contextualised insights into how such discursive contests over binary bodies, hierarchical families and ordered, closed nations naturalise underlying patriarchal logics in this politics. Wielding oppressive power, such discursive strategies and framings rely on a highly binary and heteronormative worldview, naturalising exclusions through the subtle dynamics of power and knowledge.

In terms of the question of 'What is "back" about backlash?', many of the articles typically take Faludi's (1991) basic concept as the starting point, but most agree that it is insufficient. All the articles recognise that different types of reactionary forces are pushing against current or past feminist achievements, or even the very possibility or basic ideas of gender equality, albeit in a variety of modes – reactive, pre-emptive, proactive and opportunistic. Yet, as Faludi herself notes (Faludi *et al.* 2020), backlash is not new, so notions of linear progress and pushback are being challenged in different ways across the articles. On the question of backlash as a continuous, episodic/recurring, or unique type of event, most articles here agree that it is either recurrent or continuous with episodic spikes. So how is it different this time around? Some of the 'new' features of the recent and current wave of backlash noted in these articles include increased authoritarianism, religious resurgence, populist hyper-nationalism, and the concurrence of misogyny, racism – often imbricated with antipathy to certain othered faith groups – homophobia, and transphobia, all amplified through new social media and digital technologies.

Most articles proffer some thoughts and recommendations on the implications for directions to counter backlash, whether specifically for feminist movements, for other gender and social justice defenders, or for researchers and students. Still, a better understanding of backlash and how it works across regions is a prerequisite for developing better strategies for resistance and reclaiming gender justice. To that end, many of the contributors to this *IDS Bulletin* fundamentally challenge simple and reductive

understandings of anti-gender backlash, and diverse examples of politicised backlash contestations are here 'mapped' across new geographies and viewpoints. This can help to build a more granular and multi-perspectival understanding of backlash, of its more subtle processes of co-optation and division, and of its international connectedness and the contextual salience of different strategies of resistance.

This set of complementary viewpoints on the framing and theorising of backlash is also intended to contribute to scholarship by attending to an increasingly recognised gap in research, and by presenting new ways of analysing and countering backlash relevant to diverse contexts. Furthermore, it contributes to nudging this topic out of the 'gender and development corner' by pointing to connections with parallel debates in development, such as on de-/globalisation, shrinking/hardening civic space, the rise of authoritarianism, the shifting relationships between faith, identity, and the state, democratic backsliding in governance, and more.

### Notes

- \* This *IDS Bulletin* was produced as part of the Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice programme, funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). The opinions are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the funder.
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