

UNDERSTANDING GENDER BACKLASH: SOUTHERN PERSPECTIVES



IDS Bulletin

Transforming Development Knowledge

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Cover An illustration capturing a diverse range of actors and activists around the world standing up to anti-gender movements and countering backlash.

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Understanding Gender Backlash: Southern Perspectives

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Tessa Lewin, Rosie McGee, Sohela Nazneen and
Chloe Skinner**

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About the Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice programme

Countering Backlash aims to create much needed new knowledge around the complex phenomena of patriarchal backlash and identifying opportunities for women's rights organisations and other gender justice defenders, to address the erosion of gender objectives within development and counter gender backlash. Partners based in Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Turkey, Uganda, and the UK address the challenges of backlash and seek new opportunities for intersectional and decolonial feminist impact through three intertwining strands of work: 'Voice', 'Patriarchy', and 'Policy and Practice'.

Led by the Institute of Development Studies, Countering Backlash is being implemented by a consortium which includes: Advocates for Social Change Kenya, the Arab Institute for Women at the Lebanese American University, BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, Centre for Basic Research, Centre for Health and Social Justice, Gender at Work, Nucleus of Interdisciplinary Women's Studies of the Federal University of Bahia, Özyeğin University, Refugee Law Project, and Women of Uganda Network. The programme is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). For more information, see <https://counteringbacklash.org/>.

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Introduction: Understanding Gender Backlash Across Regions*

**Jerker Edström,¹ Jenny Edwards² and Chloe Skinner,³
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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

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

Sohela Nazneen¹

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; Krizsan 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 legitimisation. 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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Backlash and Counter-Backlash: Safeguarding Access to Legal Abortion in Brazil*

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Abstract This article addresses the backlash against reproductive rights during Jair Bolsonaro's government, focusing on access to legal abortions. Although access to abortion is quite restricted in Brazil, under Bolsonaro it was further curtailed through institutionalised spaces of power. This was met by counter-backlash actions, with an intensification of feminist activism in an attempt to secure an agenda of hard-won reproductive rights. To address this struggle for reproductive rights and against restrictions, we focus our analysis on the high-profile media case of an 11-year-old girl, pregnant after being raped.

Keywords backlash, counter-backlash, gender ideology, feminist movement, reproductive rights, abortion.

1 Introduction

In *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, Susan Faludi (1991) highlights the role of religious fundamentalism and the far right, which marked the Ronald Reagan years in government, in setting the grounds for the rise in counter-feminist actions and resistance to advancements made by women's movements. Much earlier, Simone de Beauvoir (1949) had already argued that women's rights achievements are always the first to be attacked in times of crisis. The words of Faludi and de Beauvoir strongly resonate with us when considering actions undertaken by the government of Jair Messias Bolsonaro to undermine women's reproductive rights in Brazil. Bolsonaro was elected and governed with the support of religious fundamentalist and far right groups, sustaining a conservative cultural agenda based on 'moral panic' claims. He also tried to enlarge his cadre of supporters by helping elect candidates of similar political views and who tended to



be against all types of abortion, for legislative positions at the municipal to federal levels.

Access to abortion is quite restricted in Brazil, with the current legislation allowing abortion only in three situations: when the pregnancy puts the woman's life in danger, or it results from a rape, and in the case of foetal anencephaly. Still, this limited legislation was threatened during Bolsonaro's government when governmental institutions and channels were mobilised to undermine access to legal abortion – even when the victims of rape were children.

This article looks at the backlash and counter-backlash instances regarding access to legal abortions in Brazil during the Bolsonaro government, focusing on the case of an 11-year-old girl, pregnant after being raped. We chose to look more closely at this case among several other instances in which access to legal abortion was blocked, as it gained national media attention and involved the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary branches of government, as well as significant mobilisation on the part of feminist groups and organisations. To better address the issues, our discussion is organised into four sections in addition to this introduction and the final considerations. Section 2 examines the historical trajectory of the Brazilian backlash. We then look, in section 3, at the issuance of ordinance 2.282/2020, which made access to legal abortion more difficult by requiring the involvement of police authorities. Section 4 moves on to the specific case of the 11-year-old girl who was restricted access to legal abortion. In section 5, before the conclusion, we explore the actions taken by health professionals to defend women's reproductive rights, and by feminist and women's movement activists, parliamentarians, and journalists to ensure compliance with legislation.

2 The historical course of the Brazilian backlash

Susan Faludi's work on backlash against women's rights is pathbreaking in bringing to light the continuous resistance and numerous attempts to 'undo' or boycott advancements in that direction. She looks at several examples of backlash during the Reagan years; however, she does not offer us a clear-cut conceptualisation of 'backlash', nor of 'counter-backlash'. As noted by Susana Araujo (2020: 1), following Faludi's discussions, 'the popular understanding of backlash refers to episodes of acute opposition that women's rights and feminist goals face, distinct to the constant misogyny part of the patriarchal system'. However, this phenomenon seems to be much more complex, and in need of deeper theorising.

In the last decades, women's presence in positions of political representation have not increased substantially in Brazil, yet feminist ideals and projects have gained legitimacy in political and social spheres. These ideals and projects have brought

important contributions, not only in terms of a change of values regarding women's place in society, but also towards building a more gender-equitable society (Sardenberg and Costa 2010; Soares *et al.* 1995). The Workers' Party administration, pushed by feminists in government and in civil society, opened new spaces for women in executive offices and for the women's rights agenda in governmental programmes. The creation of a Secretariat for Women, with the status of a ministry, was a cornerstone in developing specific policies for women and promoting the idea of and initiatives for gender mainstreaming in different ministries and other governmental spaces (although not always successfully). In this sense, the government led by the Workers' Party offered opportunity for feminists to push forward their policy agenda.

Although gaining political space in government is a way of advancing the possibility of building policies for women, it is a provisional and unstable condition for gaining power. The underlying capitalist and patriarchal system keeps trying to reinstate the status quo, which privileges (white) men's power. Mansbridge and Shames (2008) argue that backlash is the resistance of those in power to attempts to change the status quo. Through backlash those in control use coercive power in trying to regain lost or threatened power as capacity. In this sense we may see the coup against Dilma Rousseff in 2016 as an attempt by patriarchal actors to regain their lost (or perceived as lost) privileges, and as a turning point in terms of instituting a backlash against gender and minority rights.

The coup against Rousseff might be seen as an episode of backlash in itself, not only for deposing the first woman president of the country – several studies have shown its gender-based 'lashes' (see, for example, Rubim and Argolo 2018) – but also for marking the beginning of a shift in the political opportunity structures. In this shift, agents who benefited from the capitalist and patriarchal order, and who felt perhaps that their control was endangered, tried to reinstate their power as capacity and use the state apparatus to directly promote, or help promote, actions to counter gender equality.

With the rise of Bolsonaro to government we saw the strengthening of groups that fought against women's rights in general and reproductive rights in particular – as abortion is always the agenda that most strongly mobilises these actors. His cabinet was composed of rightist military figures, such as in the Ministry of Health, as well as representatives of fundamentalist evangelical sects, with religious pastors heading the Ministry for Women, Family and Human Rights, the Ministry of Education, and as the equivalent to the Attorney General. Bolsonaro also nominated two extremely conservative men, including one pastor, to the Supreme Judiciary Court. As such, Bolsonaro's government committed itself to persecuting marginalised social groups, with women being attacked through offensive, moralising

pronouncements, as well as through government actions (or inaction). Resources earmarked for policies to combat violence against women, for example, were barely used (Resende 2022). On legal abortion, in addition to dismantling services throughout the country, the Ministry of Health released a handbook distorting information on the subject, reinterpreting norms and the Brazilian Penal Code itself by wrongly stating that every abortion in Brazil was a crime (Collucci 2022). As Ann Cudd observes, 'although a mean-spirited or punitive attitude is not necessary for a series of events to constitute backlash, it is sufficient when combined with some rolling back of past progressive gains, even if that does not make for greater overall oppression' (2002: 11). Nonetheless, as Cudd further adds, 'a punitive attitude indicates an intention on the part of a social group to deny another social group social progress' (*ibid.*: 12).

In this sense, gender backlash might be considered as those patriarchally based reactions against the advancement of gender equality and women's rights, with the intent to keep the patriarchal power structure. In turn, it provokes reactions to counter the backlash. The strength and success of these countering backlash reactions will depend not only on the intensity of the backlash in question, but also on the strength and capacity of the existing women's and feminist movements.

Bolsonaro was elected in October 2018 with 55.13 per cent of the valid votes (Brazil 2018). In his first speech at the National Congress, he stated that he would 'unite the people, value the family, respect religions and our Judeo-Christian tradition, fight gender ideology, conserving our values' (UOL 2019). As mentioned by Kováts and Pöim (2015), the fight against 'gender ideology' was the 'symbolic glue' essential for the broad recognition of the masses and the suture of all the social, moral, and political dissatisfaction of the Brazilian population, to render their support to the 'new' project that was being developed with Bolsonaro.

The policy on legal abortion became a priority target of the far right and mobilised actors both in institutions and civil society. In the former, offensive actions came mainly from parliamentarians who, through the initiatives of bills, made the fight against abortion their battlefield. In the federal government, in addition to discursive opposition from authorities and even the President, the reaction was seen through the reduction of governmental spending and discontinuity of services. Brazil even became a world actor in relation to countering the reproductive rights agenda, by signing, alongside 31 other countries, the so-called 'Geneva Consensus Declaration', in which the role of the family is emphasised, and abortion is opposed to the idea of 'protecting the right to life' (Brazil 2022).

Despite being at a substantial disadvantage in terms of resources and representation, Brazilian feminists have actively fought for

sexual and reproductive rights. Widely known as one of the best organised feminist movements in Latin America (Sardenberg and Costa 2014), Brazilian feminists have used an array of strategic actions, from protest marches to occupations of bureaucratic spaces, as well as using various media channels to defend women's reproductive rights, which will be discussed in the next sections.

3 Abortion law in Brazil

There is an average of over 600,000 'illegal' abortions performed in clandestine clinics or at home, in unsafe conditions, throughout Brazil each year. They are one of the major causes of maternal mortality in the country, particularly among poor, black, young women living in the periphery of the major cities.⁸

Despite the permission provided for abortion in the Penal Code – a very restrictive one, as mentioned above – until 1999 there were no regulations on legal abortion services in the country. This was finally enacted through a Ministry of Health document, later revised in 2005 and 2012 (Brazil 2012). A survey by Alberto Madeiro and Débora Diniz, carried out in 2016, demonstrated the positive impacts of abortion service regulation for fulfilling the law: the bureaucratic demands made for performing abortions decreased, including the previous requirement for a police report in cases where the pregnancy resulted from rape. While in 2005, 70 per cent of hospitals applied this prerequisite, in 2016 only 14 per cent of them did (Madeiro and Diniz 2016).

This scenario changed in 2020, when the government issued ordinance 2.282/2020 establishing as 'mandatory the notification to the police authority by doctors, other health professionals or those responsible for the health establishment that welcomed the patient in cases where there are indications or confirmation of the crime of rape' (Brazil 2020). The document also mandated that information on the risks of the abortion procedure should be given – but did not require warnings about the risks of carrying out an unwanted pregnancy, whether physical or psychological, especially for minors whose bodies are still developing. Worse still, it established that pregnant women should be offered an ultrasound to visualise the embryo before the procedure was performed, causing further emotional stress and potential regret.

Reaction to the ordinance was immediate among feminists, health professionals supportive of reproductive rights, and the progressive field in general. Open letters were published to sensitise public opinion. Political parties on the left and centre-left argued before the Supreme Court that the ordinance was a violation of fundamental precepts of the Constitution. In the National Congress, a 'Note of repudiation to the Ministry of Health's ordinance that imposes obstacles to carrying out the procedure provided for in the law of termination of pregnancy in cases of rape' was presented with the support of 333 civil society

organisations and social movements (Abrasco 2022). In the document, the National Congress was urged to halt the effect of the ordinance.

The Minister of Health was then called to the National Congress to explain the measure. The invitation came from opposition parliamentarians, especially those linked to leftist parties. As a result of pressure, a month after the ordinance's publication, it was partially revoked, removing the obligation to notify the police for a procedure to be carried out. However, the need to report a possible crime of rape and to preserve evidence was kept in the ordinance (Senado 2020). The outrageous suggestion to have an ultrasound to visualise the embryo was removed from the text.

4 Case study: the pregnant 11-year-old girl from Santa Catarina state

In May 2022, a girl, 22 weeks pregnant after being raped, was taken by her mother to a hospital in her state capital to have an abortion. The choice of Federal University of Santa Catarina Hospital did not happen by chance, but was the result of a referral by the local children's services council,⁹ as it is a public hospital accredited to perform legal abortions. From then on, a series of rights violations and illegal procedures followed in the conduct of the case regarding legal abortion regulations involving state authorities and agents. The case made headlines across the country's main newspapers and mobilised groups both for and against abortion.

The first breach of the law came from the medical staff. Hospital staff refused to go ahead with the procedure, providing as justification the fact that the child's 22-week gestation exceeded the legal term for performing an abortion. The Brazilian Penal Code, however, does not impose any time limitation on termination of pregnancies for victims of sexual violence.

The family was left with no alternative but to resort to the law. In court, the situation took on even more abstruse and violent contours. While the mother was fighting for the right of her child to have the abortion, the prosecutor in the case, Mirela Dutra Alberton, from the Prosecutor's Office of Santa Catarina, filed an injunction requesting that the girl be institutionally housed in a shelter for minors. She justified her action by arguing the child needed protection from the perpetrator of the rape. However, her actions suggested that the intention was to remove her from her mother's care to prevent the abortion from happening, and so allow the pregnancy to continue. With the girl in the shelter, the case began to be judged in the State Court of Justice by Judge Joana Zimmer.¹⁰

In the court hearing, the judge and prosecutor interrogated the mother and child at length, trying to convince them to continue with the pregnancy and to place the baby for adoption.

'Would you bear to keep it a little longer?', Judge Joana Zimmer asked the child, who remained silent. The judge even asked if she would like to choose a name for the baby, if she felt the baby move in her belly, if she would like to see the baby at birth, and if the 'father' (the rapist) would agree with the delivery for adoption. Trying to gain sympathy, the judge asked if the child would like to ask for something, 'a birthday present perhaps?' (Intercept Brasil 2022), as her 11th birthday was coming up. The prosecutor was even more emphatic in her persuasion tactics to induce the child to accept the continuation of the pregnancy:

Your baby is already complete, it is already a human being, can you understand that?... Instead of letting him be born and taking him out of your belly in agony, because that's what happens... Brazil does not agree with euthanasia. He will be born crying and medicine will be given for him to die; he's going to die in agony... We take him out, give him all the medical support he needs and hand him over to a couple for adoption. (*ibid.*)

The mother, who was in a state of stress and crying, seeing her child's rights being denied, said that the child did not understand what they were asking of her and begged to let her daughter be cared for by her at home. 'I'll do whatever you want, but let me take care of my daughter', she implored (*ibid.*). However, Judge Joana Zimmer was steadfast in her decision to keep the child in the shelter. This decision came despite a court ruling authorising the termination of the pregnancy. The girl ended up spending more than a month in the shelter, away from her family and without going to school.

The content and details of this hearing became widely known through a clandestine recording that was given to the press when the child was almost 29 weeks pregnant. Intercept Brasil (2022) was the first outlet to publicise the case on its YouTube channel, linked to a report that provided details, carried out in partnership with the feminist news agency Portal Catarinas. The case was widely covered by the traditional media, and on social media there were campaigns and informal group coordination that sought to denounce the abuses committed by the courts, finally enabling the child to return home and have the abortion, as originally intended by the family and the girl.

President Bolsonaro commented on the case through direct statements made to his supporters, interviews, and tweets (O Globo 2022a). As abortion tends to be a particularly hot topic during elections, he tried to take political advantage of the situation, using it to mobilise public opinion against his main opponent in the presidential race, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (who had on another occasion argued that abortion was a matter of public health), stating that those who defended the girl's right to abortion were the same ones who favoured the Landless Workers

Movement, who were against freedom of expression, and who intended to impose a dictatorship in Brazil (Holanda 2022).

The abortion was finally performed on 22 June 2022, when the child was almost 29 weeks pregnant (Albuquerque 2022a), with the mother's permission and a recommendation by the Federal Public Ministry (Ministerio Publico Federal, MPF) for the University Hospital to go ahead with the procedure (Albuquerque 2022b). The MPF also launched a civil inquiry to investigate the hospital's role in the case, after having previously refused to do so. As expected, the Minister of Women, Family and Human Rights at the time, Cristiane Britto, made a statement calling the allegations in the press about the case 'criminal' (O Globo 2022b). She also called for an investigation (Oliveira 2022) against the medical team that performed the abortion.

This case also exposed a conflict within the justice system. While the Court of Justice, in alliance with the State Prosecutor's Office, acted effectively to maintain the pregnancy through the actions of the judge and the prosecutor in the case, the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office sided with the law, effectively enabling the abortion to be carried out. Within the judicial system itself, there was an investigation of the judge's conduct (Albuquerque 2022c). One of the National Justice Council advisors declared to the press that the judge and prosecutor's actions represented serious state violence against the girl's rights.

5 Counter-backlash movements

In protest at the Bolsonaroista offensive on legal abortion and gender-based sexual violence in Brazil, feminists occupied the National Congress on 13 July 2022, with the support of left and centre-left feminist congresswomen. The 'Occupy Congress for the Lives of Women, Girls, and People Who Gest' resulted from a feminist alliance between social movement activists and parliamentarians. It was a moment of political confrontation (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2009) against the government, through repertoires (Abers, Serafim and Tatagiba 2014) of collective action, such as occupations, protests, and institutional activism through bureaucratic channels. As such, the political confrontation took place in several different arenas of power, which goes in line with the mobilising dynamics usually employed by Brazilian feminists (Costa 2005; Bezerra 2014).

Brazilian feminists have strategically framed resistance to female rights to legal abortion as sexual violence. The Anti-Racist Feminist Parliamentary Front with Popular Participation (Frente Parlamentar Feminista Anti-Racista com Participação Popular), at the time chaired by Federal Congresswoman Talria Petrone (Socialism and Freedom Party (Partido Socialismo e Liberdade-Rio de Janeiro, PSOL-RJ)), together with the National Front Against the Criminalisation of Women and for the Legalisation of Abortion, organised the 'Occupy Congress

for the Lives of Women, Girls, and People who Gest' action. This agenda proposed a dialogue between feminist organisations and congresspeople on care actions and coping with sexual violence against girls, women, and people with a uterus. Another important nexus of struggle in this collective action revolved around guaranteeing access to abortion in those cases allowed for by law in Brazil.

The occupation of the National Congress aimed, in addition to opening a dialogue with national parliamentarians, to bar an honourable mention for the judge who denied the girl from Santa Catarina an abortion. The honourable mention was overthrown both by the presence of the movements, and because the government had other priorities at the time.

The occupation supported dialogue and coordination between feminist movements in favour of abortion, and opened the way for closer relationships and networking between them and parliamentarians. The final result was positive in the sense that it created a space for reconnecting and making it possible to work together again, face-to-face, after a long period of profound isolation due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

6 Final considerations

The case of the 11-year-old girl described above gained national coverage in both the traditional and alternative media, generating popular commotion and the mobilisation of actors in favour of and against abortion, including social movements, arts performers (O Globo 2022c), parliamentarians, and the judiciary. While those in favour defended the existing abortion legislation, those against argued for the right to 'life' of the unborn foetus, and they had as supporters high-profile authorities such as government ministers and the President of the Republic.

The dissemination of the video of the hearing by a feminist alternative news agency, Portal Catarinas, was fundamental to expanding support for the child and her mother for the abortion. The judge and prosecutor's coercive behaviours were framed as 'torture' by feminists and their allies in the media. This framing of the judiciary's performance also contributed to expanding support, thus generating pressure for the resolution of the case. A campaign entitled 'Children are not Mothers' also had repercussions on social networks (Gabriel 2022).

We believe that the 'action and reaction' movements discussed here constitute a good illustration of how the intensification of the backlash against sexual and reproductive rights during Bolsonaro's government was matched by countering backlash articulated by Brazilian feminists and their supporters. From day one, resistance was present, and in every action mentioned in this article, different sectors of civil society, especially feminist movements, but also agents from inside the state, such as the

judiciary and feminist parliamentarians, were able to pushback on Bolsonaro's propositions. The ordinance was partially revoked, the 11-year-old had her right to abortion secured, and the proposed honourable mention in National Congress for the judge who denied the girl from Santa Catarina an abortion was barred.

It is also worth mentioning that, under pressure from the feminist and women's movements, one of the first pronouncements of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's government, elected in October 2022, was the revocation of the previously mentioned handbook from the Ministry of Health, as well as Brazil's withdrawal from the so-called 'Geneva Consensus Declaration', resuming, in global spaces, particularly at the UN, its position in defence of women's sexual and reproductive rights. This position was confirmed by the representative of the new Ministry of Women, Carmen Foro, at the 67th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), held in March 2023, with the Brazilian mission taking a stand alongside progressive governments.

Notes

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- 4 Luire Campelo, Researcher, NEIM/UFBA, Brazil.
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- 6 Talita Melgaço Fernandes, Researcher, UFBA and Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil.
- 7 Heloisa Bandeira, Doctoral Student, UFBA, Brazil.
- 8 This is one of the reasons why black women's movements prefer to use the expression 'reproductive justice' instead of 'reproductive rights' (Brandão and Cabral 2021).
- 9 When children and teenagers are victims of rape, they are directed first to these councils – the local '*conselhos tutelares*' – that provide assistance, including referrals for pregnancy terminations and police reports. As such, the police played no role in this case.
- 10 In Brazil, to become a prosecutor or a judge it is necessary to take and pass a civil service examination.

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'It's a Family Matter': Inaction and Denial of Domestic Violence*

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Abstract This article provides a grounded example of backlash in action surrounding the implementation of the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010 in Bangladesh. While formulation and enactment of the law marked significant achievements, its implementation has been weak. Unlike conventional analyses that concentrate on backlash in gender equality policy formulation, this study focuses on the obstacles encountered during the implementation phase. Through in-depth interviews with advocates and stakeholders responsible for implementation, the article examines their attitudes and interests concerning the law and women's rights to life, dignity, and bodily integrity. Prevailing gender norms perpetuate the trivialisation of domestic violence, framing it as a personal issue of minimal importance. Consequently, service providers tend to delegitimise and deprioritise it. This article investigates the strategies and tactics of deliberate inaction employed by backlash proponents, which is different from lack of capacity, and explores the counter-strategies deployed by advocates aiming to ensure the Act's effective implementation.

Keywords domestic violence, backlash, inaction, strategies, voice, agency, Bangladesh.

1 Introduction and objectives

Domestic violence is prevalent in Bangladesh, with almost three in every five women (57.7 per cent) experiencing some form of physical, sexual, or emotional violence in their lifetime (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2015). The government adopted the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act (DVPPA) in 2010, which defines domestic violence as 'any form of physical abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse or economic abuse against a woman or a child of a family by any other person of that family with whom [*sic*] victim is, or has been, in family relationship' (Government of Bangladesh 2010).

Adoption of the DVPPA in 2010 was a collaborative achievement of the elected Awami League government and the Citizens' Initiative against Domestic Violence (CIDV) coalition. The coalition consisted of women's and human rights organisations working on violence against women. It continued to advocate for effective implementation after the Act was passed. However, the experience with implementation has been less positive. Commitment to the Act by implementing agencies such as the judiciary, police, and Department of Women Affairs (DWA) officers does not match that of the formulators.

This article argues that dominant stereotypes regarding domestic violence as a trivial, personal matter and blaming women has resulted in inaction by implementing agencies, indicating a deprioritisation of the issue and a shortfall in political action to address the problem. The article aims to provide a grounded example of backlash in action regarding implementation of the DVPPA. It seeks to examine from the perspective of stakeholders interviewed the reasons for the Act's lax implementation. We argue that the drivers of weak implementation are related to intentional inaction, which in turn is motivated by entrenched gender norms. Together, this produces a subtle form of backlash, as described by Flood, Dragiewicz and Pease (2018) and Lombardo and Mergaert (2013). We discuss how social norms and ideologies about the family contribute to the neglect of protection and redress for women and girls who experience domestic violence, and how this impacts implementation of the DVPPA. Furthermore, we explore manifestations of backlash against the Act, as well as the countering backlash strategies and tactics employed by CIDV and women's rights organisations (WROs) advocating for the Act's implementation.

The article is based on both primary and secondary research, including a total of 32 in-depth interviews with women's rights and legal rights activists from CIDV, their allies, and other relevant stakeholders such as service agencies and legal professionals involved in the Act's implementation, including those opposing its use. Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP), one of the pioneering and largest feminist organisations in Bangladesh, was selected as a case study as an active member of CIDV. To analyse the field-level barriers, BMP's Munshiganj branch was selected for having an active movement against domestic violence. Additionally, a focus group discussion was conducted with five judicial magistrates and judges experienced in the Act's implementation.

2 The Bangladesh context

During the formulation of the DVPPA, Bangladesh had a multiparty democracy, with influential allies of the women's movement holding key positions in government. They served as gatekeepers and champions in advocating for gender justice claims, resulting in a more responsive state towards gender justice agendas (Nazneen and Hickey 2019; Akter 2020; Mahpara 2021). However,

since the Act's adoption, domestic violence has lost its relative priority, with other concerns such as child marriage and rape law reforms gaining more prominence (Sultan, Mahpara and Tasnin 2022). The political landscape has also shifted over time to a dominant party rule, where power is concentrated within one political party (Hassan and Raihan 2017). This has not only reduced the state's responsiveness to civil society and gender justice actors but also limited opportunities for them to lobby alternative political parties to advance their agenda (Mahpara 2021).

In addition to political commitment, societal norms play an equally crucial role in shaping people's perceptions and behaviours towards domestic violence. Social norms define acceptable and appropriate actions for men and women in a group or society (Cislaghi and Heise 2019). Bangladeshi society is heavily influenced by discriminatory and restrictive gender norms, where marriage is regarded as sacrosanct. Women are expected to uphold family honour by preserving their chastity and conforming to the roles of obedient wives and caring mothers (Rozario 2001; White 1992), even at the cost of sustaining abusive marriages (Sultan *et al.* 2021). Conversely, men are viewed as protectors of female family members and may resort to disciplining them when necessary. Subsequently, chastising or even physically abusing women is often condoned. There is also a prevalent 'culture of silence' where women feel ashamed to report their experiences of domestic violence, often blaming themselves (Naved *et al.* 2018). According to a multi-country study by the World Health Organization (WHO 2005), two-thirds of Bangladeshi women who were physically abused by their partners had kept silent about the violence.

Norms are also reflected in the attitudes of legal practitioners, implementing agencies, WRO allies, and sometimes even within the WROs themselves, justifying certain actions or inactions related to the Act's implementation. While studies were done during the Act's formulation to estimate budget requirements, the estimated budget was not allocated after its approval.³ There is a tendency to rely on resolution through mediation or village/community proceedings (Sultan *et al.* 2021) instead of utilising formal justice channels or the provisions outlined in the DVPPA. Recently, the Covid-19 pandemic reflected a rise in the number of domestic violence reports (Kamal 2020). The increased reporting of violence since the DVPPA was passed indicates that more women want redress, but the persistent lack of responsiveness amongst stakeholders (legal practitioners and state actors) results in the Act not being implemented and domestic violence being insufficiently addressed.

3 Defining and operationalising concepts

In this article, we employ the concepts of 'backlash', 'voice', and 'agency' to understand the resistance towards the Act and WROs' endeavours to advance its implementation. Additionally,

we examine the strategies employed by WROs to counter the backlash.

3.1 Backlash

Backlash is a response to real or perceived challenges to existing power hierarchies (Faludi 1991). Flood *et al.* (2018) define backlash as 'resistance' against progressive change. They use the terms 'backlash' and 'resistance' interchangeably to describe any active form of opposition to progressive and feminist policies, perspectives, and programmes that aims to impede progress made towards gender equality and social justice. This can occur at both individual and collective levels and can be expressed through formal and informal means (*ibid.*). Often, resistance takes the form of denying existence of a problem and can be demonstrated through disavowal – the refusal to acknowledge responsibility for addressing the need for change (*ibid.*). In such cases, backlash is manifested in the form of trivialising gender issues through demonstrating a lack of interest, inaction, and non-participation.

Although backlash is typically examined in the context of policy or law formulation (Waylen 2017), it can also manifest during implementation processes. While it is commonly associated with overt and aggressive actions, it can take more subtle forms, as observed during implementation of the DVPPA. Backlash encompasses implementing agency inaction. Lombardo and Mergaert (2013) highlight how certain stakeholders provide excuses for their inaction, such as avoiding responsibility for the change process due to a lack of ownership by expecting those who initiated the change to bear the sole burden. They identify refusing to allocate resources for implementation, failing to enforce new policies, and neglecting to establish standards or timelines to monitor the change as examples of inaction (*ibid.*). This passive resistance represents an implicit form of institutional resistance. Choosing not to act is a form of agency, as it indicates the ability of service providers to make decisions about whether to initiate steps to alter the status quo (Agócs 1997).

3.2 Voice and collective agency

According to Goetz and Musembi (2008), the concept of voice comprises two dimensions: the content or what is expressed, and performativity or how it is expressed. Both the content and performativity of voice are influenced by formal rules governing expression, gender norms, and power dynamics (Oosterom *et al.* 2022). The ability to voice oneself represents individual and collective agency, enabling action to achieve desired outcomes, engage in bargaining, manipulate, subvert, and resist (Kabeer 1999).

WROs serve as a primary platform for expressing the opinions and interests of various women's constituencies and seek to exert collective agency to promote these. Their objective is to

influence policies, laws, institutions, and organisations towards gender justice goals by demanding government responsiveness and accountability. WROs utilise their collective voice to legitimise claims, build constituencies, and develop strategies for mobilisation at local, national, and international levels (Nazneen 2022). However, they often face various forms of backlash, which they counter through strategic use of their voice and agency.

3.3 Countering backlash strategies

WROs collectively employ various strategies to counter backlash. By strategy, we mean a 'movement's comprehensive, targeted plan of action, directed toward identified goals and preferred outcomes, assessing the availability of allies and resources, and anticipating the responses and behaviors of opponents' (Beckwith 2007: 315). 'Repertoires of contention' range from violent and confrontational to disruptive and contained actions, as classified by social movement theorists such as Tarrow (2011). When addressing the issue of domestic violence, coalition building becomes crucial to overcome opposition from actors involved in implementation who seek to preserve male power and privilege (Nazneen and Hickey 2019). It also involves forming collectives to establish a broad support base that amplifies WROs' voices, vision, and struggle (Batliwala 2012). Advocacy strategies and public opinion building are key components of seeking reform as well as for building pressure for implementation. Action strategies need to be adaptable to evolving realities (*ibid.*). Media also plays a significant role, as it can help counter opposition, generate public sympathy, and contribute to framing demands (Gamson 1989). These countering backlash strategies, while like those used to demand new policies and laws, are also being used to push for the Act's implementation and will be examined later in the article for their effectiveness.

4 Backlash against the Act's implementation

Since its approval, the DVPPA has rarely been used in cases of domestic violence (Huda 2016; Yasmin 2020). Yasmin (2020) analysed 70 court orders from judicial magistrate courts and 20 case records from six districts and found that in two districts the chief judicial magistrate courts did not have a single case filed under the DVPPA in the past ten years. In another district, only one petition was filed, and in two other districts, two applications were filed (*ibid.*).

There was a three-year delay in formulating and approving the Act's rules, leading to limited awareness and understanding among judges, magistrates, and lawyers. Furthermore, there is a perception that women who experience violence want more punitive measures than can be provided through the quasi-civil approach of the Act.

Backlash against the Act's implementation can be categorised into three main types based on the interviews. Firstly, there are loopholes and issues with the law itself, creating difficulties in effective implementation, which implementers use as excuses for their inaction. Secondly, there is resistance and backlash among legal practitioners, stemming from societal norms that manifest in various attitudes and actions. Lastly, deliberate forms of inaction and backlash against the DVPPA can be observed among service providers.

4.1 Legal challenges

The DVPPA operates under a quasi-civil framework. Rather than imposing criminal sanctions, the Act focuses on providing civil remedies, recognising that survivors often wish to preserve their marriages. However, when a perpetrator violates a protection order, it is considered a criminal offence, representing a shift from a civil remedy. Due to the unique provisions of the DVPPA compared to other laws addressing violence against women, there is limited understanding of the Act's intricacies. Even the few judges who have dealt with cases under the Act claim that the provisions are confusing: 'There is also no proper training, awareness building, or information sharing among the judges to really understand how this law's implementation should be.'⁴

Procedural deficiencies also contribute to challenges in implementation. Delays in case hearings, for instance, are common due to the high volume of cases.⁵ This hinders the timely protection of survivors who require urgent issuance of protection orders to halt ongoing violence. Interviews with CIDV members revealed a lack of clarity on the execution of protection orders. There is no follow-up by implementing agencies to ensure that perpetrators are adhering to the orders, even though the court should assign this responsibility to enforcement officers, service providers, or the police, as stipulated in the Act. This lack of oversight leaves survivors feeling unsafe.⁶ Finally, although one of the Act's innovative aspects was to guarantee women's right to stay in their marital homes, in rare cases, when survivors do receive protection orders, they often feel uncomfortable continuing to reside there.

4.2 Resistances by legal practitioners

The law's shortcomings do not adequately explain its underutilisation, although they are used by implementers to justify the lack of action. However, it is the attitudes of legal practitioners and the norms they adhere to which result in disavowal of the existence of a problem (i.e. not recognising domestic violence as a human rights violation), trivialisation, and lack of interest, that are manifestations of backlash (Flood *et al.* 2018; Lombardo and Mergaert 2013).

During interviews with 15 legal practitioners, virtually all of them praised the DVPPA as 'wonderful'; however, they quickly added

that the law was impractical or that they had never applied it. Male and female lawyers in Munshiganj shared similar beliefs about the sanctity of marriage and the need to uphold family honour. They blamed women for the violence they experience, portraying women as their own worst enemies, and depicting men as victims of women's greed and infidelity. Many emphasised the priority of saving marriages, highlighting the importance of mediation to 'protect families'.⁷ These norms that shape attitudes among legal practitioners manifest in various forms of backlash and resistance. Trivialising domestic violence is a common attitude, with a prevailing notion that it is a personal matter that should not concern the judiciary: 'The conflict is not with outside people. It is within the family. A man or woman in the family is being abused by another member of the family. So, the matter should stay in the family.'⁸

Victim-blaming was observed in Munshiganj, where, during interviews, individuals involved in cases portrayed survivors as adulterous and manipulative, falsely accusing their husbands to gain financial advantage. General stereotypes of women as perpetrators or enablers of violence were prevalent. 'When we [mediators] try to solve matters, another woman is mostly responsible for not being able to resolve [the situation]. We see other women encouraging survivors to go for a legal case.'⁹ Male and female lawyers, opponents of WROs as well as their supposed allies, accused women married to migrant workers of engaging in extramarital affairs to explain why women file domestic violence cases: 'Women are weak and commit adultery. They have physical needs... 80 per cent of them file false cases.'¹⁰

Additionally, lawyers and judges often downplay the significance of the DVPPA by labelling it as a 'non-governmental organisation (NGO) Act'¹¹ and 'NGO-led'.¹² This delegitimises the law, as government authorities have a negative perception of NGOs (van der Borgh and Terwindt 2012).

4.3 Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWCA) and Department of Women Affairs (DWA): deprioritisation of domestic violence

Interviews with MOWCA and DWA showed that they had deprioritised use of the DVPPA. Despite the law being proposed by MOWCA and reviewed by the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, there is a disavowal and lack of institutional ownership, resulting in inaction and disinterest (Flood *et al.* 2018; Agócs 1997).

DWA officers interviewed were more comfortable in discussing their role in carrying out mediation, issuing notices, and conducting inquiries for the court. Their focus was on advising women and their families on available options to address violence and abuse. However, DWA officials showed reluctance to utilise legal measures to address domestic violence, as they

believed that resorting to the DVPPA would result in divorce and women had no alternative to marriage: 'It is known that DWA officers do *salish* [informal dispute resolution mechanism]. They do not advise women to take legal measures fearing women would get divorced, and their families would break.'¹³ DWA officials also did not display confidence in their role as enforcement officers, and other actors within the judiciary and police lacked a clear understanding of the role DWA was supposed to play.

A common complaint among DWA staff was the lack of resources to dedicate sufficient time to their roles as enforcement officers. However, both DWA and MOWCA are no longer resource-starved agencies following recent budget allocations, and the insufficient allocation of human and financial resources for dealing with domestic violence is viewed as evidence of the low priority given by these agencies to implementing the DVPPA.¹⁴

According to the 2013 rules, MOWCA was to enlist NGOs and other agencies as service providers to support enforcement officers in their duties and aid women and child survivors. However, this provision has not been adhered to, which has resulted in a lack of support services for survivors. Interviewed judicial magistrates mentioned the lack of designated service organisations as a reason for the DVPPA's inadequate implementation.¹⁵ Finally, although MOWCA and DWA are supposed to monitor the Act's implementation, this is not institutionalised. MOWCA's failure to act on these last two areas is an illustration of its 'choosing not to act' and a manifestation of backlash (Agócs 1997).

4.4 Police: delegitimisation and disqualification of domestic violence complaints

In the context of the DVPPA, the police's role is primarily limited to providing information and referring victims to services. Under the Act, an application is submitted to the judicial magistrate for an interim protection order. However, none of the police officials interviewed displayed interest in referring survivors to the procedures outlined in the DVPPA, as they believed they could not take any punitive action, which is what they assumed the survivors would want. It remains unclear as to whether this is just an assumption by the police, or if it is indeed the genuine desire of the survivors themselves.

Furthermore, despite the establishment of special desks in most police stations for women, children, people with disabilities, and the elderly, the police view domestic violence as low priority and not a legitimate matter for their attention. They display reluctance in documenting domestic violence cases, thereby delegitimising such complaints (Yasmin 2020).

5 WRO strategies to counter backlash: incorporating feminist voice and using collective agency?

We now reflect on how successful WROs have been in incorporating a feminist voice within the setting and framing of the domestic violence agenda and using collective agency to counter the pushback. Space limits us to a summary of the findings and conclusions on strategies for countering backlash, but more details and discussion can be found in Sultan and Mahpara (2023).

In response to the inaction and deliberate delays, CIDV and its member organisations have mobilised and undertaken various strategies to counter the resistance faced. Their repertoire includes collective action to raise consciousness through national and local-level engagement, framing domestic violence as a rights violation (Nazneen and Hickey 2019), generating knowledge and evidence to convince stakeholders (Batliwala 2012), seeking media coverage to influence public opinion, capacity building, advocacy, and using informal networks (Nazneen and Hickey 2019; Waylen 2017). At the local level, they interacted more directly with implementers (e.g. magistrates, lawyers, law enforcement, DWA) in order to influence their actions. In general, the approach was collaborative, but in cases where the expected support was not forthcoming, activities could take a more confrontational approach, through protests and complaints to public representatives.

We conclude that the strategies employed did not reach their objectives because implementation was stalled. The emphasis on capacity building could not overcome a lack of will to implement the DVPPA. Demanding state accountability by using research evidence and organising regular consultation events has not been able to elicit substantive response. Working with lawyers and implementation agencies has had limited results and could not bring about systemic changes. CIDV has not been successful in bringing about a shift in norms and attitudes regarding domestic violence. Despite significant efforts made at the national level, visible impact has been limited. Conversely, positive outcomes have been observed at the subnational and individual case levels, where the strength, social networks, and reputations of the respective WROs have made a difference. However, success remains sporadic.

There are various reasons for the limited success of the counter-strategies. Overall, the political economy context at present is different from what it was in the formulation phase of the legislation. In addition, there are issues that concern WRO mobilisation itself.

We found that coalition strategies have been static over time. The forms of strategies and actions have become conventionalised and do not have the shock value of more disruptive and

innovative activities (Tarrow 2011; Batliwala 2012). CIDV has traditionally relied on advocacy, research, evidence generation, workshops, and informal networks, which worked well during adoption (Waylen 2017), but the same repertoire was continued during implementation. However, to sustain the movement, CIDV should have used more dynamic strategies which would adapt to the new realities of implementation (Batliwala 2012), built alliances with new sets of actors, and found new champions. Although there is an understanding within CIDV that the key actors for implementation are different from those during law formulation, this has not translated into new approaches. The question also arises as to whether subtle forms of backlash and deliberate inaction require different strategies to counter them.

6 Conclusion

We have established that there is backlash to the DVPPA (Flood *et al.* 2018; Lombardo and Mergaert 2013). The attitudes of legal practitioners and service agencies are manifestations of backlash in the form of denial, disavowal, and inaction, with stigmatisation of women, trivialisation of domestic violence, and delegitimisation of the law itself.

Domestic violence and family disputes in Bangladesh continue to be perceived and treated as trivial matters to be resolved through counselling or mediation, with the aim of restoring marital relationships. The severity and impact of violence faced by women are hardly recognised, acknowledged, or validated as an offence. Changing these gender norms, however, is a long-term process, and CIDV has had limited success in mobilising collective agency (Goetz and Musembi 2008; Kabeer 1999) to bring about a shift in these norms and attitudes.

The strategies adopted by CIDV and its members to counter the backlash have been only partially successful, raising the question as to whether subtle forms of backlash require specific types of strategies to counter them. Despite the strength and reputation of the coalition and its individual members, it has not been able to effectively build a voice powerful enough to demand accountability and responsiveness from the decision makers and government agencies. The coalition can bring the different stakeholders 'to the table' but has not been able to bring about the changes in outcome important for substantive equality and enjoyment of rights (Goetz 2003). Most of the CIDV members interviewed emphasised that the capacity to implement the provisions of the law could have been developed if there was state commitment. However, they were not able to facilitate the creation of this commitment.

One significant gain is increased awareness that psychological and financial abuse are punishable offences under the law.¹⁶ This knowledge has contributed to a more open public discourse on domestic violence. As a result, women are becoming more willing

to speak out about their experiences. This shift in awareness has also allowed lawyers, human rights organisations, and WROs to frame domestic violence as a violation of rights, providing a stronger foundation for advocacy and support.

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.
- 1 Maheen Sultan, Senior Fellow of Practice, BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, Bangladesh.
- 2 Pragyna Mahpara, Senior Research Associate, BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, Bangladesh.
- 3 Interview with CIDV member, 18 April 2022.
- 4 Interview with Dhaka University Law Professor, 26 April 2022.
- 5 Interview with CIDV member, 19 April 2022.
- 6 Interview with local BMP member, 21 May 2022.
- 7 Interview with District Women's Affairs Officer, 7 April 2021.
- 8 Group discussion with magistrates and judges.
- 9 Interview with theatre activist, Munshiganj, 21 May 2022.
- 10 Interview with local journalist, Munshiganj, 21 May 2022.
- 11 National BMP member, personal communication, 24 April 2022.
- 12 National ally, personal communication, 19 April 2022.
- 13 Interview with CIDV member, 11 April 2022.
- 14 Interview with CIDV member, 18 April 2022.
- 15 Group discussion, judicial magistrates, 8 August 2022.
- 16 National BMP member, personal communication, 26 April 2022.

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Public University Students' Experiences of Anti-Feminist Backlash in Dhaka, Bangladesh^{*†}

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Abstract Public university campuses in Bangladesh have been historically significant sites of negotiating with social and political orders. Based on in-depth interviews with male and female students from three public universities in Dhaka, conducted between 2022 and 2023, this article identifies the ways in which formal and informal structures of power on campus reproduce patriarchal norms and gendered inequities. The students' narratives shed light on how the culture of residential halls, and practices of policing and surveillance, interact with patriarchal norms to limit women's agency and mobility. They also show the ways in which masculine practices which draw from hypersexual views on women and glorify violence become enabled and sustained by institutional power dynamics, wherein harassment and policing become instruments to negotiate power. The article provides new insights into the ways in which patriarchal power dynamics and gender norms promoted and practised within an institutional space create drivers of anti-feminist backlash.

Keywords public universities, moral policing, hierarchy, power, agency.

1 Introduction

Bangladesh has made significant progress in multiple indicators of gender justice, particularly on women's empowerment. This includes increases in girls' education rates, and greater female workforce participation in garment industries, as well as within the informal sector (Haque *et al.* 2019; Das and Susantono 2022). Scholars attribute these gains partially to donor-financed efforts for development, but more importantly to the growth in trade and economy propelled by a female-dominant workforce (Hossain 2017). While progress has been recognised at the national and international levels, it exists alongside persisting opposition and



resistance in various social strata – at state level, and within the family values and practices of civil society (Nazneen 2018).

Such resistance and opposition has been framed as anti-feminist backlash against gender justice and is commonly perceived as reactionary pushback against threats to current power arrangements (Faludi 1991; Mansbridge and Shames 2008). Contemporary conceptualisation around the nature of backlash is being undertaken to identify the complex ways in which it is entwined with populist forces, i.e. the rise of authoritarianism and hypernationalist agendas, transphobia, and homophobia (Edström *et al.* 2023).

Literature and evidence framed in the context of the global South is still evolving. The understanding that frames anti-feminist backlash so far in Bangladesh has been primarily focused on its more reactionary forms, such as fatwas being issued against women joining the workforce (particularly in the ready-made garments industry) in the 1980s and changes being resisted in discriminatory inheritance laws (Hashmi 2000; Naher 2010). While these are some of the more visible forms of backlash in Bangladesh, there are subtle forms of resistance and everyday politics which shape backlash at micro levels in the public space. The most common and pervasive tool which sustains gender power relations and may become a deliberate form of backlash in particular spaces is moral policing of women and gender-diverse people (Mahpara *et al.* 2022).

Public universities in Bangladesh have historically been important sites of power struggle in issues of national-level significance. These institutional spaces are shaped by national and local political power dynamics, where varying levels of power and privilege are attained by students who can form or show affiliation with politically significant figures (Suykens 2018). This results in power struggles by various student bodies who seek out opportunities to practise control over campus spaces, as being able to do so makes their position in the power structure of the institution stronger. Alongside this, campuses are also visible sites of contestations around gender politics and women's rights (Janjua 2020). Publicised incidences of sexual assault, violence, and rape on campuses have been highlighted time and again (Ferdousy 2023; Rozario 2001). In recent times, there has been pushback against progressive components of women's empowerment (i.e. bodily autonomy, mobility) through student demonstrations calling for 'decent clothing' (Farhat 2022). Yet these campuses have also been sites of demonstrations **against** rape cases and unsafe learning environments for female students (*Dhaka Tribune* 2020; *The Daily Star* 2018). Yet it has been noted that when students mobilise to protest these harms, victim-blaming against female students is used as a tactic to delegitimise their claims (Nasreen 2022).

By and large, public university campuses have never been considered safe spaces for women's mobility. Within institutions, aggressive surveillance and moral policing of young women's behaviour is a constant reality. While the presence of inequitable gender norms in educational institutions has been documented, the underlying ideologies, practices, and power dynamics which sustain it require further analysis. As coercive patriarchal forces are increasingly at work to undermine progress on equality and freedom (Khan, Tant and Harper 2023), it is crucial to understand how power dynamics and norms in public, institutional, and private spaces sustain and increasingly fuel patriarchal ideologies which enable backlash.

1.1 Moral policing, threats of violence, and patriarchal norms

In spaces where patriarchal gender norms are intertwined with systems of power and dominance, women embodying agentic behaviour is considered a threat to the status quo (Okimoto and Brescoll 2010). Across contexts, women and gender-diverse people frequently face repercussions for defying their prescribed roles or behaviours. Institutions are no exception to this as gender norms are built into how they operate. Rules, processes, and policies become gendered and systematically influence access to resources, freedoms, and privileges (Oosterom *et al.* 2022). Haas and Binard (2022) note that socio-political constructions of women's bodies are a key site for anti-feminist backlash. Historically, women's bodies have been used as a site for creating notions of masculine honour at macro and micro levels of social and political systems (Mookherjee 2015). Besides being used as instruments for furthering vested patriarchal power and privilege at the macro level, these constructions are used for backlash at the micro level. Srivastava (2012: 16) noted that conflict over 'local tradition versus foreign modernity' is a significant feature of the public sphere and the argument that 'in order to protect "our" traditions from "foreign" influence "our" women must also be shielded from change' contributes to masculinising⁶ public spaces and normalising violence against women.

Within this frame, moral policing and surveillance as a control of sexuality and sexual objectification of women and gender-diverse people become tools to dominate and silence voices (Khatam 2023). While much of existing literature explores policing as enacted upon women by close male relatives, this article explores how students in public university spaces in Bangladesh (both male and female) carry out an intense form of policing of female students. Beliefs or ideology are legitimised through various means, including media, societal norms, and socialisation processes (Pratto, Sidanius and Levin 2006). Dominant groups formulate 'legitimising myths' to justify and uphold unequal social orders and set ingroup and outgroup boundaries, based on which unequal access to social and material capital is enforced (*ibid.*). The ways in which patriarchal myths influence dynamics between groups shapes processes of anti-feminist backlash

(Mansbridge and Shames 2008). Moral policing and harassment are used to enact coercive power on women's bodies and can be a consequence of expressions of manhood seeking to reinforce power or retain privilege.

The aim of this article is to analyse the extent to which moral policing and sexual harassment are backlash strategies enacted on women in public university campuses in Dhaka. Our study identifies a particular power dynamic within this institutional space – a strict hierarchy between senior and junior students which sanctions and enables misogynistic aggression and backlash against female students.

2 Methods

The study on which this article is based is part of a larger qualitative research programme – Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice – and was undertaken from January to May 2023 in three public universities in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Public universities were chosen as the study site due to the diversity of its student body, providing the opportunity to gather a wide range of insights. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten male and ten female students from Dhaka University, Jahangirnagar University, and Jagannath University – some of the most prominent institutes in Bangladesh.

Female members of the study team facilitated interviews with female students, and male study team members with male students. Researchers obtained informed consent from the participants. Convenient snowball sampling was used, and participants were initially recruited from the researchers' own acquaintances. Participants were current master's or undergraduate students, living in official residential halls. This was because students residing outside the university have limited experience of the power dynamics.

Participants were asked about demographic factors such as age, residence area, gender identity, ethnicity, subject studied, and political affiliations. A list of *a priori* codes or themes were drawn from literature which focused on understanding power dynamics in residential halls, gendered differences in living experiences, perception of gender issues on campus, and reactive actions or deliberate strategies to prevent gender-friendly discourses or women's agency within this space. The authors followed a grounded theory approach (Charmaz and Belgrave 2012) in manual coding and analysis of the data. Using a shared matrix, multiple iteratives of coding were completed, and each emerging code was discussed and decided upon.

In-depth interviews were focused on attaining a broader understanding of lived experiences within educational institutions and the gendered challenges. The researchers avoided asking direct questions about sexual harassment or violence.

Table 1 Public university participant characteristics

Ethnicity	Male	Female	Total
Bengali	10	7	17
Chakma	0	2	2
Marma	0	1	1

Religion	Male	Female	Total
Muslim	8	7	15
Hindu	2	1	3
Buddhist	0	2	2

Age range	Male	Female	Total
21–24	7	6	13
25–28	3	4	7

Location of hometown	Male	Female	Total
In Dhaka	5	1	6
Out of Dhaka	5	9	14

Academic year	Male	Female	Total
First and second year of undergraduate	1	3	4
Third and fourth year of undergraduate	5	5	10
Pursuing graduate degree	4	2	6

Source Authors' own.

However, these narratives were shared by participants themselves when the question regarding the challenges of living on campus was raised. The most prominent responses centred on students being monitored, policed, or harassed. To safeguard participants' personal integrity while also respecting their agency, researchers reminded them at various points that it was up to them how

much they wanted to share (Shannon 2022). Particular attention was paid to non-verbal cues such as tone of voice, emotional expressions, and body language (Thunberg 2022).

We share these young people's narratives while knowing that our interactions with them were not devoid of power dynamics. Being middle-class Bengali men and women, living and working in Dhaka's urban spaces have wholly shaped our experiences of navigating the fieldwork. With one exception, we were all students of private or overseas universities, with limited knowledge of the dynamics of Bangladeshi public universities. As such, self-reflexivity and introspection were crucial during fieldwork and analysis. The research processes described above resulted in providing the participants with a sense of control and agency, so that they did not feel obligated to participate, and any risks of re-experiencing trauma were minimised.

Most participants were Bengali and Muslim, and the average age range was 21–24 years. Of the participants, seven female and six male students came from outside Dhaka. Furthermore, except for four participants, all belonged to families with limited financial resources or social capital.

3 Findings

Here, we explore the narratives of young students in public university campuses and begin by unpacking how the senior and junior hierarchy (especially in male residential spaces) facilitates and normalises misogynistic aggression. We show narratives of young students which illustrate a culture of policing, surveillance, and harassment. We also reflect on the ways in which a lack of accountability within institutional systems contributes to facilitating backlash tactics. We argue that exacerbation of surveillance and policing in institutional spaces based on morality and normalisation of patriarchal attitudes can become strategies for patriarchal actors to retain power.

3.1 Initiation into a culture of misogyny

A key reality for students living on campus is that residential options are limited, but there is a further challenge when this limited resource is co-opted by influential actors on campus who are not part of the administration. Accommodation options in residential halls are usually of two kinds: legal and political. 'Political' options are controlled by influential students, whereas 'legal' options are available to students via the university's administrative process. Students reported that only a handful of accommodation options are available 'legally'. Much of the accommodation is reserved for new students who need to ally themselves with an influential senior student. This issue is more common within male halls than female halls – students attributed this to influential actors on campus being predominantly male. Young men who come from rural areas are often unable to find alternative accommodation, having limited financial resources

and networks in the city, and therefore resort to taking up 'political' accommodation options.

Forming this political relationship also provides young men with privilege and protection on campus. Senior male students, who model themselves as '*boro bhais*' (older brothers) tend to be men from well-connected or powerful families, often regarded to have impunity from being disciplined by university authorities. For example, they can assert power to intervene and reduce penalties in cases where a junior student might owe late fees for their academic session, or even be in trouble with law enforcement authorities for reckless behaviour. The possibility of availing these privileges is contingent on students always abiding by a strict code of conduct and obeying seniors without question throughout their undergraduate lives. As these young men move into their second year and onwards, they become entitled and are expected to reproduce the same power practices.

To survive within this space, young men adopt and constantly perform aggressive and misogynistic behaviours. Pathways to cultivating social capital within these campuses, especially for young men with limited resources in the city, become intertwined with the hierarchical power dynamics of residential halls. Within these halls, a common reflection of misogyny is gossiping about women. While this practice is normalised in the wider public space, within campuses – and especially in male student halls – it becomes intensified. This happens in extremely derogatory ways: 'We do not use *bhodro* [respectful] language when it comes to girls. We call them "*maal*" [goods]. For the most part, it is common to talk about the girls around you like this.'⁷

This established atmosphere of 'locker room banter', according to male participants, fosters an environment where some students take the hypersexualisation of women to a near obsessive level. Private social media chat groups are formed, with the sole intention of continuing hypersexualised conversations about women, and sharing women's photos (including intimate pictures) and their social media account details:

*The general environment is such that it feels normal to talk about female faculty friends like this. Some guys open private chat groups with a small number of their peers... on WhatsApp or [Facebook] Messenger. Their conversation is nasty, they download or screenshot the pictures of the women they are added with on social media and share on such groups.*⁸

Seven male students, and all the female students, shared that males refusing to participate in hypersexualised gossiping in the halls or joining a senior for roaming the campus often resulted in them becoming ostracised by their peers and seniors, being relegated into crowded rooms, or bullied by being called effeminate or 'woman-like'. Young men's inability to adhere to

such practices results not only in punitive punishment, but also in losing patronage from their seniors – in the form of 'backup' during personal feuds, connections in terms of jobs, or academic support. Furthermore, young men expressed anxiety that failure to comply to the hierarchy would result in them being subjected to violence.

Resistance to young women's mobility, freedom, or agency on campus is reinforced through the discursive practices of the power hierarchy created (and sustained) by influential male students. These practices legitimise the categorisation of women's bodies as 'good/bad' and 'pure/characterless' on the basis of morality and patriarchal 'myths'. This propagation of myths narrows possibilities for women to claim greater space, visibility, or power on campus (Faludi et al. 2020; Lopes 2019). On campus, the normalisation of sexualising women's bodies occurs concurrently with young men needing to establish themselves as being aligned to masculine characteristics which are based on practices of dominance and violence.

3.2 Women's bodies as a site of power contestation

The manifestation of this misogynistic culture is mirrored in the female participants' experiences. Across the three universities, female students shared that over time, they witnessed their male classmates becoming hostile towards women. As they gain more power in the campus through seniority, male students begin to confront female students about their choice of attire and aspects of their behaviour:

Now in my third year, I began to notice that the guys in my class say a lot of nasty things about women. Who is wearing what, who has a lot of guy friends, they're always making nasty comments about all of that. As freshmen, their ideas are heavily influenced by their boro bhais. As they progress into their third/fourth year, they vocalise those ideas that they've been surrounded by in group discussions?

While policing subverts women's agency and mobility on campus, being harassed or stalked erodes it even further. All female participants reported having experienced at least one incident where they were inappropriately approached by senior male students during their first or second year. In most cases, male students are either influential themselves or have fostered strong connections with men who hold social or political power within the institution. The women's experiences included being stalked, harassed by a group of seniors, or receiving unwanted romantic and sexual advances via social media. In one incident, a 24-year-old student reported being photographed in the cafeteria without her consent by powerfully connected male students. Upon confronting the perpetrators, she reported being mobbed by several male and older female students: 'You think you're Ms Universe or something, that we're

all standing around trying to get a picture of you? Get over yourself or your whole batch is going to have to apologise for this *beyadobi* [impudence].'

Most female participants in this study shared facing taunts from their fellow male peers or being 'scolded' by senior male students. A 24-year-old third-year student from Jahangirnagar University described being taunted when her boyfriend visits her, or when she hangs out with male friends:

I hear things like 'I saw you hanging out with this male classmate after dark, what does your boyfriend have to say about that?' If they see my boyfriend has come to visit, they pass inappropriate comments about it the next time I see them in class.

The participant, out of fear of facing verbal or even sexual harassment as backlash for voicing her discomfort, chose not to challenge them. Other participants resisted by choosing to avoid certain spaces and people, or by making themselves less publicly visible on campus instead of changing their behaviours or practices.

Within the female halls, young women targeted as being 'too modern' continue to face verbal abuse and humiliation from senior female students. Young women reported that often senior female students policed younger female students who they regarded as outspoken or deviating from the 'good, respectable woman' norm (i.e. they were smoking or making friends with male peers). The justification for these acts is cited as 'protecting norms of propriety' and 'maintaining discipline'. The older female students used tactics such as verbally abusing younger female students, forbidding them from wearing certain clothing within the halls or asking other younger students to shun the student they were targeting. Students also reported facing retribution for their social media posts, for refusing to leave their rooms after being bullied, or for getting wet in the rain.

The students shared incidents where rumours of them being 'indecent women' spread throughout the campus, causing other students to treat them differently. The 24-year-old student who had her photo taken non-consensually said that seniors in her residential hall began bullying her after the incident. This led to her feeling emotionally vulnerable, and she isolated herself within her room for weeks. Once she began interacting with her peers again, she found that they had spread rumours that she was drinking and smoking in her room. This caused her to become socially ostracised to the extent that she felt it was her fault.

The nature of the aggressions perpetrated by older female students is fundamentally different from those of male students. Older female students do not have enough influence on campus

to 'discipline' or demand unquestioning obedience from male and female juniors. Neither can they establish themselves as influential figures by exercising aggression over others with impunity in the same way as males. But older female students take up the role of enabling their male counterparts to use policing, surveillance, and harassment as strategies to exercise power on campus. Their practices effectively serve to enable and legitimise the abuse of power perpetrated by male students.

It is evident from the students' narratives that the power practice on campus is structured in a way which privileges influential male students and their networks. Their power relies on drawing on being 'protectors of women and tradition', disciplinary actors, and dominant figures within campus (Srivastava 2012). Inequitable gender norms serve as a 'disciplinary power' that patriarchal actors employ via policing, surveillance, and harassment to limit women's movement and bodily autonomy (Harper *et al.* 2022; Khan *et al.* 2023). The use of such power can be subtle, such as policing young women's performance of respectability, or overt, such as enacting violence on them when their behaviours are perceived as threats. Thus, women's behaviours and choices which threaten male authority or transgress patriarchal norms are met with backlash, and women's bodies become sites where power struggles occur.

3.3 Little recourse to justice

Given the frequency of harassment on campus, there were a stark lack of reports on students seeking justice through relevant university administrative bodies. According to participants, their universities had limited disciplinary or support mechanisms for students facing harassment or bullying. Most participants either did not know where to file a formal complaint or felt that the process was too complicated. Some feared that faculties may either stall justice or weaponise the issue for their own power-play:

Each department has to deal with complaints on their own, there is no central body or committee I know of. Whether the teacher who is assigned with this responsibility will take your complaint seriously, whether they will be able to take action if the man who harassed you is influential – depends on their own affiliations, self-interests, and power in the campus.¹⁰

When spaces of formal support and justice are either questionable or do not exist, informal systems crop up in their place. When female students were in some way aggrieved, the only recourse was to report the incident to the perpetrators' seniors. A 25-year-old fourth-year female student shared her experience of being stalked by a group of seniors on campus – one of whom who was associated with the campus's primary student body:

When I would go to the food stalls or walk from one class to another, the men would follow me. They were always around –

either on their bikes riding a few feet behind me [or] sitting on the table right behind me. I lost count for how many months this went on for. I cut off my long hair, because at one point I thought maybe that will finally stop them.

However, she never complained to seniors or peers, despite being well-known among influential student bodies. She feared that doing so would result in seniors co-opting the case brought to them and publicly parading themselves as upholders of equity. It was uncertain whether they would take any action against the perpetrator, but she would certainly face further harassment and public shaming.

In another instance, a female student reported that a male junior disrupted an exam and snatched her script to copy answers. The junior in question was the son of a politically well-connected individual. When she rebuked his behaviour, he responded by issuing threats of bodily harm (including death threats through social media), forcing her to complain to the police. The police, however, were reluctant to become involved, repeatedly urging her to 'settle the matter amicably'. The student claimed that they attempted to access her social media, to leverage potentially sensitive information to force her to withdraw her complaint.

News reports indicate that despite High Court directives to implement zero-tolerance policies on harassment and abuse in education institutions and workplaces, there is limited implementation and greater non-compliance (*Dhaka Tribune* 2022). Even when institutes follow the directives on paper, student narratives reflect that inaction and lack of implementation remains a key issue. Young women shared anecdotes of their friends pursuing cases of harassment or abuse with faculties and being advised to let it go in the interest of their own reputational and physical safety.

The highly patriarchal culture within campuses allows various actors – faculties, senior influential students, state authority – to justify reluctance for action and enables further backlash when issues are brought forward. However, this study does not cover the administration and faculty experience and therefore is unable to pinpoint the specific reasons as to why inaction exists. Deeper investigation is required to explore the perceptions and attitudes of actors within university administrative spaces for more contextual understanding of the gaps and challenges which sustain inaction and delegitimisation.

4 Discussion

The students' experiences play out within a context where influential actors on campus utilise moral policing, surveillance, and harassment as tools to maintain or regain control of the campus space. Power is primarily vested with influential male students who gain authority through powerful off-campus

connections and misappropriation of institutional resources. This power becomes legitimised through myths of being '*boro bhais*' which draw on patriarchal notions of masculinity and femininity. The narratives show policing and harassment as being intertwined with patriarchal masculine norms that are upheld and reproduced in residential hall culture. Participation in the culture of hostility becomes mandatory, and the policing of women's bodies becomes a strategy to subjugate others to prove one's own worth by young men (and some women) who hold limited social and financial resources to negotiate with the socio-political power structure they are pushed into.

When misogynistic behaviours and practices become normalised in public spaces, any deviation from this can be perceived as a threat to young men's power and privileges (Chalmers *et al.* 2023). Within such a context, this study shows that young female students expressing bodily autonomy, being outspoken, and roaming around campus can become the focus of backlash by young men and women who partake in and benefit from the political power structure. Existing literature shows how controlling sexuality takes centre stage in moral policing, which is executed through social control of women's bodies (Bhalerao 2021).

Our study finds parallels with Kamal (2019), who identified how men in Bangladesh justified violence against women through tropes of 'bad women' and 'teaching a lesson'. In exploring backlash in online spaces in Bangladesh, Mahpara *et al.* (2022) note that the narrative of tradition versus modernity is used in framing feminism as a Western import which destroys local culture. This study shows how older students (especially males) appoint themselves guardians of 'tradition' to legitimise policing female bodies on campus. The notion of men being 'morally superior' protectors of 'morally vulnerable' women remains paramount (Bari 2021); while in a different way, older female students also become enactors of violence against primarily younger female students. The role women play in this exercise of power is effectively as enablers of existing patriarchal actors within the campus space.

Harassment exists within campus spaces where there are no effective mechanisms to ensure accountability, justice, or support. Even in cases that warrant intervention from law enforcement bodies, the privilege and patronage of perpetrators often blocks any scope for justice. Additionally, backlash does not always involve obvious animosity to feminist initiatives; it can take the form of trivialising existing barriers to gender justice by demonstrating apathy and non-participation (Sultan and Mahpara 2023). Inaction, disinterest, delegitimation, and deprioritisation can become strategies taken either deliberately or unconsciously to impede opportunities of challenging injustice (*ibid.*). Such actions are found in this study's narratives, where raising issues of harassment or bullying results in further

endangering young women and men. Additionally, there is far greater chance of issues being either co-opted or delegitimised; for example, to get a rival ousted from campus or to gain a reputation as a protector of women.

As pushback against gains from feminist initiatives becomes more pronounced in public spaces in Bangladesh, the legitimisation of misogynistic behaviours and calculated deployment of power through practices of policing women's bodies to secure male privilege can be seen as a microcosm of the wider prevalent social structures. Edström *et al.* (2023) point out that in countries where conservative ideologies remain dominant and gains for gender justice have achieved limited progress, backlash becomes deployed through a fuelling of structural discrimination. The students' experiences show how patriarchal dynamics normalise everyday violence and surveillance for women. This study sheds light on the covert ways in which anti-feminist backlash operates and becomes exacerbated by a lack of political will and accountability in institutional systems to enact change processes. We identify the tactics and tools employed by actors in Dhaka public universities to challenge progressive change around gender justice. The self-interest of politically motivated actors becomes tied to fostering opposition to progressive changes on campus, ultimately ensuring that patriarchal power is sustained, even when actors in the system change.

Notes

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- 6 We took the word from the cited article where Srivastava (2012: 7) used the term 'masculinised' to describe the public sphere as inherently masculine.
- 7 Fourth-year male student, 25 years, Dhaka University.
- 8 Third-year male student, 25 years, Dhaka University.
- 9 Third-year female student, 23 years, Jahangirnagar University.
- 10 Third-year female student, 23 years.

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The Centaur's Kick: Backlash as Disruptive Upgrades to Patriarchal Orders*

Jerker Edström¹

Abstract Backlash is not always pushing back against progress for women, but how is it still patriarchal? Sliced into three sections – on confluence, contestations, and cartographies – this article draws on a thesis about backlash as the exploitation of insecurity wrought by apparent crises to re/shape social orders, through re-fixing symbolic sites, namely the body, family, and nation. It begins by describing a confluence of types of actors and projects silencing feminist voice. Contesting gendered backlash narratives about the three sites are then explored, followed by a more theoretical section reflecting on cartographies of resonant concurrence and contradictions in backlash. Reflecting on masculinities, identification, and levels of hegemonic power, the argument is that the fixing of sites re/naturalises three deep-level patriarchal logics – phallogocentric binary (body), hierarchical (family), and categorical closed-systems (nation) principles – which helps us theorise the evolution of patriarchal hegemonies. This may inform more strategic countering of backlash.

Keywords patriarchal backlash, patriarchy, masculinities, hegemonic power, crisis, symbolism, affect, identification.

1 Introduction

After years of collaborations on masculinities between the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and partners from Kenya, India, and Uganda, we came together at a symposium for 'Undressing Patriarchy' a decade ago. At that time, we noted that emerging

anti-feminist backlashes [*sic*] and a more general backsliding on progress in gender equality have led some to warn of feminisms in crisis... with a neoliberal co-option of key terms and concepts in the service of global capitalist, religious or other geopolitical agendas.
(Edström, Das and Dolan 2014: 3)

Meanwhile, in a more private conversation in Rome in 2014, Joseph Ratzinger (or Pope Benedict XVI), predicted that 'the next great challenge the Church is going to face is gender ideology... the ultimate rebellion against God the Creator' (Caldwell 2023). A decade later, we find ourselves indeed overtaken by a global tide of what Faludi (1991) termed 'patriarchal backlash'.

Here, we set out a way of framing patriarchal backlash by addressing the question 'How is backlash patriarchal?' The framing comes out of a period of simultaneous literature reviews and conceptual discussions with partners, a co-organised series of five events at the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium 2020–21, and the development of a thesis with colleagues about backlash as a form of patriarchal crisis management (Edström, Greig and Skinner 2024). We draw on that thesis of how backlash works at times of apparent systemic crises through the exploitation of ontological insecurity, to divide constituencies and re/shape social orders into new or old patriarchal forms of oppression (*ibid.*). The sections that follow are framed around three Cs: a **confluence** of actors and projects silencing feminist voice (2), in **contestations** over the symbolic sites of bodies, families, and nations (3), and across **cartographies** of resonant – if also contradictory – concurrence (4). The article ends with a brief conclusion (section 5) about how this pair of spectacles may be helpful for further analysing patriarchy and countering backlash.

2 Confluence of disruptive politics of angst: framing patriarchal backlash

Feminist analyses have often diagnosed backlash as being 'different from politics-as-usual' and as fundamentally 'a reaction to progressive change' (Piscopo and Walsh 2020: 266). However, debates have increasingly grappled with the complexities of anti-feminist backlash playing out in conjunction with other divisive and oppressive politics. By looking at currently resonant forms of backlash the world over, and at what they seem to represent, we find it is not always reactive, nor always necessarily even pushing back, as we will illustrate below. To preface this analysis, Table 1 provides a schematic and simplified overview of different framings of such backlash politics, by the types of actions involved, nature of apparent aims (or attitudes to change), and likely protagonists involved, also providing examples of writers reflecting each perspective in the literature.

Debates over male resistance to change with women's empowerment and men reactively lashing back in 'crises of masculinity' are familiar in gender and development literatures and are often linked to men's violence against women (e.g. Silberschmidt 2005). However, debates over major backlash being a reaction or apprehensive preventive actions/strategies are also linked to whether these are conceived of mainly as actions by individuals, groups, and organisations

Table 1 Backlash framings by types of actions, aims, protagonists, and writers

Actions	Aims	Protagonists (examples)	Writers (examples)
Defensive reactions	Restorative/reversal	Various men's rights groups, illiberal civil society organisations (CSOs)/faith-based organisations (FBOs), online manosphere communities	Mansbridge and Shames (2008); Halperin-Kaddari and Freeman (2016)
Anticipative actions	Pre-emptive/delay/cancel	Elites with broader interests in status quo and/or growing profits	Rowley (2019); Townsend-Bell (2020)
Proactive strategies	Revolution/new future	Conservative/aspiring theocrats, ethnonationalist, fascist/far right	Graff, Kapur and Walters (2019); Fekete (2019)
Opportunistic convergence	Instrumental/mobilisation	Populist movements, authoritarian politicians, leaders	Paternotte and Kuhar (2017); Datta (2021); Denkovski, Bernarding and Lunz (2021)

Note Not all the authors cited here use the term 'backlash', but they debate essentially similar phenomena.
Source Author's own.

(e.g. Mansbridge and Shames 2008) or also more systemically embedded dynamics (e.g. Rowley 2019; Townsend-Bell 2020).

The ways in which backlash is understood as exceptional tends to bring in considerations of how it may be systemically rooted. Some pushback against changing gender relations within the context of development is not unexpected. For example, Eastin and Prakash (2013) find evidence of a 'Gender Kuznets Curve' as gender equality rises along with economic growth and development, to then stall or fall, but also that such pushback tends to later dissipate and equality increase again with further growth. They test a range of systemic (socioeconomic, political, and other) explanations, but this phenomenon can still not explain the recent concurrence of backlash across the globe – South, North, East, and West.

Teasing out the types of likely or typical protagonists linked to different types of backlash, as in Table 1, can help us to link typical actors and their aims to more systemic dynamics. Aside from reactive resistance from men's rights groups (Halperin-Kaddari and Freeman 2016) or more pre-emptive resistance from diverse networks of established economic, religious, and political elites and interests (Rowley 2019), recent radical agendas for societal change by certain fundamentalist faith-based movements more proactively lash out at feminist ideals of gender equality and inclusivity, portraying those as foreign and/or culturally contaminating.

Similarly, hard-right neofascist and ethnonationalist formations and parties aggressively push patriarchal programmes for a brave new world, if motivated more by xenophobic fears over replacement and 'demographic fever dreams' of ethnic

purification (Gökarkırsel, Neubert and Smith 2019). A plethora of protagonists are involved, but of recurring types across contexts and converging organically and opportunistically (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017; Datta 2021). Yet the interests and aims of such diverse actors are often contradictory and, whilst fought out in heated national struggles with resonant anti-globalist or anti-foreign rhetoric, backlash politics is always simultaneously imbricated with transnational connections and dynamics (Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Edström *et al.* 2024).

Whilst anti-feminist backlash emerges and intersects with such a diversity of interests and agendas beyond gender, it is crucial to understand how it is still gendered patriarchal, and how masculinity and angst over identity is exploited in this. Rather than representing an ever-present state of systemic maintenance or a one-off phenomenon, backlash appears episodically as resurgent when broader crises signal the unsustainability of prevailing orders and relations. A multiplicity of complex crises – financial, governance, security, pandemic, and environmental – are sometimes seen as interacting to create 'perfect storms' and threatening established interests. Yet, they are often simplified and selectively presented to stoke fear and anxiety for political gain, such as when security crises or economic collapse in one part of the world leading to displacement then gets presented as 'migrant crises' as described above.

It thus works at times of perceived crises through the exploitation of existential angst – or what Anthony Giddens (1991) termed 'ontological insecurity' – to divide constituencies along idealised ideas of identity and to subvert potential challenges, precisely in order to re/shape social orders into updated forms of oppression and expropriation, often justified with new mythologies of the 'good old days'. This is done through various forms of discourse capture, and the co-option and repurposing of narratives and language (Lewin 2021) for fixing three deeply symbolic 'spatial sites' – body, family, and nation – to resecure order in the face of looming chaos (Edström *et al.* 2024).

3 Contestations over the body, family, and nation

Backlash narratives about identity rely on the reduction of gender to binaries of male vs female sexed bodies, and they result in tangible repression of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex+ (LGBTQI+) and women's rights and freedoms. The uniting message is that 'It's Biology: Boys are boys... Girls are girls... always will be' (Corredor 2019: 629), as broadcast by the ultraconservative transnational advocacy group CitizenGO on a bus on international tours in 2017.² This also rests on a persistent undermining of social sciences and a fetishising of (pseudo-scientific) biology, even falling back on religion and creationism. In a highly proactive mode, conservative and faith-based formations (including the Vatican), illiberal civil society groups, and their transnational networks have long

been warning against 'gender ideology' as a nihilistic threat to mankind, as alluded to in the Introduction (section 1). Pope Francis apparently confirmed Ratzinger's earlier warning in a recent interview, namely that 'gender ideology, today, is one of the most dangerous ideological colonizations' (Mares 2023). Such theocrats and connected actors draw ideological power from religious doctrines to push campaigns to criminalise LGBTQI+ sexuality (such as in Uganda, Kenya, or Russia) and/or portray it as immoral (as in Egypt or Turkey), or doggedly protect personal status laws subordinating women, as, for example, in Lebanon, Pakistan, and India, trading in narratives that privilege some bodies' rights over others, such as the 'right to life' of the unborn.

A plethora of actors involved include certain men's rights groups (discussed immediately below) and more diffuse communities across the online 'manosphere' who engage in a highly reactive mode of backlash body politics. In response to increasing debates over gender-based violence, they mete out and trivialise misogynistic violence, as well as symbiotically engage in highly marketised cultural promotion of racialised hypermasculinity and femininity (Shaw 2018). Tapping into such hate-fuelled frustrated male entitlement, right-wing parties, political leaders, and militant, religious, and far-right groups opportunistically join a broader pushback against sexual and reproductive bodily rights. Examples of this include rolling back abortion rights in the United States (US) and some European Union countries, through the US global 'gag rule' reducing access to contraception in the global South, or through the 2017 amendment to the Child Marriage Restraint Act in Bangladesh.

Binary backlash narratives about sexed bodies (reducing the social complexity of gender relations and identities to bodily biological sex, or the meaning of 'woman' to 'female') are complemented by a globally resonant hallowing of supposedly traditional families, fundamentally patriarchal and hierarchical. Men's rights groups have a long history of reactive anti-feminism, with aggrieved fathers resisting domestic change arising from women's improved rights and status (Jordan 2016) and reported crises of masculinity from the loss of traditional male breadwinner roles (Halperin-Kaddari and Freeman 2016). Save Indian Family Foundation (SIFF) describes itself as a 'Men's Rights Organisation [sic]' which 'seeks to protect men and their families from... social experiments', on a mission to 'expose... large-scale violations of... Human Rights in the name of women's empowerment' (SIFF n.d.). Being a clear example of what Lewin (2021) refers to as the capture and repurposing of apparently progressive discourse, Srimati Basu (2016: 49) argues that SIFF's messaging reflects deep anxieties over marriage which she sees as central to 'the current crisis of the gender order in India, a "crisis of masculinity" [where] marriage features at the core'. At a global level, whilst headquartered in the US, the World Congress of Families 'opposes same-sex marriage, pornography, and abortion, while supporting

a society built on "the voluntary union of a man and a woman in a lifelong covenant of marriage" (World Congress of Families, International Organization for the Family & Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society 2002–2022).

This trend has long received proactive leadership and support from powerful Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, and other religious organisations, and the symbolic trope of 'family values' has been central in aspiring/ambitious theocrats' proactive rapprochement and occasional challenges to state power, which had, over the twentieth century, gradually secularised governance in many countries. For example, despite same-sex marriage being legal in England and Wales since March 2014, the head of the Church of England, Archbishop Justin Welby, told some Muslim UK students that 'marriage is between one man and one woman for life and sexual activity should be confined to marriage, that's in the Church of England's laws' (Selby 2015). But there is also more subtle collusion from neoliberal institutions and interests (including within the development sector) to effectively domesticate or privatise the social costs of care through women-only economic empowerment and 'women-as-mothers' social protection approaches, to obfuscate the unpaid care economy. In Turkey, Deniz Kandiyoti (2016: 106) describes this as a 'marriage of convenience between neoliberal welfare and employment policies and (neo)-conservative familialism', and a new form of 'family mainstreaming' policy is increasingly linking family and nation in, for example, Hungary, Poland, and Turkey (Moghadam and Kaftan 2019).

Narratives of the nation, then, also run deep in backlash politics, complementing the binary visions of bodies in docile domesticity within hierarchical families, by creating coherent categories of patriotic peoples. Despite the transnational organising of anti-feminist movements, national framings predominate strongly in their politics. We see ethnonationalists, neofascists, and paramilitary organisations proactively pushing for revival of national identity to strengthen national boundaries and military defence, or to rebuild old empires – American, Ottoman, Slavic, or Hindu. Resonant anti-feminist jingoistic narratives are also deployed in formerly colonised countries and framed as anti-colonial national regeneration projects, even if drawing on broader regional identities and/or faith-based ideologies, such as Africanism (Otieno and Makabira, this *IDS Bulletin*) or Hinduism (Das *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*).

Populist political parties and authoritarian leaders opportunistically draw on such sentiments to promote culturally specific racialised forms of male supremacy, using hypermasculine nationalist rhetoric. The masculinist ethnonationalism of the Indian ruling party presents majoritarian Hindu communities as being under threat from insider/outsider Others, especially Muslims (Das *et al.*, *ibid.*), and proffers a virilising project to restore the

nation, whilst turning towards authoritarianism with increasing restrictions on civil society and civil rights (Chigateri and Kundu, this *IDS Bulletin*). There are also strong links between the nation and capital, as hyper-capitalists seek deregulation of international capital flows and to dismantle multilateral frameworks on fiscal regulation and taxation, or worker and environmental protection or rights.

4 Cartographies of connected conflicted concurrence

In contemplating the resonant yet conflicted concurrence and connections in backlash across vastly diverse countries, the current tide of intensified patriarchal politics can increasingly be seen as an epochal shift at a rather fundamental level, pertaining to the age-old question of the evolution of patriarchy itself.

Whilst attempting to undress patriarchy and to follow Nancy Fraser's (2009) call to excavate the deep structures of gender injustice, which she explored within a three-dimensional view of 'social totality' – seeking economic redistribution, political representation, and sociocultural recognition for women – I proposed that we need to focus more directly on the underlying patriarchal features of societal orders (Edström 2014). The proposal was to search for the deeper structures of patriarchy through four dimensions (*ibid.*), after which a fifth was added (Edström, Singh and Shahrokh 2016); i.e. as: materially male privileged, socioculturally male centred, ideologically/politically male supremacist, and ethno-historically male identified, as well as epistemologically 'male ordered' (through a kind of reductive and peculiarly patriarchal Foucauldian power-knowledge). Yet at least three dilemmas remain. First, how do we account for intersectionality if it is gendered patriarchal? Second, how do we connect diverse national or regional variants geographically? Third, how do we explain backlash in relation to change in gender orders themselves? Reflecting on the above analysis, these deeper questions are raised here to consider three hopefully fruitful turns for further investigations.

The first question about intersectionality might be addressed by taking a decolonial turn, to tease out the multi-perspectival experiences of being in the world and understandings of our histories, which get exploited in backlash. This is connected to our sense of futurity and Anthony Giddens' (1991) notion of 'ontological security' with its associated psycho-sexually-to-socially supercharged potency of affect (Strick 2019). Our proposed ethno-historical dimension of Male³ identification (Edström *et al.* 2016), inspired by Simone de Beauvoir (1949) and other French feminists, can help us locate the role of ontological insecurity for affective identification, particularly when linked to intersectionally contested ideals of masculinity (Rich 2021; Das *et al.*, this *IDS Bulletin*). As touched on previously, we have seen plenty of resonant examples of backlash protagonists' deployment of notions of peoples' histories (contested as those are) and myths

of origins, which intersectionally shape their/our sense of identity, security, and place in the world, useful for backlash protagonists in Othering minorities and 'misfits'. Indeed, today's variegated politics of backlash are typically patriarchal and male identifying in ways that are already racialised, classed, and sexualised.

The second question about interconnected regional diversity might be approached by taking more of a spatial turn, to think critically about geographic levels of place, local to global. This analysis hinges on powerful protagonists within patriarchal orders responding to complex multilevel and interacting crises, by deploying David Harvey's (2001) notion of the 'spatial fix' to secure down order in the face of crises.⁴ In a sense, bodies, families, and nations can be related to levels, most obviously from the local to the national (except when we transgress various boundaries and borders, as more of us increasingly do). Yet this spatial fixing is not purely geographic, but also about social ordering, so we can equally relate the three sites to socioecological levels (from internal/individual and interpersonal to collective/communal to institutional and structural to ideological superstructure), and this may help explain the importance of symbolism in this spatial fixing; the sites are contested **because** of their symbolic power for ordering social relations.

But why not also focus on other symbolic sites ripe for spatial fixing? Think of the temple/church/mosque as a symbolically gendered (and gendering) meeting place for community (or contested religious sites), cemeteries (being desecrated in ethnic conflicts), or schools (Should they be secular or faith-based? Should they teach gender and sexuality, or perhaps creationism?) or, indeed, faith-based health services, and so forth (as new forms of gendering coloniality). Perhaps such analyses will also prove fruitful but, whilst also spatial and relatable to levels (whether geographic or socioecological) in similar ways, such sites also become increasingly institutional, which brings new analytical possibilities as well as likely a need for additional conceptual tools.

A major difference – and reason for focusing on the body–family–nation triad – is that the latter appears universally personal, intimate, and emotive, whereas gendered contestations over these other social institutions are perhaps more context specific. We should also make clear that the symbolic sites in focus here, imbricated in a type of spatial thinking, are different from types of policy issues, or deliberative political spaces where movements articulate voice, including their agendas and tactics (Nazneen, this *IDS Bulletin*), which may also be more appropriately linked to the latter types of social and political institutions.

Finally, then, the third and age-old question of how patriarchy survives and evolves might be linked to backlash and re-broached in a more deconstructivist turn. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) foregrounded the role of multiple

interdependent ideals of – and configurations of practices of – ‘masculinities’ as central to sustaining and evolving gender orders. They deploy Gramsci’s notion of hegemony to explain how configurations of ‘blocs’ of such masculinities – organised hierarchically – secure consent through incentives, rewards, and cajolement, but also through competition and violence when required. Gramsci (1971: 169–70) described hegemony from a ‘dual perspective... corresponding to the dual nature of Machiavelli’s Centaur – half animal and half human...[,] the levels of force and consent’.⁵ At the systemic level then, arguably patriarchal backlash reveals the moment of the Centaur’s brutish kick.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) also explain the coexistence of geographically diverse masculinities by describing national-to-regional-to-global interconnected and overlapping blocs of hegemonic masculinities. To some degree, this may help us to understand the interconnectedness and historical concurrence of backlash in so many places at a time of seeming interlocking crises. Yet we also need to link this to specific types of actors, interests, mechanisms, and material or other resources as structurally embedded, as discussed in the sections above.⁶

When it comes to the question of how consent to and support of backlash can be secured through the violent kick of backlash, we need to go beyond an analysis of actors and cultural and material interests and resources. The above discussion of exploitation of ontological insecurity to mobilise affect for Othering minorities and for identification may explain a large part. Yet we also need to account for how this oppressive racialised, classed, and sexualised gender order is naturalised and made to seem obvious or natural to so many. The more invisible epistemological dimension of Male order power-knowledge can help us here. The earlier (Edström 2014) proposal to explore this dimension provisionally characterised Male order ‘as: discriminating and reductive ..., abstract and binary (including gender binary, thus phallogocentric), homogenising and categorising...’ (*ibid.*: 119). This can then help us interpret how the three symbolic sites are used to re/naturalise three deep-level patriarchal principles: phallogocentric binary (body), hierarchical (family), and categorical closed-systems (nation) logics. Indeed, Maria Lugones (2010: 742) also identifies just such a tripartite ‘categorical, dichotomous, hierarchical logic’ as being ‘central to modern, colonial, capitalist thinking about race, gender, and sexuality’.

Many will recognise this kind of epistemological orientation as one of a Western logical positivist or empiricist bent, reifying natural and formal sciences. As briefly mentioned in the opening of section 3, backlash in body politics devalues social sciences and reifies natural sciences, but this also draws on a long history of subordination of the supposedly less hard sciences, under the more hegemonic and robustly masculine disciplines within academia. For instance, Steven Shapin (2022: 287) traces the

history of the common 'distinction between the "hard" and "soft" ..., widely invoked to contrast the natural and the social sciences', noting 'that it was good to be "hard"'. Exploring the drivers of the distinction and 'academic efforts to give the contrast coherent meaning', he also links the promotion of this duality-to-resource distribution for sciences (involving commercial and military interests), noting that the distinction is less secure today than it was in the 1960s–1970s (*ibid.*: 289). He notes how the 'gendered aspect of the distinction is quite clear, as are the historically situated relative values placed on the hard and the soft that trade on attitudes to gender' (*ibid.*: 290), which helps us to link this binary to the gender binary in a supremacist/subordinating way. He also links the distinction to 'other pertinent social distinctions – for example... the master and the servant, the powerful and the powerless' (*ibid.*), naturalising racialised and classed social hierarchy.

5 Conclusion

The myriad phenomena of patriarchal backlash across the globe today are no simple reaction to advances in the status of women, but rather a complex constellation of political, economic, and cultural forces and protagonists responding – reactively, pre-emptively, proactively, and opportunistically – to threats and opportunities wrought by apparent perfect storms of concurrent global crises, collapsing across spatial levels to threaten or unsettle our most intimate lives. Apprehension or angst over crises and uncertain futures – or ontological insecurity and identity crises, including racialised, classed, and sexualised crises of masculinity – are disruptively exploited through divisive gendered Othering, forcing binary choices to mobilise affinity with – and support for – backlash politics. Being about far more than women's rights, this is still very patriarchal at the core, simultaneously always classed, racialised, and sexualised. Deeply potent – both symbolically and practically – gender is always politicised in such politics in order to weave divisive narratives and tropes about our bodies, families, and nations. In order to control these unruly symbolic sites, backlash politics offers illusions of order amidst chaos.

Fraught with contradictions, backlash is both mythically nostalgic and defiantly nihilistic. It gets framed as local struggles against the foreign/global, whilst being transnationally connected (and often resourced). It converges as united against a purportedly political 'gender ideology' but is itself deeply politicising gender whilst deflecting from the conflicting interests of diverse protagonists and their followers. A better understanding of backlash is essential for building the critical consciousness needed for meaningful strategies to counter it. We must expose the contradictions, trace the links between the various types of actors, their typical narratives on bodies, families, and nations, and how the politics plays out at different levels. Any strategic approach to countering backlash holistically will demand an understanding of the bigger picture and deeper problem.

Notes

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- 1 Jerker Edström, Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, UK.
- 2 **CitizenGO** is an ultraconservative transnational advocacy group headquartered and founded a decade ago in Madrid, Spain. It claims to have over 18 million active members 'stopping radical lobbies imposing their agendas on societies'.
- 3 Whilst it may look odd to capitalise ordinary phrases such as 'Male supremacy' and 'Male privilege', I have taken de Beauvoir's (1949) lead from her capitalising 'Male identification' (as she does 'Othering'), because of its central function in the argument. This is very much so for 'Male order' which will be a new term for many readers, so I capitalise the 'Male' through all dimensions.
- 4 I am particularly indebted to Alan Greig for suggesting David Harvey's notion of the 'spatial fix' of the symbolic sites to resecure – or fix down – order and rule in our article (Edström *et al.* 2024).
- 5 Machiavelli (1532) had, in *Il Principe*, of course borrowed the metaphor from Greek mythology, where the Centaur – half-horse, half-man – coached Achilles in lethal military skills along with humane kindness and charismatic leadership.
- 6 Of course, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) did not focus on backlash as such, since their article was written before the onset of the current tide of anti-feminism, at a time of a more secure neoliberal 'consensus'.

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Disrupting Anxious Masculinity: Fraternity as Resistance^{*†}

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Abstract Within the experience of our work in India, context and positionality determine what we perceive as backlash against gender justice. An important underlying cause of backlash today is the widespread crisis of masculinities, where subaltern masculinities are evolving differently in response to the aggressive nationalist Hindutva masculinity. Gender and development strategies have failed to recognise or address this. This article analyses grounded examples from our action research towards generating new knowledge on how two collectives are negotiating backlash. These include the community-based transgender organisation Kolkata Rista and Humqadam, a platform comprising male activists in Uttar Pradesh working with men on gender equality. Applying the framework of ontological insecurity, this article explores ways for discovering common ground in situations where polarisation destroys the space for debate and discussion. Reflecting on the political practice of fraternity, the article examines how social movements can shift strategies when faced with exclusionary discourses.

Keywords crisis of masculinities, ontological insecurity, transgender rights, Hindutva ethnonationalism, building fraternity, inclusion/belongingness as resistance, action research, gender backlash, feminist interventions.

1 Introduction

Indian politics today is characterised by increasing authoritarianism which draws on the ideology of Hindutva aimed at establishing and promoting political Hinduism while fomenting right-wing ethnonationalism. It entails normalisation of all kinds of violence, especially against minorities, legitimised using a gendered language (Ray 2018: 373–6). While the idea of the Hindu nation has historical roots, its reinvention in the last three decades is partly attributable to the changes in the political

economy. India's embrace of neoliberal policies in these decades has shifted development priorities and led to acute precarity and growing insecurity. These anxieties have created fertile ground for a right-wing ethnonationalism to take root, which feeds off the long-standing and growing resentment of the Hindu right towards what it saw as 'appeasement' of the Muslims and other minorities. The confluence of these anxieties has contributed effectively to the launching of the political Hindu right, and its agenda of the Hindu state (Subramanian 2019; Ray 2018; Palshikar 2017).

Gender backlash, examined here through an intersectional lens, is enmeshed in this historical context, revealing the deeply gendered and patriarchal construction of ethnonationalism today: the core driver being a widespread crisis of masculinities. Reinventing mythic notions of a glorious past, this discourse constructs Hindu masculinity with a promise of control (Srivastava 2019), where the ire over socioeconomic insecurities can be directed towards the other, primarily religious minorities, especially Muslims, but also non-upper-caste Hindus. Performative acts of egregious violence directed at Muslim men are recorded and shared on social media to foment communal tensions (Mukherjee 2020). Groups such as the Dalit-Bahujan⁶ or transgender people are tolerated if they acquiesce to Hindutva supremacy. The impact of this onslaught is changing masculinities everywhere, reinforcing men's adherence and linkage to identity-based communities. This is leading to deep conflicts between men from different communities and castes, enacted on the battleground of gender.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the process by which the Centre for Health and Social Justice undertook action research towards generating new knowledge on addressing patriarchal backlash, while section 3 builds a theoretical framing to understand the construction of anxious masculinity. Section 4 illustrates through grounded examples from our action research how the two partner collectives are negotiating backlash. The conclusion (section 5) draws together what we have learned about the politics of resistance.

2 The journey

The Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ), an Indian non-profit organisation working on masculinities, health, and gender justice, has been exploring ways to counter gender backlash to strengthen gender justice. CHSJ has been facilitating a process of participatory action research with two collectives, Kolkata Rista (KR) and Humqadam, each quite different in their background, structure, and aims.

KR in West Bengal is a self-organised community-based organisation of socially and economically marginalised transgender people with outreach among various lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender+ (LGBT+) groups, including the traditional Hijras⁷ and men who have sex with men, termed MSM.

KR's main work has been on preventing HIV/AIDS, but it has also been mobilising around incidents of discrimination and violence against the transgender community because of their gender identity. Humqadam is a platform comprising male activists working on gender justice and masculinities in Uttar Pradesh. Initially members of the network Men's Action for Stopping Violence Against Women (MASVAW),⁸ these activists felt they had to respond to the increasingly polarised relationships among men across caste and religious divides.

The senior team of KR and some selected MASVAW members came together with CHSJ researchers for an inception workshop in February 2022, where the facilitator team introduced action research methodology, and the groups identified their research objectives and finalised their annual research plans. The MASVAW members named their initiative 'Humqadam', whose objective was to investigate possible pathways and collective processes to challenge the aggressive and toxic masculinities in the current scenario of radical nationalism. Humqadam decided to explore existing local traditions of social solidarity and syncretic practices and find ways to build upon these while periodically sharing their experiences with each other. KR, on the other hand, wanted to find out if the *National Legal Services Authority v Union of India* (NALSA) judgment of 2014⁹ and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2019 (TG Act)¹⁰ had brought about any changes for the transgender community and how these instruments could be more relevant and useful. They conducted an enquiry among transgender groups, as well as key stakeholders, through focus groups, shared their findings with everyone, and started a transgender helpline. Action-reflection and peer-learning were two key elements of the action research process. After a year (February 2023), the groups reconvened once again to share experiences, review their learnings, recalibrate their approaches, and make a fresh set of annual plans.

This article draws from, and analyses, transcriptions, reports, and video recordings made at each of these events, as well as social media posts.

3 The social imaginary of anxious masculinity: constructing ontological security

In recent decades, the rise of populist politics in the heart of liberal democracies, both in the West and in India, has dislodged several rules held sacrosanct by the liberal order. Populist politics worldwide has now made acceptable certain beliefs and emotions such as fear, hatred, and contempt for certain groups, even though representations of the enemy differ across contexts, as, for example, Muslims as the enemy in India and immigrant populations across Europe. In analysing the conditions giving rise to this politics, Kinnvall and Svensson (2022) point to the structural and affective changes that underlie populist mobilisation and the polarisation of everyday insecurities. Political scientists and

political psychologists are increasingly using the concept of 'ontological security' to analyse populist politics, to focus attention on the centrality of emotions in reproducing both structural power and power relations at an individual and collective level.

Ontological security is a conceptual frame that seeks to understand subjectivity. Originating in psychoanalysis (Laing 1990) and sociology (Giddens 1991), it focuses on the management of anxiety in the constitution of the self (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020). Giddens (1991) describes it as being about a sense of place in a changing world, whereas ontological insecurity is about the lack of such a narrative space. Right-wing populist politics operates in this space by meeting the desire for wholeness or sense of place with the fantasy narrative of a singular identity securely anchored in time and place. Central to this desire and narrative is a collective social imaginary constructed through narratives of gendered and racialised fantasies (Kinnvall 2019).

At the consultation seminar for this action research project in January 2021, a speaker pointed out that while the political economy in India had been changing over three decades, the anxieties unleashed were not apparent until these were woven into an emotive narrative of ethnonationalism that fuelled Hindu right-wing politics. As Srivastava (2019) points out, 'Hindu masculinity seems to be an identity that promises men control over a world that otherwise seems to be passing them by'. The existence of socioeconomic problems in the lives of men – such as unemployment – is interpreted as disruption in this utopia (*ibid.*).

The constituent elements of the narratives that seek to consolidate a singular, stable identity are collective emotions such as love for the nation, or hate, fear, or disgust of the stranger other (Kinnvall 2018). Fantasies of unity are projected to rescue the belief in (imaginary) core identities. The master signifiers in India are national and religious identity where a Hindu identity is projected as the national identity (*ibid.*). This is accompanied by a governing style that challenges the authority, neutrality, and expertise of traditional establishment elites, such as the independent press and politicians who are liberal and secular. The right-wing party has constantly discredited these liberal and secular elites as being out of touch with mass sentiment and therefore un-Indian, while pledging to protect India from 'the "pseudo-secularism" of the Congress Party' (Kinnvall 2017: 96). These sentiments have at their core an ideology of nativism, which argues that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group, which in India has become Hindu (Andrews, Kinnvall and Monroe 2015; Adeney 2015; Agius, Bergman Rosamond and Kinnvall 2020; Kinnvall and Svensson 2022; Khan *et al.* 2017).

Nativism in populist discourse is intimately connected to gender, demarcating the nation's women from other alien women (Yuval-Davis 2008). In such contexts, nativism intertwines with

a gender discourse based on the regulation of sexuality and reproduction within the nation. This discourse of protection of 'our women' is constructed by demonising the gender culture of 'the others': as in the characterisation of Muslim men as hypersexualised and a threat to Hindu women (Andrews *et al.* 2015; Dixit 2014). Banerjee refers to Hindutva as 'muscular nationalism', which promotes a more aggressive and disciplined Hindu male needed to firmly deal with the danger posed by a religious other, in the project to make India a true Hindu nation (Banerjee 2012). Kinnvall (2018) describes Hindutva as anxious nationalism, in which narratives of national identity merge with images of religious resurgence, gender, and race to construct the other in response to ontological insecurity as a sense of emasculation.

These fantasy narratives of nation and religion are kept in place through forms of emotional governance which in the Foucauldian sense implies the ways in which society governs emotions through the cultural and institutional processes of everyday life (Kinnvall and Svensson 2022; Crawford 2014; Koschut 2019; Meyer 2020; Kinnvall 2018). This gives individuals a sense of what is regarded as appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and the circumstances in which certain emotions – for instance, fear, hatred, and contempt – become acceptable. Populist agents, such as the Hindutva mass organisations in India, project fantasy narratives that concurrently reinforce reified notions of belonging and alter norms regarding what is deemed to be acceptable behaviour.

The two case studies discussed in this article reveal how at the micro level ontological security is being constructed by Hindutva agents through, on the one hand, fantasies of Hindu unity and Muslim otherness, and on the other, the appropriation of transgenderism as part of the Hindu tradition and therefore Hindu nation. The case studies also show how creative strategies under the parapets are being cultivated by the two collectives to resist and refuse being subsumed in a narrative of the nation not of their making.

4 Partners in action

4.1 'Who will stand with us?': Humqadam

The discursive power of the Hindutva narrative and its translation into the materiality of governance is nowhere more evident than in Uttar Pradesh. This large northern state shares with the rest of India an immense diversity of population belonging to different caste groups, religious affiliations, language, and inter-regional groupings. And yet despite this great diversity, or perhaps because of it, the politics of polarisation and consolidation of Hindutva rhetoric in discourse and policy has resulted in the breakdown of social cohesion; threats to the lives and livelihoods of minority (especially Muslim) communities (Ramaseshan 2017), and a hostile environment for social activists (Ali 2022).

It is here that the Humqadam collective, originally members of the MASVAW network, continue working in the prevailing political climate, living and working among poor, rural, low-caste groups. As geographically dispersed individuals, they were extremely vulnerable to the onslaughts of Hindutva agents, including the local administration. By working together over 18 months on a common objective to build social solidarity between Hindu and Muslim groups, they found ways to renew belief in their own role as social activists and in the power of social solidarity.

Initially fearful of reprisals from an aggressive environment, they were hesitant about a programme of social solidarity. In individual interviews (January 2021) and in the inception workshop (February 2022), members shared many concerns: 'We are very conscious about voicing protest. It's about [fear of] backlash.' Solidarity seemed unlikely: 'Is it possible to develop solidarities in today's environment? Who will stand with us? Can we fight these adversities?' Another added, 'To stand with each other now, trust is very important. I live elsewhere and what if something happens to me? These questions didn't occur to me earlier...' Those members from a Muslim background felt especially insecure:

Earlier we did not think so much about religion and caste. I never thought of my identity earlier. It had happened once 20 years earlier when the Babri Masjid was demolished by a mob... But now my identity is tagged to everything I write and that has become a major problem.

Given this situation, voicing protest in ways that might jeopardise their safety and that of their community was out of the question; new ways had to be found. One of these was rediscovering existing social events in the Hindu and Muslim calendar which had earlier brought together different communities living side by side. But these social celebrations had gradually acquired primarily religious connotations as community identities hardened into political affiliations. Humqadam members recollected their own early life experiences, when an ambiguous and less divisive meaning was attached to these celebrations. Consequently, Humqadam members demonstrated in small and subtle ways against division and polarisation by celebrating Holi (the festival of colour) as an inter-community festival, reviving a tradition of organising Iftar to break the fast together and collectively celebrating Eid. There were also purely secular events that they made into inter-community and cross-caste celebrations. The understanding and preservation of 'saajhi virasat' (shared heritage) emerged as a core theme for bridge-building between communities.

These instances of syncretic practices that were being reinterpreted were based for the most part on religious traditions, Hindu and Muslim. Thus far, activists within MASVAW had been secular in orientation, considering religion as patriarchal

and inimical to the work they did on gender equality. But now, as Humqadam, their responsibility lay in constructing counter-narratives by reinterpreting the social meaning of shared Hindu-Muslim shrines and syncretic systems of beliefs in the Sufi and Bhakti traditions. There are many instances of these in Uttar Pradesh which Humqadam members visited and documented, realising the popularity of these sites among both Muslims and Hindus from across India. These syncretic belief systems are so deeply rooted in the social fabric that they have for the most part survived the polarising Hindutva narrative.

Humqadam members also had to rethink their stance on mobilising communities around the secular tradition of rights-claiming that saw the state as an objective arbiter and responsible duty bearer. They realised that this was inadequate in the present circumstances where the urgent need was to build social solidarity and revive relationships among and between communities at the local level. They had earlier used the Indian Constitution in their work but from an equality and citizens' rights perspective, it was an unlikely fit for the task at hand. They debated the value of using the 'fraternity' principle of the constitution instead.¹¹

The term 'fraternity' used in India today is distinct from its meaning in other contexts such as ethnic/familial/brotherhood relations. Its usage in India by public institutions and civil society groups to counter hegemonic and divisive discourses about community and nation refers to the principle in the Indian Constitution which Dr Ambedkar, then first Minister of Law and Justice, had clarified in the constitutional debates in 1949 (Lok Sabha Secretariat [1950] 2014: 979). According to Dr Ambedkar, India was lacking in equality and wanting in the principle of fraternity as a key goal of the constitution. The fraternity principle – that is, Indians being one people – is the basis of social solidarity and needs to be actively pursued, he argues, rather than being taken for granted. In recent years, even though it is not justiciable, the Supreme Court has reiterated the 'golden principle of fraternity' (*Indian Express* 2022, 2023) when dealing with the increased cases of hate speech and religious intolerance.

The promotion of fraternity gave Humqadam the possibility of interpreting all kinds of events at the local level as being within the wider meaning of amity and friendship. It also gave them the opportunity to neutralise the threat of violence from state officials who in recent times have designated themselves as keepers of Hindutva rather than servants of the secular state.¹² Urging state officials to display the constitutional principles on office noticeboards gave the Humqadam members an opportunity to promote the message of fraternity as well as acting as protection. One of the Humqadam members said, 'Earlier we were using the constitution as a sword, but now we are using it as a shield'.

Through their work in the community and their mutual support, Humqadam itself has become a living example of fraternity and collaboration. KR, on the other hand, has taken up the question of why laws and judicial orders do not lead to changes for the stigmatised transgender community.

4.2 '*Amader swapnero daam achhe*' [Our dreams have value too]: Kolkata Rista

The Hindutva narrative is inclusive of societal groups who have a place in Hindu rituals: transgender communities, especially the Hijras, are one such group, despite their syncretic practices within Sufi traditions. Whereas in other contexts the rise of populist right-wing politics has meant a hostile environment for gender-fluid people, the transgender community in India is protected by the right wing, provided they live within the Hindu tradition (Goel 2020). This protection has been translated into laws that, while recognising their special status, also sets boundaries to their identity and imprisons them in a governmental category.

Kolkata Rista (KR), a civil society organisation of working-class transgender people, is based in Kolkata. As an activist organisation, it has for years been involved in the nationwide movement for trans rights to bring major changes to the laws affecting their status, including the TG Act. Despite the law, however, social discrimination persists in families, neighbourhoods, and institutions, including in service provision. Given this specific challenge to gender equality, KR wanted to find out whether the law has led to any changes in the way the community is perceived, and in the enabling environment for the transgender community.

During 2022, KR organised several events and workshops that brought together different stakeholders connected to the law, advisory lawyers, and the transgender community itself to discuss, dialogue, and learn about the law. Key officials in relevant departments heard directly from transgender people about the hardships they faced in their daily lives: being discriminated against and looked down upon at work and in the public institutions they approached for services. In turn, transgender people heard from these officials their difficulties in implementing the new law. The officials also did not know how to use the law as they had not received any orientation about the law itself or the protocols.

KR helped produce a documentary film featuring the lives of three transgender women and screened it in July 2022 at a stakeholder dialogue in Kolkata. Whereas for the state officials it was instructive, community members experienced it differently. At the first viewing with the officials present, the community members' response was of recognition. But as they watched the film again on their own after the officials left, many wept, expressing their embodied experience of living with grief and

rejection that laws could not mitigate. Sharing these experiences with different audiences, the film gained a life of its own. At a screening in a health facility attended by scientists and doctors to commemorate World AIDS Day, a surgeon offered his services free of cost to one of the people profiled in the film who required a major operation. Whereas doctors in hospitals generally treat a patient who is transgender with scant respect, their embodied grief demonstrated here evoked solidarity, as notably happened with this surgeon.

The difficulties of implementing the TG Act became increasingly apparent, not least because of the hesitation expressed by community members themselves. KR had envisaged that when community members were facing a crisis, the new law could be used to help them. However, the working-class transgender community were hesitant about lodging formal complaints even during a crisis; what they requested instead was mediation, shelter, and support. They were haunted by the sense that 'Society will never accept us, no matter what laws are passed'. They didn't really want a special law for their community:

Whatever laws or rules are framed, they should apply equally for those who are human, not separate laws for men or women or transgenders. We are human so we just need to be treated as human beings, that is all we expect.

They were glad at least there was a law, but it could not give them the respect and empathy they desired.

Simultaneously, the service providers or duty bearers were unsure about their roles in implementation. The Covid years (2020–21), intervening since the enactment of the law, had delayed preparation of the protocols needed for the ministries to act. Certification is a recognition of the person as transgender by the government and is a conduit to entitlements; for instance, benefit from government schemes, training, social services, and other amenities. Yet despite KR's efforts to register hundreds of applicants for transgender identity cards or to organise workshops explaining the law, there was little progress in implementation. The only way to make duty bearers conscious of their responsibility towards transgender people was a direct appeal to their sense of social solidarity, encouraging them to act with empathy.

Through their efforts, KR learned how the law on its own was not going to change everything: the law only governs the relations of the community with the state and its duty bearers, it cannot change relations within the society of which duty bearers are a part. Inclusive and affinitive practices that appeal to people's sense of humanity may be the only way to build social solidarity and transform social relations. For their embodied grief to be recognised, the transgender community needs the fraternity,

friendship, and acceptance of the wider community. As a senior police official commented,

The question is: can a law actually give freedom to any group, is that how women were able to progress or Dalits gain status? The law can only support. This needs a social revolution. We have to bring about transformation from within society.

5 Conclusion

Gender backlash in India, examined here through an intersectional lens, is enmeshed in the contemporary political context of strident ethnonationalism. It is deeply gendered and patriarchal in that it hegemonises Hindu masculinity at the expense of Muslim and other minority men, resulting in men's growing adherence to identity-based communities to seek support and protection in an increasingly hostile environment. The consequence is a rise in conflicts between men from different communities and castes, enacted on the battleground of gender. It is in this context that both collectives, Humqadam and KR, live, work on, and counter gender backlash so that the communities they serve can live in amity and security.

Given their unique and differing locations, their ways of countering gender backlash differ but also share commonalities. Humqadam learned that protesting the victimisation of Muslim men puts them and their communities in danger and therefore new ways had to be found. In the face of dangerous division, in which lives were at stake, their way of countering backlash was to promote the understanding and preservation of '*saajhi virasat*' (shared heritage) in order to build bridges between communities. As transgender people, KR enjoy a distinctive position in that they are recognised as being part of the Hindu nation; the TG Act confirms state recognition. They learned, however, that the law, while it gave them rights and recognition, also imprisons them in a governmental category so that the sole power to define who they are lies with the state.

This legal definition cannot comprehend, nor can it make provision for the diversity of transgender people's lives or their daily experience of grief because of rejection, hostility, and fear, experiences that are uniquely theirs because they live outside of and beyond the accepted societal understanding of gender. Thus, while KR struggled to learn more about the law and make it work for the community, they had, at the same time, to do it in ways that not only followed the wording of the law but also appealed for empathy, amity, and social solidarity from the different constituencies responsible for implementing the law: the state administration, including the police, service providers in health and education, as well as civil society.

Hitherto, social activist collectives such as Humqadam and KR had pursued a liberal politics of rights advocacy, but that is no longer feasible in the current context. For Humqadam, the main task shifted to building bridges between communities, while KR opted to build empathy for and understanding of the everyday grief they face among different constituencies. In so doing, both groups have had to shift away from rights-claiming. The rights framework confers entitlements on a citizen/subject envisaged as an undifferentiated individual without the marking of social relations of gender, caste, and community, a prototype that nevertheless bears the imprint of an upper caste, propertied, male who is Hindu. This of course was always the case, but in recent years Hindutva has intensified attempts to homogenise the subject/citizen who can be considered as belonging to the nation. Both Humqadam and KR serve communities which are diverse and different.

Given this, both collectives have shifted from rights-claiming towards building a new politics of resistance, namely resistance to being subsumed by the homogenising tendencies of Hindutva politics. Humqadam has focused on finding and promoting the common traditions among the different groups and communities that make up the social fabric. Since many of these traditions are distinctive to the Hindu and Muslim religions, they have had to rethink their own understanding of secularism. KR, while promoting the understanding of the law, nevertheless resist being defined only in legal terms by calling for recognition and empathy for who they are and their suffering. Both Humqadam and KR have resisted being subsumed in governmental categories not of their making in different ways with those actions that in discursive and representational terms refuse to go along with the hegemonic narratives (de Alwis 2009; Mukhopadhyay 2017).

In concluding this article, we return to the social imaginary of anxious masculinity and how Hindutva, India's current populist politics, constructs ontological security through the fantasy narrative of a singular identity, the Hindu male, securely anchored in time and place, and his other, the Muslim man and men from other minority communities. India's severe structural and political economy crisis, joblessness, and increasing inequality have given rise to anxieties that have been successfully woven into an emotive narrative of ethnonationalism by Hindutva agents and a populist right-wing parliamentary politics. In this socio-political environment, the politics of resistance pursued by Humqadam and KR at the micro level in their localised environment may seem a veritable David versus Goliath struggle.

Nevertheless, these struggles are disruptive of the ontological security built around the fiction of the singular Hindu identity that Hindutva erects. This is because both Humqadam and KR have recognised that there is no interlocutor to address appeals for rights and fairness, since neighbours have become enemies and

state institutions are implicated in the denial of rights. Instead, in different ways they have chosen to use the language of emotion: that of fraternity, friendship, and common heritage (Humqadam), and to expose their vulnerability to grief and suffering (KR); and in so doing, they both appeal for friendship and solidarity. Fraternity is not just a constitutional principle, a guarantee forever, as Dr Ambedkar warned us (Lok Sabha Secretariat [1950] 2014). It is a resource that is relational and can only be forged in the everyday practice of neighbourliness and solidarity, and both Humqadam and KR counter exclusionary discourses through the political practice of fraternity, by building belongingness as resistance.

Notes

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- 4 Sana Contractor, PhD student, Institute of Tropical Medicine, Belgium.
- 5 Satish Kumar Singh, Senior Advisor, Centre for Health and Social Justice, India.
- 6 Dalit-Bahujan refers to the hitherto 'lower caste' and ethnic tribes who have faced generations of historical disadvantage but constitute most of the Indian population. The identity is a political reframing of the 'scheduled castes/tribes/OBC' listed as government categories for affirmative action and special welfare benefits.
- 7 The Hijra tradition is one of the long-standing ways of identifying gender fluidity in South Asia and is linked to spiritual powers in the Hindu and Sufi traditions.
- 8 Men's Action for Stopping Violence Against Women started in 2001 to work among men and boys to promote gender equality. However, in the current polarised climate, MASVAW was unable to take a public position in cases of men

perpetuating egregious violence against men of other communities (Muslim or Dalit).

- 9 See **NALSA v Union of India judgment**.
- 10 See **TG Act**. The transgender community, labelled as a 'criminal tribe' through a colonial-era law, was termed after independence as being habitual offenders. After decades of struggle, a judgment by the Supreme Court ('NALSA' judgment, 2014) affirmed that transgender persons had the right to self-identify and the constitutional rights to life, dignity, and autonomy. This led to the enactment of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act (December 2019).
- 11 As a cautionary note, it was pointed out at the joint project workshop in February 2023 that the use of fraternity in many Indian languages is gendered, referring to friendship relations between different groups of men, and not necessarily women.
- 12 A Humqadam member was threatened by a police officer because despite being an upper-caste Hindu, he was 'supporting Muslim organisations' by including his name in a funding application by a Muslim organisation, which for the officer was equivalent to 'anti-national' activities.

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

Shraddha Chigateri¹ and Sudarsana Kundu²

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



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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 (Piscopo 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' (Piscopo 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*⁷ 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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Gender Equality vs 'Morality': The Erosion of Gender Agendas in Kenya*

Phil Erick Otieno¹ and Alfred Makonjio Makabira²

Abstract This article seeks to interpret the recent erosion of gender equality agendas in Kenya through a lens of anti-gender pushback, or patriarchal backlash. Since 2013, Kenyan governments have increasingly been appealing to citizens' emotions through apparently 'sound' discourse, citing simple de-contextualised narratives that resonate with many people, such as 'family values' and 'Kenyan moral codes'. Gender equality – and policies and praxis to advance this – is increasingly framed as 'non-African', with laws, policies, and practices focused upon gender justice depicted as destructive of the 'African family', underscored by a particular framing of religion and morality. By including a broader understanding of the diverse manifestations of backlash within the Kenyan context, this article focuses on how notions of morality are mobilised by a range of implicated actors – government, politicians, media, and repressive religious forces – to undermine policies, laws, and discourse that seek to further gender justice in Kenya.

Keywords gender equality, gender pushback, patriarchal backlash, Kenya, family, Africanism.

1 Introduction

Since 2013, following the first election held under the Constitution of Kenya promulgated in August 2010 (Government of Kenya 2010), Kenyan governments have been actively propagating forceful discourse to cite simple de-contextualised narratives that seem to resonate with much of the population, such as 'family values' and 'Kenyan moral codes'. The current government – elected on 9 August 2022 – has been a part of a broader renaissance of cultural and religious fundamentalism, through which efforts towards gender justice are portrayed as 'non-African', and as a system aimed at destroying the 'African family'. In establishing conformity to religious moral teachings, the government has been keen on reinforcing and supporting structures and actors promoting and defending what they perceive to be Kenyan moral



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codes. On 14 February 2023, during a prayer meeting held at the Nyayo National Stadium, President William Ruto told the Church that it would be at the centre of the nation's affairs. He said that he was happy that the Church had rediscovered its place in the governance of the country and expressed optimism that with God at the fore Kenya will prosper (*Nation* 2023).

Focusing on these dynamics through an analysis of an Advocates for Social Change Kenya (ADSOCK) study on Patriarchal Backlash Towards Gender Equality in Kenya (Otieno and Makabira, forthcoming), this article seeks to interpret the recent erosion of gender agendas in Kenya through a lens of anti-gender pushback, or patriarchal backlash. Including a broader understanding of the diverse manifestations of backlash within the Kenyan context, we focus on how notions of morality are mobilised by government actors, politicians, and repressive religious forces to undermine policies, laws, and discourse that seek to further gender justice. In section 2, we first lay out a way of conceptually framing patriarchal backlash. This is followed by a background section contextualising the recent pushback on gender justice in Kenya (section 3). Section 4 explores the increasing use of morality and supposed African family values in Kenya as our focused case in point. We then briefly reflect (section 5) and conclude (section 6) on the implications of our analysis for gender justice and for working more effectively with men to counter this trend.

2 Conceptual framing

Patriarchal backlash can be seen as an epicentre for open contestation about social norms in the present but also as initiating substantial structural change in societies for the future. Conceptualising backlash, Alter and Zürn (2020) highlight important elements such as (1) retrograde objectives, and (2) extraordinary goals and tactics that have reached the threshold of entering mainstream public discourse. Backlash movements are here conceived of as actors mobilised around achieving retrograde objectives promoted and pursued through emotional appeals, including nostalgia, and negative sentiments such as anger and resentment. The extraordinary nature of their goals often demands or inspires the breaking of taboos to underscore the claims. Reaching a threshold of entering mainstream public discourse often leads to the reshaping of institutions, both informally by repurposing and reinterpreting existing rules and processes, and formally through amending policies and processes to alter future trajectories of politics. As such, the dynamics of backlash are varied among different sectors, institutions, and milieus. Backlash can operate as a form of invisible power, as rhetoric and discourse instilling repressive normative frameworks and binaries, which in turn translate into concrete measures and initiatives, in some cases even as part of a wider policy and strategic approach.

Anti-gender campaigns have a longer history and started as soon as the term 'gender' was introduced in the UN in the 1990s (Corrêa 2017). Constellations of theocrats and other conservative actors organised around fighting 'gender ideology' which they alleged to be a tool of 'an ideological colonisation' that aimed at destroying the traditional family and family values, mobilised first in Europe and Latin America and then in Africa. Women's and human rights defenders – particularly those defending sexual and reproductive rights – were subjected to hostilities by these anti-gender movements which have also now become more evident in the Kenyan context.

We have recently seen new twists on the theme of gender justice in manifestations of – and tactics deployed in – Kenyan patriarchal backlash. This includes attempts to discredit arguments about gender equality or the gendered nature of violence, in ways which also support efforts to preserve existing gender norms and hierarchies in both private and public spaces. The Kenyan government has reneged on commitments to gender equality norms outlined in its manifesto, such as the establishment of a rule not allowing more than two-thirds of one gender in elective and appointive positions in the public sector, and appointing women to 50 per cent of its cabinet positions within 12 months of the election. Manifestations of backlash thus range from refusal by political elites and state institutions to comply with constitutional provisions and court orders, to verbal and physical violence witnessed in public spaces. Tactics have also included a muffling of the voices of certain civil society actors, through the government strategically employing people seen to be challenging the status quo and holding the government accountable; once in government, they can no longer question the same government in which they serve.

The apparent thinking underpinning these manifestations and tactics is also very binary and oppositional, specifically in terms of framing Kenya against the West and demanding a binary choice of position. For example, when the Supreme Court of Kenya (SCoK) upheld the right of the National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (NGLHRC) to register and associate, the anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex+ (LGBTQI+) movement in Mombasa led protesters from the Makadara Grounds to the County Commissioner's Office to present a memorandum to protest the ruling. Clerics also asked President Ruto to 'unequivocally denounce LGBTQ' like his Ugandan counterpart Yoweri Museveni (Bwana 2023). They alleged that Ruto 'appears to sit on the fence, fearing the wrath of the Western nations' (*ibid.*).

3 Background

Kenya has previously been seen as being relatively progressive on gender in socioeconomic development. The fact that pushback has now increased from more general inaction and resistance

to more active retrograde strategies is perhaps indicative of extraordinary tactics having reached the threshold of entering the mainstream. Backlash in Kenya has taken place in a context where state action or inaction with regard to promoting gender equality and women's rights features alongside persistent and fundamental problems such as negative social norms and shrinking civic space. An example of inaction is the two-thirds gender quota as stipulated in Article 81[b] of the Constitution of Kenya that states 'not more than two-thirds of the members of the elective public bodies shall be of the same gender' (Government of Kenya 2010). The realisation of this provision in the law has remained elusive since the promulgation of the constitution in August 2010. Non-implementation or poor resourcing can be a form of backlash: for instance, to date, the State Department for Gender Affairs (SDGA) and the National Gender and Equality Commission (NGEC) are not equipped with adequate specialisation, authority, and/or the requisite resources to enable them to effectively carry out their mandates. They have also faced restructuring and budget cuts in recent years. As a result, government commitments and policy statements on gender equality remain insubstantial.

Beyond formal policies and processes, discrediting arguments about gender equality and efforts to preserve gender hierarchies have gained traction over the last decade in Kenya. A few examples of how the co-optation and twisting/repurposing of language (Lewin 2021) has been happening within anti-gender and patriarchal backlash discourses include 'what-aboutism' (a shorthand for 'What about men and boys?'), particularly with regard to the boy child, and claims that men and boys are in crisis due to the feminisation of society. Political and religious leaders who are proponents of such narratives, posturing as a prosecuted minority, claim that men and boys are underprivileged in contemporary Kenyan society in the face of the over-empowerment of women and girls, which they claim is making men and boys lose their morally rightful place in society.

The boy child narrative has gained impetus since the initiative was taken over by the wife of the Deputy President, who is a pastor in one of the mainstream churches in Kenya. She has said time and again that once you mitigate the issues of a boy child, you mitigate the issues of a girl child:

Boychild is the carrier of the seed, he is the one that is carrying the seed for the future of this nation. And therefore if we are going to change this country, we must save our boy children. (Wanjala 2023)

The protagonists claim that the proverbial tables have slowly turned and that Kenya is staring at a cyclic gender evolution. ADSOCK's most recent study on Patriarchal Backlash Towards Gender Equality in Kenya shows the narrative of 'boys are under

siege' being expressed across its five study regions, with the vast majority of men who participated in the study saying that Kenyan men are in crisis because of what they consider to be the feminisation of society (Otieno and Makabira, forthcoming).

Patriarchal backlash in Kenya includes attempts to discredit arguments about gender equality or the gendered nature of violence and supports efforts to preserve existing gender norms and hierarchies in both private and public spaces. Relatedly, and crucially, as we argue in this article, religious and cultural essentialism play into efforts geared towards the preservation of what is considered 'Africanism' – at the expense of gender justice.

From a traditional African perspective, individuals are assigned the moral burden to bear children, putting an emphasis on heterosexual intercourse as a way through which this is to be achieved. A 'morally upright individual', according to this ideology, is one who values societal virtues and cherishes communal relationships. This school of thought promotes the ideology that procreation through heterosexual sex is the only proper way to ensure posterity in families and in the community. This notion is further buttressed by the Constitution of Kenya in Article 45[2], which states that 'every adult has the right to marry a person of the opposite sex, based on the free consent of the parties' (Government of Kenya 2010: 31).

This legal standpoint has been strengthened by the subsequent enactment of the Marriage Act 2014 (Kenya Law n.d.a.), which states that marriage is exclusively between individuals of the opposite sex. These stipulations have prompted the formulation of the current proposed Family Protection Bill of Kenya 2023 (Mokaya 2023), which seeks to sanction and criminalise same-sex relations and sexual conduct. Siring, raising children, and contributing offspring to one's lineage is thus considered a moral responsibility to one's family and to wider society.

This may well explain why there were celebrations in Kenya when President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda assented to the Anti-Homosexuality Act (Republic of Uganda 2023) on 29 May 2023. Despite the Ugandan Act being one of the strictest anti-LGBTQI+ laws in the world, many leaders (political, religious, and cultural) in Kenya saw it as a great move towards preserving the 'African family' and the moral code. Citing the constitution and religion, the Nyali Member of Parliament (MP), Mohammed Ali said:

Sections 162[a] and [c], 163 and 165 of our Penal Code criminalizes homosexuality and so do our faith values which we must not move away from, for we risk disintegrating our core family structures and falling deep into irredeemable mistakes that will cost us and the generations to come. (Jura 2023)

4 Manifestations of backlash in the form of morality and 'African values'

Analysis of the Kenyan context illustrates manifestations of backlash that are largely centred around the notion that gender justice is counter to African values and morality. President Ruto said that he would not allow Kenyans to be forced to get involved in foreign affairs. He further said that the 'constitution is very clear, that marriage is between a man and a wife, and that Kenyans should pray for our judges so that they can make decisions not to please the Western world' (Njaaga 2023). Reversals in advances towards gender equality are thus characterised by a return to 'Africanism'. Protesting the SCOK's decision to uphold the right of LGBTQI+ organisations to register and associate in Kenya, Sheikh Mohammed Khalifa of the Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya (CIPK) said 'Kenya is a religious country, guided by God. The judges have gone against God's will in their decisions by following Western beliefs and all Kenyans of good moral standing must renounce the ruling' (*Capital News* 2023). The Senator for Nandi, Samson Cherargei, who led a group of parliamentarians in criticising the court's ruling, said the group would not allow any discussion about LGBTQI+ in parliament because Kenya is a God-fearing nation and that people must fear and obey God (Njaaga 2023).

Paradoxically, this professed vision of 'African values' is underpinned by interpretations of religion to protect 'African' mores from Western decadence, yet religion has been and continues to be imported via imperialism and colonisation. For instance, efforts to spread Christianity and assimilate African societies into Western cultures were embraced even though they were pivotal in facilitating colonial control. Yet the accusation of Western influence is frequently directed at visions of gender justice as a form of ideological colonisation. This is most clear in relation to contestations surrounding LGBTQI+ rights, comprehensive sex education, and reproductive justice. This is exemplified by assertions made by the Nyali MP, Mohammed Ali, that 'homosexuality is a Western invention imposed on the continent' (Mersie and Hlatshwayo 2023).

We have witnessed pervasive human rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity in Kenya, with LGBTQI+ individuals and communities being frequent targets of physical harassment, discrimination, and violence. Such attacks are legitimised and underscored by the very notions of morality that backlash actors support and promote, including those in the government and the media, while legislative frameworks remain insufficient regarding protection or redress. Article 27[2] of the Constitution of Kenya (Government of Kenya 2010) provides for protection from discrimination by the state through taking legislative and other measures, including affirmative action programmes and policies designed to redress any disadvantage suffered by individuals or groups because of past discrimination.

However, sexual and gender minorities are not explicitly mentioned in Article 27[4], with same-sex practices criminalised under the Kenyan Penal Code Section 162[4] (Kenya Law n.d.b), further paralysing an already complacent system, which creates an enabling environment for human rights violations.

Moves to change this context of repression for LGBTQI+ people and organisations have been met with fierce resistance, in the name of morality. For instance, as touched on above, on 24 February 2023, the SCoK ruled that the refusal by the NGOs Co-ordination Board to register an LGBTQI+ lobby group violates human rights based on sexual orientation. Reacting to this, National Assembly Speaker Moses Wetangula criticised the ruling by stating that the court's pronouncement may lead to unintended and unhelpful consequences, given that Kenya is a deeply religious nation (Mwangi 2023a). These sentiments were echoed by the Attorney General, Justin Muturi, who promised to challenge the ruling on grounds that the issue was not a matter for the corridors of justice but for public consultation (Kagonye and Muthoni 2023). The MP for Homa Bay Town, Peter Kaluma, stated that 'We are engaged in a war not only to save our society but to salvage humanity from homosexual perversion [*sic*]. The war is not easy but it must and shall be won' (Mwangi 2023b). Religious leaders also criticised the move, urging Kenyans of 'moral integrity' to reject, resist, and oppose the ruling (Otieno 2023). While there was celebration over the ruling by human rights defenders and the LGBTQI+ community, there was a caveat to it. In its divided ruling, the SCoK held that Section 162 of the Penal Code that prohibits 'unnatural offences' (defined as having carnal knowledge with any man or woman against the order of nature) is binding, and hence, those caught contravening it will face the law with punishment of up to 14 years' imprisonment.

Similar moral code discourses are deployed in resistance to moves towards reproductive justice for women, with initiatives to reform the restrictive legislation in Kenya under attack. Article 26[4] of the Constitution of Kenya 2010 curtails termination of pregnancy. It states that 'Abortion is not permitted unless, in the opinion of a trained health professional, there is need for emergency treatment, or the life or health of the mother is in danger, or if permitted by any other written law' (Government of Kenya 2010: 23). This restrictive abortion law and its procedural impediments have made it difficult for women to secure safe abortions.

In March 2022, the High Court of Kenya in Malindi affirmed that abortion care is a fundamental right under the Constitution of Kenya and that arbitrary arrests and the prosecution of patients seeking abortion services and health-care providers offering such services is illegal. The court further asserted that 'Protecting access to abortion impacts vital Constitutional values, including dignity, autonomy, equality, and bodily integrity [and therefore,] criminalizing abortion under the penal code

without Constitutional statutory framework is an impairment to the enjoyment of women's reproductive rights' (Center for Reproductive Rights 2022). This ruling is still not widely known, and many women still engage in unsafe abortion practices for fear of stigma and being arrested should they have the procedure through official channels.

During the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD25) in Nairobi in November 2019 – which marked 25 years since the first ICPD in Cairo in 1994 – abortion opponents and faith-based groups held a parallel meeting at a Catholic church next to the conference venue, saying that the meeting did not reflect their views and positions (Nzwili 2019). Under the banner of what they called a 'Pro-family Caucus', they cautioned governments against making legal commitments to the Nairobi Statement (ICPD 2019) and to rather reaffirm their commitment to the ICPD Cairo Programme of Action (UNFPA 1994), which they said had a stronger 'pro-life and pro-family' platform (Nzwili 2019). In one of their statements, the group claimed that the organisers of the Nairobi Summit believed in anti-population and pro-abortion ideology, and that they wanted to use the summit to advance that ideology and to pile pressure on pro-family groups and countries that are pushing back against the sexual and reproductive health and rights agenda (*ibid.*). The Vatican-based jurisdiction of worldwide Catholicism reinforced declarations from various African religious leaders, especially that from Ghana where Catholic bishops denounced comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), terming it as a way of introducing homosexuality into the West African nation (Onyalla 2019).

It is not surprising that Kenya in its 17 commitments to ICPD25 made no mention of CSE or even the sexual and reproductive health rights of the LGBTQI+ community and other key populations. Mikael Rask Madsen (2020) posits that backlash politics against international institutions is transformed when seeking international institutional reform. This facilitates the process of entering a mutual brokering process, by means of changing the logic of diplomatic compromise, academic scrutiny, and the interest of the member states and civil society.

5 Reflections

We have learned much as Advocates for Social Change Kenya (ADSOCK) in endeavouring to delve deeper into understanding, framing, and countering patriarchal or anti-gender backlash through research, capacity building, and convening, especially considering that backlash is seemingly a nascent concept in the world of development and even more so in the Kenyan context. Indeed, history and research have shown that the path to a more equitable society is frequently met with resistance and pushback. In recent years, explicitly 'anti-gender' groups across the world have intensified their efforts to obstruct and dismantle policies aimed at promoting gender and sexual equality (Corredor 2019).

What if the resistance is not necessarily pegged to a specific group? Furthermore, what if discourses such as 'Africanism' and morality could be a backlash to gender justice, but it is, as yet, premature to classify them as such? In this case, a broader approach, one that moves beyond the dichotomy of movement and opposition, is critical.

With a long history of critically engaging men and considering their roles and relationships to gender equality, we feel it is crucial to 'reframe' men's roles in supporting gender equality, based on a recognition that efforts and initiatives to counter gender backlash so far have been driven by – and focused on – women. Investment in global efforts to stop the pushback will be met with flagging returns if the focus is not broadened. Therefore, efforts should be made to understand men's responsibilities and potential contributions to gender equality agendas in support of women's rights movements, including in countering patriarchal backlash. In Kenya, men remain key power brokers, decision-takers, and change-makers, and they are also the ones most implicated in patriarchal and gender backlash. As such, their engagement to bring about the desired changes cannot be gainsaid. This calls for using appropriate language that reflects and effectively encourages men to develop respectful, trusting, and egalitarian relations with women and others, whilst also holding men to account.

6 Conclusion

Whilst Kenya has previously been perceived as being relatively progressive on issues of gender equality in international circles, a recent swell of backlash against women's reproductive and sexual minorities' rights has taken many by surprise. By understanding this in terms of longer trajectories of retrograde projects using extraordinary tactics to reach the threshold of the mainstream, we can see how a range of actors have translated earlier inertia and resistance into widespread, visible, and proactive backlash. We argue that these actors have been particularly influential in shifting the mainstream through their use of emotive and divisive discourse on morality and supposed 'African values', which then also facilitates their pushing for changes in policies and processes against gender equality in a wide range of areas. As this is based on retrograde visions of male supremacy and patriarchal values, Kenyan men apparently stand to gain. This creates significant dilemmas for efforts to engage men in the struggle for gender justice.

Connecting issues and experiences – for example, gender roles in families, women's low representation in leadership and political positions, a particular institution's failure to effectively address men's violence against women – is critical if men are to become more effective partners in changing the attitudes, behaviours, and conditions that create gender inequities. Men must begin to address the societal, cultural, economic, religious, and political systems that either perpetuate or allow for continued

disparities and a rollback on gender equality gains. However, such engagement of men must also be centred in accountability to the women's rights movement through multifaceted approaches. It should start by men confronting their own masculinities and the patriarchal order, including questioning their own psychological and social identity – bearing in mind that the great majority of patriarchal and gender backlash protagonists are men. Such questioning will thus need to include critical reflection on men's attachment to – and understandings of – identity and masculinity, on their investments in ideas of 'Africanism', as well as on how we might understand 'family values' or 'morality' more honestly.

Notes

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Unravelling and Countering Backlash: Uganda's Sexual Offences Legislation*

Amon Ashaba Mwiine¹ and Josephine Ahikire²

Abstract Considerable progress has been seen in Ugandan women's collective advocacy for their rights since independence. Notably, women activists' efforts in the early 1990s culminated in the institutionalisation of gender equality in Uganda's constitution and a subsequent resurgence of the women's movement. Despite these efforts, certain egalitarian and inclusive policy reforms have been postponed, stripped of clauses that question patriarchal power, watered down, bureaucratically frustrated, or outrightly rejected. This article draws on ongoing contestations around the stalled Sexual Offences Bill, 2019 to address the following questions: How do we understand the current and recent swell of anti-feminist backlash? What motivates backlash against gender equity reforms? And what will it take to counter these oppositional forces? The article reveals overt and covert forms of backlash in the sexual offences legislative process, the ways in which gender justice actors countered these, and the implications for understanding and countering backlash in Uganda and beyond.

Keywords gender justice, backlash, sexual offences, patriarchy, women's rights, parliament, Uganda Women Parliamentary Association (UWOPA), law.

1 Introduction

Uganda has had an uneven experience around gender equity policy reforms. In its recent history, we see women's collective mobilisation right from the 1940s, inspired by anti-colonial actions on laws such as marriage and inheritance of family property (Tamale 1999). Women formed coalitions such as the Uganda Council of Women (UCW) in 1947 and the Young Wives Group – to fight for women's rights (e.g. citizenship, voting rights, marriage, divorce, and inheritance). The years of political instability in the 1970s and early 1980s dampened women's collective mobilisation, but the women's rights movement regenerated in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Tripp *et al.* 2008). For example, from 1989 to 1995, women as individuals and as a collective were part of



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the countrywide consultative meetings convened by different actors within and outside the state to contribute towards a constitutional review process (Matembe 2002; Ahikire and Mwiine 2020). The nationwide, relatively inclusive exercise presided over by the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government in its early years of ascending to power following a five-year guerrilla struggle, heightened optimism around gender equity promotion, especially through its outcome – the 1995 Constitution – which institutionalised the language of gender equality, at least in the formal sense.

The Constitution outlawed discrimination based on sex and made specific provisions on the rights of women as being citizens of equal worth with men. In Article 32, the Constitution introduced affirmative action in favour of groups marginalised due to gender, age, disability, or any other reason created by history, tradition or custom, for the purpose of redressing imbalances which exist against them (Republic of Uganda 1995). Naming women as citizens of equal worth and recognising specific contexts of social positioning of women and other marginalised groups were among the outstanding achievements of the NRM government reforms.

The sense of optimism motivated a series of gender equity policy reforms in the immediate aftermath of the constitutional review. Characterised by Tripp *et al.* (2008: 55) as 'new women's movements', the newly created women's organisations sustained advocacy for affirmative action on women's political representation, girls' education, gender mainstreaming, and other gender equality agendas, as well as action against domestic violence. Though incremental, these milestones were 'important steps towards achieving legislation to enable the rights granted in the 1995 Constitution' (Wang 2013: 116).

Yet, despite the progress, advocacy for gender equity policy reforms has remained largely an uneven and rather rugged terrain (Wang 2013). For instance, laws governing land, inheritance, domestic relations, and sexual rights have been on the women's movement agenda for several decades without substantive success. Often, gender equity reforms are characterised by intense negotiations and compromises leading to instrumentalist and watered down versions of policy reforms (Ahikire and Mwiine 2020). For example, compromises on domestic violence legislation in 2009 saw the passage of the law but without the contentious clause on marital rape as a form of sexual abuse. A decade later, marital rape was re-introduced in the 2019 Sexual Offences Bill (SOB) without much success. The 'consent clause' – the idea that a person can withdraw their consent before or during a sexual act – became contentious and consequently frustrated the bill's passage. Beyond the realm of policymaking, visibility of women's rights has also created a moral panic, demonstrated by worries about the family, the place of women *vis-à-vis* men in the domestic and public sphere, and especially worries about

whether women want to rule their husbands. There is a clear shift in discourse, 'where the need to protect the family has regained traction and gender equality is seen as a threat to society' (Mwiine *et al.* 2023: 11).

This article uses the notion of backlash advanced by Flood, Dragiewicz and Pease (2018) to make sense of the opposition to gender equity reforms. Flood *et al.* (2018) deploy the terms 'backlash' and 'resistance' interchangeably as the inevitable responses to social change. They argue that, 'with regard to gender, backlash is one of the many practices and processes which maintain or reinforce gender inequality' (2018: 5). At a methodological level, we use a specific policy case – the SOB – to explore ways in which deliberate threats to feminist gains manifest, their motive, the feminist effort to counter these, and the implication legislative processes have for long-term conversations on substantive gender transformation in Uganda and beyond.

This analysis is based on a larger study involving qualitative and participatory research methods. These included desk reviews, content analysis of parliamentary record (*The Hansard*), popular media stories about the SOB, group conversations with women's rights organisations, and in-depth interviews with actors from women's coalition alliances and those opposed to the bill. Group conversations with women's and human rights organisations, allies and opponents to the bill, and state bureaucrats formed the bulk of our engagements. Convenings of this nature provided space for participants to reflect on informal and formal reform processes, and to identify actors both in the coalition alliance and those opposed to the reform and the power each category held in relation to the other. Collectively, participants looked back, took stock of key milestones despite the bill failing to pass, and identified centres of influence and those whose voice mattered in the process, the spaces they operated in, and the power they wielded. Qualitative and participatory methods provided spaces for revelation, especially for the reform allies as they connected the dots of what seemed random, unplanned, and unsystematic yet well-coordinated resistance to the policy reform.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the legislative context around the SOB. Section 3 explores the process of framing, tabling, and debating the bill, and the resulting manifestations of gender backlash. Next, section 4 discusses efforts by the SOB coalition to counter backlash to the bill, and section 5 concludes.

2 The legislative context around the SOB

The SOB was drafted in response to a high incidence of sexual violence, including new forms that could not be addressed by existing legislation. Tabled as a private member's bill by Monica Amoding, a member of parliament and then Chair of the Uganda Women Parliamentary Association (UWOPA), it sought

to consolidate existing pieces of legislation into a specific law on sexual offences for the effectual prevention of sexual violence. The SOB proposed multiple reforms around sexual violence in general (rape, sexual assault, incest, and more) and against children, provided for court procedures on handling sexual violence offenders and survivors, and the creation of a sex offenders register.

Tabled in November 2019 for its first reading, the bill was debated in May 2021 and passed for presidential assent. But just three months later, President Yoweri Museveni declined to assent to the bill and referred it back to parliament for further scrutiny and reconsideration. The president cited duplication with existing laws addressing morality and advised the proponents to work with the Uganda Law Reform Commission – which was apparently opposed to the SOB – to come up with amendments beyond disjointed legislation, essentially putting the bill on hold.

In effect, such a move, of vaguely 'delegating the change to those who disagree with it, and actively sabotaging the change process' (Flood *et al.* 2018) is a form of backlash. Hence, the bill's return to parliament may not be the real manifestation of backlash, but rather the vague manner in which it was returned. Like its predecessor gender equity reforms, the SOB found itself on the shelf with no clarity as to when it would be re-tabled. Instead, one of its clauses on same-sex sexual relations was extracted and tabled independently – the Anti-Homosexuality Bill, in February 2023. The initial framing of the SOB included clause 11 on unnatural offences as already exists in the Penal Code Act 2007, i.e. 'a person who (a) performs a sexual act with another person contrary to the order of nature; or (b) engages in a sexual act with an animal; commits an offence and is liable on conviction, to imprisonment for ten years' (Parliament of Uganda 2019: 9). The bill prohibiting same-sex sexual relations and their 'promotion or recognition' was later debated, passed by parliament, and assented to by the president in record time – three months.

3 Manifestations of gender backlash

In this section, we examine the **process** of framing, tabling, and debating the bill, tracing manifestations of backlash both in the procedure as well as the content of the bill. In tracing these conversations, we look closely at the actors (coalition alliance members and the opposition), and their interests and motivations in supporting and/or opposing the bill. In effect, backlash manifested in the process and content, as we proceed to elaborate.

3.1 Denial of due certification – foot-dragging as backlash

Backlash against the SOB manifested itself at the initial stage. At a procedural level, the bill was denied a certificate of financial implication, a mandatory step in the initiation tabling. According to parliamentary procedure, all bills require

certificates of financial implication issued by the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development as provided for in the Public Finance Management Act (Republic of Uganda 2015). Monica Amoding, the motion mover, reported frustrations that characterised the early stages of tabling the SOB. She recalled years of bureaucratic foot-dragging by the government which she characterised as tactics intended to frustrate the bill's tabling. She informed the house that in contrast to usual formal procedure, the SOB had strangely failed to acquire the certificate from the government ministry:

Madam Speaker, I beg to move that a bill entitled, 'The Sexual Offences Bill, 2015' be read for the first time. However, I would like to inform the house that this bill is not accompanied by a certificate of financial implications. I am however protected by section 76 (4) of the Public Finance and Management Act. I beg to lay.

... I wish to further inform the house why this is so. For the last 15 years, the Uganda Women Parliamentary Association has been advocating for the Sexual Offences Bill to be brought to this house. In the eighth parliament [2006–11], we worked hard to see that this bill comes but it did not. We were informed that the bill was at cabinet level. In the ninth parliament [2011–16], since the first year we have been telling the ministry responsible to table this bill before the house, but it had not come. (Monica Amoding, parliamentary sitting, Thursday 14 April 2016)

Amoding's submission above reveals a mixture of emotions, frustration from state bureaucratic foot-dragging and state negation of gender equity reforms, but also activists' agential efforts in negotiating institutional blockages. The bill was thus moved on extraordinary grounds because the Ministry of Finance had spent more than 60 days without issuing the certificate. Evidence laid out in parliament indicated that for almost ten months UWOPA had not been granted the certificate to table the bill despite relentless requests.

Bureaucratic foot-dragging through time-wasting or unfounded claims that gender reforms are in the pipeline tend to deter individuals from initiating such reforms. These tactical delays rendered such reforms peripheral to government legislative business in a given parliamentary term, leading to the tabling of many of them in haste as the parliamentary session came to an end. This was the case with the prohibition of female genital mutilation (FGM) and the Domestic Violence Act (DVA) in 2010, and now the SOB, which was debated two weeks before the end of the tenth parliament.

The DVA and anti-FGM laws exemplify Uganda's typical political settlement story of populist laws with little implementation (Ahikire and Mwiine 2015). For example, in 2014, the parliamentary

gender committee summoned the Minister for Gender, Labour and Social Development to explain the slow progress regarding implementation of the DVA. The parliamentary summons was motivated by a supreme court judge who reported research which revealed that some judges and magistrates had not even accessed the DVA 2010, whilst others had ignored an act that they considered to fall under the heading of 'women's issues' (Mujuzi 2014; Ahikire and Mwiine 2015). We argue that these moments of refusal and delays, however subtle and informal they might look, point to a seemingly well-coordinated opposition within the state bureaucracy. That sexual offence issues have been on the women parliamentarians' agenda for 15 years without a breakthrough to the parliamentary legislative agenda attests to deep-seated gender backlash.

3.2 In the content of the bill

The framing and content of the SOB also critically became the subject of backlash. The UWOPA-led coalition agreed to a tactical framing of the SOB which included leaving out potentially controversial issues such as marital rape and sex work among others. Policy reforms that contradict the explicit doctrine, codified tradition, or sacred discourse of the dominant religion or cultural group, such as criminalising sexual abuse marriages, ownership of marital property, and cohabitation, had all been resisted in previous reform efforts (Matembe 2002; Kawamara-Mishambi and Ovonji-Odida 2003). The coalition framed marital rape (an issue earlier rejected in the DVA 2010), as 'seeking consent'. The framing was an intentional strategy to steer clear of contentions that had potential to derail the bill. Yet what the coalition had avoided turned out to become the source of contention. When the bill reached parliamentary committee stage,³ where women's rights activists had no control, the bill received additional clauses that became the focus of opposition. These included proposals on criminalising sex work and 'unnatural offences'. According to coalition members, the new version of the SOB looked like a re-invention of the Anti-Homosexuality Law of 2014, commonly referred to as the 'Bahati Law',⁴ earlier annulled by the constitutional court.

Women activists saw the insertions as a hijack of the SOB agenda. Whether this was intentional or not, it was not without effect. In practice, the insertions generated intense resistance within parliament as well as externally amongst the international community and derailed the progress of legislative reform. Monica Amoding, who moved the bill, felt isolated by the additions, especially by informal dealings in which she was pressured to accept the new provisions or risk losing the entire bill. The criminalisation of same-sex relations and prostitution created another layer of backlash, this time with opposition emerging from within previously supportive coalitions such as some of the women's rights and civil society organisations. One women's rights activist expressed her frustration with the additions to the bill she once supported:

We would rather forego the bill and then wait for another opportune time for us to present something that is more acceptable. We would rather not have it at all than have something that criminalises a section of women.⁵

Clearly, the parliamentary committee had its own interests in the bill – introducing new provisions criminalising prostitution and same-sex relations – which unfortunately derailed the entire reform process. In our view, this was procedural backlash.

3.3 Humour in agony – Uganda’s parliament as a cradle of backlash

Parliament seems to have been the epicentre of backlash to the bill, notably manifesting in the clause about consenting to sexual intercourse. The bill read ‘[n]otwithstanding that a person has consented to performing a sexual act with another, he or she may withdraw such consent at any time before or during the performance of the sexual act’ (Parliament of Uganda 2019: 18). As stated earlier, the coalition had intended this clause to re-introduce the question of marital rape earlier scrapped from the domestic violence law. The clause on consent was strongly opposed mostly by male legislators. Legislators asked how practical it would be to gather evidence in a matter that concerns two adults in private. Some argued that consent to sex is a psychological issue and believed that legislating on issues of emotion could be problematic. Yet others thought consenting or withdrawing consent could be used by one party against another in case of any disagreement. Regardless, contentions over the consent clause pointed to men resisting giving up the patriarchal benefits of controlling women’s sexuality.

Beyond oppositional concerns, majority legislators severely sexualised the debate, thereby infantilising and ridiculing the entire reform. For example, one male legislator said:

Consent is given at the stage of take-off and all of us fly. Now, we are on a plane; we have taken off and we are at cruise speed, and you say, stop! What do you want the pilot to do? To crash the plane? [Laughter] – Aren’t you causing trouble to stop in the middle of nowhere?
(Parliament of Uganda 2021)

Coded language revering male sexual organs in symbolic ways such as ‘big manhood’, ‘size of the needle’, ‘men who are impossible’, and the legislators’ laughter that ensued in the house grossly trivialised concerns over horrific and pervasive cases of sexual violence. The analogy of the plane was quickly appropriated and deployed by different actors opposed to the bill to the effect that the issue was no longer a serious concern that deserved public attention. Similar horrific humour was displayed as parliament passed the Anti-Homosexuality Bill

in 2023. In a televised parliamentary debate, a male legislator supporting the bill illustrated his case as follows:

Madam speaker, when I look at you and the honourable ladies in this house, there is no reason for a man to run after a man for sex... Right honourable speaker, there's nothing so sweet and so good for a man more than a woman.
(NTV Uganda 2023)

The normalisation of such debasing characterisation and the casual use of the speaker in a sexualised manner without attracting warning entrenches a patriarchal culture that reinforces predatory violence. These kinds of symbolic representations of masculine sexual domination drew on heteronormative-patriarchal frameworks to mobilise male opposition against the bill, while pathologising women activists' motive of ending sexual violence. Persistent debates of this nature produce a patriarchal parliamentary culture that stymies support for social justice in the country. This culture was clearly demonstrated in the uncritical support of the grossly homophobic Anti-Homosexuality Act 2023.

4 Efforts to counter backlash

The SOB coalition engaged in diverse strategies to counter and negotiate resistance. These included attempts to discursively frame the bill with previous contentions in mind, using an existing law to table the bill on extraordinary grounds after being denied a certificate of financial implication, strategic disengagement from the media, reliance on credible individual actors, forging issue-based coalitions, and mobilising support from within and outside parliament (e.g. recruiting male allies).

Earlier, we talked about how the bill was resisted in its formative stages and how it was strategically moved on extraordinary grounds as provided for in the Public Finance Management Act. The other strategic negotiation related to women allies was on deliberately excluding media coverage. Frequently, the media is seen as an important tool for raising and sustaining critical policy agendas in the public realm. For instance, Ahikire and Mwiine (2020) show that in the past, women activists trained media actors on gender-sensitive reporting during legislation on domestic violence. Women coalition members engaged the media to ensure that domestic violence legislation remained in the limelight. However, in the case of the SOB, the coalition avoided engaging with the media because it had become the biggest enemy, often trivialising debates on gender, especially issues of sexuality. Indeed, during parliamentary debates where the media could not be avoided, the reporting was 'comical', sexualising women's bodies, and infantilising and ridiculing the bill as anticipated. Activists noted that had this trivialisation begun in the early days of policy framing, the bill may not have even made it to parliament.

UWOPA was crucial in sponsoring the SOB and offering an influential platform upon which to forge an alliance amongst different actors within and outside parliament. It was used as a collective platform to generate the women's legislative agenda but also to come up with a series of strategies, negotiations, concessions, and compromises. UWOPA equally spearheaded collaboration and alliance building across women's and human rights organisations to handle different gender reforms. It particularly formed a coalition with Action for Development (ACFODE) and the Center for Health, Human Rights and Development (CEHURD). Indeed, coalition/alliance building in gender equity policy reform processes has been recorded as a strategic step to enhancing women's voice in policymaking processes (Ahikire and Mwiine 2019; Mwiine 2022; Nazneen and Hickey 2019). For instance, while examining reforms on gender violence, Nazneen, Hickey and Sifaki (2019: 7) argue that 'where coalition-building strategies have reached beyond parliaments to build alliances with actors in broader institutional spaces, success rates seem to have been higher'. Despite intense opposition, the coalitions sustained a national (and indeed international) conversation on the sexual rights of women in an otherwise dominantly patriarchal and heterosexist public. These lessons will be critical for further efforts to counter backlash.

5 Conclusion

The process of legislating on sexual offences in Uganda reveals a complex web of gender justice struggles, particularly in the surge of resistance. Some of these forms of resistance are becoming increasingly explicit while others remain subtle whilst severely undercutting the momentum of gender justice in the country. In sum, this analysis contributes to existing literature on the conceptualisation of gender backlash. Revealing normalised sexualised humour in parliament and its trivialising impact, for example, resonates with Flood *et al.*'s (2018) argument that opposition to gender equality is shaped by sexist norms and widespread acceptance of gender inequalities as biologically inevitable and justified. We argue that unquestioned sexualised humour is not without effect. It normalises sexism and entrenches a male-club culture that holds back women's legislative voice.

Of particular interest was the notable fragmentation of women's voice within the women's movement. The voice was divided and largely incoherent. While some women celebrated parliament's passing of the bill, other sections of the coalition decried what they saw as its regressive nature, especially in its criminalisation of sex work and same-sex relations. Yet the fact that women activists mobilised around women's individual rights within the context of marriage and culture alerts us to their collective voice on sexuality – a normally private issue. Their efforts in articulating the relevance of the SOB, mobilising coalitions, working in alliance with some men, and moderating a discussion within the public on

sexual offences placed them 'outside the reach of power [and] upset the established laws' (Foucault 1978: 6); and demonstrated their deliberate exercise of power in a highly patriarchal and heteronormative society, even when the bill was not passed into law. The debate made visible sexual offences that are often taken for granted and opened up public debate on the possibility of naming and therefore countering backlash against gender justice in the long run.

Notes

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- 2 Josephine Ahikire, Professor, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Makerere University, Uganda and Senior Research Fellow, Center for Basic Research (CBR), Uganda.
- 3 After the first reading, bills are referred to the Legal and Parliamentary Affairs Committee for scrutiny. This committee is mandated to ensure quality and fairness of the provisions; receive and consider public submissions on the bill; and discuss, make recommendations, and present the scrutinised bill to parliament for consideration.
- 4 Hon. David Bahati was the member of parliament who introduced the Anti-Homosexuality Bill in 2009. The bill was passed by parliament in December 2013 and signed into law by the president on 24 February 2014. Months later (August 2014), the Constitutional Court annulled the law on the basis that it was passed by MPs without the requisite quorum and was therefore illegal.
- 5 Interview, 2 December 2021.

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Queering Gender Backlash*

Tessa Lewin¹

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;² in Iran, new, stricter legislation to control how women dress (2023);³ and in Uganda, the introduction of legislation that criminalises homosexuality (2023).⁴

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 (Martínez, 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',⁵ 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 affect 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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Deconstructing Anti-Feminist Backlash: The Lebanese Context*

Nay El Rahi¹ and Fatima Antar²

Abstract The matrix of deep-rooted social, political, sectarian, and patriarchal structures in Lebanon necessitates the introduction of a nuanced understanding of 'backlash' that veers away from definitions of the notion that apply mostly in Western contexts. This article proposes a contextualised definition of backlash for Lebanon and frames it by unpacking the structural flaws found in the very way Lebanese society is constructed, and in power relations within the country's familial structures. It also discusses the different forms of anti-feminist backlash observed in the country over the past few years, focusing on three axes: systemic violence, tactical backlash, and atomised backlash. Explored through case studies ranging from the hostile sectarian system against women in politics to radical religious groups, this article explores how backlash in this context diverges from the conceptualisations of backlash in existing literature.

Keywords backlash, Lebanon, queer, women, sextarianism, civil marriage, political participation.

1 Introduction

Born and raised in a socially and religiously traditional, politically affiliated family, Amani El Beaini first started exhibiting signs of rebellion as early as primary school. In her school, where gender stereotypes prevailed, girls were not allowed to practise sports; Amani insisted on playing basketball, so she joined a community team outside of school to do this. Twenty years later, Amani was at the forefront of the battle to stop the notorious Bisri Dam Project and a vital member of the national campaign to protect the Bisri Valley.³

The turning point in Amani's story, however, was the brutal assault she suffered at the hands of a member of her extended family. She insisted on reporting the man to the police and later taking him to court for the assault. Yet, to her dismay, her family pressured her to drop the formal complaint. She refused



to concede. In a classic paternalistic scenario, Amani found herself denied justice simply for demanding it from a male family member. Her family expected her to heed to the community's needs and drop the charges. Community pressure did not stop there: it also affected police conduct. They significantly slowed down the complaint process. At the time of writing (2023) – over three years after the incident – no verdict has been reached due to the lengthy judicial processes in Lebanon.

Amani's story is not uncommon. Women in Lebanon live under a matrix of deep-rooted social, political, and patriarchal structures, originating from families and spreading to governmental institutions. This necessitates the introduction of a nuanced understanding of 'backlash' that veers away from its definition as a hostile reaction to perceived gains.

This article frames backlash in the Lebanese context and unpacks the structural flaws in the very way its society is constructed, as well as the different forms of anti-feminist backlash observed in Lebanon over the past few years. These forms can be categorised as tactical and atomised, and diverging from the conceptualisations of backlash in existing literature.

The rest of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 explores the Lebanese context and unpacks notions that are specific to it. Section 3 departs from existing literature on backlash to delineate the features that characterise violence and anti-feminist backlash in Lebanon. Section 4 offers a discussion of the different types of systemic violence and backlash observed in Lebanon. Section 5 concludes.

2 The Lebanese context

Lebanon is a constitutional republic with an elected representative parliament and a constitutionally independent judiciary. The constitution mandates the partition of power in public offices, parliament, and government on a confessional basis among the country's four major male-headed sects; and also mandates these sectarian communities to handle their respective communities' personal status issues and establish their own religious courts.⁴ This creates a multilayered political system, a sectarian consociationalism that reproduces traditional patriarchy.

Over the past four decades, Lebanon has been ruled by an unaccountable political oligarchy with undisputed powers. Warlords-turned-governors morphed citizen-state relationships into patron-client dynamics with basic rights dispensed in exchange for political loyalty (El Rahi 2023a). The country's vulnerabilities culminated in the Port of Beirut's tragic explosion on 4 August 2020, against the backdrop of ongoing economic collapse ranked by the World Bank as among the top three most severe worldwide since the 1850s (World Bank Group 2021).

Maya Mikdashi's 'sextarianism' framework (2015) is particularly helpful in understanding the complex patriarchal political system women in Lebanon live under. It explains how sect and sex co-organise social and political life in Lebanon, and how they are mutually constitutive modes of political difference. Perhaps the personal status laws and census registration are two sites where sextarianism is most visible. Mikdashi (2014, 2015, 2022), among others (Joseph 2005; Traboulsi 2012), contends that the country's 15 personal status laws create non-homogeneous legal conditions for the Lebanese but share one commonality: patriarchal bias. They not only enshrine men's privilege over women, but also differentiate among women of different sects, stripping them of their ability to make unified claims.⁵ Mikdashi (2015) also demonstrates how census registration highlights the ways sex and sect coordinate to cement women's status within the Lebanese political order. Female citizens are registered strictly in relation to male citizens, as wives or daughters, while male citizens form the nodal points around which legal, bureaucratic, and kinship relations develop, extend, and contract (*ibid.*). Women cannot be considered heads of families or be non-patriarchally incorporated individuals.

Suad Joseph (1997, 2005) argues that the patriarchal family serves as a venue of social and political control in Lebanon. Under a frail state, she argues, kin became the 'anchor of security for Lebanese citizens' and a bridge to access resources in the market, the workplace, and in politics (Joseph 1997: 79). Resultantly, kin groups became recognised as legitimate political actors, claiming loyalty from their members that pre-empts and precedes loyalty to the state. The 'kin contract' arrangement remains one of the most significant deterrents to Lebanese women's full citizenship. Joseph (1993, 2011) also theorised other notions underlying the Lebanese patriarchal power matrix, namely patriarchal connectivity and political familism. However, the kin contract is the most pivotal for understanding the family-based patriarchy that permeates the state in Lebanon.

3 Relevant literature

Despite the wide scope, most definitions of backlash still fall short of capturing its nuances in Lebanon. A localised definition of backlash in the Lebanese context makes two fundamental diversions from existing understandings and reveals four distinct features.

The first diversion is in describing backlash as a reaction. Rowley's (2020) call for a reconfiguration of our understanding of backlash is relevant here. For instance, what has been framed as 'unprecedented' in the United States emerges from a long history of state-sponsored violence, institutionalised discrimination, and objectified disregard for non-white, queer, and immigrant-marginalised bodies (*ibid.*). In this sense, backlash is no longer a reactionary pushback or an anomaly, but should rather be

conceptualised as a condition that is inherent within systems of oppression, and a built-in self-protective mechanism (*ibid.*).

Similarly, linking Lebanon's political instability to its status as a 'weak state', Maya Mikdashi (2022) talks about an 'epidermal state' that has always been obvious, violent, and sovereign to vulnerable groups – queer, migrant workers, refugees, the incarcerated, and sex workers, among others. Mikdashi conceptualises the state in Lebanon as one that performs its sovereignty by regulating bodies through securitisation, violence, bureaucracy, and the law, using bodies' gendered, racial, sexual, and classed stakes as sites for this performance, and exerting violence against people positioned differently at various levels of precarity (*ibid.*).

The definition that frames backlash as a hostile reaction does not hold in the Lebanese context. The Lebanese epidermal state had been violating vulnerable bodies for decades before its violence came into full view with the nationwide brutal oppression of protestors in 2019. The reframing that Rowley (2020) proposes – that makes visible the quotidian violence of the state and its embodied and spatial effects, constitutive of backlash but not always necessarily obvious – is particularly relevant to conceptualising backlash in Lebanon.

The second diversion is around the assumption that progress is a precursor to backlash. Townsend-Bell's (2020) framing of backlash as a moment of revelation places it on a continuum with misogyny. The spectrum starts with the misogyny–racism node, organised around maintaining the status quo, and ends with backlash: various acts of overt and explicit violence responding to vulnerable communities' attempts to claim power, hence stepping over an explicit do-not-cross boundary. Townsend-Bell (2020) also suggests a middle pre-emptive backlash node, which works to prevent changes to the status quo and does not require an attempt to claim power. A group's mere existence in particular spaces is the infraction triggering violence, making backlash possible even in the absence of progress. Resultantly, for some groups, the distance between the everyday lived experience of misogyny – rigged with violations – and backlash as overt spectacle, is negligible (*ibid.*).

4 Backlash in Lebanon

4.1 Systemic violence as baseline

One distinct feature of backlash in Lebanon nuances the remedial backlash framing, accentuating a pronounced intentionality about preventing gains, built into the system's design, and meant to keep power concerted in a minority positioned at a specific intersection of sex, gender, legal status, and class. Women in Lebanon, as well as members of all vulnerable and marginalised communities, are 'surrounded by, embedded in, and pushing against a sextarian, epidermal state' (Mikdashi 2022: 182). This makes the hostility and exclusion that they face quotidian,

inherent within the system engulfing them, and intentional. The overt, more visible acts of violence – backlash – serve as tools to cement that system.

A second feature is the frail baseline position of women and other vulnerable communities within the system. With basic rights denied to them, the room for gains is already marginal, the space between the two ends of the spectrum is already insignificant, and claiming power is an elusive endeavour. In Townsend-Bell's (2020) terms, their mere existence is the infraction that elicits the hostility.

A third feature is the site from which this quotidian violence originates. What makes the predicament of women particularly devastating is that the exclusion they face results from power structures embedded in and flowing from family systems into the state (Joseph 1997). This feature reveals the fundamental role of the family, a non-state actor with considerable political clout, in the make-up and maintenance of the system. Amani's story that opened this article illustrates this. Even in a situation where she was physically harmed, her loyalty to her family was expected to take precedence over any claims to justice. The silencing in the domestic sphere serves to prevent the possibilities of gains.

The final feature of backlash in Lebanon is its function as a tool of misplaced action – an exit strategy for a system in a moment of overlapping crises. Perhaps this contextual definition aims to flip the script on backlash, from framing it as the violence marginalised communities endure when they cross a line, to what dominant powers would do when the system that upholds their privilege goes through a moment of peril. It shifts the attention to the network of powers that perpetrate this violence, as opposed to what those enduring it might have done to trigger it. The definition attempts to frame the political juncture – the system in crisis – as the trigger of the backlash unleashed by its dominant players. The more intense the pressure on the system and the more existential the crisis, the harsher the vitriol it unleashes against the most marginalised and/or any movement threatening the social and political order. Backlash serves as a tool to divert attention from looming socioeconomic menaces, to help the system avoid existential discussions, and to extend its longevity by creating imaginary enemies.

An equivalent to backlash in the Lebanese context could be,

the various forms of structural discrimination and exclusion that are fed, incubated, and fuelled by the sectarian epidermal system; and that fight and obstruct advocacy for rights, but more importantly, impede the possibility of progress and gains. This structural hostility departs from familial structures, travels across generations, and cuts through governmental, non-governmental institutions, and the market.⁶

The various forms of violence and backlash in Lebanon are not on a spectrum *per se* but could instead be described as a pool of variegated tools – coexisting and operating concurrently and complementarily – making up a patchwork of hostile strategies that authorities use on demand depending on the requirements of the political moment. Apart from the systemic violence as default mode, forms of backlash include tactical and atomised backlash.

4.2 Tactical backlash

In June 2022, a video showing a floral installation on a billboard celebrating Beirut Pride being vandalised went viral on social media. In the video, a group of men under the name of Jnoud El-Rabb (Soldiers of God) (Christou 2023), who proclaim themselves as the ultimate defenders of God, and of the Christian community against alleged satanic endeavours such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex (LGBTQI) acts and civil marriage, are seen ripping off the installation whilst reciting verses from the Old Testament. Officially formed in late 2019, articles about the group speak of a membership of several hundred who claim to be ready to act if any phenomenon opposes their Christian convictions (Hayek 2022).

Jnoud El-Rabb's video emboldened official measures. Following its release, Lebanon's Ministry of Interior and Municipalities ordered security forces to take necessary measures to prevent any kind of celebration, meeting, or gathering of the LGBTQI community, calling these activities 'contrary to divine principles' (*L'Orient Today* 2022). Weeks later, a protest against pro-LGBTQI events was organised in Tripoli, Lebanon's second-largest city with a Sunni majority, followed by the creation of the 'Soldiers of Fayhaa', a similar group to Jnoud El-Rabb, in the city in July 2023 (Fayhaa is a title usually used for Tripoli). Most recently, in the summer of 2023, the country's political and religious leaders intensified their campaign against the queer community: the head of a prominent political party called for the killing of LGBTQI people (Younes 2023), the culture minister called for the ban of the *Barbie* movie (Jadah 2023), and the education minister called for the ban of a boardgame in schools because it showed a rainbow (Al Bawaba 2023). Following this slew of troubling remarks and decisions, Jnoud El-Rabb attacked a queer-friendly bar in Beirut, marking an alarming escalation in anti-queer sentiment (Daraj Media 2023). The group's attacks are part of a wider trend in Lebanon and the region of escalating rhetoric and violence against queer communities.

Remarkably, Lebanon has yet to repeal Article 534 of the country's Penal Code, which criminalises 'unnatural sex'.⁷ A legacy of the French colonial era, Article 534 is Lebanon's most publicly debated regulation on sexuality. It reflects the moral value system prevailing in the society, which remains largely traditional, based on dogmatic religious views and traditional gender roles and relations. Following the attacks in 2023, two parliamentary blocks proposed bills explicitly penalising homosexuality.

In this context, where sexuality is heavily policed, and some orientations and identities are criminalised, LGBTQI communities remain vulnerable. In some regions, so much as waving a rainbow flag might be perceived as 'a win' deserving of backlash, silencing, and even violence. This, however, has not prevented activists from founding non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and collectives to support the LGBTQI community and provide services for the most marginalised within it. In that regard, Lebanon is known to be the only Arab country where queer groups organise publicly.

The persecution has also not hindered several prominent voices – journalists, lawyers, and social media influencers – from voicing their support of the LGBTQI community and endorsing personal freedoms and rights more broadly. The last decade has seen increased activism for sexual freedoms, queer-friendly bars and spaces have opened, and celebrities have openly discussed their sexuality. However, the deployment of sexuality policing to manufacture moral panics over the hetero-patriarchal nuclear family has been a constant feature of governance in Lebanon. Anti-LGBTQI campaigns ebb and flow based on the optics and requirements of a junctural political moment, instigated by political and religious authorities.

The experience of the Greek neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn, which rose to prominence amid Greece's economic crisis a decade ago and won 18 parliamentary seats in 2012, might help explain the situation further. Groups such as Golden Dawn and to a lesser extent, Jnoud El-Rabb, small, often geographically contained networks of right-wing extremists whose ideology amalgamates politics and religion and whose politics are premised on dogmatic interpretations of religion, usually thrive in situations of disenfranchisement, poverty, and lawlessness (Trilling 2020). Just as Greece offered ideal conditions for the rise of Golden Dawn in the wake of the global financial crisis between 2010 and 2013 (*ibid.*), so is the oligarchic Lebanese state today paving the way for extremism with its deliberate inaction *vis-à-vis* the financial and economic collapse, and the ensuing impoverishment of large sectors of Lebanese society. Indeed, journalists and activists in Lebanon often and repeatedly accuse authorities of using various groups and entities to divert the attention of the masses from their ongoing hardships while dodging accountability (Mawad 2023; Moukaled 2023).

Civil marriage seems to also be 'a satanic project' in Jnoud El-Rabb's books, a heresy that paves the way for the legalisation of same-sex unions (Hayek 2022). The Lebanese context is one where citizens' personal status management and regulation is the exclusive mandate of religious authorities. The issue of civil marriage, in particular, has received considerable resistance for decades, with religious institutions framing it as immoral, sinful, and subversive. Yet several NGOs, legislators, politicians, and other figures have attempted to pass laws and proposals

for civil marriage. Bills proposing to legalise civil marriage in Lebanon have been debated in parliament since the 1950s but have always been systematically rejected (Khoury 2020). Like LGBTQI-centred panics, however, civil marriage debates re-emerge periodically, and tensions often seem to surge on the eve of junctural political events in the country, such as elections. The fearmongering appears to be stoked by political and religious authorities seeking to attack secular candidates who support civil marriage and aiming to maintain the political status quo.

Hundreds of couples continue to travel abroad for the explicit purpose of getting married civilly today because civil marriages are not contracted on Lebanese soil. Lebanese citizens who contract a civil marriage abroad register their marriage upon their return to Lebanon and settle issues and disputes arising from it in Lebanese civil courts that recognise such marriages. However, because the Lebanese state has not devised a unified civil law in Lebanon, these disputes are governed by the laws of the countries where the marriages were contracted (El Rahi 2023b).

The advent of a group of newly elected secular Members of Parliament (MPs) – dubbed the 'Change MPs' – to parliament following the 2022 elections, who overtly support civil marriage, prompted fierce opposition from both Muslim and Christian religious leaders. It galvanised discussions on televised talk shows and social media, triggering a renewed round of backlash by clerics and religious and conservative authorities. Several clerics took to social media to spew false information about civil marriage, demonise MPs Ibrahim Mneimneh and Halimé El-Kaakour,⁸ and incite hate and violence against them (El Rahi and Mendelek 2022).

Civil marriage and LGBTQI rights in Lebanon are fundamental sites of contestation: prone to debate and backlash, albeit backlash that could be framed as tactical. This is firstly because these are issues that sporadically, but systematically and deliberately, re-emerge on the eve of junctural political events and are made to seem like pressing menaces to the entire social fabric. They are thus exploited to construct moral panics over perceived threats to the hetero-patriarchal, conservative family order while the actual real threats to society remain consistently dismissed.

Secondly, the backlash could be framed as tactical because practically no tangible progress has been made on these two fronts – civil marriage and LGBTQI⁹ – rather, ongoing and increasing resistance and hostility. The former is still not legalised and its supporters are demonised, and the latter is criminalised and often pathologised. Thus, debates around these two issues are only galvanised – on demand – to fend off any attempts at building an alternative, secular, and socially equitable system of governance for the country. As materialising and regulating

bodies are conditions for the epidermal state to perform its sovereignty according to Mikdashi (2022), these two issues are primary sites of state sovereignty.

4.3 Atomised backlash

Although backlash in the form of explicit physical violence against individual women politicians is rare in Lebanese politics, the advent of young women – unaffiliated with any political figure, sectarian political party, or family – to parliament in May 2022 unleashed hostile reactions and revealed an array of demeaning practices directed at them. This could be framed as atomised backlash because it targets specific individuals and responds to a novelty or a phenomenon that could be perceived as a win for women – the breakthrough of an independent young woman into a traditional and conservative male-dominated, mostly gerontocratic, institution. Following Townsend-Bell's (2020) framing of backlash as a continuum that ends with overt acts of violence responding to vulnerable communities stepping over an explicit do-not-cross boundary, the existence of young women unaffiliated with any of the usual players on the Lebanese political scene in parliament could be seen as one such boundary. It can also be viewed as an instance of pre-emptive backlash, where the mere existence of young women in parliament is the infraction triggering violence, despite them not carrying out feminist agendas *per se*. Atomised backlash can be divided into two types: backlash against individual women – usually outspoken and visible – in the media and/or politics; and backlash against demands or women's rights and relevant laws.

In a tweet from July 2022, Lebanese MP Cynthia Zarazir (one of the four women 'change MPs' elected to parliament in 2022) revealed repeated incidents of sexual harassment she was subjected to by her male peers in parliament. Zarazir discussed multiple incidents of violation, 'disrespect', and 'harassment' by her fellow MPs over several months following her election (Ghoussoub 2022). Zarazir was the target of a slew of intimidating and demeaning practices, including having her last name mocked and compared to an Arabic word that means cockroaches, being assigned a filthy office in parliament with drawers filled with condoms and issues of *Playboy* magazine, and being denied a parking spot (*ibid.*). For the context of this article, this incident is framed as atomised backlash targeting a particular individual; however, it can also be seen as atomised backlash targeting progress on an issue.

Leading up to the 2022 parliamentary elections, several political parties and even the then newly elected prime minister proposed different women's quota laws (Shibani 2021). Local NGO Fifty-Fifty, which focuses on women's political participation, converged with 50 other organisations and 12 experts to draft a law for a women's parliamentary quota.¹⁰ The proposal, adopted by Inaya Ezzedine, an MP affiliated to the Amal Movement,¹¹ was dismissed in

the joint parliamentary committees' session in October 2021. Ironically, it was MPs belonging to the same parliamentary bloc as Ezzedine who were most staunchly opposed to a discussion about it (Megaphone News 2021). Upon raising the quota issue, MPs decided not to discuss it and promptly moved on to the next item on the agenda under a pretext of limited time. It is worth noting that only eight parliamentarians were ready to sign the proposed bill (El Rahi 2023b). Upon the proposal's dismissal, Ezzedine stormed out of parliament and held a press conference, publicly shaming the MPs for their move (Megaphone News 2021). Ezzedine's statement and the parliament's dismissive attitude triggered a wave of condemnations through statements and online posts from civil society, NGOs, experts, and journalists who had advocated for the quota. All quota proposals since 2005 have been successively dropped.

It is a common practice among the male-dominated political oligarchy in Lebanon to publicly demean women politicians during televised debates, making blatantly sexist and belittling comments referring to their families, sex lives, and looks. While this is not particularly atomised backlash, it remains an insidious practice furthered by the political elite against women politicians across affiliations – part and parcel of Rowley's (2020) 'microscapes of harms' that precede the overtly violent act against them. This practice contributes to silencing these – and other women – from engaging in political debate for fear of being targeted. It is outside the scope of this article to delve into the multiple instances of such practices occurring both in public – parliamentary sessions and television shows – and in private conversations.

5 Conclusion

This article opened with the story of a feminist – Amani El Beaini – which exemplifies some of the multiple forms of hostility and discrimination that women in Lebanon must live with. It also showcases the insidious matrix of patriarchal structures that leave women with few avenues for action. As explored and discussed throughout this article, the exclusion, discrimination, and violence that women in Lebanon face occur in all spheres of life and flow particularly from the domestic sphere – from family systems – and into the social and political institutions and the state. The definition of backlash as a hostile reaction or response to destabilisation in the status quo, hence, does not hold in this context, where violence is pervasive, structural, and embedded in the very systems making up the families, communities, and state of Lebanon.

Even though the exclusion experienced by women in Lebanon cannot be confined to a response, and the fundamental threat to women's rights and gender justice in Lebanon is structural and viciously embedded in the system, there remains clear instances of reactive opposition to particular issues, resistance to individual women, and misogyny that surfaces in response to certain developments. In addition to the pervasive systemic

violence, this article illuminated two forms of backlash against women's rights and gender justice observed in Lebanon. These can be categorised as atomised and tactical backlash. Atomised backlash is reactive violence that targets either individual women in politics or specific women's rights such as the women's quota in parliament and women's political participation. Tactical backlash is also observed – namely on the issues of civil marriage and LGBTQI communities – whereby tensions around these issues are sporadically but systematically stoked and galvanised – on demand – to demonise their supporters and fend off any attempts at building an alternative, secular, and socially equitable system of governance for the country.

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.
- 1 Nay El Rahi, Researcher, Arab Institute for Women (AIW), Lebanon.
- 2 Fatima Antar, Gender Studies Instructor, Lebanese American University and Research Assistant, Arab Institute for Women (AIW), Lebanon.
- 3 The World Bank had funded (before cancelling it) a water supply augmentation project known as the 'Bisri Dam Project' in the Bisri Valley, 35km south of Beirut. Despite the World Bank's and major politicians' promises that the project would supply residents of Beirut and Mount Lebanon with improved water services, environmental and rights activists as well as landowners in the area opposed it for being an ecological disaster that would use over 6 million square metres of mostly agricultural land to deliver drinking water from a highly contaminated source to the country's capital.
- 4 Article 95 of the Lebanese Constitution states that
The Chamber of Deputies that is elected on the basis of equality between Muslims and Christians shall take the appropriate measures to bring about the abolition of political confessionalism according to a transitional plan. A National Committee shall be formed and shall be headed by the President of the Republic; it includes, in addition to the President of the Chamber of Deputies and the Prime Minister, leading political intellectual and social figures. The task of this Committee shall be to study and propose the means to ensure the abolition of confessionalism, propose them to the Chamber of Deputies and the Council of Ministers, and to follow up the execution of the transitional plan. During the transitional phase: a. The sectarian groups shall be represented in a just and equitable manner in the formation of the Cabinet. b. The principle of confessional representation in public service jobs, in the judiciary, in

the military and security institutions, and in public and mixed agencies shall be cancelled in accordance with the requirements of national reconciliation; they shall be replaced by the principle of expertise and competence. However, Grade One posts and their equivalents shall be excepted from this rule, and the posts shall be distributed equally between Christians and Muslims without reserving any particular job for any sectarian group but rather applying the principles of expertise and competence. (Republic of Lebanon 1926)

This article has not been implemented to date.

- 5 Because each sect regulates the personal status issues of its community with a distinct court and set of laws, the laws governing the personal status affairs of women differ by sect. For instance, Sunni women can be granted custody of their children from 12 years old, while Shiite women can gain custody of their daughters from seven years old, and their sons from two years old.
- 6 Focus group discussion with feminist activists, Arab Institute for Women (AIW), Lebanon. In February 2022, in the context of the Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice programme, the AIW convened select feminist activists and women who have served in decision-making positions in their local districts, community projects, or campaigns to discuss what backlash looks like in the Lebanese context. This definition was put together collaboratively with the selected feminists who participated in this session.
- 7 The vague term 'unnatural sex' implies every sexual practice that does not involve marital coitus, and thus does not serve the aim of procreation and reproduction of new citizens within a nuclear heterosexual family (i.e. homosexuality, sex outside of marriage, anal sex, etc.).
- 8 Dr El Kaakour was the first woman from Iqlim al-Kharroub to be elected as an MP in 2022. She is particularly invested in Lebanese women's ability to pass down their nationality to their children and is regularly met with criticism from Sunni clerics affiliated with Dar al-Fatwa for her support of civil marriage and a secular state. Ibrahim Mneimneh was elected to one of the Sunni seats in 2022. Known for his advocacy of a secular state and his commitment to addressing social justice issues by being pro-civil marriage and pro-LGBTQI, Mneimneh was met with outrage from Sheikh Hassan Merheb, Deputy Inspector General of Dar al-Fatwa.
- 9 Although Penal Code 534 has not been annulled, there has been a series of progressive judicial rulings in 'unnatural sex' cases. The rulings advocated strongly for the protection of marginalised groups, explicitly emphasising that homosexuality is not criminalised in Lebanon, and demanding investigations be halted to align criminal procedure with fundamental rights, especially the right to privacy and protection from torture. On civil marriage, in 2012, Nidal Darwich and Khoulood Sukkarieh

- worked for ten months with civil marriage advocate, Talal Husseini, to exploit a legal loophole to perform a civil ceremony in Lebanon. The then caretaker Interior Minister Marwan Charbel was unable to come up with a reason to avoid registering Nidal and Khoulood's marriage, and they became the first couple in the history of the Arab world to get a civil marriage in their home country. It was not long before the couple started receiving death threats, following a fatwa by the highest Sunni authority in Lebanon, which eventually led them to seek asylum in Sweden (El Rahi 2023b).
- 10 The law stipulates a minimum of 26 out of 128 seats in parliament for women, and at least 40 per cent of names on every political party's candidate list reserved for women.
 - 11 The Amal Movement is a Lebanese political party and former militia affiliated with the Shia community. It is the largest Shia party in parliament with 14 MPs. The party has been led by Nabih Berri since 1980. Nabih Berri has been speaker of parliament since 1992.

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Glossary

ACFODE Action for Development [Uganda]
ADSOCK Advocates for Social Change Kenya
AIW Arab Institute for Women [Lebanon]
ALiGN Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms [UK]
BIGD BRAC Institute of Governance and Development [Bangladesh]
BJP Bharatiya Janata Party [India]
BMP Bangladesh Mahila Parishad
CAA Citizenship Amendment Act [India]
CANRAD Centre for the Advancement of Non-Racialism and Democracy [South Africa]
CBO community-based organisation
CBR Center for Basic Research [Uganda]
CEHURD Center for Health, Human Rights and Development [Uganda]
CGSRHR Centre of Excellence for Gender, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights [Bangladesh]
CHSJ Centre for Health and Social Justice [India]
CIDV Citizens' Initiative against Domestic Violence [Bangladesh]
CIPK Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya
COPASAH Community of Practitioners on Accountability and Social Action in Health [India]
CSE comprehensive sexuality education
CSO civil society organisation
CSW Commission on the Status of Women [USA]
DFID Department for International Development [UK]
DVA Domestic Violence Act [Uganda]
DVPPA Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act [Bangladesh]
DWA Department of Women Affairs [Bangladesh]
EBRD European Bank for Reconstruction and Development [UK]
ESID Effective States and Inclusive Development [UK]
FBO faith-based organisation
FCRA Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act [India]
FGM female genital mutilation
GEM Grupo de Estudos sobre Saúde [Studies and Research on Women, Gender, Health and Nursing, Brazil]
GoI Government of India
ICPD International Conference on Population and Development
IDRC International Development Research Centre [Canada]
IDS Institute of Development Studies [UK]
IFPE Instituto Federal de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia de Pernambuco [Pernambuco Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology, Brazil]
JPGSPH James P Grant School of Public Health [Bangladesh]
KR Kolkata Rista [India]
LAU Lebanese American University

LGBTQI+ lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex+

LSE London School of Economics and Political Science [UK]

MASVAW Men's Action for Stopping Violence Against Women [India]

MOWCA Ministry of Women and Children Affairs [Bangladesh]

MP Member of Parliament

MPF Ministerio Publico Federal [Federal Public Ministry, Brazil]

MSM men who have sex with men

NALSA *National Legal Services Authority v Union of India*

NEIM Núcleo de Estudos Interdisciplinares sobre a Mulher [Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies on Women, Brazil]

NEPEM Núcleo de Estudos e Pesquisa sobre a Mulher [Center for Studies and Research on Women, Brazil]

NGEC National Gender and Equality Commission [Kenya]

NGLHRC National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission [Kenya]

NGO non-governmental organisation

NIA National Investigation Agency [India]

NRM National Resistance Movement [Uganda]

OBC Other Backward Class

OHCHR Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [Switzerland]

PPGNEIM-UFBA Programa de Pós-Graduação em Estudos Interdisciplinares sobre Mulheres, Gênero e Feminismo da Universidade Federal da Bahia [Postgraduate Program in Interdisciplinary Studies on Women, Gender and Feminism at the Federal University of Bahia, Brazil]

PSOL Partido Socialismo e Liberdade [Socialism and Freedom Party, Brazil]

PUCL People's Union for Civil Liberties [India]

QUT Queensland University of Technology [Australia]

RJ Rio de Janeiro [Brazil]

SAIH Norwegian Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund

SCoK Supreme Court of Kenya

SDG Sustainable Development Goal

SDGA State Department for Gender Affairs [Kenya]

SDP skills development programme

Sida Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency

SIFF Save Indian Family Foundation

SOB Sexual Offences Bill [Uganda]

SOGI sexual orientation and gender identity

UCC Uniform Civil Code [India]

UCW Uganda Council of Women

UECE Universidade Estadual do Ceará [State University of Ceará, Brazil]

UFBA Universidade Federal da Bahia [Federal University of Bahia, Brazil]

UFMG Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais [Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil]

UFPE Universidade Federal de Pernambuco [Federal University of Pernambuco, Brazil]

UNEB Universidade do Estado da Bahia [State University of Bahia, Brazil]

UNFPA United Nations Population Fund [USA]

UNICAMP Universidade Estadual de Campinas [Campinas State University, Brazil]

UNRISD United Nations Research Institute for Social Development [Switzerland]

UP Uttar Pradesh

UWOPA Uganda Women Parliamentary Association

WHO World Health Organization [Switzerland]

WRO women's rights organisation

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Rosie McGee, Sohela Nazneen and Chloe Skinner**
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'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.'