

FRAMING PAPER

Facing the backlash: what is fuelling anti-feminist and anti-democratic forces?



Ayesha Khan, Emilie Tant and Caroline Harper

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Introduction: Backlash and patriarchal norms

Women and feminists all over the world are facing grave challenges and assaults on their freedoms. A global deterioration of progress on women's rights is taking the shape of a coordinated and well-funded backlash against gender equality, LGBTQI+ diversity and feminism. This is intimately connected to trends in authoritarian rollbacks to global democracy.

Anti-feminist forces are orchestrating this erosion of women's rights, with organisations and individuals working against collective freedoms in a push to reclaim or retain power. They do this through using narratives and rhetoric that harden or maintain conservative patriarchal norms, generating anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQI+ and anti-reproductive rights sentiment (McEwan and Narayanaswamy, 2023; CFFP, 2021). The backlash against gender and LGBTQI+ equality is also fuelling de-democratisation, being sustained by movements and funding flows that are ideologically *driven*.

Unequal gender norms and biases exist across all continents, income levels and cultures – making them a global issue. The proportion of women who hold positions as heads of state has remained around 10% worldwide since 1995, while around 50% of people still believe men make better political leaders than women (UNDP, 2023). Such patriarchal norms and male biases infuse our social, economic and political systems, proving detrimental to people of all genders, including men, and particularly the planet (IPCC, 2022).

Anti-gender ideology movements are driving a backlash to deny women basic rights, and to criminalise LGBTQI+ lives (Tant et al., 2023), even embedding ultra-conservative ideologies into our education and legal systems (see Box 1). It is important to recognise the links between anti-feminist and other anti-rights movements which also uphold racialised and hyper-nationalist agendas (Edstrom et al., 2023).

The consolidation and alignment of ultra-conservative and anti-rights actors means that patriarchy's resurgence is taking multiple forms. Reinforcement of traditional patriarchal structures is being fuelled by an array of powerful interests which are weaponizing gender norms to stoke fear and division. Drawing on authoritarian tactics that tap into fears of women's progress and economic precarity, these actors use religious, political, judicial, and social levers of power to reassert a gender hierarchy based on binary norms (Chenoweth and Marks, 2022).

Box 1: Backlash embeds into legislation

Backlash and backsliding are global trends that are gaining pace, shown by a parallel passing of new laws through legislatures in Uganda and the United States that strip rights based on gender and sexuality.

Uganda: Anti-Homosexuality Bill 2023.

Homosexuality was already illegal in Uganda, but this Bill introduces the death penalty for 'aggravated' homosexuality (in cases of transmission of HIV/AIDS) and decrees life sentences for those considered to be 'promoting' homosexuality, effectively criminalising speech about LGBTQI+ rights.

United States: Florida House Bill 2023: 1069 Education

This Bill is just one of many in Florida reinforcing patriarchal and binary norms around gender. It prohibits educators to cover gender diversity, sexuality and non-heteronormative sex in reproductive health education, only using materials approved by the Department of Education. It also prohibits requirements for personnel or students to be referred to with pronouns that do not correspond with biological sex.

Democratic backsliding

After the end of the Cold War and the fall of many military regimes in the Global South,¹ the 1990s witnessed an expansion in the number of democracies around the world. Along with this, a wave of states adopted new legislative quotas for women, expanding gender inclusion in electoral politics. It appeared to be only a matter of time until women's rights would be realised, supported by newly consolidating democracies everywhere.

'The contemporary fascist trends - ones that engage in death-dealing and rights-stripping - in the name of defending family, state and other patriarchal institutions, support ever-strengthening forms of authoritarianism.'

Judith Butler, 2023

Unfortunately, global developments in the new millennium led to growing authoritarianism with the rise of populist leaders in Russia, the US, Brazil, India and other states. With the rise of authoritarianism, the resilience and power of a resurgent anti-rights movement was revealed. Democratic trends have proved increasingly fragile, and instead of moving along predicted pathways from *transition* to *consolidation*, most states have come to a model of hybrid democracy at best – characterised by constraints on civil liberties and civic space, illiberal and exclusionary policies, and struggles over the legitimacy of the electoral process (Carothers, 2002; Diamond, 2015; Aksoy, 2018; Kandiyoti et al., 2019; Nelson, 2021).

Turkey is backsliding into electoral authoritarianism, led by the conservative right-wing Justice and Development Party, relying on religion to dismantle state secularism (Arat, 2021). India is becoming increasingly authoritarian as the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party imprints its religious Hindutva ideology on the state's law, education and political life (Anand and Lall, 2022).

In numerous contexts, autocrats use anti-gender policies and reforms that discriminate against women in the name of upholding family or religious values, to enhance their legitimacy claims and ensure the stability of their governments (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, 2022).

Anti-feminist backlash

During the 1990s, along with a wave of democratization, women's rights activists made landmark gains in building a global consensus on women's human rights and gender justice. To date, 179 countries have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Key United Nations (UN) conferences on human rights (1993), population and development (1994) and women (1995) expanded global commitments to women's human rights.

Yet in the same decade, the term 'backlash' was coined to name the reactionary opposition to feminist gains that was seeking to restore a patriarchal status quo in the face of progressive social change (Faludi, 1991). No example of backlash better captures its ongoing effect than the recent rollback of the constitutional protection to abortion rights in the US (CRR, 2022).

¹ The 'Global South' is a common term used to categorise countries around the world. Often it is employed to refer to nations that have historically been exploited through colonisation. In using this term, the authors would like to acknowledge current international debates which question whether another generalising and binary framework (Global North-Global South) is productive for reconstituting and challenging global power relations.

The current context of backlash against feminism and backsliding on democracy is making it impossible for the UN to hold the next world conference on women. Instead of building on their achievements, feminist movements are firefighting to contend with backlash at home and a dismantling of gender justice consensus internationally (Sanders, 2018; Shameem, 2021).

This clearly played out in 2022, when in response to the death in police custody of Kurdish 22-year-old Jina 'Mahsa' Amini, feminists from Iran and the diaspora campaigned for the successful expulsion of Iran from its four-year elected term on the Commission on the Status of Women. Iran became the first UN member state to be ousted from the Commission, supported by efforts from the global feminist community (UN News, 2022).

How do patriarchal norms inform and enable backlash?

Norms are social 'rules' that most people follow, and that appear to them to be 'normal'. Norms can be positive or negative for human rights and well-being. Patriarchal gender norms sustain a hierarchy of power relations and privileges, typically favouring what is generally considered masculine or male, over that which is judged feminine or female (Heize et al., 2019).

Patriarchal norms reinforce systemic inequalities, including the unequal sharing of power and resources, that undermine the rights of women and freedoms for marginalised genders (Harper et al., 2020). As such patriarchy is, in essence, a coercive force that can be used to expand and maintain control over others, but one that many recognise implicitly as 'normal' (see Box 2). Gendered differences also intersect with other oppressions and forms of discrimination, often through class and racial systems, resulting in a lack of diversity among those in power, both men and women (ibid.).

Those who want to maintain patriarchal power use and perpetuate certain understandings of what is 'normal' to promote traditional gender roles, uphold their power and privilege, and push back against change. (Chenoweth and Marks, 2022). These norms tend to feel familiar to most people, with both men and women being co-opted into the backlash, often working against their own interests.

Box 2: Examples of patriarchal gender norms

- 'Men make better political leaders'
- 'It is acceptable for a man to beat his wife'
- 'Women are born to be mothers'

Most social, economic, political and gendered operating systems have historically bestowed power upon the few and discriminated against the many. Norms reproduce these systems as a way to maintain unequal power structures in our day to day lives, also shaping people's ability to claim their rights (Harper et al., 2020).

Unequal gender norms also work as 'disciplinary power', affecting many millions by limiting their mobility, physical autonomy and opportunities for work, study and leisure (Harper et al., 2022). This has been described this as the constant 'fear of violence' that reigns over women's and LGBTQI+ peoples' lives (Gqola, 2022). Fear of violence keeps women out of politics (Krook, 2017), in abusive romantic relationships (Lahav, 2023), in low-paid work (Pillinger, 2016) and consistently feeling at risk of men's sexual and gender-based violence (Gqola, 2022).

Norms are important sites for transformative change: by renegotiating societies' wider beliefs and socially acceptable behaviours, gender justice movements can collectively dismantle the normalisation of violence and inequality. Feminist and LGBTQI+ movements countering patriarchal norms have impact by shifting widely held sexist attitudes and behaviours relating to gendered roles, male and female positions in society, sexual diversity, binary gender identities and common ideas about men's violence towards women (Jiménez et al., 2021).

But movements cannot access all the spaces where backlash is happening. Because patriarchal norms invisibly operate within most institutions and systems of governance, concerted efforts are needed to disrupt the biases and prejudices that facilitate backlash and perpetuate institutional misogyny.

How is backlash materialising?

Global consensus around gender justice claims is fracturing. A rise in religious nationalism, accompanied by state-led reaffirmations of patriarchal norms, has supported the efforts of anti-rights and backlash actors (Htun and Weldon 2018; Lewin 2021; Edstrom et al. 2023). These strong currents of conservative-led change are now live in multiple countries, including in India (Choudhury Lahiri, 2021), the US (Herman and Muldoon, 2018), Turkey (Arat, 2016), Hungary and Poland (Roggeband and Krizsán, 2020).

Anti-LGBTQI+ narratives are proactively promoted, most obviously in Uganda, where the Anti-Homosexuality Act was passed into law in 2023. This law includes a potential death penalty for those convicted of 'aggravated homosexuality' and up to 20 years' imprisonment for the 'promotion of homosexuality,' reversing progress on equal rights (HRW, 2023). Organisations popularising anti-LGBTQI+ narratives have also been found to be funded by Global North bilateral donors, whose own policies supposedly support LGBTQI+ rights (Provost, 2023).

Conservative patriarchal forces are always at work, but more recently they have coalesced to make progress in dismantling existing systems and institutions intended to protect women's rights, while actively constructing others in their place. This acts as a way to reinstate inequality both at home and internationally; a key strategy has been to co-opt and dilute UN and human rights language, in order to derail the collective progress made since the 1990s (Goetz, 2019).

Reactionary and 'misogynistic narratives' are influencing public policy-making and political discourse (Chenoweth and Marks, 2022). For example, of the 1,572 US politicians who have helped ban abortion since Roe fell, 86% are men (Sasani, 2023). Without efforts to counter institutional misogyny and gender norms in institutions, the picture is bleak (Opondo and Harper, 2022).

Groups of the religious right argue for 'natural rights, family rights and the right to life of the unborn,' against the demands of international women's rights constituencies (Sanders, 2018). Even individual countries, including the US, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Vatican, consistently facilitate efforts to remove the language of sexual and reproductive rights – or the term 'gender' – from international agreements (Washington et al., 2021).

Today's anti-gender and anti-rights movements are actively pursuing the rollback of progressive legal reforms and introducing rights-stripping bills, such as the Treatments for Sex Reassignment Law, signed in the US state of Florida in May 2023. In parallel, such movements fuel the rise of anti-feminist voices in politics and media, popularising misogynistic social norms and creating narratives that subjugate women and other oppressed groups (CFFP, 2021).

Authoritarian leaders have launched a simultaneous assault on women’s rights and democracy that threatens to roll back decades of progress on both fronts.

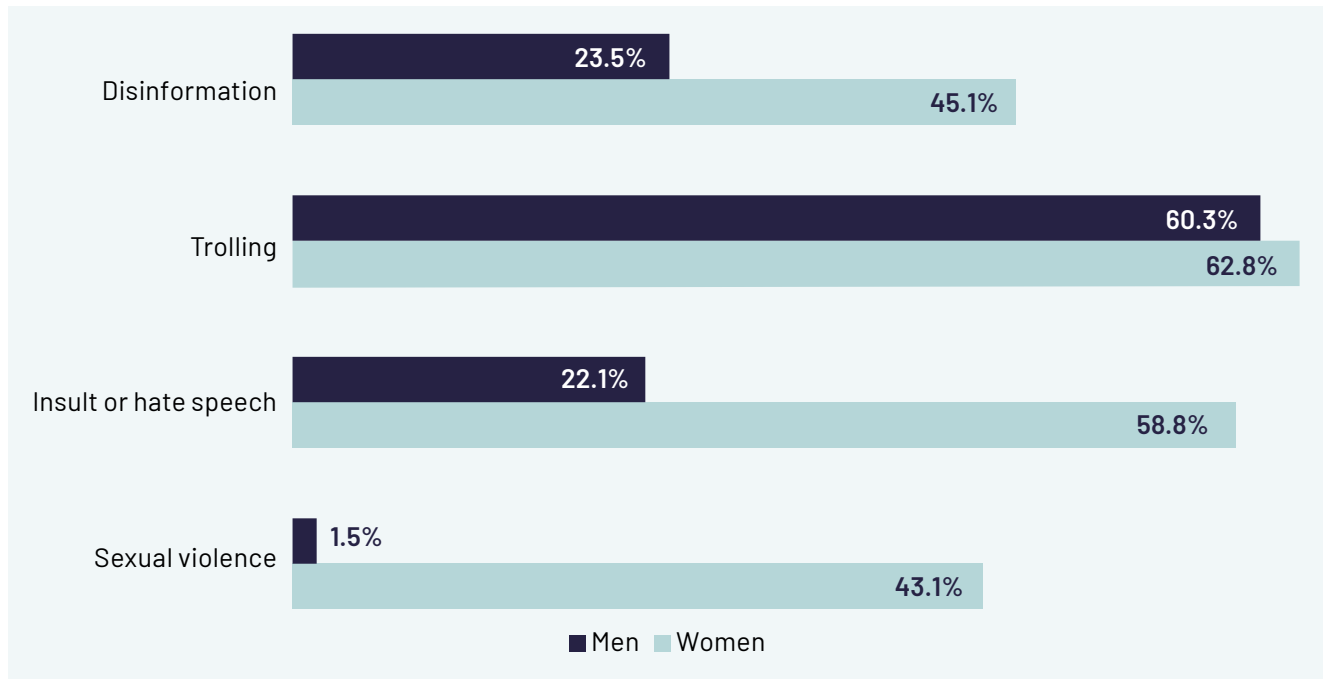
Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks, 2022

With decreased funding available for knowledge production around gender justice issues, backlash is also taking hold in other less visible, but more insidious ways (Blitt, 2018; Nazneen et al., 2019; Shvanyukova, 2022). Classrooms in the US state of Texas are denied access to gender-diverse literature due to the anti-gender movement mounting an educational offensive to reinforce patriarchal norms through curriculums. This is relying on a divisive political tool which manufactures fear around non-heterosexual gender and sexual diversity, ‘making hatred into political currency’ (Butler, 2023).

The very design of internet and social media platforms is also amplifying and normalising the spread of extreme misogyny through sexist, racist and biased algorithms (Diepeveen, 2022). The global popularity of misogynistic internet celebrity Andrew Tate is just one provocative example of the impact of the *Manosphere* – a thriving anti-feminist ecosystem with hundreds of thousands of users worldwide on numerous forums connecting incels,² ‘Men’s Rights Activists’, extreme misogynists, ‘Pick Up Artists’ and far-right groups (Bates, 2021; Brace, 2023; Perliger, Stevens and Leidig, 2023).

Still, political will to enact digital policy that intervenes against and moderates hateful or violent content against women and LGBTQI+ people has failed to keep track with the pace and scale of technological change (Diepeveen, 2022). The digital sphere is increasingly saturated with misogynist content – with targeted online and offline attacks on women in politics during electoral campaigns weakening democratic process, as data from Kenya’s General Election in 2022 shows (Figure 1, Kakande et al., 2023).

Figure 1: Percentage of monitored candidates experiencing a specific form of online gender-based violence on Twitter in the Kenyan General election



Source: Kakande et al., 2023

² ‘Incel’ (involuntarily celibate) is an extremist worldview and ideology that has emerged from a loose ecosystem of anti-woman online communities known as the ‘manosphere’ (Brace, 2021). Incels have been broadly linked to anti-feminism, male supremacy and the Men’s Rights Movement and even white supremacy (Cook, 2020), although the ‘manosphere isn’t just white’ (Onuoha, 2022).

Funding for anti-rights networks, actors and movements

Backlash is fuelled by international funding that far exceeds the financing of progressive movements. In just one example, between 2013 and 2017, LGBTQI+ movements received \$1.2 billion in contrast to the \$3.7 billion received by anti-gender movements globally (GPP, 2020). Between 2009 and 2018, a group of 54 organisations based mainly in the US, Russia and Europe were engaged in anti-gender activism with funding of more than \$700 million (Datta, 2021).

Organisations and actors involved in backlash politics have trained and funded their representatives to enter positions of power in national and local governments, judiciaries and other areas of influence (Shameem, 2021). Global religious institutions like the Vatican, other Christian transnational organisations and Islamic international institutions³ work alongside each other to influence global policy and discourse (Sanders, 2018). They wield visible and hidden power, within and across national boundaries, to preserve the status quo, and to resist or reverse progressive reforms.

Organised opposition to women's and LGBTQI+ rights is largely under-scrutinised and generally underestimated, while groups involved can be very sophisticated in their fundraising (Provost, 2023). Anti-rights funding is also largely unrestricted, well-targeted and strategically light on demands around measurement and accountability for dispatch of funds.

What can be done to counter the backlash?

Defending democratic rights requires coordinated responses from progressive actors working together in coalition – with sufficient resourcing and vision. To tackle regressive social norms, women's freedom and agency must be defended and expanded in all aspects of life.

According to the Gender Social Norms Index, there has been little to no overall progress towards more gender-equal norms over the last decade, which has materialised as a period of stagnation for women in the areas of politics, gendered violence, reproductive justice and economic autonomy (UNDP, 2023).

Despite this demoralising picture, it is still vital to remember that women have been resisting patriarchal oppression throughout history (George and Harper, 2022). Thousands of people today – activists, philanthropists, scholars and politicians – are involved in a pushback, fighting against patriarchy for collective human rights and democracy, guided by feminist principles.

ALIGN, through ODI's Gender Equality and Social Inclusion programme, will work to provide evidence, inform, convene, and support action to counter this patriarchal backlash. One key message underpins this work: for emancipatory norm change to have a chance to embed and transform society as a whole, it must take a long-term view to deeper change, inspiring the hearts and minds of individuals, along with structural and institutional reforms. We will engage with the global research community to:

- **Uncover critical sites where the backlash operates unseen**

For gender justice movements to better respond to threats posed by patriarchal backlash, more evidence is needed to reveal the strategies, funding flows and critical spaces in which it operates. Mapping the global dynamics of anti-rights movements and understanding how norms-based narratives affect public discourse and policy can reveal key sites in which collective action can be taken.

3 For example: CitizenGo, Alliance Defending Freedom, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation

- Generate solutions for regulating digital space**

Silent algorithms and the back-end design of social media are the invisible underbelly driving the spread of misogynistic content and online violence towards women and LGBTQI+ people. ALiGN will continue to expose the architecture of digital space and its impact on gender norms, working with partners globally to develop advocacy strategies for making digital spaces safer for all.
- Gather evidence on how feminist activists organise and impact gender norms**

Tracking, mapping and financially supporting women’s resistance is essential in a time defined by closing civic space and backlash. Learning and sharing across geographies will strengthen knowledge on how movements have impact by innovating and adapting. ALiGN will also explore how creative approaches, like *artivism*, can help make claims visible, engage emotions and contribute to shifting norms and political consciousness.
- Propose ways in which feminist foreign policy can respond to backlash**

States pursuing feminist foreign policy have an opportunity to coordinate an international response that can effectively push back against the rollbacks on women’s and LGBTQI+ people’s rights. Countries such as Germany, Canada, Chile, Colombia and others with feminist leadership can work in coalition for gender justice. ODI will explore potential policies that can tackle the global dynamics of the anti-rights movement, both on and offline, including funding for feminist movements defending democracy.
- Learn how LGBTQI+ movements mobilise in local contexts**

LGBTQI+ rights are increasingly under attack, and granular studies are needed to understand how movements mobilise and resist oppression so that they can be better supported. By exploring what strategic actions activists call for, ALiGN aims to help build alliances for change to help protect their rights.
- Build-up movements that bring in more male allies**

Patriarchy is bad for men too, subjecting them to oppressive hierarchical work and social lives, compounded by unjust class, race and caste systems. But there are many pro-feminist men, and building knowledge on how to expand male movements for gender justice is essential to making transformative change.
- Expose educational spaces as significant sites of backlash and resistance**

Anti-rights organisations are successfully contesting comprehensive sexuality education, promoting the de-secularisation of curriculums, jeopardising gender equality content and constraining academic spaces. ALiGN will work to uncover their strategies and impact with locally grounded empirical studies.
- Make space for alternative visions in public debate and multilateral fora**

Multiple overlapping crises call for imaginative alternatives to systemic problems. By bringing feminist understandings and transformative policies into international spaces, global efforts and solutions can more effectively tackle the material conditions that backlash taps into. This can help achieve progress on urgent issues such as climate, democracy, equal rights and economic justice.

These agendas represent urgent questions that need to be addressed and are key areas in which to build momentum to act. There are roles for everybody who supports human rights and feminism – from funding, to allyship, to policy advocacy, to locally-led work in communities. Working together, supporters of a more gender equal world can expose the relationship between patriarchy, injustice and inequality, in order to re-define a shared future that supports the freedom of all.

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About ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – patriarchal gender norms. Through its vibrant and growing digital platform, and its events and activities, ALIGN aims to ensure that the best of available knowledge and resources have a growing impact on harmful gender norms.

ALIGN Programme Office

ODI

203 Blackfriars Road

London SE1 8NJ

United Kingdom

Email: align@odi.org.ukWeb: www.alignplatform.org**Disclaimer**

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