

Feminist Dispatch: Confronting Global Antifeminist Backlash

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Abstract

Given the recent surge in authoritarian populism, right-wing nationalism, anti-gender movements, the manosphere (representing male supremacy culture on websites, blogs, and online forums), and state crackdowns on civil society – feminist intellectuals, activists, and groups have faced increasing misogyny and reprisal. This surge has sparked renewed discussions about antifeminist backlash, often referencing Susan Faludi’s influential book, *Backlash: The undeclared war against American women* (1992), which examined the media’s backlash against the women’s movement in the United States during the 1980s. This collaborative paper critically reflects on the conference titled “Anti-Feminist Backlash in the Global South: Cross-Regional Discussions, Strategies, and Innovative Practices,” organized by the Arab Institute for Women and hosted at the Lebanese American University in Beirut, Lebanon, in June 2023. We explore the patterns of antifeminist backlash discussed at the conference and innovative feminist resistances emerging globally. While the current sociopolitical and sociocultural moment underscores the need to address the intensified antifeminist backlash, it also necessitates reevaluating the concept of backlash and its limitations to comprehend the complexities of contemporary antifeminist politics and foster effective transnational feminist solidarity.

Keywords: misogyny, feminist mobilization, antifeminist backlash, anti-gender movement, transnational feminisms

Introduction

In this paper, we critically reflect on the “Anti-Feminist Backlash in the Global South: Cross-Regional Discussions, Strategies, and Innovative Practice” conference held in Beirut from June 19 to 22, 2023. Conceptualized and hosted by the Arab Institute for Women at the Lebanese American University, the conference aimed to “produce and build knowledge on anti-feminist backlash, compare and contrast anti-backlash strategies, and to build cross-sectoral and transnational alliances among anti-backlash actors in the Global South” (Arab Institute for Women, 2023, p. 1). Scholars, researchers, activists, and gender consultants from countries including Serbia, Palestine, Lebanon, Morocco, Jordan, Malaysia,

India, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Brazil, Iran, United Kingdom, Tunisia and Turkey participated in the conference, discussing specific instances of backlash in their respective contexts.

The conference was organized with the support of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) (Institute of Development Studies, n.d.), the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) foundation. IDS is a research, learning, and teaching institute focusing on generating and sustaining equitable global development (Institute of Development Studies, n.d.). IDS partners with “governments, philanthropic foundations, non-governmental organizations, academics, and civil society to transform approaches to progressive social, political, and economic change in ways that ultimately make a difference to people’s lives” (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, n.d.). The Institute learns from, highlights, and uplifts local communities and initiatives in visioning transformative possibilities. SIDA, a Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs government agency, works in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Europe and cooperates with government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector to “reduce poverty and oppression around the world” (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, n.d.). FES operates alongside German foreign and development policies. Its mission is the “promotion of social justice, democracy, peace, and security” (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, n.d.).

The “Anti-Feminist Backlash in the Global South” conference has its roots in a six-year project funded by SIDA and spearheaded by IDS, titled “Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice” to document and research global patriarchal backlash to gender justice. The project aims to generate scholarly and activist knowledge about backlash by partnering with activists, academics, policymakers, women, LGBTQIA+, human rights organizations, and activists. These partnerships aim to develop strategies and identify opportunities to counter backlash effectively. Partner organizations include The AiW at LAU in Lebanon, BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), and BRAC James P. Grant School of Public Health (BRAC-JPGSPH) in Bangladesh, Gender at Work Consulting in India, Advocates for Social Change (ADSOCK) in Kenya, Center for Basic Research (CBR) in Uganda, Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ) in India, Nucleus of Interdisciplinary Women’s Studies of the Federal University of Bahia (NEIM) in Brazil, Özyeğin University in Turkey, Refugee Law Project in Uganda, SAHAYOG in India, and Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) in Uganda.

The conference commenced with welcome speeches by Dr. Michel E. Mawad, the President of LAU, Ms. Myriam Sfeir, Director of The AiW, and Mr. Jerker Edström, Research Fellow at IDS. Following this, a performance titled “Backlash Played Out,” directed by Dr. Lina Abyad, Associate Professor of Theatre at the Department of Communication, Arts & Languages at LAU, showcased the experiences and lived realities of individuals impacted by gender discrimination and violence. The performance served as a catalyst for discussions on the conference’s themes.

Over the course of three days, the conference featured 10 panels, including “Backlash: Understanding Power Dynamics”; “Backlash Against Gender Rights: Exploring Global and Regional Perspectives”; “Linking Backlash and Crises: Why Now, Why Here, There and (Almost) Everywhere?”; “Countering Backlash Against Gender Rights: Innovative Practices and Lessons Learned”; “Misogyny, Morality, and State Repression: Anti-Feminist Backlash in Malaysia, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh”; “Workshop: Grasping Patriarchal Backlash: Briefing and Interactive Gameplay- Chess”; “Backlash in the Media: Analyzing the Role of Traditional, Digital, and Alternative Media Outlets”; “Breaking Barriers: The Struggle for Gender Rights and Freedoms”; “Case Study on the Feminist Civil Society Platform in

Lebanon”; and “Reflections on Backlash: A conversation.” There was also an interactive workshop on “Grasping Patriarchal Backlash: Briefing and Interactive Gameplay – Chess,” which allowed participants from different regions to identify and map the various power players in politics, traditional and social media, think tanks, and organizations funding anti-feminist rhetoric and violence. The exercise helped participants compare and contrast how anti-feminist backlash is playing out and learn about the specificities of regional and local contexts.

In this paper, we address two simultaneous interrelated projects on backlash and anti-feminist backlash that emerged at the conference. First, we discuss the global patterns of backlash and anti-feminist backlash in the current moment through a contextually and geographically situated transnational feminist framework, as revealed at the conference. We then deconstruct and reconstruct the understanding and practice of backlash and anti-feminist backlash. Drawing on Mohanty’s (1988) seminal essay, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” we explore the complexities surrounding the concept of backlash, including the temporal accuracy of labeling the current manifestation of anti-feminism as well as the liberal use and implication of the term. The concurrent analysis aims to help scholars, practitioners, and activists better discern anti-feminist mobilizations for more effective transnational feminist solidarity.

Global Patterns of Anti-Feminist Backlash and Feminist Strategies of Resistance

The primary motivation for this conference is exploring the emergence of “new forces” actively working to roll back the progress achieved on the level of women’s and LGBTQIA+ rights and to limit civic freedoms (Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice, n.d.). One clear global pattern is the rise of right-wing and populist parties aiming to reinforce traditional gender norms and suppress LGBTQIA+ and other minority communities. For example, in her presentation titled “Anti-Feminist Backlash, Counter Strategies for Resistance and Modes of Building Transnational Alliances,” Dr. Isis Nusair, Professor of Women’s and Gender Studies and International Studies at Denison University, highlighted how figures like Donald Trump and masculinist and white nationalist groups, such as the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement, Oath Keepers, and Proud Boys politicized women’s bodies as arenas of contention. They support and advocate for repealing reproductive rights, passing laws criminalizing the transgender community, and implementing voting restrictions that disproportionately affect people of color.

Similarly, Ms. Hasina Khan, Founder and Member of the Bebaak Collective, a coalition of autonomous women’s groups working in various states of India, discussed how Narendra Damodardas Modi and his fervently Hindu nationalist government in India have pursued development projects that displaced millions, eroded labor protections, and stripped the rights of Muslims across the country and in occupied Kashmir. For instance, laws like the anti-Muslim citizenship law of 2019, which stripped millions of Muslims of citizenship, are often rationalized under the guise of liberating Muslim women. As Khan noted in her presentation titled “Muslim Women’s Rights in the Context of Muslim Personal Laws in India: Between State Repression and Patriarchy,” the combination of Hindu fundamentalism and neoliberalism places feminist groups in a conundrum, where they are caught between discriminatory personal laws and Hindu fundamentalism.

The anti-feminist backlash in Lebanon is deeply entangled in the country’s complicated political landscape marked by the legacy of the French mandate and the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), patriarchy, sectarianism, a refugee crisis, and the collapse of the economy. As fundamentalist and populist nationalist politics intensify around the world,

so do attacks on LGBTQIA+ communities. Ms. Abir Chebaro, a gender consultant and activist, discussed how, in Christian-majority areas, artists have faced anti-LGBTQIA+ attacks for incorporating rainbow colors into their work. Ms. Nay El Rahi, a researcher and activist, spoke about how the Lebanese system of governance, which is built on a sectarian-based-power sharing model, impedes women's agency and the struggle for rights. In particular, the Lebanese personal status laws and census registration are sites where, as Dr. Maya Mikdashi, Assistant Professor at Rutgers University has argued, sect and sex consolidate women's inferior status and male supremacy. She delivered a keynote speech titled "Sextarian Backlash: The Political Work of Moral and Sex Panics," shedding light on how sect and sex co-constitute gendered social and political life in Lebanon. The talk also highlighted the role of the state in consolidating sovereignty through surveillance of vulnerable and marginalized populations, including but not limited to queers, migrants, refugees, and sex workers.

The traditional media have always played a central role in reporting and/or misreporting feminist politics. However, the surge in digital media and online misogynistic anti-feminist backlash marks a distinct and recent phenomenon. Online platforms dedicated to "men's rights" have garnered substantial followings, offering tutorials on how to abuse, violate, and assault girls and women without consequences. The manosphere is a collection of men's online communities, forums, and groups that provide a platform for those who align themselves with toxic masculinity, hyper patriarchy, misogynistic viewpoints, and the enticement of boys and young men through hooks such as masculinity coaches. Moreover, nefarious dark web spaces have emerged as new hubs for the aggregation and rapid escalation of gender-based violence, reaching unprecedented levels of intensity. Dr. Nada Bobičić, Research Associate at the University of Belgrade, Ms. Sanae Ansar Ech-Chotbi, a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Erfurt, Mr. Israr Hasan, Research Associate at BRAC-JPGSPH, and Dr. Sharin Shajahan Naomi, Gender Expert at BRAC-JPGSPH, discussed the celebration of sexism, discrimination, misogyny, and violence on various traditional media and online platforms, including Facebook. Mr. Omar Khaled, General Manager for Spot Cast in Lebanon, presented the centrality of alternative media and cross-border collaborative approaches to invalidate hate speech about feminism.

The weaponization of women's ministries and affiliated organizations by states to promote anti-feminist ideologies and endorse detrimental neoliberal policies is another global pattern. For example, Dr. Azza Basarudin, Assistant Professor at California State University, Long Beach, highlighted how Malaysia's Ministry for Women, Family, and Community Development serves as the mouthpiece of state anti-feminism to promote women as "the weaker sex," irrational and emotional, and needing guidance and protection. The Ministry's work aligns with how patriarchy and misogyny are legitimized in beliefs, attitudes, and behavior patterns that shape customs and practices, particularly in the Malay Muslim communities. Through campaigns such as "Happy Women, Happy Families," the Ministry advises married women working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic on how to maintain familial harmony by being subservient to their husbands and how to enhance their femininity for their husbands through online makeup application and grooming tutorials.

Similarly, Dr. Nurseli Yeşim Sünbuloğlu, Director of the Women's Studies Research Center at Kadir Has University, illustrated how state-sponsored organizations, such as the Women and Democracy Association (KADEM), played a pivotal role in President Tayyip Erdoğan's victory by serving as the crucial political arms of fundamentalist and neoliberal state agendas. KADEM billed as an Islamic feminist organization, promotes conservative family values and campaigns against gender-based violence and has become the women's rights

advocacy in Turkey. In this vein, KADEM supports and reproduces biological essentialism and patriarchal gender ideology while co-opting feminist and rights-based activism.

State backlash against women's rights and human rights NGOs is also shrinking the space for radical feminist resistance worldwide. Dr. Islah Jad, Associate Professor at Birzeit University, showed how in Palestine, the complex interplay involving Israeli settler-colonial violence, imperialist donors, the Palestinian Authority, Islamist groups, and women's movements has led to a backlash against the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Israeli restrictions of donor agencies to those aligned with Western liberal values and the imposition of colonial funding conditions, such as withholding aid from groups labeled "terrorist and anti-semitic," have severely impacted funding for rights-based advocacy. Both the Palestinian Authority and Islamist groups are wary of women's organizations which are accused of pushing Western values and agendas. Meanwhile, women's groups and their organizing strategies are increasingly disconnected from grassroots movements, which alienates their target population.

Dr. Tina Beyene, Assistant Professor at California State University, Northridge, explored how in Ethiopia the state's adoption of neoliberal policies, the deterioration of human rights, and the dependence of women's rights on donor-funded NGOs have fragmented the feminist movement in the country. Following corruption allegations and human rights criticisms from NGOs during the 2009 election, the government banned NGOs from advocating for rights, including women's rights, through stringent laws requiring that NGOs receive 90 percent of their funding locally, effectively disqualifying most NGOs from engaging in non-neoliberal projects. In Lebanon, too, anti-feminism is channeled through attacks on civil society. As Ms. Lina Abou-Habib, Director of the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship at the American University of Beirut (AUB), Ms. Marianne Touma, Gender and Inclusion Field Officer at UN Women, and Ms. Rima Al Mokdad, Gender and Social Inclusion Technical Advisor at UN Women, note, the various sectarian political parties, publicly assail NGOs, including feminist ones as conduits for various foreign agendas, especially where the latter call for political accountability and respect for women's and human rights.

Despite the surge in global anti-feminist backlash, feminist intellectuals, activists, and practitioners are responding with innovative strategies. For instance, Ms. Diana Ishaqat, Communications and Fundraising Manager at Sakeena, a youth-centered, non-profit, and non-partisan organization that upholds the rights of orphans, noted how the thickness of tribal, family, and religious affiliations in all aspects of Jordanian life creates a cycle of discrimination for orphans, especially as they exit the foster system. Tribal and familial lineage leaves orphans who lack access to this crucial social capital on the margins of citizenship. The work of groups like Sakeena aims to break down the stigma and barrier orphans experience, thereby calling into question the exclusionary practices which become state-sanction tools for marking insiders and outsiders.

Other innovative challenges come from social movements where ordinary girls and women challenge the state directly. For instance, in India, Muslim women led the Shaheen Bagh nonviolent grassroots movement to protest the Citizenship Amendment Act and the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC) targeting Muslim communities. These intergenerational Indian Muslim girls and women shut down a major highway for 100 days. As Dr. Deepta Chorpa, Senior Research Fellow at IDS, notes, this women's only protest allowed for heightened activism. Their intersectional positions on labor unions also garnered support from other labor unions, students, and groups, such as the Punjabi farmer protesters who were locked in a battle with the Modi administration's neoliberal agricultural sector reforms.

Ms. Khan discussed the potential of cross-sectional solidarity for feminists in India. For instance, caste discrimination and Brahmanical tendencies within feminist groups have seen productive alliances between Muslim and caste-based communities. Dr. Beyene, noted that despite the state ban on rights-based advocacy, Ethiopian feminists have deployed innovative methods to continue advocating for women's rights, such as rebranding gender work by purging the language of rights and replacing them with "training," "economic empowerment," "service expansion," "girls' rights," "capacity building," and so on.

Rethorizing Backlash

The past two decades have witnessed the global rise of illiberal actors, right-wing organizations and movements, and authoritarian populism. From Italy, Poland, Hungary, Turkey, Brazil, and the United States, campaigns against gender variance, feminists, abortion rights, LGBTQIA+ rights, sex education, and diversity, equity, and inclusion are gaining traction. The widespread outcry against feminists and liberal proponents of racial and gender justice is an alarming indicator of a growing global and transnational movement to dismantle democratic values and institutions. Butler (2024), in her latest book, *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, chronicles the rise of the "anti-gender movement" that treats gender as a monolith and weaponizes it for political capital. For instance, Russia sees feminism and LGBTQIA+ rights as a threat to national security. Evangelical and Catholic communities deploy it as the reason for the destruction of the traditional family; the Vatican views it as a menace to civilization and "men" (Butler, 2024). In Poland, contemporary anti-feminist backlash takes shape in the form of "opportunistic synergy" between religious fundamentalist and right-wing populist parties where they capitalize on citizens' social anxiety and frustrations with neoliberalism to de-democratize and push for conservative legislation and anti-gender policies (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022, p. 24). In Brazil under Jai Bolsonaro, anti-gender ideology found its way into legislation and public policies. Turkey's president Tayyip Erdoğan fanned the flames of conservatism and authoritarianism, activating the anti-gender movement as a backlash to progressive policies and freedoms, reaffirming a pro-family narrative, and attacking LGBTQIA+ communities.

Butler (2024) argues that anti-gender ideology is more than just a backlash to feminism; it encapsulates a more capacious desire for restoration projects, including patriarchal power, white supremacy, Christian nationalism, compulsive heterosexuality, and hierarchies of humanity. In the United States, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, scores of anti-transgender legislations, and detention camps for migrants and refugees are all examples of new forms of fascism that promise solutions to various forms of threats and social ills. Teaching gender is equated to being in opposition to science, religion, and nature, as well as an affront to morality, patriarchy, masculinity, and social order (Butler, 2024). Gender theory becomes the site for moral panics where people of color, queers, transgender people, migrants, refugees, and feminists are targets of vitriol and violence. In essence, the anti-gender movement is an unsettling instance of backlash actively taking place globally.

Throughout the course of the "Anti-Feminist Backlash in the Global South" conference, much of the analysis of the current global anti-feminist backlash was informed by Faludi's (1992) conception of backlash in the 1980s in the United States. Faludi (1992) views backlash as "a recurring phenomenon: it returns every time women begin to make some headway toward equality, a seemingly inevitable early frost to the brief flowerings of feminism" (p. 68). Backlash, according to Faludi, depends on two crucial points: one is the idea of feminist gain, and the second is the retraction of some forward moments. While Faludi's approach is frequently cited in academic and activist work on backlash, it is essential to recognize that the development and application of backlash in the circumstances of the Global North cannot be generalized to localized contexts and struggles. The centering of

the United States and the progress-driven narrative of backlash theories sparked a lively discussion at the conference. Participants debated the portability of a theory or metaphor of backlash that emerged in the context of liberalist discourses of the Global North, questioning its relevance for making sense of the anti-feminist attacks in the Global South. Furthermore, there was debate about how backlash read through Faludi's framework posits a linear reactionary narrative of progress and a hegemonic reading of feminist struggles.

Piscopo and Walsh (2020) offer more recent theorizing of backlash in a special issue of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. They argue for an intersectional and transnational approach that attends to power dynamics, distinguishes between discrimination and backlash, and centers the bodies bearing the brunt of the backlash for a more profound and multilayered feminist analysis. Piscopo and Walsh's theorizing challenges a teleological understanding of feminist history and struggles put forward by Faludi (1992), while reaffirming a framework that could respond to contextualized rising authoritarianism, a constellation of anti-backlash actors and their agendas, and complex local-global interplay. Mansbridge and Shames (2008) suggest that it is productive to confine backlash as a response "directed against change agents or change leaders" through "the use of coercive power to regain lost power as capacity" (p. 625). Backlash, then, Mansbridge and Shames claim, involves a rootedness in maintaining the status quo through restoring "part or all of one's former power in the most general meaning of capacity" (p. 627). Tracing backlash through the dynamics of coercive power allows for a more complex and multilayered analysis of where, when, and how backlash occurs and the varied strategies for engaging backlash.

In her presentation, Dr. Basarudin, Assistant Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, California State University, Long Beach, asked three central questions to underscore how the backlash is context-specific with a complex array of issues and tensions: What work is anti-feminist backlash doing? What does tracing specific sites of backlash illuminate about the backlash narrative? What are the implications of backlash to feminist gains and futures? In posing these questions, Basarudin challenges normative theorizing of backlash that flattens the diversity of subjecthood and embodied oppression. She focuses on contextually situated bodies under surveillance to unpack the specific nature of the backlash and how it is interconnected to global dimensions. She asked participants to consider what anti-feminist backlash tells about gender, sexuality, power dynamics, and the state of our communities and cultures. Additionally, she insisted on attending to the link between the past, present, and future backlashes to chart an imagining of political possibilities. Dr. Nusair further emphasized during the conference that while monitoring and responding to the intensification of the anti-feminist backlash is imperative, we must also reconsider framing backlash as a unidirectional phenomenon and view it as a "continuum of violence leading up to eruptions." Nusair further noted that "this broader perspective allows us to consider patriarchal adaptations as well as the potential for feminist mobilization and counter-backlash efforts that transcend gender boundaries."

In general, patriarchal and misogynistic logics are central to understanding the backlash phenomenon. However, since the backlash phenomenon is rooted in context and geopolitics, teasing out its situated practices and deployments is crucial. The Abolishing Patriarchal Violence Innovation Lab defines patriarchal violence (PV) as "an interconnected system of institutions, practices, policies, beliefs, and behaviors that harm, undervalue, and terrorize girls, women, femme, intersex, gender non-conforming, LGBTQIA+, and other gender-oppressed people... PV is a widespread, [normalized] epidemic based on the domination, control, and colonizing of bodies, genders, and sexualities, happening in every community globally. PV is a global power structure and manifests on the systemic,

institutional, interpersonal, and internalized levels. It is rooted in interlocking systems of oppression” (Black Feminist Future, 2023). Patriarchal violence at this political juncture in history can be narrated through interlocking dynamics of authoritarian populism, white supremacy, and right-wing nationalism that seek to not only restore patriarchal/white power to public and private spheres but, more importantly, to dismantle liberal democratic institutions and criminalize and eliminate gender and sexual minorities and minoritized communities.

Conclusion

The obliteration of feminist struggles for rights and freedoms is at the heart of the illiberal and undemocratic backlash efforts. Feminists have long advocated against gender discrimination, patriarchal violence, and sexual freedoms, and their gains threatened the status quo and hierarchies of power. The common stereotype about feminists includes feminazis, man-haters, anti-family, unfeminine, radical, angry, and lesbians. Feminists are often accused of emptying spaces of humor and joy, a claim that Ahmed (2023) has addressed extensively in her book, *The feminist killjoy handbook: The radical potential of getting in the way*. The book covers an expansive range of practices – refusing to give into patriarchal dictates, refusing to laugh at misogynist jokes, refusing to participate in reproducing biological essentialism and gender binary, refusing the history of erasure, refusing to celebrate colonial and/or genocidal national holidays, refusing to stop naming a problem, refusing silence, and the list goes on. To “killjoy” is to reclaim freedom and dignity for women and marginalized groups who continue to face the erosion of their civic, political, and economic rights.

Social media platforms have greatly aided the rise of authoritarian populism, sectarianism, and religious fundamentalism. They have also amplified and mobilized misogynistic violence with impunity, and led to an uptick of anti-feminist backlash. These factors have prompted the convening of the conference in Beirut titled “Anti-Feminist Backlash in the Global South: Cross-Regional Discussions, Strategies, and Innovative Practices.” It is in the spirit of the feminist killjoy that is immensely challenging, enraging, and joyful that the participants of this conference came together to build a cross-border solidarity network to share research and resources, engage in collaborative thought processes, and build capacity with regional and global stakeholders, including academics, activists, policymakers, and gender consultants. Participants subscribed to the power of a “feminist killjoy” in bringing together a collective transnational movement to refuse patriarchal restoration and misogynistic violence.

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