

How to Study Anti-Gender Backlash in Lebanon

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The concept of anti-gender backlash is west-based and does not adequately account for the specific dynamics and the intricacies of anti-feminist backlash in the Lebanese context. Gender discrimination in Lebanon is systemic. Therefore, anti-feminist backlash is structural and manifests through the systemic violence and quotidian hostility inflicted to women and LGBTQ individuals.

In this article we revisit the origins of the term and examine its resurgence at the global level with the rise of right-wings politics, religious fundamentalism, and economic crisis. We also propose a localized definition of backlash within the Lebanese context and present its trends, forms, as well as its manifestations in women’s daily life.

One: Backlash is a relatively recent concept that has entered our feminist discourse and literature in the past few years. Since we aim to create contextualized, decolonial knowledge from the ground up, it is useful to revisit the origins of the term.

The term anti-feminist backlash was first introduced by Suzan Faludi in 1991 to analyze the counter-reaction to women’s rights within the American context. Faludi defined backlash as a pushback against real or perceived threats to the existing power structure. She characterized 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 (Faludi, 1991).

According to Faludi, Backlash is distinct from the ongoing, systemic misogyny embedded in patriarchal systems, describing it instead as episodic and acute opposition specifically targeting women’s rights and feminist gains.

The global resurgence of the term “backlash”, amid the rise of right-wing politics, fascist movements, religious fundamentalism, and economic crisis, has prompted feminists from the Global South to reflect on the applicability of such concept. This exercise would also help us deepen the understanding of how our own social and political systems govern women’s life. This process offers renewed momentum to interrogate the systemic violence faced by women, and to sharpen our feminist goals and tools.

Two: Understandably, this west-based framing does not adequately account for the specific dynamics and intricacies of anti-feminist backlash in the Lebanese context. The prevailing definition of backlash requires critical deconstruction and reexamination through the lens of systemic discrimination embedded in the Lebanese socio-economic and political systems.

In Lebanon, the term backlash has recently gained popularity in the literature on civil society and women’s political participation, particularly in relation to the violence women face in their daily life. However, much of this discourse treats backlash in isolation from its systemic patriarchal origin, focusing primarily on overt acts of violence targeting individuals in civic and political spaces.

This trend is clearly visible in studies related to violence perpetrated against women in different fields as well as in the recurring debates over women’s dress code. An example of these controversies was the one surrounding the right of a female journalist working in a public television to wear a hijab, or the aggressions directed at women wearing certain styles of swimsuits. As a result, more covert and structural forms of violence often go unrecognized and only reactionary violence is focused on.

A crucial preliminary step in analyzing the anti-feminist backlash in Lebanon is to first examine the social and political system in which women’s daily lives unfold: their structure, functions and the existing power dynamics between economic, financial, religious and political actors.

Three: The political system is an oppressive system where patriarchy, class, legal status and sects intersect. Hence when it comes to anti-feminist backlash, the Lebanese political system does not need to be triggered by any gain in order to react, rather it is this “network of powers that perpetrate violence” (El Rahi & Antar, 2024).

On the social level, the relationship between the state and the citizens is best analyzed through two paradigms. The first is the “political familism” defined as: “the deployment of family institutions, ideologies, idioms (idiomatic kinship), practices, and relationships by citizens to activate their needs and demands in relation to the state or polity and by the state or state actors to mobilize practical and moral grounds for governance based on a civic myth of kinship (Joseph, 2005) and public discourse that privileges family” (Joseph, 2011).

This paradigm, in which the concept of “family” permeates and shapes public life and political processes, partly explains why traditional political parties in Lebanon are often based in family allegiances, and why and how political leadership continues through familial lines (El Rahi, 2023).

The second paradigm is the “kin contract” where families can legitimately claim prior loyalty of their members, over and above the state’s claims to loyalty...”. (Joseph, 1993,

2005 & 2011). Hence, the kin contract validates patriarchal extended kinship as a venue of social and political control, which serves as the most significant deterrent to Lebanese women's positioning as full citizens (Joseph 2005).

On the political level, and in theory, the Lebanese system operates under a sectarian power sharing system. While this model of consociational democracy has had, to some extent, its positive dimension (Elbadawi et al., 2011, p. 116) fostering an environment of political and cultural pluralism, it has also reproduced traditional patriarchy through the constitutional recognition of religious communities to establish their own religious courts and personal status laws.

In practice however, the Lebanese political system functions as a system of "za'ama", where key decisions are made outside formal constitutional institutions. Within this "de facto" system, (Lahham, 2022) access to rights and services often depends on an individual's personal or familial ties to a political leader, or za'im. Among the many functions of the za'ama system, the redistribution of the state's assets and national resources among their followers which constitutes the main factor of the failed state.

Economically, the system is best described as an oligarchy which captures the class's family nature of Lebanon's economy, and the legal privileges and exemptions that it enjoys (Traboulsi, 2014). According to Traboulsi, a consortium of families took control of country's economy since the independence era and have a monopolistic control over every sector of the economy.

Four: To grasp anti-feminist backlash in the Lebanese context, we need to rely on two key frameworks:

Sextarianism: The systemic violence endured by women in the Lebanese context is better understood through Maya Mikdashi's "sextarianism" framework (Mikdashi, 2022). It explains how sect and sex co-organize social and political life in Lebanon, and how they are mutually constitutive modes of political difference. The personal status laws and the census registration are two sites where sextarianism is most visible. The religious laws 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. As for the census registration, where women are registered strictly in relation to male citizens, as wives or daughters, limit women from being heads of families or being non-patriarchally incorporated individuals (Mikdashi, 2022).

The "kin contract" (Joseph, 2005) which refers to "formal and informal understandings that membership in family proceeds membership in the state, and that families legitimately can claim prior loyalty of their members (male and female) over and above the state's claims to loyalty" (Joseph, 2011, p. 152). Hence, the family-based patriarchy permeates the state in Lebanon, and under a frail state the kin contract becomes "the anchor of security for Lebanese citizens who use idiomatic kinship in all realms of life to access to resources in the market, the workplace, and in politics" (Joseph, 1997).

Five: Backlash in the Lebanese context is not a spectrum, but rather includes various forms and tools, coexisting and cooperating concurrently and complementarily creating hostile strategies that authorities use on demand depending on the requirements of the political moment.

Hence, the commonly held assumption that backlash is a reaction to feminist progress does not apply in the Lebanese context. Backlash here cannot be understood as a response to significant advancements in women's rights, because such progress has been minimal.

Over the past century, feminist movements have achieved only limited gains, with no major breakthroughs in areas such as civil status laws, nationality rights, the penal code, or the recognition of sexual and bodily rights. This raises a critical question: how can we speak of gender backlash in a context where achievements have been largely absent?

A localized understanding of backlash reveals two fundamental diversions from prevailing definitions:

The first point of diversion lies in defining backlash as a hostile reaction to either real or perceived gains. In systems of oppression where discrimination is embedded in the very fabric of society, backlash should be understood less as a reaction and more as a self-protective mechanism that is already built-into the system (Rowley, 2020).

This framing aligns closely with the Lebanese context, where the concept of "epidermal state" (Mikdashi, 2022) offers a compelling lens, where the state performs its sovereignty by regulating bodies through securitization, 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. Therefore, the violence of the state, constitutive of backlash, is quotidian and often invisible.

The second diversion from the original definition is the assumption that progress in feminist goals is a precursor to backlash. Originally, backlash is defined on a continuum: it encompasses the attitudes and actions of those who feel threatened by changes in the status quo and those who act to secure or reinstate that status quo. The continuum starts at remedial backlash, which is defined as the reactionary, hostile reclamer of the status quo; continues toward pre-emptive backlash, which aims to prevent changes to the status quo by constraining political parties; and finishes at misogyny, a full-blown attempt to maintain the status quo.

Six: So anti-feminist backlash is structural in Lebanon, but how does it manifest?

In Lebanon, the minority who holds the political power is positioned at a specific intersection of sex, gender, legal status and class, is relentlessly determined to keep the status quo. In parallel, women as well as members of all vulnerable and marginalized communities are resisting against a sectarian and patriarchal system.

Anti-feminist backlash is embedded in the everyday functioning of social and political institutions, and designed to obstruct rather than to respond to feminist gains. It is not episodic but structural and deliberate, functioning to preempt any potential advancements in women's rights.

The second feature of the anti-feminist backlash 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" (El Rahi & Antar, 2024, p. 155).

The third feature stems from the first form of exclusion women face which occurs within their own families. Their marginalization from political life is closely linked to their lim-

ited access to resources, often due to inheritance laws or prevailing cultural norms that restrict women's economic independence and political agency.

The final feature of backlash is its function as a tool of misplaced action or an exit strategy during overlapping crisis. In systems facing existential crisis, lacking of substantial reforms and dominated by identity politics, and the creation of imaginary enemies, the establishment tends to preserve their power. This shifts attention to how dominant groups react when their privileges are in peril, rather than to the actions of those enduring violence and marginalization.

Different examples can be seen in the campaigns led by two religious groups, *Jnoud El-Rabb* and *Jnoud El-Fayha*, targeting civil marriage and queer communities. These aggressions are reinforced by governmental decisions and practices that systematically restrict individual rights, such as preventing any kind of gathering or meeting for the LGBTQI community, or banning a movie (Barbie) or a boardgame in schools because it showed a rainbow.

Seven: So, is there backlash in Lebanon after all?

In Lebanon, backlash can be understood as both tactical and atomized (El Rahi & Antar, 2024). In both cases, anti-gender backlash is mobilized primarily in response to debates related to civil marriage and LGBTQI rights. "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" (El Rahi & Antar, 2024, p. 158).

Backlash is tactical, particularly evident in responses to civil marriage law and LGBTQI rights, where no tangible progress has been achieved despite persistent public demands. These issues continue to face strong resistance from the ruling class. Civil marriage, in particular, has been a topic of debate since the 1950s and was one of the key reform demands of the National Movement in the 1970s. Discussions around civil marriage and individual rights tend to resurface periodically often generating political tension, especially during pivotal moments such as elections or when used strategically to divert attention from economic debates in parliament that ultimately serve the interests of the ruling class.

Backlash in Lebanon is atomized. This is most visible on two levels: backlash targeting individuals or an issue related to gender equality.

Atomized backlash targeting individuals: when looking closer at women's participation in politics we rarely witness any explicit physical violence committed against women's politicians (El Rahi, 2025). However, changes in the political scene since 2022, marked by the emergence of new political actors and parties, as well as the advent of new young women unaffiliated to any of the traditional sectarian parties unleashed hostile reactions against them. The backlash here is a counterreaction to the breakthrough of independent young women into a traditional and conservative male dominated institution. Directly after their election's MPs Cynthia Zaarour and Halimeh Kaakour faced harassment, mockery, and violent verbal attacks.

This was also evident during the recent municipal elections, where women who chose to run in their husband's villages- where they had been registered after marriage in accord-

ance with civic registry rules- faced opposition. Although a recent reform allows women to run either in their original hometowns or in their post-marriage place of residence, these women were sometimes pressured to run instead in their original hometowns.

Atomized backlash targeting issues perceived as a win for women: Atomized backlash is also visible when a phenomenon or an issue could be perceived as a win for women. Law proposals for quota have been presented to parliament since 2005 by different political parties and their public discourse seem to endorse such “reform”. However, in October 2021, a proposal on women’s quota adopted by Inaya Ezzeddine, an MP affiliated to the Amal movement, was dismissed in the joint parliamentary committee. Ironically, it was MPs belonging to the same parliamentary bloc as Ezzeddine who were most staunchly opposed to a discussion about it.

Eight: So, backlash does exist and it tends to reappear in recurring cycles. However, what is critical to assert and emphasize is that it is embedded within the social system itself.

Every day, women in Lebanon navigate acts of violence and discrimination. Backlash is quotidian in women’s life where discrimination against them is embedded in every system that governs their life: their families, their communities, the market and the state. All these actors “can manage to obstruct any meaningful change that women attempt to achieve (El Rahi, 2023).

A salient illustration of this dynamic is found in the legislative initiatives that pertain to women’s rights. Law 205/2020, which aims to “criminalize sexual harassment and provide rehabilitation for its victims” illustrates this issue. This law faces major obstacles in implementation due to its narrow, morality-based definition of sexual harassment and the absence of accompanying legal reforms - labor and penal codes - that are essential for effective enforcement.

Nine: In light of the preceding analysis, we propose the following definition of anti-gender backlash:

Backlash is “the various forms of structural discrimination and exclusion that are fed, incubated, and fueled by the sextarian epidermal system; and that fight and obstruct advocacy for rights. More importantly, impede the possibility of progress and gains. This structural hostility departs from familial structures, cuts through governmental and non-governmental institutions, as well as social and economic entities”. These aggressions ebb and flow based on the political moment and are cyclical in nature.

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