Countering Patriarchal Backlash against Gender Justice

A six-month series of sessions between 1st December 2020 and 1st June 2021 At the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium

Co-hosted by
Institute of Development Studies (IDS)
and MenEngage Alliance

Bridging theory, activism,
policy and practice

Focus on Patriarchy and Power

A Brief Guide:

Session Contents
Conversation Directions
Video Links

TUESDAY 1 DECEMBER, 3:00-5:30PM CENTRAL AFRICAN TIME
Understanding the Global Tide of Patriarchal Backlash

Eva Zilén — Kvinna till Kvinna
Alan Greig — Co-founder, Challenging Male Supremacy Project
Jerker Edström — Research Fellow Institute of Development Studies
Sana Contractor — Public health researcher and practitioner
Deniz Kandiyoti — Emeritus Professor of Development Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.
David Ngendo Tshimba — Senior Research Fellow, Refugee Law Project (RLP), School of Law at Makerere University
Sonia Corrêa — Research Associate, Brazilian Interdisciplinary Association for AIDS (ABIA)

MenEngage UBUNTU SYMPOSIUM
08:00 AM WASHINGTON DC | 3:00 PM KIGALI | 6:30 PM DELHI
4 FEB 2021 THURSDAY

SESSION 2: COUNTERING PATRIARCHAL BACKLASH AGAINST GENDER JUSTICE
Backlash, Body Politics and Online Misogyny
An interactive dialogue on two key arenas in which backlash is playing out in today's world - the body politics of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and the rise of on-line misogyny and the 'manosphere'.

SPEAKERS
ALEX DI BRANCO — Institute for Research on Male Supremacism
BECKY FAITH — Institute of Development Studies
LOKE NIELSON — DARE Gender
MARIA ALICIA GUTIERREZ — University of Buenos Aires
NEIL DATTA — European Parliamentary Forum on SRHR
SABINA F. RASHID — BRAC University
NIKKI VAN DER GAAG — Gender Consultant
MAGALY MARQUES — MenEngage Alliance

Interpretation available in English and Spanish. Subtitles available in 18 languages
Register at bit.ly/UbuntuThursdays1

MenEngage UBUNTU SYMPOSIUM
08:00 AM WASHINGTON DC | 3:00 PM KIGALI | 6:30 PM DELHI
11 MAR 2021 THURSDAY

SESSION 3: COUNTERING PATRIARCHAL BACKLASH AGAINST GENDER JUSTICE
Hijacking Gender? Backlash in Policy and Practice
A discussion with conversations exploring anti-feminist backlash and co-option in policy spaces and its implications for policy and practice on gender equality.

SPEAKERS
AMON ASHABA MWIINE — School of Women and Gender Studies, Makerere University
LAURA TURQUET — UN Women
LENA KARLSSON — Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA)
SUDARSANA KUNDU — Gender at Work
TESSA LEWIN — Institute of Development Studies
DISCUSSION CO-CHAIRS
ANDREA CORNWALL — SOAS University of London
JERKER EDSTROM — Institute of Development Studies

Subtitles available in 18 languages
Register at bit.ly/UbuntuThursdays3

MenEngage UBUNTU SYMPOSIUM
08:00 AM WASHINGTON DC | 3:00 PM KIGALI | 6:30 PM DELHI
2 HOUR DURATION
13 May 2021 THURSDAY

SESSION
Movement-Building to Counter Patriarchal Backlash: A Conversation Space
How can those working to engage men and boys and transform masculinities come together with feminist and social justice movements to counter the global rise of patriarchal backlash?
Join us for this discussion and share your thoughts

Register at: bit.ly/UbuntuRm5
Subtitles available in 18 languages / Register at menengage.org/symposium

TUESDAY PLENARY
Uniting to Counter Backlash: A Roundtable Discussion Looking Forward
01 JUN 2021 TUESDAY

Lina AbiRafeh — Executive Director Arab Institute for Women
Neil Datta — Secretary European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights
Jerker Edström — Research Fellow Institute of Development Studies
Aarti Narsee — Civic Space Research Officer CIVICUS
Bafana Khumalo — Co-Chair - MenEngage Alliance Director of Strategic Partnerships - Sonke Gender Justice
Joni Van de Sand — Co-Director Global Secretariat MenEngage Alliance

2 HOUR DURATION
9:00 AM WASHINGTON DC
3:00 PM KIGALI
6:30 PM DELHI
MenEngage UBUNTU SYMPOSIUM

#UbuntuSymposium
Interpretation available in French, Spanish, and English
Register at menengage.org/symposium

Countering Patriarchal Backlash against Gender Justice

This six-months series of sessions at the MenEngage Ubuntu Symposium has explored this global trend through a masculinities angle and a focus on patriarchy; to advance our understanding of backlash against women's rights and gender justice and how the men and masculinities field can strengthen its efforts to better support feminist movements to counter it. The five sessions are briefly described below, with YouTube links to each.

1. '<u>Understanding the Global Tide of Patriarchal Backlash,</u>' 1st December 2020. Introduced by **Jerker Edström** from the Institute of Development Studies, the first session in the series comprised three sets of conversations focussed on backlash in different contexts and time scales, through the lenses of race, ethnonationalism and the politics of religion in the 'big picture'. The first conversation – was between **Sana Contractor** from CHSJ in India, and **Eva Zillén** from Kvinna-till-Kvinna based in Sweden. They gave us a chillingly resonating perspective on how backlash against gender equality and diversity rights play out in terms of ethno-nationalism and majoritarian identity politics in the broader 'Indo-European' region, so to speak – from East-to-West. Shrinking civic space, nationalism, and authoritarian politics are 'feeding each other' in Eva's words.

In the second conversation – between **David Tshimba** from the Refugee Law Project in Uganda, and **Alan Greig** of the Challenging Male Supremacy Project in New York – we heard how issues of white supremacy and colonial legacies shape backlash differently in the US and in Uganda, North-to-South as it were. In the US, we heard of a reactive backlash by (mainly white) privileged groups, with a sense of aggrieved entitlement and masculinity, which becomes simultaneously gendered and racialised, but also rooted in male property-ownership. In Uganda, backlash must be understood as differently racialised, in terms of 'coloniality' – in the longer history of colonisation and post/neo-colonial politics. Here, resistance to 'Western' ideas of gender and rights can get mobilised by oppressive actors (and regimes) which delay and pre-empt progress on gender equality, also co-opting and depoliticising gender by institutionalising women's issues and almost obviating any open and visible backlash.

The third conversation – between **Deniz Kandiyoti** from SOAS in London and **Sonia Corrêa** from ABIA in Brazil – connected different contexts, continents, and timescales, to exploring the links between anti-gender backlash, religious conservativism and authoritarian politics connecting diverse histories and current dynamics of backlash, with local-to-global (or transnational) connections over the longer term. Deniz Kandiyoti challenged simplistic notions of backlash as a 'reactive re-claiming of power and privilege', pointing to; (i) powerholders' co-optation of gender and the colonisation of gender spaces by elite women, (ii) the neoliberal wave attacking welfare states alongside an NGO-isation of 'gender' and; (iii) the 'war on terror' leading to a split between Western feminists and others, and the critique of 'colonial feminism'. This enabled religious conservatives from the early 70's to step into the space and push gender policy out of the sphere of publicly deliberated policy. Sonia Corrêa took us back to 'the 'Catholic cradle' in the transition between Cairo and Beijing when the gender-trouble of the Vatican erupted', back to the 1970's US 'moral majority movement', and earlier – tracing anti-gender discourse to anti-Marxist discourse throughout the 20th Century, and the deeply ingrained imprint of the 'naturalised gender binary in neoliberal ideology'. The discussion pointed to backlash as both ecumenical and linked to secular forces; not just as co-opting but also deploying a strategy of 'perennial semiotic inversion' (e.g. the idea of feminism being colonial). They also challenged us to question the idea of a need for 're-politicising gender', as backlash itself is already highly gendered.

Watch the 1st session: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Sa4ge11ub0&feature=youtu.be

2. "Backlash Body Politics and Online Misogyny," 4th of February 2021.

In the second session, co-chaired by independent consultant **Nikki Van der Gaag** and **Magaly Marques** of MenEngage, we heard a set of two conversations focused on understanding different forms of backlash in (a) the digital on-line space, incl. the 'manosphere' and (b) the body politics of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

In the first conversation, **Alex di Branco**, from the US-based Institute on Male Supremacy, focused on radical male supremacist on-line movements in the US and Canada, targeting feminists with viral messaging and targeting women's sexuality and rights, with chilling examples from 'Gamergate', 'pick-up artists' and hate campaigns by 'incels' (involuntary celibates). **Becky Faith** from IDS took us through an analysis of backlash against feminism and women 'on- and off-line', covering misogynist digital violence in the 'manoshpere' as well as the broader structural violence of the digital platforms and the broader digital industry in different settings, analysed through a framework layers of visibility in digital power. The discussion explored 'margins-to-mainstream' and 'on-line to off-line' violence.

Turning to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) in the second conversation, we heard from **Maria Alicia Guttiérez**, from the University of Buenos Aires, discussing intersectionality and attacks on SRHR and women's rights in Argentina. **Sabina F Rashid** (from James P Grant School of Public Health/BRAC in Dhaka) linked the ongoing backlash against gender justice and SRHR in Bangladesh to backlash against – and criminalisation of – sexual minorities (LGBTIQ), as well as to shrinking civic space and broader attacks on secular freedoms; with chilling examples of brutal murders, death threats and censorship internet shut-downs. The latter includes a new Digital Security Act, also linking 'national sentiment' to 'religious sensitivities.'

Neil Datta, from the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, described the forum's shift – from a formerly self-assured stance of progressive European governments 'helping others' – to recently having to understand the emergence of the 'anti-gender movement' across Europe itself. Old 'anti-abortion' forces have broadened their attack to also targeting LGBT rights and broader issues on Gender and GBV. Children's rights are being mobilised as an idea, arguing that minority protections are conflicting with the rights of religious communities. The success of these movements has involved both (a) 'professionalisation' (in terms of policy processes and engagement) and (b) international network development (especially with US religious groups linking and organising centrally to Europe, but also to Africa). This is the emergence of a modern movement with chapters like 'Agenda Europe' and similar initiatives in different European countries since ca. 2013.

The ensuing debate connected three older movements coming together; religious communities with a normative agenda, far-right fascist movements resurgent and then 'populism' as a force, which is more neutral and opportunistic – all coming together recently to access power; in Europe and the USA, but also echoed in other countries (Neil gave the example of Trump's 'MAGA movement' – with Steve Bannon as the far-right ideolog, Mike Pence for the religious right, and Donald Trump as the opportunistic populist).

Watch the 2nd session: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gApzdaWHtg0&feature=youtu.be

3. "Hijacking Gender? Backlash in Policy and Practice," on 11th March 2021.
Chaired by **Jerker Edström** from IDS and Co-facilitated by **Sinèad Nolan** of MenEngage, the third session explored anti-feminist backlash and co-option in policy spaces as well as its implications for policy and practice on gender equality. **Amon Mwiine** from the Centre for Basic Research in Uganda, and **Sudarsana Kundu** of Gender at Work in India, shared findings from recent literature reviews and policy mapping exercises in their countries, outlining how gender policy has become increasingly co-opted and depoliticised through the power politics of balancing commercial and political interests with international opportunities and neoliberal pressures. **Tessa Lewin**, from IDS, reflected on common themes across the cases and presented a way of reading this depoliticization and co-option through understanding backlash as connected to knowledge power and – in Susan Faludi's conceptualisation – spanning from 'frontal assaults' to 'overt-to-covert mythmaking' through the creation and reshaping of narratives, which Lewin understands as forms of 'discourse capture'.

Prefacing the second main conversation on backlash and co-option in international policy spaces, **Andrea Cornwall** from SOAS in London, gave some revealing reflections from participant observation research in attending – over several years – a growing number of events at the annual CSW, both organised and infiltrated by conservative groups with anti-gender agendas, moving from fringe to main spaces and vice versa. We heard of highly professional tactics and sophisticated strategies for the capture and reshaping of narratives, including forming 'discourse coalitions' using 'gender as an organising principle', and building 'chains of equivalence' to divest key terms of their original meaning, treating different kinds of claims to gender, human and identity rights as 'negotiable.'

We then heard from **Lena Karlsson**, of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) about how backlash politics is experienced by actors in bilateral agencies aiming to promote feminist international assistance policies, including reflections on resulting tensions and inevitable trade-offs. **Laura Turquet**, from UN Women, about the politics of generating data and evidence for multi-lateral processes in gender policy (discussing the example of the recent preparation of a Families report) which gets treated as technical solutions to fundamentally political problems. Ultimately, UN Women is left in an ambiguous position for countering backlash, being caught up in the multilateral politics between member states.

The debate also touched on the importance for engaging across other movements and issues for social justice (including addressing socialisation with youth and child rights movements, and on-line and offline spaces), as well as some implications of these dynamics for policy and practice on engaging men in gender equality strategies (which itself has both been accused of growing out of a depoliticised neoliberal co-option of gender, on the one hand, and at least has the potential to become captured by certain men's rights actors engaged in backlash) looking also more closely at how men engage as policy makers/actors in these processes and spaces.   With reference to the topic of 'discourse capture' we also heard a suggestion to develop deeper thinking around 'affect capture' and how the gender-binary and heteropatriarchy remain fundamental divisive principles in intersectional politics.

Watch the 3rd session: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-4fAMS4MAQ

4. **"Movement-Building to Counter Patriarchal Backlash"**, 13th May 2021

The fourth session was organised as a couple of interactive Conversation spaces for reflecting on experiences of anti-feminist backlash in our own contexts – as CSO actors, researchers, activists and MenEngage members – and to explore potential strategies and directions to support of feminist and other social justice movements in countering backlash.

Co-facilitated by MenEngage (**Sinead Nolan** and **Joni van de Sand**) and the 'Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice' programme at IDS (**Chloe Skinner** and **Jerker Edström**), the session offered participants an opportunity to reflect on their experiences in small breakout rooms over two discussions interspersed with sharing between the groups. Recapping and reflecting on the previous sessions in this backlash series, this penultimate session opened an initial space for conversation to share practical strategies used in different contexts and begin to collectively consider some concrete steps that members of the Alliance can take to build on and link with efforts from other gender justice movements to counter backlash. The conversations and ideas were captured in note form and provided inputs for planning and delivering the final session of the series tying together the series and proposing ways forward for the Alliance, as per the commitment in the Alliance's new strategic plan for 2021-24.

Watch the 4th session: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-n6hDFSCt0M

5. **"Uniting to Counter Backlash: A Roundtable Discussion Looking Forward"**, 1st June 2021

Starting with introductions and a recap of highlights from the series, by the co-chairs **Joni van de Sand** from MenEngage, and **Jerker Edström** at IDS, this closing session reflected on insights from the series and the broader symposium, to explore how work on masculinities and men could better help to counter patriarchal backlash in support of other social justice movements. The format was a set of two two-way conversations, followed by a plenary debate with questions, and a closing of the series.

The first conversation, focused on gendered identity politics in 'engaging men for gender equality' to counter backlash, and in relation to feminist networks and movements. This began with a brief provocation from **Bafana Khumalo**, of Sonke Gender Justice in South Africa (and Co-chair of MenEngage), who pointed to the usefulness of evidence in facing push-back from men, as well as the importance of insisting on the focus on inequality, women and their equal rights; for example, reminding grumbling men on International Women's Day that 'every day is a Men's Day'. He argued that, in facing backlash from right-wing religious groupings, it is essential to meet their arguments with more evidence-based counterarguments and narratives, as well as exposing hypocrisies in backlash-appeals to 'cultural' roles for men, for example. This was followed by a provocation from **Lina AbiRafeh**, of The Arab Institute for Women at the Lebanese American University. Addressing the questions "Men to counter anti-feminist backlash? Which men, how and why?", AbiRafhe picked up on Khumalo's appeal to evidence and stressed the importance of nuance in thinking about which men, how and why. She recommended engaging with young men for a range of reasons, including their flexibility, openness to accountability, and presence in public space or in the streets. The ensuing dialogue centred on how we might address and counter the influence of men pushing/lashing back. Given the history of faith-based actors and leaders amongst backlash protagonists, Lina pointed to a need for being realistic about how helpful it might be to rely on certain religious leaders for positive change. Bafana cautioned that religious actors are not monolithic and must also be challenged rather than avoided – challenging patriarchy in religion and the narrow reading of texts.

The second two-way conversation focused on navigating the gendered politics of policy spaces in the broader political economy. **Aarti Narsee**, of CIVICUS and based in South Africa, described sexual minority rights particularly as having been targeted in many countries by conservative groups promoting 'family values', but also that women's rights activists and journalists have been targeted. CIVICUS has focused on civic space and joining forces with very different organisations – working intersectionally – to focus on SRH rights as well as civic space, by coordinating advocacy at the EU and international levels. **Neil Datta**, from the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual Rights, appealed to grounding ourselves in the situation we are facing, which is a different historical phase from what we have been used to (with human rights and Western influence over the 90s and 00s), as well as positioning ourselves in relation to 'our adversaries'. A backlash lens is inadequate to understanding what is happening, in three ways; it isolates us from other actors or understanding their perspectives, we don't see the shifts in broader sector, and we fail to see what is being created at the same time as gender rights are being dismantled.   Neil described three families of backlash projects; 'theocratic projects' (often quite removed from the daily lives of their believers), 'hyper-capitalistic projects', and 'illiberal political projects' which tend to be authoritarian, ethnonationalist/fascist or totalitarian. The ensuing dialogue picked up on the need to go beyond specific types of familiar organisations and the need for intersectional alliance-building, with Aarti describing experiences of collective advocacy across movements in Poland, even if there is also sometimes hesitancy about making certain gender claims from some organisations who may feel they do not have such mandates. Neil pointed to the need to, in addition to civil society strategies, analyse the legislative parameters of what is changing and can be changed at both national and regional (EU) levels.

The Plenary Debate brought together all panellists to invite broader questions and the question of 'How can the MenEngage Alliance act in solidarity with other gender justice activists and leaders under attack?' Neil emphasised focusing on that patriarchy is also bad for most men, that feminism essentially benefits everyone and, particularly, to focus on how and where power moves. Lina stressed the importance of appealing to 'doing the right thing' (as opposed to only particular groups' interests), as well as listening to women, 'passing the mike', following their leadership, and finding people to work with on the inside. Aarti appealed to the importance of working in broader alliances and breaking out of silos. Bafana picked up on Lina's challenge and the importance of the MenEngage leadership pushing for passing the mike, including in the recruitment of female leadership in the executive and board, as well as at all levels. He also echoed Aarti's call for building broader alliances and – picking up on an audience comment – highlighted the necessity of calling out the UN or EU for allowing forces, including certain religious forces, to co-opt and 'strangle' funding for gender justice issues. Acknowledging Neil's warning, Bafana also appealed for the need to engage honestly with religious leaders attracted to 'the service of power' and who 'want to be in the palace'. Comments from the participants also expanded on challenges around divisive constriction of CSO funding and on the opportunity of working with younger men – incl. across religious communities.

The session was wrapped up with Jerker giving a brief update on the Countering Backlash programme and possibilities for future collaboration, followed by Joni outlining some ways forward for the MenEngage Alliance in pushing forward to counter backlash as part of its new strategy, reflecting and a new learning initiative in an intersectional feminist-led perspective, including conversations on racial and social justice more broadly.   She reflected on the ongoing difficult question of whether the alliance should respond directly to men who are 'lashing back' or ignore them to reduce their air-time, but emphasised that – either way – MenEngage needs to be vocal in this debate going forward.

Watch the final session: Uniting to Counter Backlash: A roundtable discussion looking forward