COUNTERING BACKLASH

RECLAIMING
GENDER JUSTICE

SYNTHESIS REPORT

OF RESEARCH OVER SIX YEARS

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Acknowledgments

This report of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS)-led research programme 'Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice' is the result of many people's work. The report was drafted by Jerker Edström, Tessa Lewin, Sohela Nazneen and Chloe Skinner, with research assistance support from Sarah Austin, Antea De Jesus Gomez, Ben O'Donovan-Iland and Raisa Philip. We authors would like to acknowledge and thank all those involved across the years and the regions.

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CONTENTS

ACRONYMS

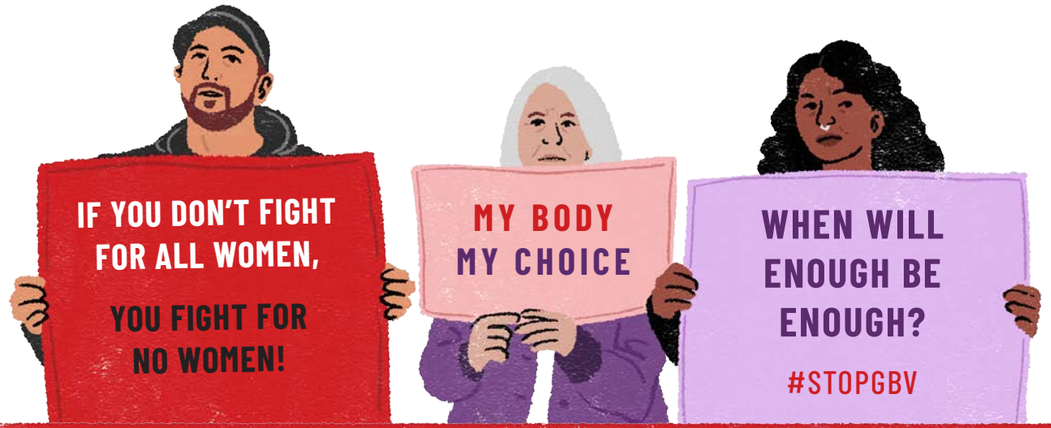
ADSOCK	Advocates for Social Change – Kenya
AiW	Arab Institute for Women
BIGD	BRAC Institute of Governance and Development
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (original name)
BRAC-JPGSPH	BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health
CBR	Centre for Basic Research
CHSJ	Centre for Health and Social Justice
CSO	Civil society organisation
DVPPA	Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection Act
FBHA	Federal University of Bahia
GBV	Gender-based violence
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
KADEM	*Kadın ve Demokrasi Derneği* (Women's Democracy Association)
LAU	Lebanese American University
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, non-conforming groups
NEIM	*Núcleo de Estudos Interdisciplinares sobre a Mulher* (Nucleus of Interdisciplinary Women's Studies)
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
RLP	Refugee Law Project
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SMKU	Shahri Mahila Kamgar Union
WOUGNET	Women of Uganda Network
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
USA / US	United States of America / United States

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report distils six years of collaborative research (from late 2019 to early 2026) by the Institute of Development Studies and 11 partners across seven countries on how contemporary gender backlash operates, and how feminist, queer, and other social movements are resisting it. It argues that current backlash is not simply anti-feminist business as usual but a qualitatively different, globally proliferating mode of patriarchal crisis management, emerging amid intersecting crises, authoritarianism, and deepening inequalities.

The report conceptualises gender backlash as a multidimensional attack on gender equality, its institutions, and those advancing gender justice, driven by overlapping reactive, pre-emptive, proactive, and opportunistic actors including religious fundamentalists, ethnonationalist projects, conservative civil society, digital manosphere communities, and authoritarian-leaning states.

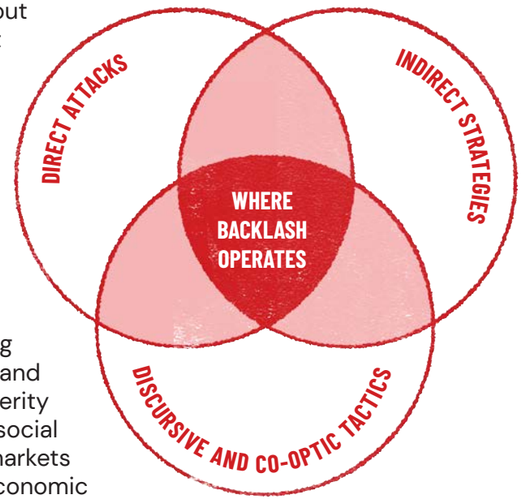
These actors operate through transnational networks and digital platforms, mobilising affect (fear, resentment, nostalgia) and targeting symbolic sites of bodies, families, and nations to re-naturalise heteronormative, patriarchal, and majoritarian orders. Backlash is theorised as both episodic and continuous: a recurring mechanism that updates inequitable systems under pressure, rather than a temporary reversal of linear progress.



Empirically, the report identifies three interlocking modalities through which backlash manifests.

First, direct attacks include legal and physical violence, criminalisation (e.g. anti-LGBTQ+ laws), online harassment, and dismantling of gender institutions, all aimed at silencing activists and shrinking civic space.

Second, indirect strategies hollow out gains via stalled implementation, budget cuts, bureaucratic foot-dragging, and legal dilution, rendering progressive laws largely symbolic.



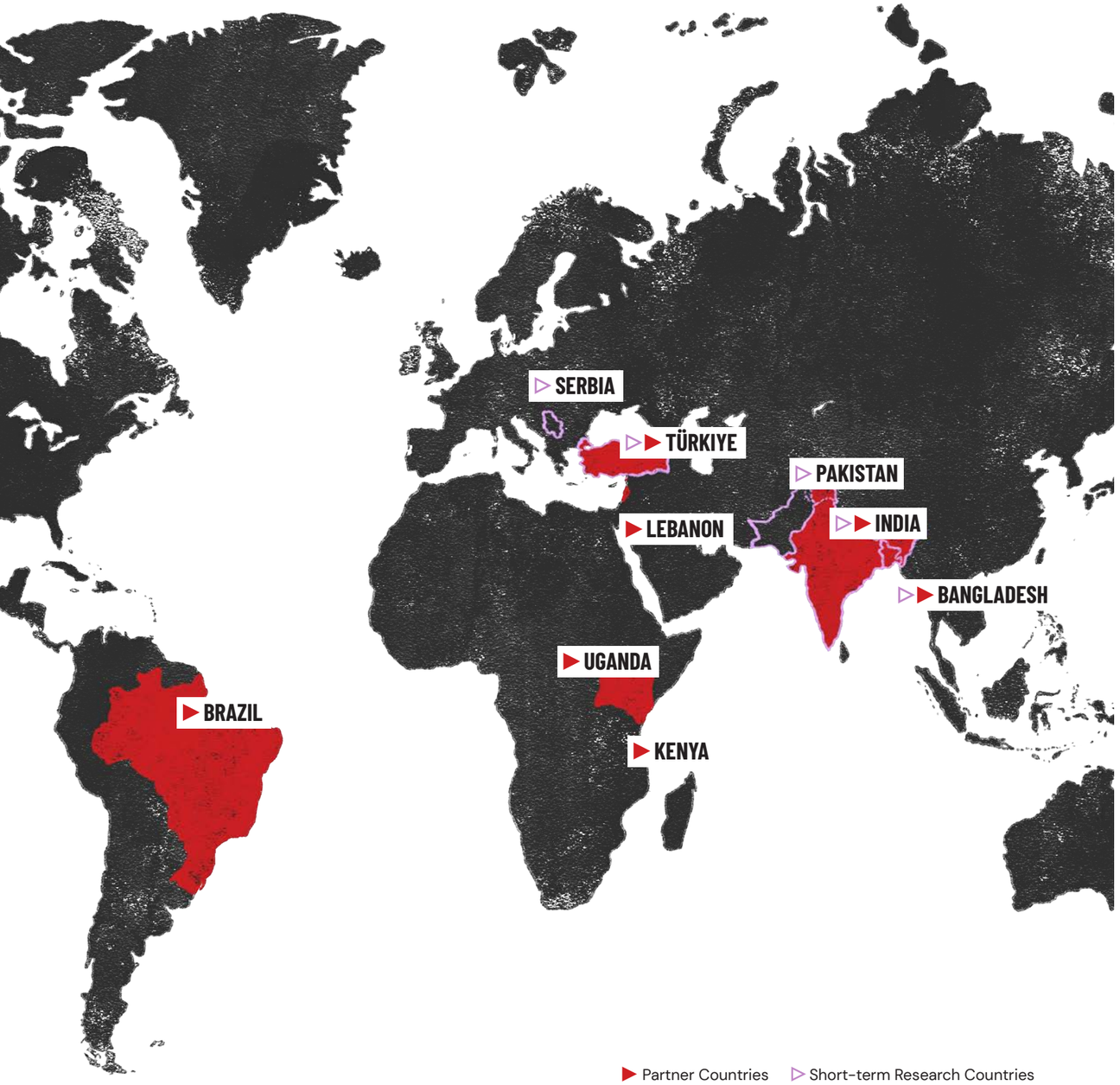
Third, discursive and co-optive tactics capture language (e.g. 'gender ideology', 'gender justice', 'family values'), pit rights against one another, and frame feminism and LGBTQ+ rights as foreign or immoral, often under the guise of protecting children, religion, or national traditions and culture. Neoliberal reforms and austerity further erode care infrastructures and social protection, re-masculinising labour markets and weakening women's socioeconomic autonomy.

Against this landscape, the report documents rich repertoires of feminist resistance and resilience. Movements combine agile offline mobilisation (marches, occupations, community organising) with careful digital practice (online safety protocols, strategic visibility/invisibility) to survive surveillance, harassment, and repression. They pursue persistent implementation struggles – monitoring laws, building accountability mechanisms, training duty bearers, and ensuring stalled policies continue to be contested – as well as use discursive strategies that reframe issues (e.g. reframing domestic violence as a development and human rights concern), make harms more visible and relatable through storytelling, and construct counter-narratives and practices of solidarity and fraternity in polarised, violent settings. Cross-movement coalitions, union organising among informal workers, and investments in leadership and organisational capacity are shown to be critical infrastructures for sustaining counter-backlash work, especially when combined with material support and economic justice campaigns.

The conclusion argues that understanding backlash as structural, transnational, and affect driven has strategic implications: defensive work to hold the line cannot be separated from transformative projects that reimagine institutions, solidarities, and futures. The report calls for deepened theorisation of backlash from multiple geopolitical vantage-points; tools for tracking its manifestations in real time; and long-term, flexible feminist funding that treats movements as co-strategists rather than implementers. It urges donors, policymakers, and allies to support integrated strategies – legal, narrative, digital, organisational, political, and economic – that centre those most targeted by backlash and nurture feminist futures grounded in solidarity, care, and collective power.

SECTION 01

INTRODUCTION



Two decades after the Platform of Action agreed at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, and around the time of the launch of the Global Goals for Sustainable Development in 2015 (also known as 'the Sustainable Development Goals', or SDGs), the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) consulted with partners and external peers to chart priority directions for research (Edström *et al.* 2017), revealing deep concern over the steady increase in backlash against women's rights, inclusion, and gender justice in different countries. Consequently, IDS mobilised with partners to develop a multi-year research programme, 'Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice', which was supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and started in late 2019. We have worked together as 12 partners (including IDS) across eight countries (Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Türkiye, Uganda, and the United Kingdom), and this report presents an overview of what we have learned along our journey about the rising tide of backlash, how to counter it, and our recommended directions for future research and action.

Our working definition of this 'backlash' against gender justice and equal human rights first pointed to it being **substantially different** from the familiar long-standing resistance to progress for gender justice and equality or, in Faludi *et al.* (2020)'s terms, different from anti-feminist 'business as usual'. But what is different about this moment? And why now? This programme and report come at a time of deepening crises and polarisation, with ever increasing levels of attacks against feminist movements, minority groups, and various efforts at inclusive development. Understanding these trends and politics is ever more crucial, at a time when resources available for doing so are rapidly being withdrawn. While US President Donald Trump's rise to power in 2016 and his 2025 comeback take up much of the attention in these debates, it is crucial to engage with diverse Southern perspectives to grasp the global spread of this backlash (Edström *et al.* 2024b).

For six years, as this has intensified, we have focused on developing a deeper understanding of backlash, on exploring how policies for gender equality and equal rights have been eroded through various means, and on finding new directions and opportunities for feminist resistance in real time. We have pursued these aims with co-constructed research through three intertwining strands of work in conversation: 'voice', 'patriarchy', and 'policy and practice'. Each of these has engaged research partners, activists, movements, and policymakers across seven countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Convened by IDS in the UK, partners have collaborated in research, capacity building, convening debates, and communicating knowledge and strategies for reclaiming gender justice nationally and internationally.

Research methods included analytic reviews, policy mapping and tracking, problem-focused primary research, comparative analysis, and Action Research with partners in specific countries experiencing contexts of anti-gender backlash. Capacity building was also part of our co-created research and convening approaches. Partners' and IDS' capacities to conduct research, develop research and pedagogical methods, and train others – as well as our advocacy and communication – have improved through co-learning and collaborating on the programme; and through research methods workshops, analysis, and writing workshops, as well as publishing, convening, and designing strategies for spreading the word together.

Capacity and methods development involved developing tools and methods for tracking and tackling backlash with research activists and practitioners, complemented by outreach to different audiences through meetings, seminars, webinars, and e-discussions. Co-convening sessions between academia, researchers, women's rights organisations, civil society organisations (CSOs), bureaucrats, and policymakers has created spaces for collective reflection, moments of revelation, and conceptualisation of backlash.

Alongside IDS, the other 11 key partners include: Advocates for Social Change Kenya (ADSOCK); the Arab Institute for Women (AiW) at the Lebanese American University (LAU) in Lebanon; BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) and BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health (BRAC-JPGSPH) in Bangladesh; the Centre for Basic Research (CBR), the Refugee Law Project at Makerere University (RLP), and the Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) in Uganda; the Nucleus of Interdisciplinary Women's Studies of the Federal University of Bahia (NEIM) in Brazil; Özyeğin University in Türkiye; and, SAHAYOG, with the Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ) and GenderSphere (formerly Gender at Work Consulting), in India. We have funded seven further seed grantees – across India, Pakistan, Serbia, Türkiye – and leveraged global networks, peer organisations, and policymakers to broaden debates and capacity building, such as by hosting an informal cross-sectoral 'Coalition for Gender Justice' to explore backlash within international policy spaces.

Through these partnerships and methods, we focused this collective effort on three interrelated aims from the outset:

1. **understanding backlash against women's rights and gender justice;**
2. **exposing the erosion of gender agendas and objectives in policy spaces, their co-option and its nefarious effects; and**
3. **identifying new opportunities and directions for women's and social justice movements to reclaim and defend gender justice and equal human rights.**

Put more simply, we ask:

Q. What kind of phenomenon are we dealing with?

Q. How does backlash work in terms of feminist aims and policy space?

Q. How can we counter backlash better?

The remainder of this report is organised into sections around these broad aims, synthesising and presenting highlights of insights from across the collective partnership, our research, and engagements.

COUNTERING BACKLASH: PARTNERS

Advocates for Social Change Kenya (ADSOCK)

ADSOCK is based in Nairobi, Kenya, and focuses on community mobilisation, capacity strengthening, and lobbying and advocacy activities that promote gender equality and social justice. It encourages contextually nested approaches to influence men and boys, in particular through policy and practice at community and institutional levels.

BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD)

BIGD is a Bangladesh-based social science research and academic institute dedicated to generating and sharing knowledge through education, research, and public and policy engagement. Its work on Countering Backlash has focused on the issues of online gender-based violence (GBV), domestic violence, and Hindu personal law reform.

The Arab Institute for Women (AiW) at the Lebanese American University (LAU)

From Beirut, Lebanon, AiW advances women's empowerment and gender equality nationally, regionally, and globally with research, education, development programmes, and outreach. AiW works across academia and activism, and focuses on women's political participation, civil marriage and personal status laws, and violence against women, within the Countering Backlash programme.

BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health (BRAC-JPGSPH)

BRAC-JPGSPH was co-founded by BRAC, icddr,b and Brac University in recognition of a need for community-based teaching and learning to provide innovative local research for sustainable public health solutions in Bangladesh. In Countering Backlash, it has focused on understanding the impact of gender backlash and promoting male allyship, working with men in informal settlements and universities to support positive masculinity.

Centre for Basic Research (CBR)

CBR is an independent research centre in Uganda, initially established as an educational trust and subsequently registered as a non-governmental organisation (NGO). CBR's broad aim is to conduct research of basic social significance. Its research under the Countering Backlash programme has focused on implementation of the Affirmative Action Policy as enshrined in the 1995 Constitution, the Domestic Violence Act, 2010, and the process of legislating on the Sexual Offences Bill, 2019.

Institute of Development Studies (IDS)

IDS, based in the UK, delivers world-class research, learning, and teaching that transform the knowledge, action, and leadership needed for more equitable and sustainable development globally. It is the lead partner in the Countering Backlash programme, providing research framing and analysis, programme management, and research uptake support.

GenderSphere

Based in India, GenderSphere (formerly Gender at Work Consulting) brings together new knowledge on deep structures of inequality and discriminatory social norms with innovative approaches and tools to transform them in organisations and communities. For this programme, it has focused on the issues of domestic workers' rights, funding for women's rights organisations, and citizenship rights of Muslim women.

Nucleus of Interdisciplinary Women's Studies of the Federal University of Bahia (NEIM)

NEIM (Núcleo de Estudos Interdisciplinares sobre a Mulher) has led feminist research in northeast Brazil for over 40 years (since 1983). Its research spans women's work and rights, gender and democracy, women's health in globalised industries, sexualities, violence against women, and intersectionality with race and age. For the Countering Backlash programme, it has focused on reproductive rights, GBV, and conditional cash transfers.

Özyeğin University

Özyeğin is a non-profit foundation university based in Istanbul, Türkiye. It positions itself as one of the most innovative and research-oriented universities in the country. Özyeğin was initially a seed grantee under the Countering Backlash programme, examining the women's rights movement in Türkiye; it then transitioned to become a full partner, expanding its research to analyse men's rights groups' social media presence and its relationship to backlash.

SAHAYOG and Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ)

SAHAYOG is a non-profit voluntary organisation based in India that promotes the health and rights of marginalised women and young people, with a vision of achieving gender justice and upholding constitutional values. CHSJ is a charitable trust working on community development, with field interventions and partnerships in more than ten states in India. It collaborates in conducting Action Research as part of the programme, working with men and boys to support gender justice.

Refugee Law Project (RLP)

RLP provides legal aid and counselling to asylum seekers and refugees in Uganda. It offers referrals on a range of non-legal matters, including sexual violence and GBV, and access to medical care, housing, and education. Provision of direct support is complemented by education and training activities. RLP has carried out research on understandings of backlash in relation to migrants and refugees, and the experiences of survivors of male rape.

Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET)

WOUGNET is an NGO that conducts research on the intersection of gender and technology, advocates for a gender-inclusive internet and information, communication, and technology (ICT) policies, and implements initiatives that empower women by challenging and shifting oppressive patriarchal structures perpetuated online and offline. Its research for Countering Backlash focuses on online feminist organising and shrinking civic space.

SECTION 02

UNDERSTANDING AND FRAMING BACKLASH

From the perspective of feminists and those concerned with building an equal and inclusive world, gender backlash 'can be conceptualised as an attack on gender equality, its institutions, and those that seek to advance gender justice' (Lewin 2024: 142). The individuals, communities, and movements that challenge patriarchal gender orders are indeed under threat. However, this historical moment is 'different from anti-feminist business as usual', in Susan Faludi's terms, not only or because it affects women or sexual minorities **more** than usual, but because it does so **differently** and has become far more complex (Faludi *et al.* 2020). Over recent decades, attacks on gender justice have intensified globally, intersecting with rising authoritarianism, social polarisation, widening inequalities, and entrenched structural violence. This section presents insights from what we have learned about this complexity, its temporal dimensions and transnational proliferation, about the protagonists and their aims, and about how affect and emotions are exploited for polarisation by targeting certain identities and issues of contestation.

ACTORS AND INTERESTS IN BACKLASH

Contemporary backlash politics is not driven by one unified movement, and many argue that it is intertwined with other contestations and projects (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018; Corrêa *et al.* 2018; Datta 2021). Its actors, drivers, and effects are neither monolithic nor coherent. Until recently, most research on backlash has emerged from, and been shaped by, dynamics in the global North – more often with reference to more privileged groups within that context – and this despite similar dynamics unfolding across diverse social and political landscapes (Nazneen and Okech 2021; Edström *et al.* 2024a, 2024c).

While attacks on gender equality and social justice are acute and ongoing across each of the countries where this programme operates, partners articulated dissatisfaction from the outset with the then dominant framings of backlash as a mere reaction to real or perceived progress towards equality and inclusion. By asking 'Who are involved and are they all lashing back?', it became clearer that different types of protagonists in this societal dynamic are variously reactive, pre-emptive, proactive, or opportunistic in their aims or opposition to progress on gender equality (Edström 2024), as laid out in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Backlash framings by types of actions, aims, protagonists, and writers

Actions	Aims	Protagonists (examples)	Writers (examples)
Defensive reactions	Restorative/ reversal	Men's rights groups, illiberal civil society organisations, some faith-based groups, online manosphere communities etc.	Mansbridge and Shames (2008); Halperin-Kaddari and Freeman (2016)
Anticipative actions	Pre-emptive, delay/cancel	Political and economic elites, with interests in status quo and protecting/growing profits	Rowley (2020); Townsend-Bell (2020)
Proactive strategies	Revolution/ new future	Religious fundamentalist and aspiring theocrats, ethnonationalist, fascist far right	Graff, Kapur and Walters (2019); Scrinzi (2017)
Opportunistic convergence	Instrumental mobilisation	Populist movements, authoritarian politicians, leaders	Datta (2021); Paternotte and Kuhar (2018); Denkovski, Bernarding and Lunz (2021)

Note: Not all the cited authors use the term 'backlash', but they debate essentially similar phenomena.
Source: Adapted from Edström (2024: 73).

Reactive Anti-feminist Actors:

We have noted a broad array of reactive anti-feminist actors, from men's rights groups and various manosphere communities to more traditionally conservative CSOs, media outlets, and digital platforms, which together are increasingly normalising reactive backlash narratives. Some faith-based organisations, NGOs, influencers, and online communities help to normalise anti-gender messages by framing them as common sense or morally grounded. In **Türkiye**, government-aligned women's organisation KADEM has strategically de-emphasised language of gender equality, while instead adopting and repurposing the term 'gender justice' as promoting conservative ideas of complementary gender roles aligned with religious tradition, thus blurring distinctions between progressive and regressive advocacy (Günay-Erkol and Sünbüloğlu 2024).

Across contexts, algorithm-driven digital platforms fuel and exploit emotive reactions by amplifying misinformation, moral panics, and polarisation, thus shaping public opinion and creating favourable conditions for authoritarian and populist agendas to gain traction (Faith 2022).

Per-emptive Actors:

We also see more pre-emptive actors stalling or foreclosing progress on equality and inclusion, serving the interests of hyper-capitalist elites, global corporations, and dominant social groups (Edström *et al.* 2024c; Chigateri and Kundu 2024; Veneklasen 2024; Judge 2024). Furthermore, transnational ultra-conservative networks amplify and connect such local efforts. Religious coalitions, state-backed alliances, and international conservative NGOs provide ideological framing, campaign strategies, and material support across borders. In **Serbia** and **Türkiye,** for example, global anti-gender movements have strengthened and legitimised local actors, enabling them to resist gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights, using internationally circulated narratives of 'gender ideology', alleged threats to children, or cultural contamination (Günay-Erkol and Sünbüloğlu 2024; Stojčić and Bobičić 2023). In **Lebanon**, sectarian religious authorities work closely with political elites to maintain patriarchal family laws and stigmatise those advocating for women's or LGBTQ+ rights (El Rahi and Antar 2024).

The people want the fall of the sectarian system

Proactive Actors:

More proactive actors include religious fundamentalist movements and ethnonationalist – or fascist – formations, with more revolutionary agendas for a new future that, although differently motivated by faith or racial ideologies, are still deeply patriarchal (Edström 2024; Corredor 2019). In **Brazil**, conservative evangelical networks and right-wing politicians have reframed debates on gender equality, sexuality education, and reproductive rights as threats to family and nation, generating moral panic to consolidate electoral support (Sardenberg *et al.* 2024a).

Opportunistic Actors:

Finally, we have seen a range of more opportunistic actors, such as populist leaders who benefit from – and play a critical role in – mobilising and legitimising backlash. By capitalising on social change, economic precarity, and rising insecurity, they redirect public anxieties towards feminists, queer communities, migrants, and other minorities. They include authoritarian and authoritarian-leaning state leaders, such as the ethnonationalist government in India described above, and others. In **Uganda**, for example, President Yoweri Museveni is exhibiting increasing authoritarianism, driven by the need to shield the power of his long-serving political regime. This has translated into shrinking civic space, including clampdowns on women's rights organisations, the freezing of their funds, and accusations that they are using foreign funding to destabilise the government. In both **Kenya** and **Uganda**, state leadership has enacted laws directly targeting women's and LGBTQ+ rights under the banner of protecting 'African values' (Mwiine and Ahikire 2024; Otieno and Makabira 2024).

Taken together, these state and non-state national and international actors – each adapting to local political opportunities – form a dynamic ecosystem that sustains and expands organised resistance to gender equality and often social justice more broadly. This politics works in complex ways, as variously domestic and transnational, as religious and secular, and as formal and informal. While not a single movement, various backlash actors reinforce one another. Their influence is grounded in local histories and power structures but is also increasingly connected across borders.

TEMPORALITY AND TRANSNATIONAL PROLIFERATION

Beyond the protagonists involved and their individual or group interests, in different contexts partners have described aggregate societal shifts in how normal discourse and politics are framed, such as a progression from normal everyday anti-feminist resistance to proactive, overt, and aggressive backlash in **Kenya** (Otieno and Makabira 2024). Or, as in **India**, it has now become normalised to publicly malign and express hatred towards certain minority groups (Das *et al.* 2024). This raises deeper questions about this difference from business as usual surrounding the temporal aspects of direction and speed of backlash, as well as its scale and transnational proliferation.

Many partners have asked 'What is 'back' about 'backlash'' when, for many communities, the rights in question were never realised in the first place.

In **India**, for example, colleagues emphasised that Dalit women and domestic workers have seen little tangible progress (Chigateri and Kundu 2024), while in **Lebanon** systemic sexism intertwined with sectarianism – what has been termed 'sextarianism' (Mikdashi 2022) – continues to block meaningful advances towards gender justice (El-Rahi and Antar 2024). Conversing across contexts, it quickly became clear that what we were confronting is not simply a case of one step forward and one step back, and that the temporal dimensions of backlash are far more complex than the term suggests.

Partners' research confirms Rowley (2020)'s and Townsend-Bell (2020)'s view of backlash as deeply enmeshed in societal structures and systems of oppression and violence – gendered, racialised, and elitist, as in **Bangladesh** (Ahmed *et al.* 2024) or **Lebanon** (El-Rahi and Antar 2024).

In this sense, backlash is both episodic and continuous (ibid.; Lewin 2024); not an anomaly, but a recurring and inherent feature of systemic oppression, triggered by specific contextual dynamics that go well beyond any nation and opposition to progress on gender equality and social justice.

From this perspective, backlash emerges epochally, in historical context, and organically as a mechanism to shore up and update broader inequitable systems that are under pressure and showing morbid signs of unsustainability (Edström *et al.* 2024c). While being about far more than gender, we have found backlash to be still deeply gendered in that both the systems being updated and the ways of operating are fundamentally masculinist and patriarchal (ibid.; Günay-Erkol and Sünbüloğlu 2024; Das *et al.* 2024; Greig *et al.* 2025).

While partners' research has primarily focused on backlash in diverse national contexts, the question of its transnational proliferation has become important. In considering both its structural embeddedness and complex temporality, a striking difference between contemporary acute backlash and more familiar long-term resistance has been its virtually simultaneous occurrence across countries and regions. Several partners recognised in their analyses that, while locally rooted and played out, such backlash is also driven or facilitated by higher-level trends and crises, whether in contexts such as **India** (Chigateri and Kundu 2024), **Lebanon** (El Rahi and Antar 2024), or **Uganda** (Edström *et al.* 2025).

CRISES, IDENTITIES, AND SITES OF CONTESTATION

To understand the complexity of contemporary anti-feminist backlash, we need to examine the contextual factors that shape its emergence, popularity, and intensity. That is, we need to account for the force of its appeal. The contestations involved in backlash variously unfold within a shared global context of multiple protracted crises and deepening material inequalities. These overlapping crises – and the insecurity they generate – have created fertile ground for backlash to proliferate. By stoking fear and amplifying a sense of threat, different backlash actors offer simplistic solutions to complex problems – promising to (re-) establish order and stop chaos, conceived of as a form of patriarchal crisis management (Edström *et al.* 2024c).

Central to this strategy is the vilification and scapegoating of 'othered' identities and communities and the movements that seek to advance their rights. Varying according to context, such othered groups are portrayed as the root causes of various societal challenges or crises: economic hardship, the persistence of colonial power structures, or alleged moral and social decline. Across Latin America, anti-gender movements accuse queer communities and basic sex education of 'corrupting' children, as in the 'Don't Mess with my Kids' (*Con mis hijos no te metas*) campaign, which began in Peru in 2016 and spread. In countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Kenya, Serbia, **Türkiye**, and Uganda, feminism and LGBTQ+ rights are cast as threats to morality, the family, or the nation.

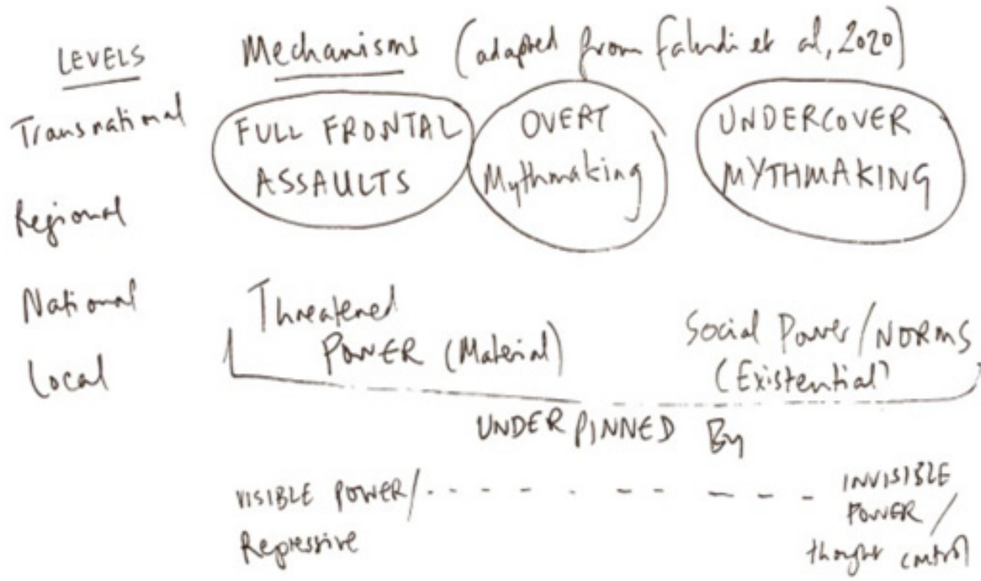
In **Bangladesh,** attempts to reform Hindu family law triggered resistance from religious and political groups, which framed gender-equal reforms as threats to minorities' identities and tradition (Sultan *et al.* 2024). In **Brazil**, feminist and LGBTQ+ movements are portrayed as incompatible with family values and national identity, enabling political actors to stoke social anxiety and convert it into electoral power (Sardenberg *et al.* 2024a). In **Lebanon**, moral panic around LGBTQ+ and feminist organising is used to distract from economic crises and collapse and to shield deeply unequal legal structures from scrutiny (El Rahi and Antar 2024).

While the forms vary, the function is consistent: these narratives tap into the power of emotions and affect – mobilising fear, resentment, and nostalgia – to frame marginalised groups as the source of disorder, rather than addressing the actual, structural drivers of inequality and exclusion. This rising affective polarisation in culture and politics is further intensified by the viral spread of mis- and disinformation online (Faith 2022). Polarising algorithms, profit-driven platform models, and the overt alignment of techno-capitalist actors with populist figures all contribute to an emotionally charged, divisive, and often hostile digital and political landscape.

The discourse in backlash narratives thus polarises opinion and targets certain deeply symbolic sites of contestation, namely: bodies, as 'naturally heterosexual', male or female; families, as 'traditional' and patriarchal; and nations, as ethnically orderly and homogenous (Edström *et al.* 2024c; Chigateri and Kundu 2024; Judge 2024). This is both to divide and rule, and to reframe norms, ideas, 'truths', and policies (to serve powerful interests).

As described in Figure 2.1, backlash can be understood as operating at multiple geopolitical levels, and across a continuum of mechanisms, from full-frontal assaults to undercover mythmaking. These reflect different types of power operating simultaneously, from visibly repressive power to more invisible power. It suggests that backlash is driven by threatened power – both material and cultural (as related to core values and social norms).

Figure 2.1 Visual overview of backlash

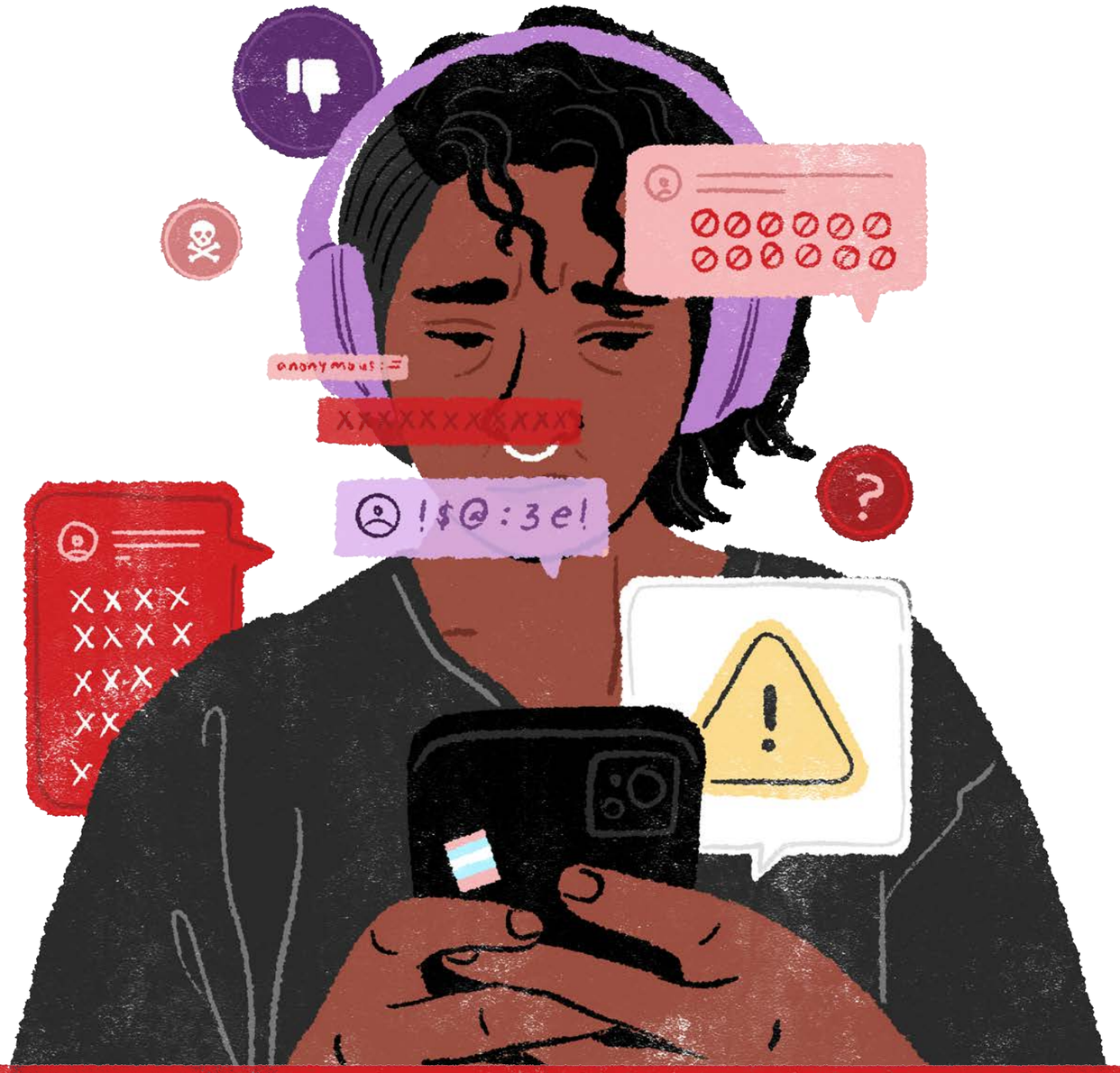


Source: Lewin and McGee (cited in Edström *et al.* 2026).

It is to how this politics works and manifests in specific political contexts that we turn in the next section.

SECTION 03

MANIFESTATIONS OF GENDER BACKLASH



Gender backlash operates through multiple, overlapping mechanisms, ranging from overt attacks on feminist, queer, and social justice activists and institutions that protect gender equality and rights or deliver services to marginalised groups, to subtler forms of obstruction such as deliberately stalling policy and programme implementation, and discursive co-option of feminist and queer rights language to delegitimise claims, pitting one set of rights against others and stigmatising activists (Nazneen 2024), as described in Table 3.1

Backlash manifests across policy arenas, civic life, digital spaces, and cultural discourse. Mechanisms interact, reinforcing one another, and function at multiple scales – from intimate, bodily control, to structural and institutional processes.

Table 3.1 Mechanisms of gender backlash and its manifestations

Backlash mechanisms	Manifestations	Example	Implications for feminist/queer voice
Direct attacks	Violence	Online threats, intimidation/physical attacks	Silencing of activists
	Dismantling of gender equality programmes/ institutions	Funding slashed or units that address GBV closed	Sites of action for activists limited
	Use of regressive laws to limit activism	Use of security acts/ICT laws to limit contestations	Silencing of activists/ sites of action limited
Indirect strategies	Hollowing out of policy/ programmes	Domestic violence decriminalised; gender equality elements removed from existing laws/policy	Claims made on state are ineffective
	Deliberate inaction/foot-dragging by the state	Deliberate non-implementation of laws/policy	Claims on duty bearers become ineffective
Discursive tactics	Stigmatisation/vilification	Abortion rights activists branded 'baby killers'	Legitimacy of activists' voices undermined
	Disavowal/ delegitimisation of claims	Poor women labelled lazy and as not deserving of state aid	Claims made are trivialised
	Re-traditionalisation of gender roles	Only heterosexual marriage counts	Legitimacy of alternative claims undermined
	Pitting one set of rights against others	A foetus's right to life trumps the mother's health and choice	Rights language co-opted to push back

Source: Adapted from Nazneen (2024: 19).

DIRECT ATTACKS TO SILENCE GENDER JUSTICE ACTORS

Backlash frequently manifests as direct, visible, and often violent attacks designed to intimidate and control.

Control of bodies and mobility is a central mechanism, enforced through both societal and legal channels. In **Bangladesh**, partner research within university spaces demonstrates that patriarchy is upheld not only by men but also by women, who police dress, behaviour, and mobility through ostracism, bullying, and moral surveillance (Ahmed *et al.* 2024).

Legal and policy measures further entrench overt backlash.

Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act criminalises queer communities (Judge 2024); ministerial decrees in **Brazil** restrict access to legal abortion (Sardenberg *et al.* 2024a); and a range of laws and policies such as **India**'s Citizenship Amendment Act institutionalise Islamophobic and gendered exclusion (Chigateri and Kundu 2024). **Lebanon**'s patriarchal family laws, reinforced by sectarian political structures, keep women's and LGBTQ+ rights largely outside reform efforts, using moral panics to justify ongoing policing of gender and sexuality (El Rahi and Antar 2024).

Digital platforms both enable activism and intensify overt and subtle forms of backlash.

Across **Serbia, Türkiye,** and **Uganda**, state and social actors weaponise mainstream and digital media to promote traditional values and spread derogatory stereotypes about feminist and LGBTQ+ communities and movements. Online harassment – including threats, misogynistic slurs, and doctored images – targets activists and politicians, aiming to intimidate and discredit. Where institutions ignore or trivialise such violence, the chilling effect on organising is profound. Simultaneously, cybersecurity laws masquerading as protective measures serve as tools for surveillance and repression, as in the case of **Bangladesh**'s Digital Security Act (Antara *et al.* 2024), and criminalise dissent in the guise of safeguarding morality or national values.

In contexts such as **Lebanon**, political and social structures are so imbued with the logic of GBV that backlash is less a reaction to feminist gains than an active, self-protective maintenance of oppressive order (El Rahi and Antar 2024).

These strategies are designed and deployed by those in power to reassert their hold during moments of crisis – creating imaginary enemies and scapegoats among marginalised communities and threatening movements.

In other places, backlash is enacted by the slashing of government funds.

For example, in **Brazil**, for GBV programmes, and in Uganda, where the state has also de-registered and suspended donors that fund CSO activities. In January 2021, the Government of **Uganda** suspended the funding and operations of the Democratic Governance Facility, a major funder of civil society, consequently affecting the operations of many women's rights organisations. The government's suspension of the funding was premised on arguments that funds through NGO programmes were used to finance activities and organisations designed to subvert the government under the guise of improving governance. The suspension's greatest impact was on the capacities of women's and human rights organisations, including advocacy for gender equity policy reforms (Mwiine *et al.* 2023).

Backlash can also involve directly obstructing enforcement, as in **Bangladesh**, or delegitimising bills through mockery, discursive minimisation, and the watering down of legislative aims.

For example, majority legislators in **Uganda** severely sexualised the debate on the Sexual Offences Bill (2019), thereby infantilising and ridiculing the entire reform. They used coded language that referred to male sexual organs in symbolic ways; the ensuing laughter in the Parliament grossly trivialised concerns over horrific and pervasive cases of sexual violence (Mwiine and Ahikire 2024b). These manifestations mirror broader tendencies to erode existing protections against GBV and sabotage new reforms – either by omission or through active subversion.

INDIRECT STRATEGIES OF DELAY AND INACTION

Backlash against gender equality is often understood as solely an overt, reactionary push by those threatened by social progress. However, in practice it frequently emerges through more subtle, insidious forms: co-option, where movement language, laws, or policies are appropriated and redirected (discussed below); and erosion, the deliberate hollowing out or non-implementation of hard-won rights and protections.

Gender-progressive laws often mark only the beginning of a journey rather than its triumphant end. After their enactment, governments may tout a rhetoric of gender justice while deliberately withholding essential resources, budgets, training, or institutional support, resulting in near-total non-implementation.

In **Bangladesh**, advocates spent years pushing for the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act (2010) (DVPPA), but its implementation has been systematically undermined through deliberate inaction, lack of interest, deprioritisation, and delegitimisation by the very authorities charged with its execution (Sultan and Mahpara 2024). Institutional ownership is lacking, with bureaucratic and normative resistance rooted in prevailing patriarchal norms around family honour and the sanctity of marriage, and in a tendency to view domestic violence as a private – often trivialised – matter. As such, the DVPPA is rarely enforced, and feminist actors find themselves with shrinking civic space to influence policy amid increasing authoritarianism.

Uganda demonstrates parallel dynamics. The Domestic Violence Act (2010) was passed only after contentious protections were removed (notably, a clause on marital rape). Even then, authorities undercut its power by withholding funding, ensuring the law remained dormant and violence persisted. During the 2021 general election, through the Financial Intelligence Authority the government withheld funding from NGOs that were perceived to be critical of the regime, thereby limiting their ability to provide services (Ahikire and Mwiine 2024). This was supplemented by patterns of bureaucratic foot-dragging, as seen in the protracted delays and hostile amendments to the 2019 Sexual Offences Bill, which was weakened by the insertion of punitive clauses criminalising sex work and homosexuality – thereby transforming a feminist initiative into an instrument of further marginalisation (ibid.).

Both these examples typify a global pattern: policy that poses any real threat to established power is either neutralised through legal dilution or simply left to decay.

DISCURSIVE AND CO-OPTIVE TACTICS

In **India**, backlash emerges as a discursive convergence of anxious masculinities and right-wing ethnonationalism: the mythologised ideal of Hindu masculinity under threat and the policing of 'outsiders'. Gender politics has become a battleground for the defence of majoritarian identity, with vigilantism and state action wrapped up in rhetoric of reinforcing boundaries and excluding minorities (Das *et al.* 2024; Chigateri and Kundu 2024).

Bangladesh, **India**, and **Lebanon** all report backlash against legislation aiming to secure equal rights for minority women, in some settings resisting reforms in family law under the pretext of defending minority interests from external interference. This is contested terrain in **India**, as legislation such as triple *talaq* (men's unilateral right to divorce his wife by uttering 'I divorce you' three times) and debates on the Uniform Civil Code have been fiercely contested among groups working with Muslim women. Often, these laws have been passed under the pretext of defending Muslim women from Muslim men, with some groups lauding efforts to legislate on this, no matter the intent, and others questioning the intent and impacts on Muslim men and women (Chigateri and Kundu 2024).

Kenya and **Uganda** demonstrate the discursive invocation of 'African values' to paint gender equality as un-African, and language framing LGBTQ+ and feminist activism as Western impositions that threaten collective identity (Akhire and Mwiine 2024; Otieno and Makabira 2024). Similar efforts are found in **Serbia** and **Türkiye**, where backlash actors deploy strong language to characterise feminism and equality as attacks on tradition, family, and the nation.

Policy regressions often coincide with attacks on civic space, as observed in rapid-fire legislative changes amid crises in **India**, clampdowns on civil society through financial and legal restrictions in **Uganda**, and shrinking room for advocacy and dissent everywhere. Regulation, surveillance, and media restrictions serve to erode both space and means to organise for realising women's rights – policies further enabled by co-opted discourses of protection and order (Ahikire and Mwiine 2024).

A distinct dimension of backlash operates through discourse, co-opting feminist and rights language and reshaping narratives to delegitimise gender equality agendas, as in the case of pitting children's rights against those of mothers in **India** (Philip 2023). Anti-gender actors selectively appropriate language and terms from progressive movements to redirect debates and policies in conservative directions. Processes of discourse capture reframe feminist or sexuality rights language (Lewin 2021) – 'gender' is depicted as ideology, 'family' as a heterosexual nuclear unit – and mobilise nationalism or anti-colonial sentiment to resist reforms. Across **Bangladesh, Kenya, Serbia**, and **Türkiye**, feminism and queer rights are portrayed as foreign, threatening national identity, and undermining traditional values.

In **Brazil**, the Ministry of Human Rights was rebranded as the Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights under leadership opposed to reproductive rights. This allowed policies to pivot from bodily autonomy to protection of the family and foetal rights (Sardenberg *et al.* 2024b). In **Türkiye**, KADEM, a state-linked CSO to advance women's issues adopted and promotes the term 'gender justice' rather than 'gender equality', selectively using feminist language to reinforce binary and religiously sanctioned gender norms. **Bangladesh**'s Digital Security Act and Cyber Security Act both deploy feminist-tinged rhetoric to justify online surveillance, restrict dissent, and undermine claims made by digital feminist activists (Antara *et al.* 2024). These are strategies of discourse capture where oppositional voices are delegitimised, self-censorship increases, and organising becomes both riskier and less effective.

Digital platforms amplify discursive backlash. Across **Serbia**, **Türkiye**, and **Uganda**, state and social actors weaponise online spaces to propagate traditionalist values, harass activists, and spread misogynistic stereotypes. Threats, doctored images, and slurs target both politicians and activists, aiming to intimidate and discredit them. Simultaneously, cybersecurity laws presented as protective measures rather function as tools of repression and surveillance.

DISMANTLING OF STRUCTURES FOR GENDER JUSTICE

The above direct, indirect, and discursive tactics and strategies do not only contribute to dismantling, co-opting, or repurposing structures for gender justice and equality, but they are also facilitated by a longer-term erosion in structures and institutions. Ongoing neoliberal and austerity-driven retrenchment in social policy constitutes an underlying dimension of erosion. Across **Brazil**, for instance, the rollback of care infrastructure and the targeted dismantling of cash transfer programmes (such as the Bolsa Família social welfare programme) systematically disadvantage poor women, who are overwhelmingly responsible for unpaid care work and are the primary recipients of social welfare (Sardenberg *et al.* 2024a). New iterations of these programmes have introduced restrictions that largely exclude poor women, especially those outside the formal workforce, and underinvestment in day care continues to reinforce traditional roles and dependency (Sardenberg *et al.* 2024a).

Such changes are often cloaked in the language of fiscal discipline or administrative efficiency, yet they deepen inequality, reinforce dependence, and stigmatise women as 'lazy' or 'morally suspect', as also the case in **Uganda** (Ahikire and Mwiine 2024). In **India**, similar dynamics have unfolded as domestic workers' struggles for rights and recognition go unaddressed, with inaction from authorities reflecting enduring assumptions about gendered labour, precarity, and the naturalisation of women's subordination (Chigateri and Kundu 2024).

Co-option is particularly visible in policies around women's political participation. In both **Brazil** and **Uganda**, affirmative action and quota systems have occasionally served less to foster meaningful inclusion than to create isolated enclaves of female representation – sometimes used as evidence to defuse calls for wider reform, sometimes manipulated as vote banks or incorporated into ruling party patronage networks. Women occupying these positions are often stigmatised, trivialised, or co-opted, and their legitimacy persistently questioned by male and female colleagues alike. For example, in **Uganda**, women members of parliament in reserved seats have faced co-ordinated attacks designed to undermine the affirmative action policy (reservations) that led to their inclusion in Parliament (Ahikire and Mwiine 2024). Affirmative action seems to have subsequently had the much-feared consequence of recreating male privilege in a whole new way.

Women's presence in politics rarely translates automatically to systemic change when the structures that regulate their participation remain fundamentally patriarchal (Sardenberg *et al.* 2024a; Kubík Mano and Sardenberg 2025).

These manifestations of direct, indirect, and discursive strategies for the co-option and erosion of gender equality agendas and language do more than merely unravel past gains; these processes actively reconfigure the landscape of possibility – recasting the terms, institutions, and horizons of feminist and queer struggle. At the same time, backlash carries socioeconomic and political consequences, reinforcing gendered hierarchies by pushing women into domestic roles and re-masculinising workplaces. For example, in **Lebanon** and **Uganda** women's political participation is curtailed when quotas and affirmative action come under attack, and female leaders are presented as less capable. These narratives weaken both individual legitimacy and broad commitments to gender equality.

Nonetheless, backlash provokes counteraction. Activists and communities adapt, innovating resistance strategies in policy, civil society, and public discourse, reflecting resilience and renewed struggle.

SECTION 04

COUNTERING BACKLASH: RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

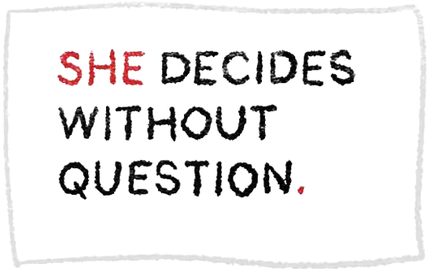
Despite the formidable array of backlash strategies targeting gender equality movements, policies, and possibilities, feminist organisers and their allies continually seek new ways to resist, adapt, and sometimes win ground back. Counter-backlash is also varied and multi-scalar. Partners in this programme have collaborated with IDS in producing different resources for activists and CSOs to support such action (Antara *et al.* 2024; Faith *et al.* 2024; Greig *et al.* 2025). As above, this section synthesises programme evidence across our country contexts to map the strategic repertoires that movements deploy to survive, resist, and build feminist futures in hostile contexts.

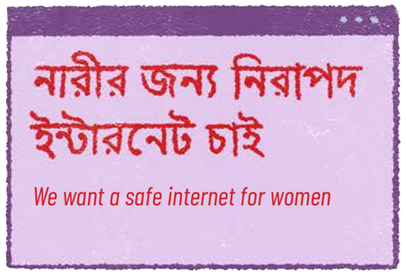
The terrain of gender backlash, and resistance is uneven and fiercely contested. Movements must continually innovate, adapt, and work collaboratively – across regions, issues, and sectors – to defend hard-won gains, and challenge the persistent efforts to erode gender and sexual justice. This section addresses counter-strategies including survival, protest, ensuring implementation, discursive resistance, and movement and coalition building.

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

Being under attack demands agile activism, including moving offline to organise. Face-to-face organising and physical mobilisation are essential components of counter-backlash strategy, particularly in contexts where digital spaces become hostile or are being surveilled. Movements demonstrate remarkable agility in shifting between online and offline modalities.

Mass mobilisation demonstrates the power of collective action to create political pressure and achieve concrete wins. In **Brazil,** the 'Basic Income We Want' ('*Renda Basica que Queremos*') campaign was launched in response to Bolsonaro's inadequate Emergency Aid proposal, which offered only R$200 a month in basic income payments. With a coalition of over 300 organisations, the campaign used online petitions, media outreach, and direct advocacy, including institutional pressure through letters to the National Congress, and thousands of calls and emails to politicians. In April 2020, in response to pressure from the campaign, the Congress passed a bill raising the monthly universal basic income to R$600 per person (Telles 2020). When the amount was cut again in 2021, the movement repeated its tactics, submitting petitions, engaging with politicians, using media strategies, and launching artistic campaigns (Ferreira *et al.* 2024). Direct action creates visibility and can open up political space. Also in **Brazil**, the 'Occupy Congress' action led by feminist movements formed a coalition that conducted face-to-face activism after the pandemic, demonstrating the continued power of physical presence in political spaces (Sardenberg *et al.* 2024a).





Victory in the face of backlash sometimes comes from sheer numbers and sustained community presence. In **Uganda**, coalition efforts have taken the form of organising marches for domestic violence law, engaging with media, amplifying voices, and educating women on their rights. These mobilisations influenced constitutional discussions and exerted pressure for more progressive policies. Mobilising coalitions demonstrated both the difficulties involved in and potential of countering entrenched power with unified, diversified mass action (Ahikire and Mwiine 2019; Ahikire and Mwiine 2024).

Campaigns can also combine traditional protest with creative visibility tactics on social media. In **Brazil**, the 'A Child is Not a Mother' campaign involved both digital mobilisation and physical demonstrations to campaign in defence of women's rights over their bodies (Sardenberg *et al.* 2024b), which has also strengthened movements for bodily autonomy.

Yet, as backlash increasingly manifests online through harassment, surveillance, 'doxxing' (the release of private information online without someone's consent), and coordinated attacks, movements need to develop sophisticated approaches for digital safety while maintaining their online presence and organising capacity.

In **Bangladesh**, activists advocate for legislation against online GBV and for creating safer online spaces while building awareness of available safeguards for safer online experiences. As a strategy to counter online backlash against activists, BIGD created a resource pack on Online Safety for Activists (Antara *et al.* 2024), providing practical advice including: limiting and filtering comments on posts; using alternative, safer communication channels; detaching personal accounts from public messaging accounts; using humour in messaging; strategic self-censorship; and collective solidarity. The resource pack also lists structures of response that collectives and activists can adopt, institutions they can reach out to, and legal recourse available in **Bangladesh**.

In **Uganda**, through WOUGNET's partner work, participants stressed the need for safe digital spaces, cyber-law reform, and increased digital literacy. They called for inclusive digital policies to dismantle the oppression marginalised communities face, particularly LGBTQ+ individuals. Recommendations included strengthening legal frameworks to protect activists' digital rights, providing capacity building and digital security training, and fostering continued collaboration with other civil society groups (Ongom and Marunga 2024a, 2024b).

RESISTANCE AND PUSHING FORWARD AGAINST INACTION

Resistance in the face of backlash and erosion demands strategies like direct action and public demonstration, as well as pushing for implementation and accountability. To start, protest – taking to the streets, occupying spaces, and making demands visible – remains a vital counter-backlash strategy that creates political pressure, builds movement solidarity, and challenges narratives of inevitability or consent.

In **Brazil,** campaigning on social media and protest marches in defence of women's rights over their bodies strengthened movements for bodily autonomy. As noted above, the 'A Child is Not a Mother' campaign combined digital mobilisation with physical demonstrations, creating multi-platform visibility that exerted pressure on courts and politicians (Sardenberg *et al.* 2024b). In another example, the 'Occupy Congress for the Lives of Women, Girls, and People Who Gestate' action in July 2022 exemplifies strategic occupation as protest. Led by feminist movements, this coalition brought together pro-choice organisations, civil society groups, and health associations to physically occupy congressional spaces, opening dialogue with Congress members on abortion rights and sexual violence. This direct action achieved concrete victories in a case involving an 11-year-old rape survivor. Importantly, the action also reignited face-to-face activism after the pandemic, demonstrating the continued power of physical presence in political spaces (Sardenberg *et al.* 2024b).

In **Uganda**, coalition efforts have taken the form of marches for the introduction of domestic violence law, demonstrating how mass mobilisation creates political pressure. These marches engaged media, amplified voices, and educated women on their rights. Such mobilisations influenced constitutional discussions and exerted pressure for more progressive policies, demonstrating both the difficulties in, and potential for, countering entrenched power with unified, diversified mass action (Ahikire and Mwiine 2024).

Effective protest rarely stands alone but combines with legal, media, and advocacy strategies. In **Brazil**, coalitions of pro-choice and women's rights organisations led media, legal, and parliamentary campaigns alongside protest actions. This multi-pronged approach forced judges and politicians to reverse some abuses in abortion cases, stop new regressive policies, and reorient public debate towards bodily autonomy.

Beyond winning rights on paper, movements must vigilantly monitor implementation and hold states accountable for enforcing progressive legislation. It is this sustained advocacy work that transforms formal rights into lived realities.

In **Bangladesh**, the Citizens Initiative Against Domestic Violence exemplifies sustained implementation advocacy. Despite the passage of the DVPPA, its implementation has been slow. Women's rights organisations have maintained consistent pressure through advocacy, training, media mobilisation, and alliance building – ensuring domestic violence remains a matter of public debate and legal recognition. Gender actors point to backlash as the reason for poor implementation, raising awareness of legal rights around psychological and financial abuse, and advocating for accountability of duty bearers (Sultan and Mahpara 2023).

This work involves multiple strategies: capacity building for legal professionals and service providers, public awareness campaigns about available legal protections, documentation of implementation gaps, and direct advocacy with government agencies. By keeping implementation failures visible and contested, movements prevent laws from becoming merely symbolic victories.

Implementation advocacy requires building accountability mechanisms that track progress, document failures, and create pressure for enforcement. In **Bangladesh**, coalition work enables greater reach in policy and civic spaces, allowing organisations to monitor implementation across multiple sites and constituencies. This coordinated monitoring makes it harder for states to ignore implementation failures or to dismiss concerns as isolated complaints.

DISCURSIVE RESISTANCE: LANGUAGE, STORIES, AND NARRATIVES

Framing and language matters profoundly in expanding movements' reach and challenging dominant narratives. In **Bangladesh**, gender actors have worked to challenge dominant frames and discourse by framing domestic violence as a human rights violation rather than a private family matter, pointing to backlash as the reason for low uptake and slow implementation of the DVPPA, and raising awareness of legal rights around psychological and financial abuse – not just physical violence (Sultan and Mahpara 2023).

Similarly, strategic framing of discourse in **Uganda** has identified the Domestic Violence Bill as a development issue and protecting family values, broadening its appeal beyond women's rights constituencies, and winning over religious and traditional leaders who previously opposed the bill (Ahikire and Mwiine 2019). This reframing helps movements widen alliances, create new narratives, and gain traction among different segments of society. In **Kenya** and **Uganda,** activists frame gender equality campaigns as both anti-violence and pro-development, sometimes strategically engaging religious and traditional leaders, or leveraging international attention to overcome blockages.

Storytelling can also help to make the harms of backlash visible, as personal narratives serve as a powerful vehicle for generating empathy and mobilising support. In **Bangladesh**, activists use social media platforms to emphasise the harms of sexual violence and GBV such as rape, and domestic violence, by highlighting individual experiences to evoke empathy and garner the support needed to shift societal attitudes, strengthen legal protections, and ensure survivor safety and justice. Digital networks have created online and offline protests against GBV by focusing on these concerns (Sultan *et al.* 2024).

Storytelling approaches can extend to high-profile campaigns. In **Brazil,** the 'A Child is Not a Mother' campaign defended the legitimacy of granting access to legal abortions irrespective of the length of pregnancy, focusing particularly on child survivors of sexual violence. Progressive media such as Intercept Brazil and the feminist platform Portal Catarinas played key roles by reporting on court hearings and telling the stories of cases involving minors, fuelling social media campaigns that exposed abuses by courts, and building support for survivors and their families (Sardenberg *et al.* 2024b).

In highly polarised environments, constructing alternative narratives becomes essential to reducing violence and building solidarity. The **Humqadam** group of activists in **India** provides a compelling example. Operating in Uttar Pradesh amid rising Hindu nationalism and communal polarisation, Humqadam constructed counter-narratives of shared Hindu-Muslim spaces, belief systems, and cultural traditions. This messaging of shared culture supported building solidarity among communities, and neutralising threats of violence at community level and from state actors supporting the narrative of a Hindu state (Das *et al.* 2024; Dasgupta *et al.* 2025; Greig *et al.* 2025). One Humqadam activist articulated this shift: 'Earlier we were using the constitution as a sword, but now we are using it as a shield' (Das *et al.* 2024: 91). This reflects a move from legalistic rights-claiming toward narrative work that builds social cohesion as protection against backlash violence.

BUILDING MOVEMENTS, SOLIDARITY, AND COALITIONS

Coalition building emerges as a foundational counter-backlash strategy across contexts. Alliances enable movements to expand their reach, pool resources, access diverse constituencies, and create political pressure that isolated organisations cannot achieve alone.

In **Brazil**, coalitions of pro-choice and women's rights organisations led media, legal, and parliamentary campaigns that forced judges and politicians to reverse some abuses in abortion cases, stop new regressive policies, and reorient public debate towards bodily autonomy.

In **Bangladesh**, the Citizens Initiative Against Domestic Violence has maintained consistent pressure to ensure domestic violence remains a matter of public debate and legal recognition, even as law implementation stalls, as discussed above. Actors working for gender equality have particularly emphasised coalition and alliance building as being crucial, which allows for greater reach in policy and civic spaces (Sultan and Mahpara 2023).

Similarly, in **Uganda** politicians such as Miria Matembe, alongside the Ugandan Women Parliamentary Association and Action for Development, have engaged in coalition building and mass mobilisation to involve more women in political processes and enable them to gain influence in political discussions. These coalition efforts have taken the form of marches for domestic violence law and engagement with media, amplifying voices and educating women on their rights.

An important aspect of forming strategic alliances is to build solidarity across differences. Movements need to strategically identify shared concerns to build alliances across traditional boundaries. In **Bangladesh**, digital rights activists highlight interlinkages between online GBV and freedom of speech to garner wider support within the human rights network. As a younger demographic with limited presence in policy spaces, the activists align with more senior organisations who have institutional access. They also work with media platforms, for whom free speech is a shared concern (Sultan *et al.* 2024).

In contexts marked by extreme polarisation and violence, the politics of fraternity – social solidarity across divides – becomes a key counter-backlash strategy. The platform in **India** studied by SAHAYOG and CHSJ exemplifies 'fraternity as resistance' to backlash driven by anxious masculinity and Hindu nationalism. Comprising male activists working on gender justice and masculinities, Humqadam responded to increasingly polarised relationships among men across caste and religious divides (Das *et al.* 2024). Humqadam members reflected on their earlier practice of mobilising communities around secular traditions of rights-claiming that saw the state as an objective arbiter and responsible duty bearer. Realising that this was now inadequate and that new urgent needs centred on building social solidarity and reviving relationships among and between communities at the local level, they instead shifted the focus to building fraternity as enshrined in the constitution – the principle that all Indians are one people. This fraternity principle, while not legally enforceable, has been reiterated by the Supreme Court amid growing hate speech and religious intolerance. The approach aims to reduce everyday risks, foster local peace, and create shields against communal violence, displacement, and state-sponsored polarisation (Das *et al.* 2024).

BUILDING AND SUSTAINING SUPPORT FOR GENDER JUSTICE ACTORS

Building organisational capacity, developing leadership, and creating sustainable movement infrastructure enable long-term resistance to and resilience against backlash. In **Bangladesh** for example, gender actors have amplified marginalised voices, built capacity, and advocated for accountability, organising training programmes, media engagement, and sustained advocacy to build skills and confidence within movements (Sultan and Mahpara 2023). In **Uganda,** direct trainings of activists through policy dialogues and multi-stakeholder meetings build capacity for engagement in policy spaces. This capacity building enables activists to navigate complex political terrain and advocate effectively (Ongom and Marunga 2024a 2024b).

In **India**, informal workers' unions such as Shahri Mahila Kamgar Union (SMKU) organise for better working conditions, immediate relief in crises (such as the Covid-19 pandemic), and a sense of collective identity and mutual aid. These organisations function as critical infrastructure – supporting both basic needs and movement resilience. SMKU provided valuable emergency relief to domestic workers during the pandemic in the form of rations and online benefits. SMKU and the wider network it belongs to also created space to amplify domestic workers' voices, share their experiences, and to mobilise against the backlash they face (Gender at Work 2023).

These organisations ensure workers' voices continue to be heard, even amid sectoral backsliding, providing solidarity and functioning as essential movement infrastructure.

In **Uganda**, efforts to involve more women in political processes include educating women on their rights and enabling them to gain influence in political discussions. This leadership development builds capacity for sustained political engagement and challenges exclusion from decision-making spaces.

Union organising among informal workers creates both economic leverage and political voice. In **India**, SMKU's organising of domestic workers provides a platform for collective action and advocacy, while building solidarity and collective identity. These economic organising efforts address immediate material needs and build long-term movement capacity and resilience.

Alongside organising for rights and economic justice, movements and activists need material support. Economic resistance and organising around material needs constitute crucial dimensions of counter-backlash strategy, recognising that survival and security enable continued activism. Providing immediate material support during crises builds movement loyalty and demonstrates care (Chopra 2021). In India, as noted above, organisations such as SMKU provided valuable emergency relief to domestic workers during Covid-19 in the form of rations and online benefits. This relief not only addressed immediate needs but created networks for sharing experiences and mobilising against backlash.

In addition, large-scale campaigns for economic justice can demonstrate the power of coordinated action. In **Brazil,** the 'Basic Income We Want' campaign involving over 300 organisations mobilised to raise proposed emergency aid during Covid-19 through online petitions, media outreach, direct advocacy, institutional pressure via letters to Congress, and thousands of calls and emails to politicians. The campaign successfully tripled the original aid proposal amount. When cuts were proposed again in 2021, the movement reactivated these tactics with additional artistic campaigns (Ferreira *et al.* 2024).

CONCLUSION:
TOWARDS FEMINIST FUTURES

Our research has shown that contemporary gender backlash is not so much a temporary deviation from linear progress, but rather a broader societal shift involving multiple actors and networks of interest. They are not all pushing back in the sense that different types of actors' aims and tactics are variously reactive, pre-emptive, proactive, or simply opportunistic, but they come together in a broader confluence of reactionary and patriarchal politics. They converge with strategies that exploit emotions such as fear and anxiety to shore up patriarchal, racialised, and elitist orders in the face of multiple intersecting crises, as various structural privileges come under increasing strain. Contestations over gender and other social identities are typically targeted, focusing on certain deeply symbolic sites: the body, the family, and the nation – both to divide and rule, and to reframe norms, ideas, policies, and notions of 'truth'.

Backlash operates through intertwined phenomena of:

1. **direct attacks (on people, movements, policies, and institutions);**
2. **indirect tactics (deliberate inaction, delays, and diversions); and**
3. **discursive strategies.**

Together, these reconfigure the institutional and imaginative terrain on which feminist, queer, and broader social justice struggles unfold. At the same time, in **Bangladesh**, **Brazil**, **India**, **Kenya**, **Lebanon**, **Türkiye**, and **Uganda**, movements have responded with equally multifaceted repertoires of survival, resistance, and prefigurative organising that counter these trends while modelling alternative futures grounded in solidarity, care, and collective power.

Looking across the programme, several overarching lessons stand out.

- First, diagnosis matters. Understanding backlash as crisis management, and as **both** episodic and continuous, clarifies why strategies that focus only on defending past gains for gender justice are insufficient, and why analytical work is also essential political work and the base on which to develop counter strategies.
- Second, integration and coordination across strategies strengthens movements, and diverse tactics reinforce one another. Our strategies must be integrated and context-specific, combining both digital and offline tactics, narrative interventions, legal advocacy, emergency responses, and long-term institution building in ways that respond to particular and situated constellations of threat and opportunity.
- Third, the lines between defensive and transformative work are porous. The very practices that enable movements to survive in contexts where democratic backsliding and/or autocratisation are leading to the shrinking of civic space means relying on developing online safety infrastructures to support community-level fraternity building and intersectional coalitions. These will also preserve and expand our capacity to imagine (and fight for) more just futures.

Our findings point to clear priorities for future research and action.

1. Research needs to deepen the Southern-led theorisation of backlash as a structural and transnational phenomenon, including its entanglements with authoritarianism, neoliberalism, religious fundamentalism, ethnonationalism, and digital capitalism, and to refine tools for tracking its manifestations in real time.
2. There is a need to further develop accessible ways of communicating insights and methods for organising, advocacy, and capacity building – to democratise both problem analysis and strategy building for countering backlash – that is, building and nurturing an ecosystem of resistance across countries and regions.
3. Practically, donors, policymakers, and movements' allies should invest in long-term, flexible, feminist funding for research and action; support cross-border movement infrastructures; and support narrative, legal, and organising strategies that centre those most targeted by backlash, rather than instrumentalising their struggles.

Countering backlash requires treating feminist, queer, and allied movements as co-strategists, whose situated knowledge, risks, and innovations must shape agendas. Our efforts to reclaim gender justice must move beyond damage control towards nurturing the feminist futures already being seeded in the present.

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