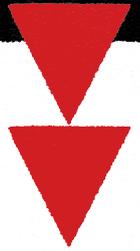


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CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION 1

COUNTRY SUMMARIES 4

Bangladesh Summary 5

India Summary 9

Kenya Summary 14

Lebanon Summary 18

Türkiye Summary 21

Uganda Summary 24

THEMES AND PRACTICE STORIES 27

Theme 1: Learning from the Past 28

Theme 2: Understanding the Context 32

Theme 3: Analysing Backlash Actors and Forces 38

Theme 4: Developing Creative Approaches 46

Theme 5: Working Across Online/Offline Spaces 50

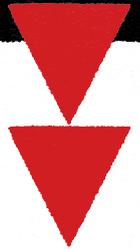
Theme 6: Working with Generational Differences 55

Theme 7: Strengthening Solidarity Practices 61

Theme 8: Responding to Mental Health Needs 65

CONCLUSION 69

ACRONYMS



ADSOCK	Advocates for Social Change Kenya
AiW	Arab Institute for Women Lebanese
AKP	Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi)
BIGD	BRAC Institute of Governance and Development
CBOs	Community-Based Organisations
CBR	Center for Basic Research
CGSRHR	Centre of Excellence for Gender, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
CHSJ	Centre for Health and Social Justice
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
EES	European Election Study
FEM	Forum to Engage Men
FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
HQ Fellows	Humqadam Fellows
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IRMS	Institute for Research on Male Supremacism
IWSAW	Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World
JPGSPH	BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health
KADEM	Women and Democracy Association
KNCHR	Kenya National Commission on Human Rights

LAU	Lebanese American University
LNOB	Leaving No One Behind
MASVAW	Men's Action for Stopping Violence Against Women
MOHRAU	Men of Hope Refugee Association Uganda
MPH	Master of Public Health
NEIM	Nucleus of Interdisciplinary Women's Studies of the Federal University of Bahia
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NRM	National Resistance Movement
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
RLP	Refugee Law Project at Makerere University
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights
TFGBV	Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence
UP	Uttar Pradesh
WOUGNET	Women of Uganda Network

INTRODUCTION

- ▶ **Half a century ago the United Nations' first international conference on women was held in Mexico City in 1975, in the wake of the burgeoning movements for women's and civil rights of the 1960s and 1970s. That was followed by several important milestones toward greater gender equality, including significant UN Women's conferences in Copenhagen 1980, Nairobi 1985 and Beijing 1995.**

The [Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action](#) (1995: 3–4) agreed that:

'Women's rights are human rights' which means that 'the full and equal participation of women and men as agents and beneficiaries of people-centred sustainable development', encouraging 'men to participate fully in all actions towards equality'.

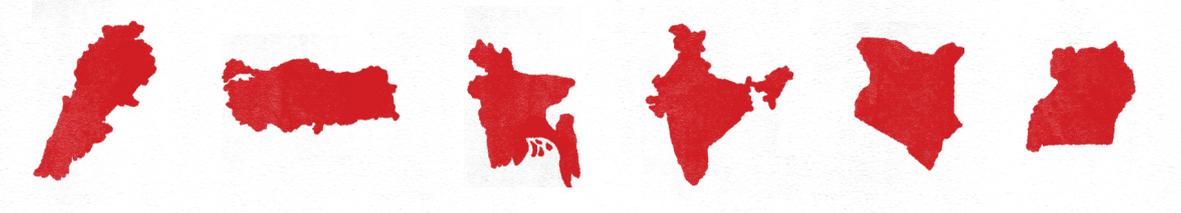


After two further decades of 'mainstreaming gender' in development, the 2015 Global Goals for Sustainable Development finally included gender equality as a stand-alone goal fundamental to sustainable, equitable and peaceful global development. Yet, the goals failed to address masculinities and barely mentioned 'men'.

In 2025, things have not quite turned out as this hopeful history would suggest and, whilst there have certainly been opposition and contestations all along the way, the past decade has witnessed a virtually global swell of what Susan Faludi (1989) termed 'patriarchal backlash' against feminist goals for women's rights and equality. This epochal shift seems to have taken many by surprise and there is something deeply troubling with how men and masculinities feature in this recent reactionary and divisive politics. Here we thus take aim at 'troubling masculinities in patriarchal backlash' by speaking to a readership of progressive civil society actors and activists as well as deeply engaged policy makers, researchers and students.

Around the time of the launch of the Global Goals for Sustainable Development in 2015, many of us were already getting increasingly concerned over the steady increase in backlash against women's rights, inclusion and gender justice in different countries. Thus, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) mobilised with a range of 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.

The six years of co-constructed research on deepening our understanding of backlash, on the erosion or dismantling of gender policies and on finding new opportunities for feminist resistance was organised through three inter-twining strands: 'Voice', 'Patriarchy' and 'Policy and Practice'. These have been led, respectively, by IDS Fellows Sohela Nazneen, Jerker Edström and Tessa Lewin with Rosemary McGee, and each strand has engaged research partners, activists, movements and policy makers across seven countries in East Africa, South Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. Convened by IDS, partners have collaborated in research, capacity building, convening debates and communicating knowledge and strategies for reclaiming gender justice nationally and internationally.



Our geographic spread of partners and locations has provided strategic opportunities to leverage capacity strengthening to diverse local civil society groups and networks, as well as gender justice researchers and activists, with additional benefits of hosting regional and international meetings and workshops for mutual learning and sharing lessons and findings. Along with IDS in the UK, the other 11 key partners are: Arab Institute for Women (AiW) at the Lebanese American University (LAU) in Lebanon; Özyeğin University in Türkiye; BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) and BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health (JPGSPH) in Bangladesh; SAHAYOG with the Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ) and Gender at Work Consulting, in India; Advocates for Social Change Kenya (ADSOCK) in Kenya; Center for Basic Research (CBR), Refugee Law Project at Makerere University (RLP) and Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) in Uganda, and; Nucleus of Interdisciplinary Women's Studies of the Federal University of Bahia (NEIM) in Brazil. Out of all of these, seven partners – ADSOCK, AiW, Özyeğin, JPGSPH, IDS, RLP, and SAHAYOG with CHSJ – are working together on the 'Patriarchy' strand. We have also engaged with global networks, peer organisations, civil society platforms and policy makers for broadening debates and capacity building, exploring backlash and the erosion of gender justice agendas within policy. Through these partnerships and a shared critical approach to masculinities, we have focused this collective effort on the three interrelated **aims** of the overall programme, namely:

- **Understanding patriarchal backlash against women's rights and gender justice**
- **Exposing the erosion and co-option of gender agendas and objectives in policy spaces**
- **Identifying new directions for women's and other social justice movements to reclaim and defend gender justice and equal rights**

Our research methods have been highly diverse, and have included analytic reviews, primary research, critical narrative or discourse analysis, comparative analysis and action research with partners. Capacity building was also part of our co-created research and convening approach. Capacity and methods development was achieved through developing tools and methods for analysing, tracking and tackling backlash together with research activists and practitioners, complemented with outreach to different audiences through meetings, seminars, webinars and e-discussions.

The purpose of this publication is to inspire and inform civil society actors and activists as well as researchers and students with stories from partners' practice along with some practical tools and resources to counter backlash more effectively, with an emphasis on working with men and masculinities to counter this backlash in a shared struggle for equality and social justice. We are thus 'troubling masculinities' in more ways than one. Related to our three aims, these include:

- **exploring the ways in which men troubled in/about their masculinity (and lives) are mobilised in backlash, and the trouble that deployments of ideals of masculinity cause in backlash,**
- **troubling our own framings, assumptions and understandings of men and masculinity in relation to progress and pushback, and**
- **troubling how we work with men and masculinities in countering anti-feminist backlash, for raising critical consciousness and stronger accountability.**

The rest of this publication is organised into a series of country and partner overview sections to provide a rich tapestry of grounded and variegated contextualisation across regions. This is then followed by eight thematic sections on:



We close with a brief conclusion, summarising some key highlights and messages from this work.

COUNTRY SUMMARIES



Country maps not to scale

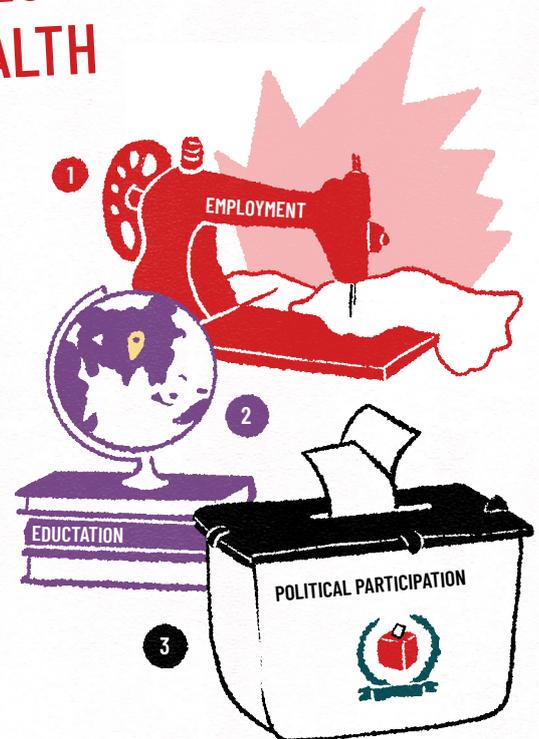


BANGLADESH SUMMARY

BRAC UNIVERSITY JAMES P. GRANT
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

National Context

In Bangladesh, interventions for women's empowerment have historically faced a reactive backlash against progress made by the feminist movement in narrowing gender gaps in employment, education and political participation. The notion of gender equality has been met with backlash from a range of actors, who feel threatened by interventions focusing on women's socio-economic empowerment and women's growing visibility in the public sphere. Studies have highlighted the factors shaping men's perceived disempowerment, not least the rapid pace of social and economic structural change in recent years, and its impacts on perceptions of people's roles and rights within the society.



Since the late 1990s, the growth in the ready-made garments industry and increase in employment opportunities in urban areas led to the rise of women's employment. At the same time, the inclusion of women's empowerment in development sector agendas increased the visibility of women in the public space and their opportunities for economic mobility and financial independence. Studies show that the consequent disruption in gender roles, in both urban and rural contexts, led to a growth of male resentment, and backlash is commonly understood as an outcome of this resentment. Aspects of women's empowerment are seen to be, and are portrayed as, eroding the image of the ideal Bangladeshi (South Asian) woman, an image which is often tied to nationalistic sentiments constructed on women's bodies.

Research on men's perceptions of women's participation in development initiatives in rural Bangladesh shows the different aspects of male resentment: men's fear of losing authority; worries about female domination of the family; and concerns that family cohesion is being disrupted. All of these perceptions have helped to provoke backlash against women's participation in socio-economic development initiatives, especially those that men perceive to be female-focused.

Understanding backlash in terms of male resentment at perceived loss of patriarchal power provides an important foundation for work to counter backlash. But less attention, both research and programmatic, has been given to men's differential experiences of gendered hierarchies, and the ways in which patriarchal norms continue to constrain most men while privileging elite men. Efforts to counter backlash also require an analysis of how certain kinds of masculinities and hierarchies of masculine identities are maintained and mobilised to enact backlash, and how men's



roles in countering backlash could be solidified. There has been limited qualitative analysis of the ways in which dominant narratives of masculinity are used to drive and sustain patriarchal power structures, by deepening the fear, resentment and anxieties that fuel anti-feminist backlash within Bangladeshi society.

In August 2024, Bangladesh experienced a political transformation with the [fall of Sheikh Hasina's 15-year authoritarian regime](#) that was propelled by a [mass uprising against state violence and crackdowns on student protests](#) demanding revisions of the quota system for government jobs. While the links between authoritarian state violence and masculinity are deeply embedded into the way gender roles become embodied and shape everyday life, deeper analysis is warranted to look at the ways in which control and power at all levels are often maintained through the use of gendered violence and the dominance of patriarchal norms. Thus, the uprising and subsequent overthrow of the regime have created a critical juncture for the gender justice agenda in the country, which [may face further backlash and erosion in gains in women's rights](#) or may enable new opportunities for aligning gender justice goals with broader movements for social reform.



BRAC SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH
JAMES P. GRANT



i

About JPGSPH

BRAC JPGSPH, established in 2004 at BRAC University in Dhaka, Bangladesh, addresses critical public health challenges in the developing world. It offers an international Master of Public Health (MPH) programme and conducts multidisciplinary research through [5 Centres and 4 Hubs](#). Focusing on urban and rural health, gender equity, and health systems, BRAC JPGSPH collaborates globally and nationally to drive transformative public health solutions. Under its Centre of Excellence for Gender, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (CGSRHR), research programmes focus on understanding the lived experiences and addressing issues of gender-based violence (GBV), child marriage, and digital tools for Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), translating evidence into advocacy and policy influence.

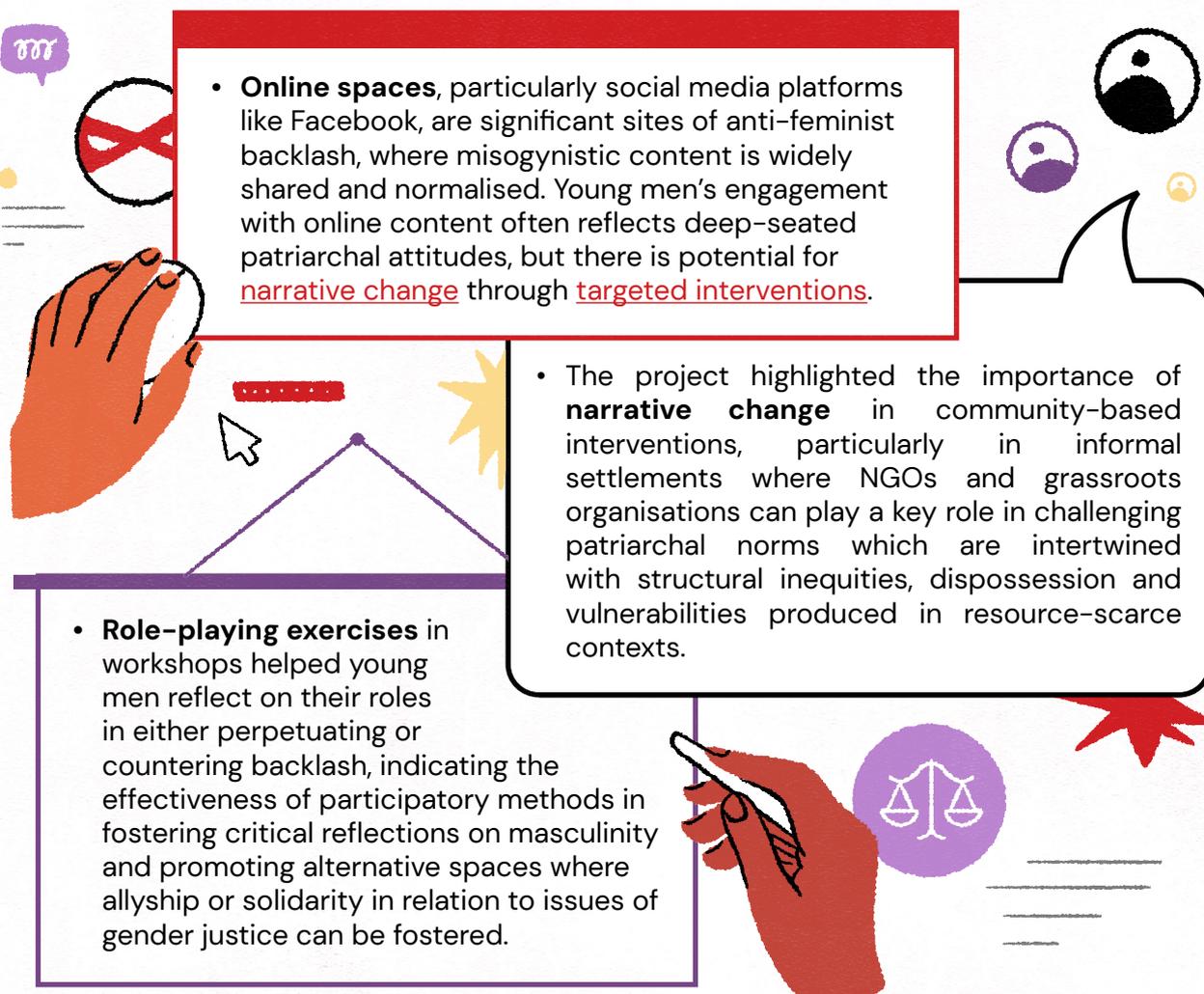
Overview of Countering Backlash Project: JPGSPH

The starting point for JPGSPH's work under the Countering Backlash programme was the [need to better understand the intersectional factors](#) that produce certain dominant masculine narratives and the ways in which these relate to the manifestation of anti-feminist backlash in Bangladesh. With a focus on young men in informal settlement and public university campus contexts, JPGSPH researchers sought to make visible the patriarchal dynamics of anti-feminist backlash in relationship to structural and social factors that inform, maintain and mobilise crises in masculinities, as both a felt experience and widespread narrative.

Through qualitative research and capacity building activities, the JPGSPH project engaged young men, activists, and stakeholders to critically reflect on gender norms and power relations. The **key objective** was to understand and address the anti-feminist backlash in Bangladesh by:

- 
- Exploring the ways in which intersectional social and structural factors shape constructions of masculinities and the ways in which these are related to the nature of anti-feminist backlash and backlash actors, including in digital spaces.
 - Contributing to the development of qualitative evidence on masculinities and the role of men in different forms of anti-feminist backlash in order to better understand the phenomenon of backlash.
 - Exploring the ways in which the notion of allyship and experiences of positive masculinities are understood among men and can be incorporated into approaches for gender justice by local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs).

Findings across the six-year period of the project underscore the need for sustained efforts to challenge patriarchal norms and promote gender equality in Bangladesh, reiterating that backlash is not just a reactive response to gender justice gains but also a deliberate strategy to sustain patriarchal power structures. It manifests in various forms, including online harassment, moral policing, and institutionalised resistance to women's rights. The project identified several openings and **strategies** for motivating and mobilising young men to counter backlash, as follows:



- **Online spaces**, particularly social media platforms like Facebook, are significant sites of anti-feminist backlash, where misogynistic content is widely shared and normalised. Young men's engagement with online content often reflects deep-seated patriarchal attitudes, but there is potential for **narrative change** through **targeted interventions**.
- The project highlighted the importance of **narrative change** in community-based interventions, particularly in informal settlements where NGOs and grassroots organisations can play a key role in challenging patriarchal norms which are intertwined with structural inequities, dispossession and vulnerabilities produced in resource-scarce contexts.
- **Role-playing exercises** in workshops helped young men reflect on their roles in either perpetuating or countering backlash, indicating the effectiveness of participatory methods in fostering critical reflections on masculinity and promoting alternative spaces where allyship or solidarity in relation to issues of gender justice can be fostered.

For more details of JPGSPH's work on countering backlash in Bangladesh, go to Practice Stories:

- [Using intersectional analyses of lived experiences of masculinity to understand backlash better in Bangladesh](#)
- [Understanding patriarchal dynamics and countering with healthy masculinities across 'online' and 'offline' spaces in Bangladesh](#)
- [Exploring opportunities for allyship among youth in informal settlements and young university male students in Bangladesh](#)
- Nonsequi consequi consecusam, sint in rem que laci cullo blautem reptat ex etur, sam ipic tet



Image Description: Raiyaan Mahbub, researcher at JPGSPH, co-hosting a discussion session with adolescent boys in Kallyanpur's informal settlement in Dhaka. *Photo Credit: Raiyan Islam Kaiko, Documentary Photographer, Bangladesh*



INDIA SUMMARY

SAHAYOG/CENTRE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

National Context

Men and masculinities are at the heart of the gender backlash that we see in India today. While one section of the country is basking in an enormous range of economic opportunities, another much larger section is not part of this growth story. Unemployment rates are high among young men and their income levels have not increased. The lack of income and livelihood has tremendous implications for the way men start perceiving the world and behaving. It has heightened a sense of fear and insecurity among young men, where they are unsure of who they are, and about their place in the world. This phenomenon is often referred to as 'ontological insecurity'.

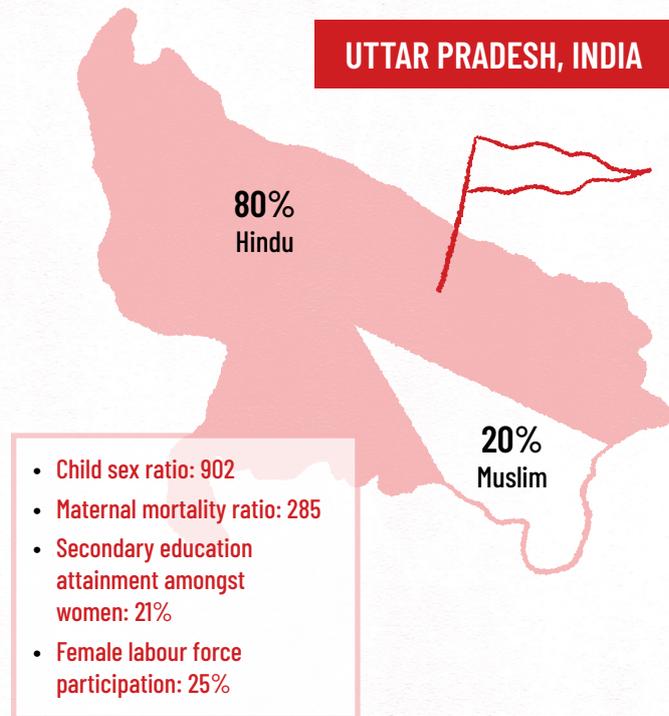


Contemporary right-wing politics exploits this sense of insecurity, reinforcing an imaginary glorious Hindu past along with real-life enemies to create a sense of security anchored in emotions, such as love for the nation and hate for the stranger. In India this has strengthened religious polarisation and controls over women. Muslims, who constitute around 14 per cent of India's population, and in some places Christians who constitute around 2 per cent, are being cast as outsiders and interlopers. Hindutva has emerged as a politico-religious ideology, which is significantly gendered. Hindutva celebrates a Hindu nationalism, in which national identity is fused with an overtly masculinised religious resurgence, with increased patriarchal controls over the lives of women and girls.



This patriarchal Hindu nationalism should also be understood as, in part, a reactive backlash to the progress that has undoubtedly been made in the adoption of many progressive laws and policies to address violence against women and promote women's empowerment and gender equality in India in the last 25 years. This progress itself is the result of a much longer history of diverse women's groups campaigning for women's empowerment and gender justice over the last 50 plus years. Campaigns for women's equal rights, often framed in secular terms, have often drawn on and collaborated with demands for equal rights for religious minorities and struggles for caste justice, not least because patriarchal violence has long played a key role in maintaining intersecting social hierarchies based on religion, caste and class. The rise of an aggressive and patriarchal Hindu nationalism can be seen as a reassertion of these social hierarchies in the face of challenges from women's groups and other progressive social movements.

Uttar Pradesh (UP) is the largest state of India. It is socially diverse with its population of Hindus and Muslims, comprising roughly 80 per cent and 20 per cent of the population respectively. Its [socio-economic and gender indicators](#) are below the national average. [Violence against women](#) is common and men's patriarchal control over women's autonomy is increasing. Since the 2000's a new form of religious polarisation is being promoted through what is called '[everyday communalism](#)'. This includes instigating frequent, small, low-intensity incidents out of petty everyday issues to sustain constant and low-key communal tension. Muslims face social ostracism. Vigilantism is common and state-led actions against Muslim communities are supported enthusiastically. Such everyday communalism has become a significant component of Hindutva's patriarchal nationalism.



About SAHAYOG/CHSJ



SAHAYOG



[SAHAYOG](#) and the Centre for Health and Social Justice ([CHSJ](#)), both active in UP, have been working on increasing men's involvement in, and accountability for, gender equality since the late 1990s. This work started with involving men and boys in anti-violence activism and in promoting gender equality. Lessons learned from this work were subsequently tried out in other states and in different development domains. These included lessons around the pedagogical approaches, as well as the process, trajectory, and domains of changes in women's autonomy, gender relations in the family and in the community. This work also led to the formation of several networks to promote gender equality work with men and boys, including Men's Action for Stopping Violence Against Women ([MASVAW](#)) in UP and the Forum to Engage Men (FEM) at the national level, which constituted itself as [MenEngage India](#) in 2023. In 2014, SAHAYOG/CHSJ coordinated the [2nd MenEngage Global Symposium](#), which proved to be a milestone in the expansion and consolidation of the MenEngage Global Alliance.

Overview of Countering Backlash Project: SAHAYOG/CHSJ

The current upswing of Hindutva politics in UP is creating a radical rearrangement in relationships between men on grounds of religious identity, along with a rise in aggressive masculinities. Social and gender activists involved with SAHAYOG/CHSJ have been concerned about these changes among men and boys but have felt unable to address them in their existing work on gender equality and social justice. A [Participatory Action Research \(PAR\)](#) project was designed, with the objective of identifying a methodology that could help to shift perspectives and build capacities of these activists to understand and address these changes in masculinities within an intersectional lens. This would enable them to act within their spheres of influence and form a network of social activists who could individually and jointly address anxious and aggressive masculinities in UP. The group adopted the name Humqadam (Co-Travellers, HQ) to identify themselves, and the social activists involved are referred to as Humqadam Fellows (HQ Fellows).



The theory of change was anchored in the principle of 'praxis', generating knowledge through action and reflection, as described in the above figure. The key 'action' in this **PAR process** was a series of 'reflection workshops' with the HQ Fellows. These workshops served as spaces for reflection and for planning actions that could be realistically implemented by members of the group. This created an iterative cycle of sharing, reflection, learning and action. Field visits were also arranged for the HQ Fellows to jointly analyse real-life experiences of solidarity and polarisation. This theory of change was derived from lessons from earlier interventions but with some differences. One crucial assumption was that if committed and trained social activists were engaged, then the reflective discussion would enable them to inspire each other to creative action. The intervention was open-ended and evolutionary in nature. It was located within development practice even though it did not aim to influence any commonly used development parameters.

BOX 1: Tools and Resources Used in PAR Process

- 

1. In-depth interviews – not only to generate data but to revisit personal histories and motivations and rediscover courage.
- 

2. Workshops – To share concerns, hesitations and fears and to support and energise each other.
- 

3. Joint Field visit – observe and analyse, strengthen analytic 'lens'.
- 

4. Field level activities with support and collaboration among Fellows – using several tools and resources.
- 

5. Collection and sharing experience of Coexistence and Fraternity – directory of practices.
- 

6. HQ Fellows reached out to other activists and media persons – case studies were documented.

The PAR process with HQ Fellows was conducted over two and a half years and progressed through three broad stages:

1

STAGE 1: From Despair to Hope

At the beginning, all the activists were concerned but also confused about how to address the increasing polarisation they were encountering. As one HQ Fellow said: 'Our ability to protest injustices has been compromised. We can clearly feel that some forces are pushing us back'. One of the Fellows from a Muslim background confessed that he was never so aware of his religious identity and that everything he said or did was now being interpreted through a religious lens. The Fellows now hesitated in undertaking campaigns on social issues and human rights violations, fearing social and governmental backlash. The PAR process enabled them to talk among themselves, share their fears and hesitations and build a sense of solidarity and hope that they were not alone. In so doing, HQ Fellows felt able to experiment with some changes in the way they responded to this situation they saw around them. They made plans to observe signs of solidarity and sites of resistance instead of getting overwhelmed by the signs of polarisation and intolerance.

2

STAGE 2: Experiments and initiatives

A range of tools (see box 1) were used to strengthen HQ Fellows' powers of observations and analysis. They were able to identify several existing practices of shared traditions within their local communities, which provided a foundation on which to challenge polarisation. One Fellow described his journey of discovery. He went to visit a Dargah (a religious shrine and place of worship for Muslims) for the first time. He saw that the devotees included both Muslims and Hindus. People from both religions were living together in the area without any rancour, despite attempts to create divisions. The HQ Fellows decided to strengthen these bonds of fraternity between the Hindu and Muslim communities through community-level initiatives.

3

STAGE 3: Convinced that change is possible

During the discussions it emerged that the principle of 'fraternity' was a foundational principle of the Indian Constitution. In India, the term fraternity was applied by Baba Saheb Ambedkar, the 'father' of the Constitution, to emphasise social solidarity. Ambedkar had insisted that fraternity was very important for developing equality, unity, and a shared sense of citizenship within such a socially diverse and stratified country. HQ Fellows decided to make fraternity and shared heritage (sajhi viraasat) the cornerstones of their efforts to pushback against the rising tide of religious intolerance, inter-communal hate and aggressive masculinities.

There were several **achievements** at the personal level, in the community and in terms of development practice, as follows:

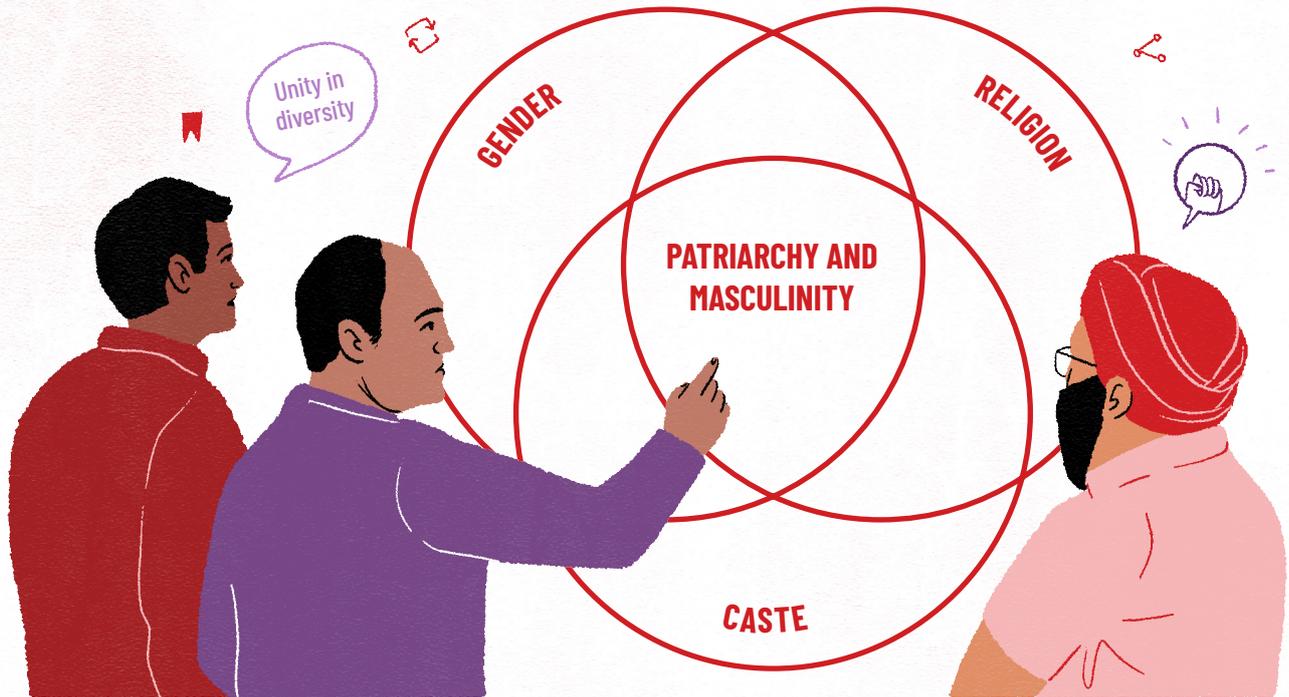
- HQ Fellows regained their self-confidence and purpose as social activists. Fellows shared this change with pithy aphorisms such as:

बदलाव संभव है
change is possible

नए मौके
तलाशने होंगे
*we need to find
new opportunities*

खतरे को भांपते
रहना होगा
*we need to be constantly
aware of potential pitfalls*

- There was increased clarity that patriarchy and masculinities are not just related to gender relationships, but are linked intersectionally to factors such as caste and religion that affect relationships between men.



- The HQ Fellows developed a greater understanding of religious and cultural diversities and syncretic practices. Existing syncretic religious and cultural practices and shared traditions in several areas of daily life like trade, craft, agriculture, and business can underpin efforts to strengthen social solidarity.
- The HQ Fellows were able to bring Hindus and Muslims, as well as families across different castes, closer together through several small interventions in the community. These community interactions created a sense of happiness and fulfilment among the participants. Such emotions can be a potential antidote to the emotion of hatred that strengthens aggressive religious polarisation.
- Empathy towards others, male, female, and other genders in the family and outside is essential to bring about equality and social justice and to Counter Backlash.
- The promotion of 'fraternity' can become an important means for building solidarity in socially divided communities, where the state is complicit in promoting such divisions. Under these conditions, it may not be feasible or advisable to focus rights-based approaches on issues of state accountability. Instead, 'fraternity' provides an alternative framework within which to foster respect for equal rights for all.

For more details of SAHAYOG/CHSJ's work on countering backlash in India, go to Practice Stories:

- [New Ways of Doing Gender Justice Work in India](#)
- [Strengthening Social Solidarity in a Politically Polarised Context in India](#)
- [Working on Fraternity with Young Men and Boys in India](#)



KENYA SUMMARY

ADVOCATES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE - KENYA

National Context

There is a significant patriarchal backlash underway against gender equality in Kenya. Driven by a range of forces, including cultural and religious fundamentalists and populist political actors, backlash in Kenya manifests both online and offline, targeting not only women and LGBTQIA+ communities but also gender justice activists regardless of their gender. In the last decade, restrictive policies on civil society organisations (CSOs) have been imposed and there is growing resistance to and utter disregard for gender-sensitive legislation.



In many ways, this is a [backlash to progress](#) on gender equality. Since the promulgation of the current [Constitution of Kenya](#) in 2010, there has been substantial if slow progress in advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. This includes the adoption of gender related policies and legal measures, among them progress on women's representation in leadership and decision-making platforms, right to matrimonial property, right to citizenship, and gender parity in education enrolment. Yet, patriarchy remains stubbornly entrenched in Kenyan society. The general election in August 2022 did see a positive shift in the political participation and representation of women, linked in part to Article 81(b) of the Constitution which stipulates that 'not more than two-thirds of the members of elective public bodies shall be of the same gender'. But [political leadership](#) continues to be, and is seen as, a [masculine domain](#). Without the two-thirds rule, few, if any, women would be elected to represent communities in Kenya in parliament or even at the county assemblies.

"The Political Parties Act Amendment (2011) was passed with a specific view to make the elections more equal for women candidates and other marginalised groups, with these amendments being intended to bring order and sanity within the nomination process. [...] Political parties are now competing to bring women into their lists."

- Ann Nderitu, Registrar of Political Parties

But [violence against women](#) in politics and public life remains both a tool and expression of the backlash, to silence women and reinforce their subordinate position in relation to men in society. An increase in reported murders of women by men ([femicide](#)) led to mass protests in 2024, but the killings continue, making 2024/2025 the [deadliest years for women](#). [According to Femicide Count Kenya, data](#) indicates that 504 women were killed between 2019 and 2024. Men's use of GBV is sustained by both institutional and cultural impunity. Police and judicial systems continue to fail the victims and survivors of patriarchal violence. At the same time, political and cultural life is increasingly dominated by the re-emergence of

nationalist and pan-Africanist ideologies, which emphasise so-called 'traditional' values and a strong, unified national identity. These ideologies are deeply gendered, celebrating the construction of a 'masculine' national identity, embedded in notions of strength, dominance, and the enforcement of patriarchal social norms. Men are often pressured to conform to these patriarchal notions of masculinity, which emphasise aggression, dominance, and control over women.

These [political and cultural developments are entangled with a deepening economic crisis](#). Conventional expectations of male adulthood, associated with wage-earning and/or land ownership, have been destroyed for many men by rising male unemployment and land dispossession, linked to corporate land-grabbing and state corruption. Economic hardship and widespread social discontent have created opportunities for political and social forces to stoke and channel men's anger and anxiety in the service of anti-gender campaigns. The enrolment of [conservative religious groups](#) has proven to be a highly influential factor in the advancement and entrenchment of anti-gender campaigns, often shaping national discourse and policy in Kenya. Social surveys indicate that anti-gender messaging is cutting through, revealing a cross-section of men expressing overt disapproval of ongoing initiatives for gender equality and women's empowerment, terming them as a threat to their masculinity.



State responses to social unrest have only intensified civil society concerns about threats to the rule of law and democracy itself. Proposed tax increases in the 2024 Finance Bill prompted mass protests, known as the [Gen Z protests](#) as they were organised and led by youth activists across the country, who grabbed public attention with social media stunts and reached millions of young Kenyans with viral content against the current regime. This culminated in a breach of parliament on 25 June 2024. Although the Finance Bill was withdrawn, a subsequent and unprecedented wave of abductions, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings across the country has targeted leading activists perceived to be critics of the current regime. The [Kenya National Commission on Human Rights \(KNCHR\)](#) has urged the government to act decisively to address cases of abduction, hold perpetrators accountable, and restore public trust in security and justice systems. To date, little action has been taken and, according to [police records and mainstream media reports](#), the number of cases has increased yet further. In this context of impunity for political violence, repression of democratic protest and re-energised patriarchal masculinities, the challenges facing all those who seek to counter backlash and uphold a vision of human rights and gender equality are significant.



About ADSOCK

ADSOCK was formed in 2001 as an initiative to engage men, boys, and institutions in the promotion of human rights, with the main focus on advancing gender equality in diverse communities across Kenya. ADSOCK uses grassroots activism, community education and capacity strengthening, policy advocacy, and research to challenge patriarchal social norms and empower diverse communities to challenge intractable social ills. With a vision of a just and equitable Kenyan society where people of all gender identities are valued equally, ADSOCK collaborates with government agencies, international partners, and community stakeholders and a pool of male and female activists, to drive sustainable social change.

ADSOCK recognises that there are multiple, contextually specific pathways to both personal and social change. As an ally and member of civil society coalitions working for gender justice, ADSOCK’s theory of change emphasises the mutually reinforcing goals of norms change and systems change. Work to change the cultural, social and religious norms and political and economic power relations that reinforce gender inequalities must also involve advocacy and campaigns to dismantle the policies and structures that reinforce patriarchal norms and stereotypes. Over more than two decades of work, ADSOCK has learned the importance of identifying and targeting the dominant actors who have a stake in maintaining the status quo and of contributing to the strategies of advocates, movements and ‘networks of interest’ working for change. Thus, we work through alliances at the intersections of our priority themes to influence policy and practice guided by the principle of **Leaving No One Behind (LNOB)**.

Overview of Countering Backlash Project: ADSOCK

The **objectives** of ADSOCK’s work on countering patriarchal backlash are focused on:

- **Transforming social norms:** Engaging men and boys to promote positive masculinities and challenging deeply entrenched gender stereotypes. The term ‘gender equality’ is often used but in Kenya, the term is still considered by many as a ‘Western’ concept and is framed by **anti-gender forces as a threat to ‘Africanism’**.



- **Linking online and offline advocacy:** Leveraging online platforms to challenge gender stereotypes, countering misinformation and disinformation, and building solidarity among gender justice advocates. This online work has been complemented by sensitisation forums with communities, creating safe spaces for conversations to counter patriarchal backlash, and collaborating with stakeholders to influence gender-responsive policies and ensure accountability at national and county levels.

- **Mobilising communities and civil society:** Transformative progress towards achieving the systemic changes for people and planet promised by Agenda 2030 will not be possible without a fully engaged civil society and people’s genuine participation through their organisations and communities. As part of broader civil society networks, ADSOCK works to mobilise community action for gender justice.



In pursuit of these objectives, ADSOCK has implemented the following **strategies** to counter backlash and mobilise men and boys in support of gender justice:

- **Community sensitisation forums:** [Conducted sensitisation forums to challenge harmful gender norms](#) and promote positive masculinities through participatory discussions to counter patriarchal backlash in diverse communities. Mobilised community action plans addressing GBV and gender inequalities, with active participation from local leaders and stakeholders. ADSOCK conducted community forums in 16 counties, training local leaders on countering gender backlash. Each of these forums targeted 30 participants, totalling approximately 480 participants, with roughly equal participation of women and men.
- **Online campaigns:** Used digital platforms (Facebook, Instagram and X) to combat gender mis/dis-information, amplify gender justice voices, and facilitate real-time discussions. Over 548 online engagements monthly, enhancing awareness and mobilisation against patriarchal narratives. Incorporated interactive social media posts, podcasts, and real-time engagement strategies such as WhatsApp discussion groups.



Image Description: ADSOCK Countering Backlash campaign messaging. Taken from photo by ADSOC, Kenya

- **Research and policy engagement:** Published the '[Patriarchal Backlash Towards Gender Equality in Kenya](#)' study, providing insights into manifestations of backlash and strategies for countering it. Engaged male policymakers and allies to foster gender-sensitive governance and institutional reforms.
- **Capacity Building:** Trained CSOs, grassroots organisations, and government officials on male allyship, gender-sensitive programming, and effective response mechanisms.

For more details of ADSOCK's work on countering backlash in Kenya, go to Practice Stories:

- [Working Across Online/Offline Spaces in Kenya](#)
- [Working with Generational Dynamics in Kenya](#)



LEBANON SUMMARY

ARAB INSTITUTE FOR WOMEN,
LEBANESE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

National Context

For the past four decades, Lebanon had been ruled by ‘sectarian neoliberalism’, a hybrid of sectarianism and an increasingly pronounced neoliberalism. This peculiar mix was maintained by an unaccountable political oligarchy with undisputed powers. Warlords-turned-governors morphed citizen-state relationships into patron-client dynamics with basic rights and services dispensed in exchange for political loyalty. Multiple wars have erupted in Lebanon since the establishment of the Lebanese republic in 1943, including internal clashes, a civil war that engulfed the country for over a decade entrenching sectarian divides, multiple Israeli wars, and an occupation of border towns in the south of the country that ended in 2000.

September 2024 marked the expansion of the Israeli war on Gaza into Lebanon, and an alarming escalation of the aggression into the Lebanese borders, characterised by wholesale destruction and decimation of entire towns and neighbourhoods. This brutal war – which killed thousands, injured hundreds of thousands, and displaced over a million – unfolded against the backdrop of an oligarchic rule that oversaw a financial and economic collapse and the severe devaluation of the local currency in 2019, and maintained an attitude of deliberate neglect vis-à-vis these crises, and the resulting disintegration of infrastructure. The systematic impoverishment of the vast majority of the population – highlighted by the banks’ confiscation of people’s decades of savings in 2019, was followed by a massive explosion in the capital’s port that decimated half of the city in 2020, resulting in a mass exodus of the Lebanese. [A World Bank report on poverty in Lebanon released in May 2024](#) shows that poverty has more than tripled over the past decade, reaching 44 per cent of the total population by 2022.

Understanding the nature and workings of the Lebanese state in relation to women and other vulnerable groups is crucial to better understand the context. Despite the apparent social and cultural openness of Lebanon compared to other Arab countries, women and vulnerable communities are massively affected by Lebanon’s patriarchal system. Lebanon has 18 officially recognised religious sects, and 15 personal status laws governing marriage, divorce, child custody, alimony, and inheritance, creating non-homogeneous legal conditions for its citizens. The laws not only provide greater privilege for men but also discriminate against women of different sects. The patriarchal organising of sectarian identity and difference around issues of sex and sexuality gives rise to [what has been termed a sextarian system](#). While women are full citizens by law, with political rights such as the right to vote, they are also ‘pseudo-citizens’, with an ambivalent relationship to the state. By relegating personal status matters to sectarian courts, which are notorious for invariably upholding patriarchal bias, the



1943

Establishment of the Lebanese Republic

1975-

1990

Lebanese Civil War and multiple Israeli invasions

2000

End of Israeli occupation in border towns

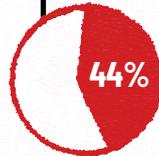
2019

Financial and Economic Collapse



2024

Israeli war on Gaza expands into Lebanon
As per a World Bank report, poverty tripled in Lebanon since 2012



44% living below the poverty line



Lebanese state abstains from assuming its full responsibility towards women. This sectarian system makes use of the **kin contract** and **political familism** to undermine women's formal citizenship rights, subordinating them to patriarchal kin relationships, which are constitutive of state power. At the same time, the Lebanese state uses its coercive powers to uphold the social and political centrality of the kin contract, in part by violating the rights of all those who are deemed to threaten the 'family', including queer communities, migrant workers, refugees, the incarcerated and sex workers.



About AiW

AiW, previously known as the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), was established in 1973, building upon the Lebanese American University's rich history as a school for women. At that time, it was the first such institute in the Arab world and it remains the only one of its kind in Lebanon. It is also among the first globally. The Institute advances women's rights and gender equality nationally, regionally and globally through research, education, development programmes, and outreach. AiW works at the intersection of academia and activism. In the Arab region and globally, AiW serves as:

- **A Bridge:** representing women and gender issues in the region and bringing these issues into international dialogues, ensuring that their perspectives are represented.
- **A Hub:** sharing knowledge on and by Arab women with the world and supporting the creation of new knowledge from/for the region. AiW also connects people and partners to Arab women and gender issues in the region by channelling funding and support to their work and by using their vast network.
- **A Voice:** amplifying Arab voices in global discourses on gender and promoting gender equality and human rights in the Arab region.

Overview of Countering Backlash Project: AiW

As part of the Countering Backlash programme, AiW chose to focus on three heavily-debated policy areas related to women's rights in Lebanon: political participation, civil marriage and the broader context of personal status laws, and violence against women, including both sexual harassment and domestic violence. In focusing on these three dimensions of women's rights to understand what backlash means in Lebanon, AiW addressed all three intertwining strands of the programme's work: 'voice', 'patriarchy', and 'policy and practice'.

Amid economic crisis, political dysfunction and a long history of conflict exacerbated by Israel's ongoing military attacks, AiW has developed and disseminated an analysis of patriarchy and backlash in Lebanon that challenges the prevailing orthodoxy of understanding backlash as a reaction to progress on women's rights. Through publications and convenings, AiW changed the way that backlash is understood in the country by emphasising its ongoing structuring within the patriarchal organising of sectarian identity and difference around issues of sex and sexuality.

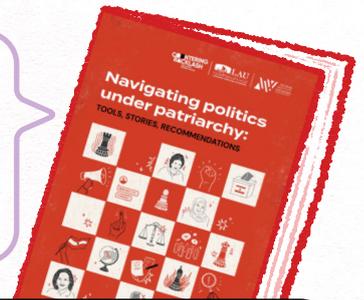
To change the ways in which backlash is understood and addressed in Lebanon, AiW has:

- Published a working paper on [Understanding Backlash in Lebanon](#), which defines and discusses the complex dimensions of backlash in the country.



- Hosted, in partnership with IDS, the international conference: [Anti-Feminist Backlash in the Global South: Cross-Regional Discussions, Strategies, and Innovative Practices](#), which convened global scholars with activists from Lebanon and the region to build knowledge on anti-feminist backlash, compare strategies, and develop cross-sectoral and transnational alliances among actors in the global South.

- Drafted [a toolkit on women's political participation](#) as a resource for women in politics as well as scholars working on this issue. The toolkit includes stories from male allies across the Lebanese political landscape, whose testimonies of anti-patriarchal masculinities can contribute to efforts to counter backlash.



- Developed and screened the documentary 'We Become Women', which traces the history and diversity of the women's movement in Lebanon between 1975–2020 in order to create a political and cultural archive of feminist stories and achievements.



Photo credit:

Screenshots from AiW's documentary 'We Become Women'.

For more details of AiW's work on backlash in Lebanon, go to the Practice Story:

- [Understanding Backlash in the Context of Patriarchal Political Familism in Lebanon](#)

TÜRKİYE SUMMARY

ÖZYEĞİN UNIVERSITY

National Context

The rise in conservative, religious, and nationalist ideologies in Türkiye under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) has contributed to a resurgence of traditional patriarchal values and led to a backlash against gender equality efforts and women’s rights movements. This gradual consolidation of an Islamist neopatriarchy since 2011 marks a change from the early years of AKP rule. Coming into power in 2002, the AKP initially pursued reforms that aligned with democratic principles as part of the EU accession process and focused on economic growth. Following worldwide political upheavals in 2011, most notably the so-called Arab Spring which saw the collapse of several autocratic regimes, the tenor of AKP rule changed. This was consolidated with the adoption of a presidential system in 2018, accelerating a noticeable shift towards a more authoritarian style of governance, but still accompanied by neoliberal economic policies, which were present from the beginning of AKP rule. In 2018, Freedom House ranked Türkiye’s political regime as ‘not free’.

Especially since the withdrawal of Türkiye from the Istanbul Convention in 2021, the promotion of ‘traditional Turkish family values’ has intensified, with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declaring 2025 as ‘The Year of Family’. This declaration is further complicated by the ongoing political polarisation in Türkiye, with different groups holding very different views on gender roles, women’s rights, and the role of religion in society. While some far-right groups and religious conservatives strongly oppose LGBTQIA+ rights and see gender equality as a ‘Western’ ideology that undermines Turkish values, in certain versions of secular nationalist perspectives, there is room for female empowerment and diverse gender roles. This has made it difficult to have open and constructive dialogue on these issues, as they often become politicised and used as tools in broader ideological battles.

2002



2011



2018



"3 children per woman"

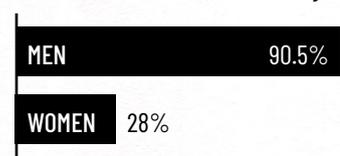


This political polarisation must be understood in the context of growing economic and gender inequalities. In 2023, the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report ranked Türkiye 129th out of 146 countries. The AKP’s embrace of neoliberal economic policies has coincided with the promotion of conservative, religious, and nationalist ideologies, which reinforce patriarchal/traditional gender roles and limit women’s autonomy, further contributing to economic and social disparities. This alignment has resulted in policies that often prioritise the ‘patriarchal/traditional family’ as a normative part of Turkish culture over women’s individual rights and economic empowerment. This is reflected in the results of

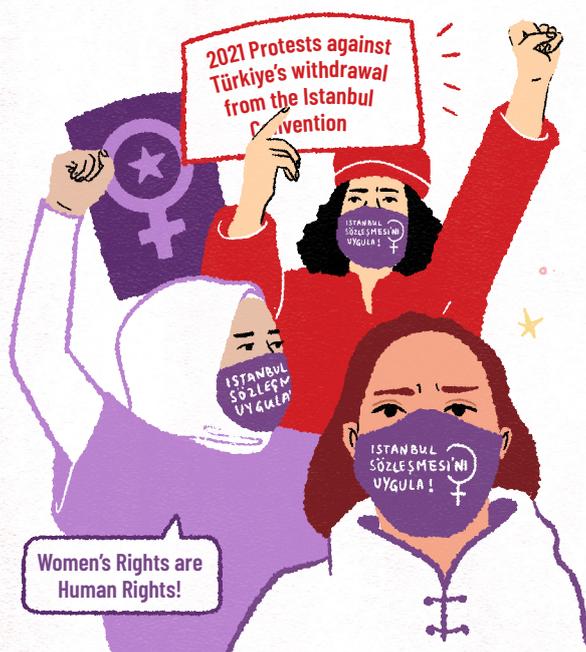
the latest [Household Labor Force Survey](#), showing a markedly lower employment rate for women compared to men aged 15+ (30.4 per cent for women vs 65 per cent for men in 2022). The employment rate for women aged 25–49 with children under 3 in their households was 28 per cent, compared to 90.5 per cent for men, implying insufficient welfare support by the state for women so they can return to paid work. At the same time, women are almost three times more likely than men to be in part-time work.

EMPLOYMENT RATE (2022)

For those with the child below the age of 3



In the [AKP's neoliberal conservative approach](#), women are expected to join the labour market in ways that do not challenge their obligations in the household and family. The patriarchal structure that places men as the sole or primary financial support of the neoliberal family has subordinated women, but also increased pressure on men as well. With increased job insecurity, precarious work, and widening gender-based disparities in employment opportunities and wages, economic instability has intensified.



Social discontent with growing inequalities has, in part, been managed through state-led efforts to discipline civil society, and in particular feminist groups and activists. Over the past decade, the lion's share of government funding for organisations working on 'women's issues'; has gone to [KADEM \(Women and Democracy Association\)](#), established in 2013 under the leadership of Sümeyye Erdoğan (President Erdoğan's daughter). As the AKP has consolidated its autocratic regime, KADEM has come to hold a more central position in the field of gender equality and women's rights, gradually shrinking the space for feminist organisations. Yet scholarly interest in KADEM has been very limited. In order to understand the gendered dynamics and complexities of a state-sponsored rise in conservative, religious, and nationalist ideologies, it is important to analyse the role played by KADEM in promoting and legitimising such ideologies.

About Özyeğin University

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[Özyeğin University](#), a private, learner-centred entrepreneurial research university founded in 2007, is committed to fostering research and open dialogue on gender and sexuality. A key component of this commitment is its active engagement with critical masculinity studies. The university's contributions to this field aim to move beyond traditional, often restrictive definitions of masculinity, fostering instead a broader understanding that embraces diversity and inclusivity. By supporting research and discussion on these crucial topics, Özyeğin University plays a vital role in challenging conventional norms and promoting more nuanced perspectives on gender and identity. It hosts research projects, international and national symposiums, and workshops on male engagement with gender equality, non-violence, and positive masculinities. The university has also supported the publication of resources for workshops and sourcebooks, to widen the impact of research and social change. This includes a [manual](#) to facilitate workshops that aim to cultivate positive, non-violent masculinities as an outcome of a project hosted by Özyeğin University.

Overview of Countering Backlash Project: Özyeğin University

With the support of the Countering Backlash programme, researchers from Özyeğin University and [Kadir Has University](#) designed a research study to critically examine the rise of a distinct form of neoliberal masculinity promoted by the state-supported NGO, KADEM, within the evolving socio-political landscape of Türkiye. The **objective** of the study, conducted between April 2022 and November 2023 was to analyse the links between neoliberal and Islamist ideologies as manifest in KADEM's framing of Turkish masculinity. The research sought to understand the ways in which this model of masculinity serves to reinforce traditional gender roles while simultaneously adapting to and utilising the language of neoliberal economic principles, thereby creating a seemingly modern yet fundamentally neopatriarchal framework for gender relations.

The research study used a **discourse analysis methodology** to examine the fusion of traditional and neoliberal narratives and tropes in KADEM's promotion of a distinct Turkish masculinity through its articles and public statements. [Discourse analysis focuses on how language is used to frame issues and influence](#) the sociopolitical context. The study also looked at how KADEM's discourse on masculinity is discussed and represented by different media outlets with conflicting political agendas around gender, and conducted interviews with key informants from feminist CSOs to learn more about KADEM's influence.



Image Description: A poster from a feminist convening in April 2025: "To Reinstate the Istanbul Convention #FreeImamoglu". Photo Credit: Nurseli Yeşim Sünbuloğlu

Findings from the study revealed KADEM's linking of discourses on the traditional family and economically successful masculinity to promote a model of gender complementarity rather than gender equality. In framing this complementarity as 'gender justice', KADEM offers a seemingly palatable alternative to more progressive visions of gender equality, deflects criticism of patriarchal structures, and undermines efforts to challenge gendered power dynamics. In doing so, KADEM subtly reasserts neopatriarchal hierarchies, emphasising women's roles in the family and men's roles in the neoliberal economy, making frequent use of Islamic texts and teachings to legitimise this gender order and impose its framing on civil society more generally. The research study highlights the complexity of backlash forces in Türkiye, and the significance of civil society as a terrain on which a new 'common sense' about conservative gender relations can be constructed and legitimised by an organisation officially mandated to support women's empowerment. In this way, KADEM is a key actor in the deepening patriarchal backlash in Türkiye.

For more details of Özyeğin University's research on backlash in Türkiye, go to the Practice Story:

- [Researching civil society's role in backlash in Türkiye](#)

UGANDA SUMMARY

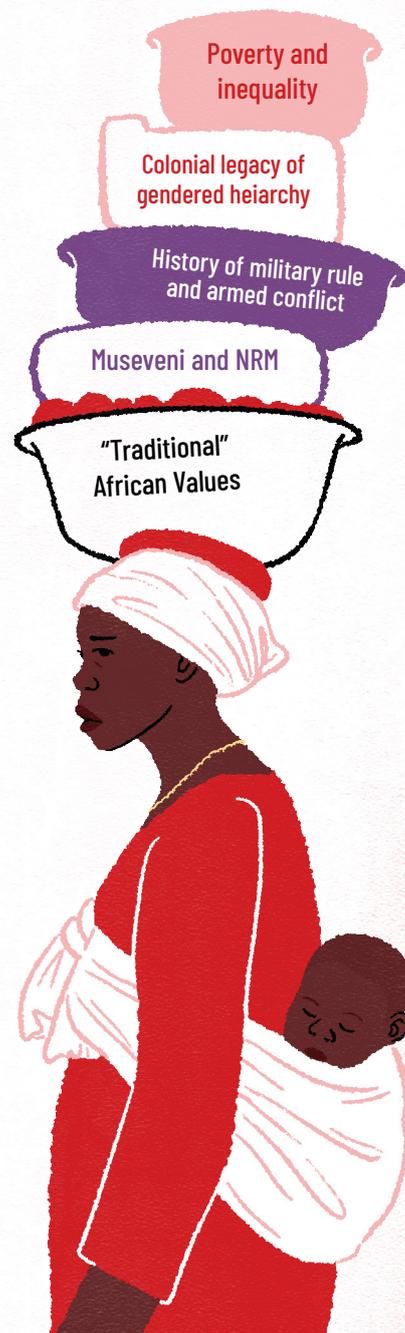
THE REFUGEE LAW PROJECT

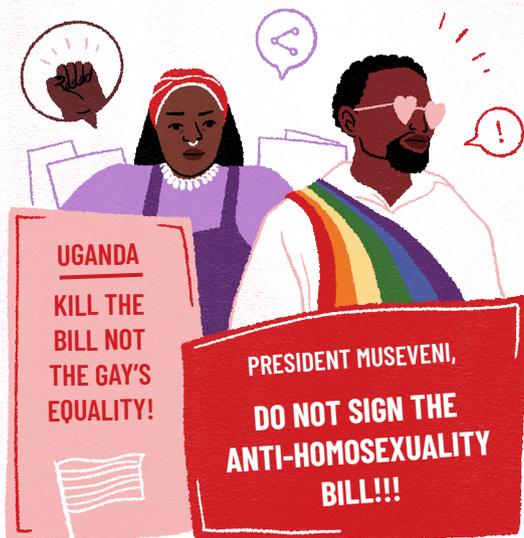
National Context

The persistence of patriarchal structures in Uganda is deeply rooted in the nation's historical trajectory. The [colonial imposition of hierarchical systems](#), both gendered and racialised, entrenched traditional male authority at the household and community levels while excluding colonised people of all genders from political power in the higher echelons of the colonial state. Since gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1962, successive regimes have consolidated a patriarchal political culture and socio-cultural environment through appeals to a ['traditional' masculinity](#). Exacerbated by a history of military rule and internal armed conflict between rival political factions, the accession to power of the National Resistance Movement (NRM) in 1986 established a political settlement under the leadership of President Museveni, which endures to this day; Museveni was re-elected president for a sixth term in 2021.

Gender policy and discourse continue to shape this political settlement. In part as a response to pressure from women's rights groups in Uganda and in part to appease international donors, the country has ratified important international gender equality instruments and commitments and put in place legal frameworks to advance gender equality and women's empowerment. But over time, and [against a backdrop of entrenched poverty](#), rising inequality, and ongoing conflict-related displacement, the ruling NRM has adopted an increasingly strident anti-gender discourse in order to manage social discontent and maintain its hold on power. Such a discourse has found a ready audience amongst many men, who perceive progress on women's rights as a threat to what they see as their traditional roles and authority, already made precarious by worsening economic conditions. This state-sponsored patriarchal backlash continues to be legitimised by an anti-colonial rhetoric, framing 'gender ideology' as an imposition by former colonial powers, and by [appeals to 'traditional' African values](#) framed in terms of Christian theology, even though this theology was itself a colonial imposition.

With significant financial support from US faith-based conservative campaigning groups, legislative and discursive attacks on LGBTQIA+ communities and their rights have been a key strategy for state-sponsored backlash. An Anti-Homosexuality Bill was first proposed in 2009, and in March 2023 the draconian [Anti-Homosexuality Act](#) was passed, criminalising consensual same-sex conduct with penalties of up to life imprisonment, attempted homosexual acts with penalties of 10 years in prison, and the death penalty for those convicted of so-called 'aggravated homosexuality'. The Anti-Homosexuality Act signals the Ugandan state's interest in positioning itself as a leader in the [anti-rights movement](#) on the African continent and beyond.





Patriarchal backlash in Uganda is thus a multifaceted phenomenon, deeply intertwined with the nation's historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts. The challenges to the patriarchal and heteronormative status quo being posed by feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements, coupled with socio-economic anxieties, have triggered a reactionary response, reinforcing 'traditional' masculine identities in order to perpetuate gender inequalities. While such notions of masculinity remain influential, alternative forms are emerging, signaling a potential shift in gender dynamics. However, the state's continued endorsement of patriarchal values and policies poses a significant obstacle to the advancement of gender equality and the dismantling of entrenched power structures.



About RLP

RLP plays a leading role in providing legal assistance and advocacy services to refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda. Established in 1997, RLP is a project of the School of Law at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda. The organisation's primary goal is to promote and protect the rights of refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda, and its work is guided by the principles of refugee protection, human rights, and social justice. The organisation provides a range of services, including legal counselling, representation, and advocacy, as well as psychosocial support and community outreach. RLP's team of lawyers, counsellors, and community workers provide services to refugees and asylum seekers from many countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan. RLP has also established a refugee-led advocacy group, which provides a platform for refugees to advocate for their rights and interests. RLP has also partnered with other organisations to provide vocational training and economic empowerment programmes for refugees. Despite the challenges and complexities of working with refugees and asylum seekers, RLP has achieved significant success in promoting and protecting the rights of this vulnerable population. The organisation's work has been recognised internationally, and it has received awards for its innovative approaches to refugee protection and advocacy.



Overview of Countering Backlash Project: RLP

Addressing the rights and needs of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), torture, and other forms of trauma has become a significant focus of RLP's work. Sexual violence is a recognised feature of many recent and ongoing conflicts in Africa, and refugees fleeing conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan who seek RLP's support include many survivors. The organisation has established a specialised unit that provides comprehensive services to SGBV survivors, including medical care, counselling, and legal assistance, as well as advocating for their rights and dignity.

Through systematic screening of its refugee clients, RLP has found that the percentage of men reporting experiences of sexual violence in their lifetime ranges from 25–39 per cent, depending on the location of the screening (on arrival, at clinics in refugee settlements or at the organisation's offices). Although these figures remain lower than for female refugees, the extent of refugee men's suffering from male-perpetrated SGBV led RLP to initiate specific services for male SGBV survivors,

who remain heavily stigmatised in a society that associates vulnerability to violence with femininity and whose needs are largely neglected by humanitarian policy and programming. When several male survivors came together to form the [Men of Hope Refugee Association Uganda \(MOHRAU\)](#), RLP supported this [collective healing and advocacy initiative](#) by providing meeting space, technical support, South–South exchanges, as well as training and support with media work for advocacy. Through its support for MOHRAU and work with male SGBV survivors, RLP has come to recognise the specific uses of male–on–male sexual violence in ethnic conflicts as a tool of patriarchal domination. The military efficacy of male–on–male SGBV depends on its brutal enforcement of the heteropatriarchal logic of violence and domination. Sexual violence is used to subjugate men, both by feminising them as rape–able and by sexualising them as ‘other’ (that is, as non–heterosexual in a context of rising homophobia).

With support from the Countering Backlash programme, RLP designed and carried out a research study with refugee male SGBV survivors. The **objective** of the research was to examine male SGBV survivors’ experiences in the context of growing patriarchal backlash in order to [better understand how therapeutic activism by male SGBV survivors](#) might contribute to challenging the misogyny and homophobia that fuel backlash.

The study employed a culturally sensitive and contextually grounded methodology to explore the lived experiences of South Sudanese survivors of male–on–male rape in a refugee settlement context in Adjumani, in Northern Uganda. Through snowball sampling, 21 South Sudanese male survivors of rape, ranging in age from 23 to 47 years, were recruited from refugee settlements in Adjumani district. Through in–depth narrative interviews and phenomenological analysis, the study aimed to understand the complex interplay between conflict–related trauma and socio–cultural factors in order to better identify the support and care services needed to address male survivors’ psycho–social needs.

Key findings from the research study include:

1

Experiences of trauma: Male survivors experience high levels of post–traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety. The majority of study participants also reported that they had not accessed any form of support or care for their experiences, citing lack of awareness, fear of stigma, and limited availability of services.

2

Links with backlash: The intensifying misogyny and homophobia that mark patriarchal backlash in Uganda have also exacerbated the trauma that male SGBV survivors experience as well as their subsequent isolation and lack of support.

3

Therapeutic activism to counter backlash: At the same time, the study reiterated the transformative power of support and care for survivors of sexual violence, of all genders. Through its support to the collective healing and advocacy work of MOHRAU and other peer support groups for male survivors, RLP has not only aimed to assist group and individual healing but also to promote a broader cultural shift, through male survivors speaking out against the destructive mandates of patriarchal masculinities for people of all genders. The study reaffirmed the importance of this therapeutic activism by male survivors in countering the masculinised domination that animates patriarchal backlash in Uganda.

For more details of RLP’s study with male SGBV survivors, go to the Practice Story:

- [Supporting male SGBV survivors in the context of rising backlash in Uganda](#)

THEMES AND PRACTICE STORIES



1
LEARNING FROM
THE PAST



2
UNDERSTANDING
THE CONTEXT



3
ANALYSING
BACKLASH ACTORS
AND FORCES



4
DEVELOPING
CREATIVE
APPROACHES



5
WORKING
ACROSS ONLINE/
OFFLINE SPACES



6
WORKING WITH
GENERATIONAL
DIFFERENCES



7
STRENGTHENING
SOLIDARITY
PRACTICES



8
RESPONDING TO
MENTAL HEALTH
NEEDS

THEME 1

LEARNING FROM THE PAST

The [2024 Sustainable Development Goals Report](#) makes clear that the goals and targets of [Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development](#), adopted by UN Member States in 2015, will not be achieved. With five years to go, half of the 17 targets are only showing minimal or moderate progress, while in over a third advances have stalled or are going in reverse. Income and wealth inequalities have increased – not decreased – nearly everywhere since the 1980s, according to the [2022 World Inequality Report](#). World Bank and [OECD data](#) show that countries in the Global South are likely to pay out USD 50 billion more in debt repayment in 2024 than they receive in grants and loans. At the eighth [Global Development Forum](#) in Washington DC on 18 April 2024, it was emphasised that ‘the Global South is experiencing a debt crisis unseen in this century’.



■ On track for the most part ■ Progress is moderate/minimal ■ Stalled or going in reverse

Widening inequalities and growing precarity in many societies have fuelled waves of protests over the last 20 years, on issues of economic hardship and inequality, and against austerity policies, corruption and abuses of power. The upsurge in what has been termed ‘[unruly politics](#)’ signals a crisis of political legitimacy, produced by the failures of the neoliberal development paradigm and its [hollowing out of democratic processes](#). This includes a depoliticisation of civil society’s countervailing power through [NGOisation](#), such that widespread resentment at [neocolonial models of development](#) has often lacked channels for expression other than street protests. It is in response to these conditions that the rise of authoritarianism in many countries should be understood, a rise which has been energised by, and in turn energises, resurgent patriarchies and attempts to rollback progress on gender justice. As scholars [Jenny Gunnarsson Payne and Sofie Tornhill \(2023: 78\) emphasise, the democratic deficits and structural inequalities](#) caused by decades of neoliberal development policy have opened up space for anti-gender forces to provide ‘[a particular political response to the de-democratising effects of corporate power and neoliberal global governance, namely the restoration of stable – and ‘natural’ – categories of masculinity and femininity, which are seen as the bedrock of society and of human civilisation.](#)’



Efforts to counter the growing patriarchal backlash in many societies must reckon with the failures of the development paradigm, [not least its undermining of feminist visions of radical social transformation](#). As a [recent paper from UN Women has emphasised](#), anti-patriarchal work with men and boys has similarly been constrained by depoliticised and reductive understandings of the category ‘men’, social psychological accounts of gender norms, and organisational forms that, together, have limited its ability to contribute to intersectional feminist mobilisations. From the start of the Countering Backlash programme,

Patriarchy Strand partners have recognised that new ways of working are needed to meet the challenges posed by multi-faceted backlash forces and dynamics. The themes outlined below reflect this commitment to exploring new understandings and new ways of working, whether through [intersectional analyses](#) of backlash contexts, [creative approaches](#) to mobilising men's support for gender equality, working across the [online/offline continuum](#), addressing [generational differences](#), strengthening [social solidarities](#) and responding to [mental health issues](#). The Practice Story from India below discusses the methodology used to engage a group of male gender justice activists in reflecting on lessons learned from their past work in order to develop a more effective approach to countering patriarchal masculinities in a highly politicised context of religious polarisation.



PRACTICE STORY

New Ways of Doing Gender Justice Work in India

Religious identity has been central to the construction of masculinity and gender relations in India since its independence in 1947. Religious difference was key to the partition into independent India and independent Pakistan. Since then, despite having a robust secular legal and policy framework, religion continues to influence the polity of India in significant ways. In the last 25 years there has been an upsurge of [Hindu religious majoritarianism](#). UP, being a very large state with a significant Muslim population and with many Hindu religious shrines, has been at the centre of such mobilisation against religious minorities.

With the support of [SAHAYOG and CHSJ](#), [MASVAW](#) has been active in UP for many years, working with men on violence prevention and gender equality. This work has grown increasingly difficult in recent years, with the rise of a patriarchal Hindu nationalism and associated persecution of religious minorities. MASVAW gender activists were initially hesitant, when they were [first approached to participate in PAR](#) to explore ways of addressing social polarisation and aggressive masculinities. They were unsure whether other network members would agree with this new agenda as it could be considered too 'political' or even against the current government. It also did not directly relate with 'men's involvement in women's empowerment', the issue that had support from funders and on which many were working. Some activists shared that they feared that such work could potentially escalate existing tensions between the Hindus and Muslims and affect their organisations' credibility and work. At another level, there was fear that these organisations were also at risk of losing their accreditation with the national government to receive development related funds from foreign agencies.



In the face of this hesitation, it was decided that the researchers, who were also founder members of MASVAW, would approach some of their first comrades in this work. As a result of these conversations, seven activists agreed to participate in the **first round of in-depth interviews**. Five of them were Hindu and two Muslim. This group adopted the name Humqadam (Co-Travellers, HQ) to identify themselves and the social activists involved came to be referred to as Humqadam Fellows (HQ Fellows). During these interviews, conducted via video conference, the activists shared their hesitations and fears, giving many examples from their work area as well as their personal experiences. They also shared their own personal histories of how they had entered the world of social activism, and their transformational experiences. They shared the difficulties they had to face from their families, their

communities and even their economic hardships, but expressed no regrets because the work had given them satisfaction and recognition.

The second step of the PAR process was an **Action Research Workshop**, held two months after the initial interviews, which convened some of the HQ Fellows along with the researchers and some resource persons. A key theme was the HQ Fellows' relationship to risk in their activism. As younger men, being single or less tied to their families, HQ Fellows had felt more able to take risks in their work. Now they had families and headed organisations which depended on projects and grants to remain operational. Reflecting on this experience, HQ Fellows felt that they had gained more resources to tackle these risks than they had in the past, yet they had become risk averse with the feeling that they had more to lose.

Three months later, the larger group of seven HQ Fellows met once again with the three facilitator-researchers for the **first Reflection Meeting**. The group discussed the long history of shared and syncretic traditions in UP that is often referred to as the 'Ganga-Jamuni' culture. The river Yamuna joins the river Ganga in UP and this term refers to how the culture of UP has traditionally included both Hindu and Muslim elements, as these two communities have been living together in the same villages for centuries. The term also implies coexistence within a larger whole. One of the HQ Fellows shared that his work on children's education had involved both the madrasas and primary schools. He had attended a madrasa as a child, and he felt that children from madrasas were often ill-equipped when such children joined 'regular' schools after their primary classes to finish their schooling. This work had been well received among both Muslim and Hindu teachers and parents. Later their organisation had been successful in organising several joint meetings to promote communal harmony. This led to discussions on how there were many traditions where both Hindu and Muslim communities participated together in the past, but these were being lost. At the end of this reflection meeting all the HQ Fellows agreed that they would look for syncretic traditions in their work areas. They also decided that they would try to hold some joint community events or celebrations if the opportunity arose.

The group came together once again two months later for the **second Reflection Meeting**. HQ Fellows reported back on the work they had done in the intervening period, identifying aspects of 'Ganga-Jamuni' culture with which they could work, and in some cases organising joint celebrations for Muslim and Hindu community members. These stories energised the group, inspiring hope that this work on building bridges between communities in an overall environment of religious polarisation



Image Description: Poster from the work of one of the HQ Fellows integrating gender equality with work on social solidarity titled: "Shared Heritage for Peace Friendship and Democracy". Pictures clockwise from top left: Participants from a workshop on Constitutional values; Muslim and Hindu women celebrate Holi (Festival of colours) with flowers; Workshop on shared heritage with Muslim women; Community campaign on Constitutional values; Let's play – a programme for adolescent girls.

was possible. One of the HQ Fellows invited the whole group to his work area where there was a famous shrine to a Sufi saint where people from all faiths and from all over the country visited, a field visit to the shrine took place three months later. After this the work gained momentum, though the HQ Fellows continued to face several challenges, not least state complicity in promoting polarisation.

The PAR process generated several important **insights** for countering backlash work in a context of politically motivated religious polarisation:

- **Emotional conviction:** The repeated sharing of experiences among a group of peer activists who had lost their hope was important to rebuild their confidence and belief in their activism for gender justice.

Lived Experience

JUSTICE FOR ALL

- **Creative adaptation:** The quick turnaround time of two or three months between meetings allowed the HQ Fellows to share, learn and make plans and keep the cycle of learning and action fresh, relevant and adaptable to the annual cycle of social and cultural events that is part of rural life.

- **Social solidarity:** Focusing on syncretic traditions to foster social solidarity between Muslim and Hindu community members has enabled the HQ Fellows to challenge the aggressive masculinities and patriarchal violence that is so central to Hindu nationalism. Linking gender justice to social solidarity has helped to foster respect for equal rights for all in a political environment that is increasingly hostile to traditional rights-based development practice.

Image Description:

A Journey of Possibilities: Stories of our Shared heritage, Fellowship and Fraternity. Collection of Stories of Shared Heritage, published by SAHAYOG

उम्मीदों का सफर

साझी विरासत,
सौहार्द
व बन्धुत्व
की कहानियाँ

THEME 2

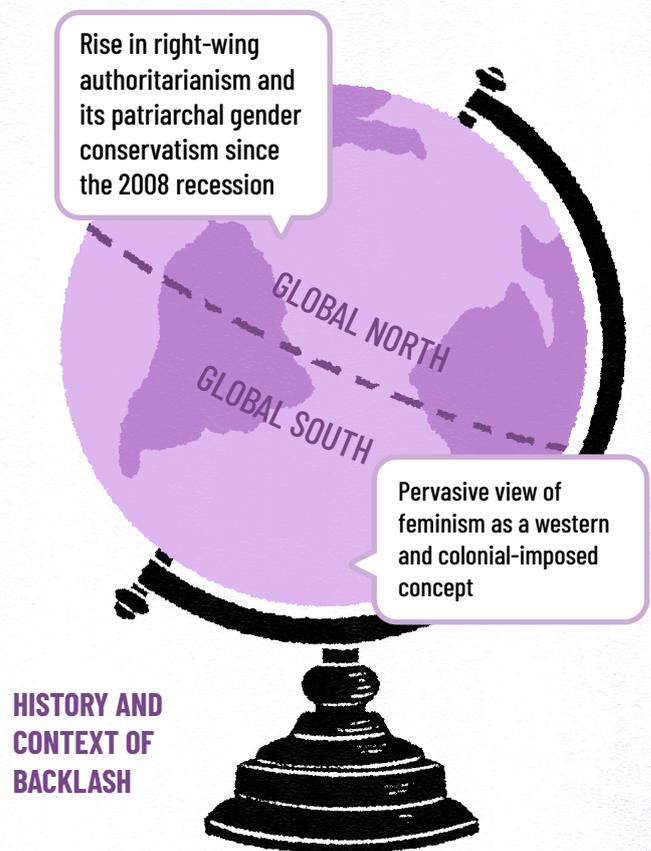
UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

Any work to counter patriarchal backlash must ground itself in an understanding of the specific histories and contexts shaping the [coalitions](#) of actors and forces behind backlash, and their particular agendas and strategies. There are many commonalities across different regions and countries in terms of these anti-feminist, anti-rights agendas and strategies, not least because they are often being shaped by transnational networks of conservative civil society groups and sympathetic states. But there can also be significant differences, linked to historical and contemporary political economies. In many parts of the global North, the rise of right-wing authoritarianism and its patriarchal gender conservatism is often attributed to the economic and political crises of neoliberalism after the 2008 recession; here, [‘official feminism’](#) is associated with discredited elites and anti-feminism is framed as a radical anti-systemic politics. In a context of rising authoritarian nationalism, this anti-gender politics is also deeply racialised, targeting migrants and other racialised minorities as a threat to national ‘family values’.

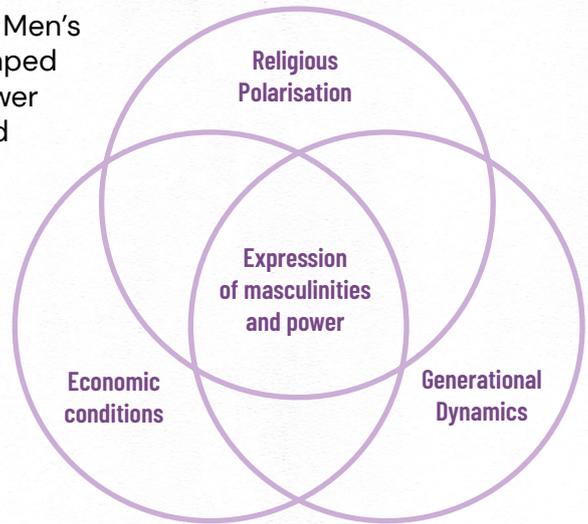
[Across the global South, different dynamics can operate.](#) In formerly colonised countries, backlash forces frequently frame their opposition to ‘gender ideology’ in terms of an anti-colonial struggle against ideological imposition by a neocolonial West/North. In countries with recent histories of non-democratic rule, the return of patriarchal strongmen can be a sign of continuity rather than rupture. In rapidly growing economies such as India, the violent masculinities associated with Hindu nationalism are celebrated by backlash forces for their contribution to national progress, rather than framed as a response to perceived crisis and decline.

Understanding the ways in which backlash agendas, strategies and narratives are contextually specific is essential. This also applies to understanding the complexities within a given context. The work of Patriarchy Strand partners [highlights the importance of developing an intersectional understanding of backlash](#) in specific settings and communities. In Bangladesh, [JPGSPH’s qualitative research](#) with young men in universities and informal settlements highlighted a relationship between economic precarity, institutional impunity and the pervasiveness of misogynistic attitudes and practices. **Insights** arising from the work of the Patriarchy Strand partners include the importance of:

- **Assessing both continuity and change:** Understanding both the continuities and discontinuities in current manifestations of backlash is important. In [India](#), efforts to counter backlash have had to address the aggressive masculinities and religious polarisation promoted by Hindu nationalist ideology in recent years. In [Lebanon](#), AiW has focused on understanding the [structuring of backlash within the country’s sextarian system](#), which continues to subordinate women to patriarchal kin relationships.



- **Investigating intersectional masculinities:** Men’s experiences and expressions of masculinities are shaped by their positioning within multiple relations of power in each context, which affect their gravitation toward and involvement in backlash. Patriarchy Strand partners have investigated these intersectional complexities in relation to [economic conditions](#), [generational dynamics](#) and [religious polarisation](#).
- **Understanding conditions of violence and trauma:** A contextual understanding of backlash must also consider conditions of violence and trauma, linked to historical and current conflict. In Uganda, [RLP’s](#) research with male survivors of sexual violence highlights how misogyny and homophobia interact in backlash.



PRACTICE STORY:

Intersectional Analyses of Lived Experiences of Masculinity to Understand Backlash in Bangladesh

There has been significant research on the socio-economic contexts shaping patriarchal backlash to progress on women’s empowerment in Bangladesh. But there is still a need to better understand the [intersectional](#) factors that produce certain dominant masculine narratives and the ways in which these relate to anti-feminist backlash. In the Countering Backlash project developed by [JPGSPH](#), the research component primarily centred on uncovering how masculinities are shaped by and contribute to violence and anti-feminist backlash. By examining these dynamics, the research sought to better grasp the ways in which patriarchal norms and power structures influence men’s

behaviours and attitudes, and how these, in turn, perpetuate GBV and resistance to gender justice initiatives. Such insights are critical for designing targeted interventions that address the root causes of backlash and promote more inclusive and equitable gender norms.

The in-depth qualitative research was undertaken with two key population groups: [young men and adolescent boys residing in informal settlement spaces](#) and young men residing and studying in public and private university campuses within Dhaka city. In-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), focused case studies and participant observation (through repeated interviews with a chosen pool of young men in public universities) were conducted from 2021–2023. The opportunity to explore men’s, especially younger men’s, lived experiences enabled an intersectional analysis of the relationship between systemic inequities, class

“The key advantage of (this process) was that it did not put anti-feminist backlash (i.e. how the backlash is happening) at front and centre – that would have shaped our lens in a very specific way, and perhaps would have taken longer to build a more intersectional lens. Instead after multiple rounds of discussion with the Patriarchy Strand partners and lead, we realised it made more sense to focus on asking how masculinities are embodied and practised in varying contexts and why is it related to the backlash? That led to inquiring into the underlying power structures and patriarchal dynamics.”

– Researcher, JPGSPH

struggles, structural violence and the pervasiveness of anti-feminist sentiments that manifest as backlash in various sites. In terms of this project, these sites included the bodies of young women as well as community and institutional spaces of informal settlements and campuses.

This qualitative research generated the following key **insights**:

- **Links between the perceived sense of masculine crisis and support for patriarchal backlash:** The precarious conditions of life for young men in informal settlements, linked to class and other structural inequities, fuels young men's anxiety about being able to live up to dominant masculine ideals. As one FGD participant said:

"The goal of men here is to work and be the sole earner. Here, you see so many of us - not a single one will deny this reality. It is who we are, there is no escaping this."



For some men, the way to resolve this anxiety about living up to masculine ideals and fear of losing status in the eyes of other men as well as women, is to reassert their patriarchal privileges over their households, as well as to assert their place in male hierarchies by endorsing patriarchal values of control and invulnerability. One FGD participant emphasised the importance of not showing one's feelings as a man, especially in conditions of economic hardship:

"I did not cry when my mother died. This was no ordinary person. It was my mother. I had my two young sisters with me who were deeply mourning. From the time of burial to this time, I haven't cried in front of my sisters. If I cry, what hope do they have for their lives."



Image Description: Young men at Kallayanpur's informal settlement in Dhaka, at a tea stall to meet friends and catch up after coming back from work. Photo Credit: Raiyan Islam Kaiko, Documentary Photographer, Bangladesh

- **Institutional cultures of impunity sustain backlash:** In the context of public universities, patriarchal norms and practices are normalised by cultures of impunity that facilitate and celebrate the exercise of oppressive and aggressive masculinities, and sustain the covert strategies used by backlash actors in institutional spaces. In the differing contexts of university spaces and informal settlements, backlash actions and sentiments are ways for young men to enact a patriarchal masculine identity that is, at once, institutionally endorsed yet experientially threatened. The research has generated a better understanding of men's experiences while adding more context to understanding the ways in which women's subjugation and oppression are maintained by deliberate backlash strategies and normalised patriarchal behaviours.

"Pathways to cultivating social capital within these campuses, especially for young men with limited resources in the city, become intertwined with the hierarchical power dynamics of residential halls. Within these halls, a common reflection of misogyny is gossiping about women. While this practice is normalised in the wider public space, within campuses - and especially in male student halls - it becomes intensified. This happens in extremely derogatory ways: 'We do not use bhadro [respectful] language when it comes to girls. We call them "maal" [goods]. For the most part, it is common to talk about the girls around you like this."

– From Public University Students' Experiences of Anti-Feminist Backlash in Dhaka, Bangladesh

Despite the research focusing on young men's lived experiences, there are **some limitations** to note:

- The project provided the space for generating grounded qualitative evidence, yet data remains largely reflective of heteronormative/cisgendered perceptions. Further research on gender justice and gender power relations require an intersectional lens which critiques the binary. This would help to build a more thorough and grounded evidence base that would be useful for stakeholders working in the gender justice space in Bangladesh.
- There were limited opportunities to collect evidence from the perspective of backlash actors themselves. This would have enabled a deeper understanding of the motivations, processes and underlying ideologies that fuel the choice of certain strategies over others. Future work should explore the motivations and ideologies of backlash actors to better understand the strategies they employ and develop more effective counter-strategies.

Moving forward, the research approach could be expanded to include these different perspectives, and more participatory methods to engage communities in co-creating solutions to counter backlash.



PRACTICE STORY:

Understanding Backlash in the Context of Patriarchal Political Familism in Lebanon

AiW has been advancing research, education and programming on women's empowerment and gender equality for over 50 years. During this time, Lebanon has endured prolonged armed conflict, linked to sectarian divides and Israeli military aggression. Economic conditions have deteriorated sharply since 2019, and the wholesale destruction of entire towns and neighbourhoods by Israeli forces from September 2024 onwards have devastated a society already reeling from the failures of political elites to manage multiple economic, social and political crises. With most people struggling for their livelihoods and access to basic services, and thus their ability to uphold their rights and

dignity, it has been difficult for feminist scholars and activists to demand that anti-feminist backlash be discussed, let alone countered, as an urgent national priority.

Yet the work of AiW, as part of the Countering Backlash programme, has focused on making such a demand. To do so, AiW has centred scholarly and activist attention on anti-feminism by shaping an understanding of backlash as a structural feature of the patriarchal oligarchic rule that has failed Lebanon so starkly in the context of the multiple crises discussed above. This understanding challenges the conventional view that backlash is a set of reactive actions intended to halt and/or reverse progress on gender equality. But a close examination of patriarchal structures and histories in Lebanon reveals the limitations of this view of backlash as simply a reaction to feminist advances. Building on scholarly work over the last 10–15 years, AiW has developed a more structural analysis of backlash as routinised, pre-emptive resistance to gender equality demands, a political resistance to change which inheres within the patriarchal organising of sectarian identity and difference around issues of sex and sexuality.

Working with [Maya Mikdashi's concept of 'sextarianism'](#), AiW explored the ways in which the 15 personal status laws governing marriage, divorce, child custody, alimony, and inheritance for Lebanon's 18 officially recognised religious sects not only secure men's patriarchal privileges but also [constitute women as 'pseudo-citizens'](#), with an ambivalent relationship to the state. Personal status matters are adjudicated by sectarian courts, which are notorious for upholding patriarchal bias. Meanwhile, the state itself operates through the '[kin contract](#)' and '[political familism](#)', which are concepts theorised by Suad Joseph, and which have become key concepts for AiW in its work to reframe backlash as structural and not merely reactive:

1 Kin contract: Kin groups and extended families are recognised as legitimate political actors and a haven that the Lebanese turn to for protection and resources under a weak incapacitated state. Consequently, under a frail state, kin became the anchor of security for Lebanese citizens who used idiomatic kinship in all realms of life: the market, the workplace, and politics. The 'kin contract' has been characterised as the formal and informal understanding that membership in families precedes and pre-emptively membership of the state, and gives families the ability to legitimately claim prior loyalty of their members, over and above the state's claims to loyalty. State actors, political leaders, and militias use families to mobilise and organise the population, paving the way for all leaders to present themselves as the senior patriarchs of the extended political family. This also allows these leaders to call for the loyalty, deference, and servitude due to them as heads of families. Further, the kin contract validates the patriarchal extended family as a venue of social and political control and the most significant deterrent to Lebanese women's full citizenship. It confirms the state's legitimisation of kin primacy and justifies the state's mobilisation of religion to sanctify extended kinship.

2 Political familism: This term refers to the deployment of family institutions, ideologies, idioms, practices, and relationships by citizens to activate their demands to the state; and by state actors to mobilise grounds for governance based on a civic myth of kinship and public discourse that privileges family. In the Lebanese context, political leaders assimilate kinship norms into their political practices. They treat the state as a source of resources to expend for kin and kin-like connections, privileging males and elders over females and juniors in the distribution of resources. They distribute state resources in the function of their friendships and connections, deferring to family heads in matters related to members of their families. Similarly, religious authorities continually reference family and kinship elevating kin to the level of the sacred. The privileges of males and elders, justified in kin moralities and sanctified by religion, have been a constant feature of the social and political arenas in Lebanon: elites have distributed resources on the basis of relationships, subsidising the control of males and elders over females and juniors in the family. At the same time, the Lebanese state exercises its legal prerogatives and bureaucratic functions to preserve this social-political formation of the 'family' by violating the rights of marginalised groups who are seen to threaten it, including queer communities, migrant workers, refugees, the incarcerated and sex workers.

Working with these concepts of the sextarian system, the kin contract and political familism, AiW undertook the following activities to change public understanding of backlash in Lebanon.

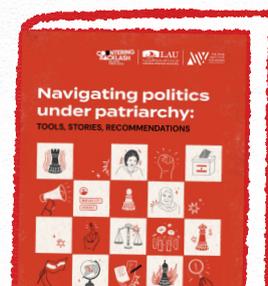
Published a **working paper** '[Understanding Backlash in Lebanon](#)', which defines and discusses the complex dimensions of backlash in the country. To develop the paper, AiW convened feminist activists and women who have served in decision-making positions in their districts and communities, in order to discuss what backlash looks like in the Lebanese context, and thus collaboratively came up with a contextualised definition.



Hosted, in partnership with IDS, an **international conference** at the LAU on '[Anti-Feminist Backlash in the Global South: Cross-Regional Discussions, Strategies, and Innovative Practices](#)', which convened global scholars with activists from Lebanon and the region to build knowledge on anti-feminist backlash, compare strategies, and develop cross-sectoral and transnational alliances among actors in the global South. The conference provided an important opportunity to reflect on recent cases of backlash in challenging and often underexplored contexts.



Drafted a **toolkit on women's political participation** as a resource for women in or seeking to enter politics as well as scholars working on the issue. Currently in the design process, the toolkit includes stories from male allies across the Lebanese political landscape, whose testimonies of anti-patriarchal masculinities can contribute to efforts to counter backlash.



Developed the **documentary** 'We Become Women', which traces the history and diversity of the women's movement in Lebanon between 1975–2020, featuring the underrepresented voices and inspiring stories of the leading women to understand the particularities, challenges, and contributions of the movement itself. Screened at LAU's New York office in March 2025 during the 69th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, the documentary is an important historical/archival reference to the collective feminist and cultural memory and the women's movement in Lebanon.



Photo credit: Still from AiW's documentary 'We Become Women'.

In all these above activities, AiW has sought to remain true to its legacy of collaborative pedagogy by consistently involving the student community in a range of academic and outreach endeavours, actively sharing, discussing, and analysing backlash work with interested young aspiring scholars. The value of this legacy has been acknowledged, with the AiW team winning the 'Times Higher Education Awards Arab World 2024', in the category of Research Project of the Year: Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, for the 'Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice' programme. The work of AiW in researching backlash in Lebanon is ongoing, and remains a testament to the institute's dedication to keeping women's rights at the core of its commitments, and its persistence in its feminist orientation and praxis.

THEME 3

ANALYSING BACKLASH ACTORS AND FORCES

There has always been resistance to efforts by women's rights movements to change the patriarchal status quo. Where feminist progress has been made, it has succeeded in the face of patriarchal resistance to change, whether from individual men in families, workplaces and communities or from the male leadership of political, economic and social institutions. But the intensified backlash in politics, policy and public discourse in recent years across otherwise markedly different societies is being driven by a multiplicity of actors and agendas that cannot simply be reduced to an account of men resisting progress on women's rights. Not only is such progress far from uniform, meaning that anti-feminist politics is resurgent irrespective apparently of specific feminist advances; it is also clear that a range of actors and forces, with differing agendas and visions, have energised and been energised by an anti-feminism for their own specific political purposes. [Surveying Latin America, Brazilian scholar and activist Sonia Corrêa notes:](#)

"...anti-gender formations are based on older religious networks of opposition to abortion rights... But they also involve a very heterogeneous range of secular (or apparently secular) actors... the list includes career politicians, members of professional corporations (especially lawyers and doctors), journalists, polemicists, businessmen, neoliberal and right-wing libertarian activists, and also some openly fascist groups."



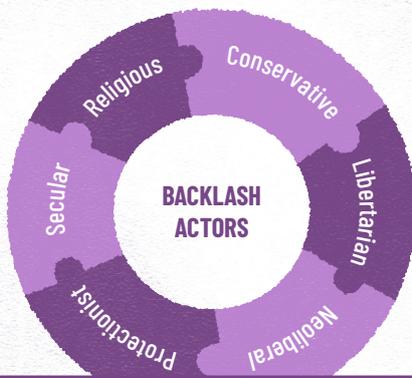
Sonia Corrêa

Researchers tracking the [rise of anti-gender coalitions and campaigns across the world over the last 15 years emphasise that](#) it is important to 'conceptualise the recent struggles over "gender" as part of a broader conflict, where what is truly at stake is the future of democracy'.

The work of the Patriarchy Strand partners confirms the need to analyse the range of backlash actors and forces in any given context to better understand the opportunities and strategies to counter such backlash. To support such analyses, [IDS has created Backlash Chess as a participatory analytical tool](#) to examine the diversity of backlash actors in a specific context and their different strategic moves (see [Practice Story](#)). In Türkiye, researchers from [Özyeğin University](#) and [Kadir Has University](#) investigated the ways in which the state-sponsored CSO, KADEM has itself been mobilised in support of the ruling party's neoliberal social conservatism, co-opting the language of 'gender justice' to promote its patriarchal 'family values' (see [Practice Story](#)). Insights arising from this and the work of the other partners include:

1 Emotional appeals of backlash actors: Across differing political agendas and contexts, backlash actors exploit 'crisis emotions', namely the anxiety and anger linked to multiple crises (political, economic, ecological). Backlash forces have been effective in framing people's insecurities in gendered terms and in narrating solutions that claim to 'fix' the sense of crisis through restoring/renewing gender hierarchies.



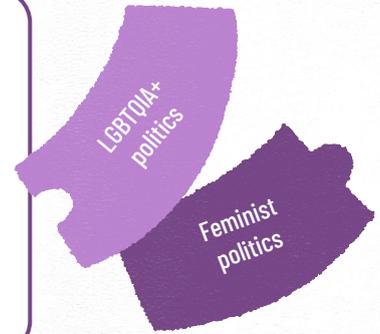


2

Political tensions between backlash actors: This shared emotional appeal serves also to mask tensions and potential political fractures within backlash coalitions (e.g. religious vs secular, conservative vs libertarian, neoliberal vs protectionist). These fractures are possible entry points for countering backlash.

3

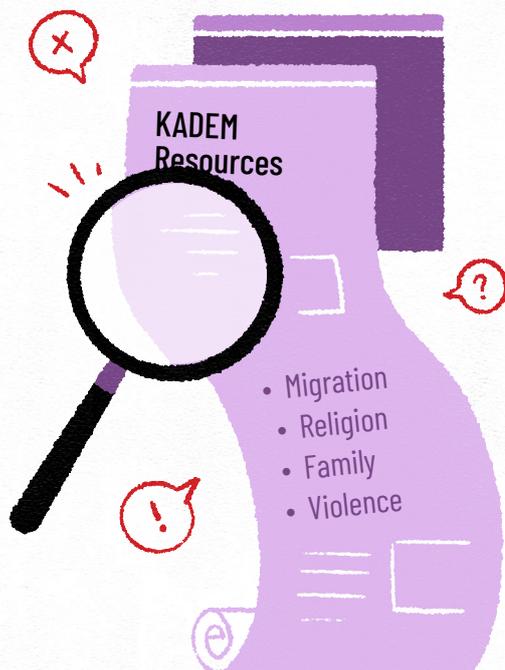
Transnational organising of anti-feminist consensus: Despite being often framed in nationalist terms, backlash is increasingly transnationally organised and funded, and fuelled by the global rise of the online 'manosphere'. Working through civil society networks and sympathetic states, backlash forces are attempting to forge a new anti-feminist consensus. Countering backlash, thus, requires counter-organising at all levels to revitalise a feminist and LGBTQIA+ politics that is responsive to the very real crises being faced.



PRACTICE STORY

Researching Civil Society's Role in Backlash in Türkiye

Over the past decade, the state-sponsored CSO, KADEM has come to dominate the field of gender equality and women's rights in Türkiye. Established in 2013 under the leadership of Sümeyye Erdoğan, the daughter of President Erdoğan, the influence of KADEM has grown in tandem with the consolidation of autocratic neopatriarchal rule by the AKP, under the leadership of President Erdoğan. Yet there is a lack of research on and understanding of the links between the regime's illiberal turn, underpinned by resurgent conservative, religious, and nationalist ideologies, and influential voices in civil society on 'women's issues'.



As part of the Countering Backlash programme, researchers from Özyeğin University and Kadir Has University conducted a study in 2022–2023 to examine the influence of KADEM in legitimising the AKP's increasing authoritarianism and backlash against feminist progress on gender equality, which was exemplified by Türkiye's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021. The study used a discourse analysis method to examine the content of KADEM's online materials, including reports on women in relation to various social issues such as migration, religion, family, violence; news items; speeches by the executive chairs; and articles written mainly by KADEM members. These texts were coded to identify the major themes arising and the social issues with which they engaged and were then analysed to explore the political implications of KADEM's approach to these issues. The analysis considered the historical and political context within which KADEM operates, examining its relationship with the state and its role in shaping public discourse on gender and masculinity in particular.

This discourse analysis revealed the following key **findings** on KADEM's influence in relation to patriarchal backlash and growing authoritarianism in Türkiye:

- **Growing conservatism:** In contrast to its alignment with third-wave feminist ideas and commitments in its early years, KADEM has, over time, actively distanced its work on women from a feminist perspective. For instance, in an [interview](#) in 2019, KADEM's executive chair Saliha Okur Gümrükçüoğlu suggested that *'advocating for women's rights is not specific to feminism'*. Referring to pre-Islamic and Islamic Turkish societies, Okur Gümrükçüoğlu argued that *'the fact that there is no subordination of women in our religion and deep-rooted civilisation, as in Western civilisation, has not left us with the need for a feminist struggle'*. This was clearly signalled by KADEM's withdrawal of support for the İstanbul Convention, as it became a clear marker of political polarisation in the country.
- **Defining "gender justice" as gender complementarity:** This term provides the ground for a neoliberal version of Islamic neopatriarchal masculinity to figure in KADEM's discourses. KADEM advocates 'gender justice' as an Islamic alternative to the so-called Western-imposed gender equality. In KADEM's understanding, men and women cannot be equals due to their biological differences; they rather have complementary roles. In one of its [recent official statements](#), KADEM emphasises [this biological basis of gender difference](#):

"Therefore, it is against the natural order of things to expect legal and political practices that ignore physiological and spiritual differences to bring equality."

Notably, KADEM's discourse attributes the existing inequalities between men and women to patriarchy. However, it presents patriarchy as an abstract culprit without addressing specific examples or discussing the role of individual men and their actions in reproducing these inequalities. [In its public statements](#), KADEM [draws on Islamic teachings to emphasise men's responsibility as 'the caretakers of women'](#), and the fact that 'inherent differences in man and woman may require men to come to a position of "primus inter pares" in some matters, which means "priority among equals"'. KADEM frames this male priority as a 'duty and a burden imposed on men, and a "priority among equals" is given to man so that he can fulfil this duty as required'.

- **Celebrating an Islamist neoliberal masculinity:** In emphasising men's 'natural' responsibility to provide for their families, KADEM fuses a celebration of economically successful neoliberal masculinity with a religiously sanctioned domestic femininity for women. Even though KADEM's campaigns against domestic violence do target men as the perpetrators of this harm, its approach is framed in terms of appealing to men's 'correct' role as guardians of both women and socially responsible cultural values. In this way, KADEM positions men in a dominant role in the neoliberal economic and socially conservative gender order. [In an article commenting on one of KADEM's anti-violence campaigns](#), Hilal Kaplan points out that 'KADEM sets out to prove that preserving women and preserving societal values are not conflicting goals but rather complementary ones'.



These research outcomes were then discussed by a wider group of feminist scholars and NGOs to validate the study's findings and conclusions. Among the participants were Professor Feride Acar (Middle East Technical University), Hilal Gençay ([Women for Women's Human Rights](#)), Esra Aşan ([Feminist Bellek](#)), Gülsüm Ekinci (journalist and activist who interviewed women activists about AKP policies on gender) and Dr Oğuz Can Ok (gender equality expert at Özyeğin University). Participants agreed that the Islamist neoliberal masculinity promoted by KADEM subtly reinforces existing power structures and hinders progress toward genuine gender equality. Participants validated the study's finding that KADEM's intervention in gender inequalities is selective and that its 'gender justice' discourse rarely poses a far-reaching challenge to neopatriarchal hierarchies. In this way, it is clear that the rise of KADEM and its associated discourses on family and masculinity should be seen as a component of gender backlash in Türkiye, by helping to forge a regressive synthesis of familialism, traditionalism, Islamism, and Turkish nationalism. Reflecting on the study design, the decision to focus attention on KADEM's discourse rather than the organisation as a whole enabled the study to track KADEM's evolution in response to deepening political polarisation over the last decade.



Image Description: A placard at a demonstration for gender equality on 8 March 2025: "Women getting poorer while the Directorate of Religious Affairs is getting richer". Taken from photo by [@feministgeceyuruyusu](#)

Key **insights** from this research and subsequent discussions with feminist actors in the field are that:

- A **comprehensive mapping** of all backlash actors detailing their discourse and practice is useful.
- A **focus on a single backlash actor** to see how they evolve over time helps understand better the changing landscape of backlash.
- An **analysis of the tensions and divergences** (as well as alignments) among different backlash actors is significant in order to see the cracks in the backlash bloc and thus to identify opportunities to develop feminist politics toward gender equality.



PRACTICE STORY

Backlash chess

Chess is a game of power and conquest, emerging from India in the 5th or 6th century as 'chaturanga', introduced to Persia in the 7th century as 'shatranj', to then spread across Europe and the world. The game consists of sets of different pieces – 'chessmen' in English – with different types of powers for making moves. It is played on a grid of squares, or sites, with the aim of occupying and moving across these sites to defeat the opponent's chessmen.

As a game of strategy, involving a range of 'chessmen' with different types of powers engaged in a conflict over occupying sites on a board to gain victory, chess opens up ways for thinking about the diversity of forces involved in backlash and responses to it. During Countering Backlash's inception phase, which involved literature reviews and conceptual [debates between partners, as well as with external thinkers and stakeholders](#), the Patriarchy Strand recognised the need to support partners in identifying and analysing the different types of backlash actors in their local contexts. This commitment to a structural analysis of backlash forces built on the work that several programme partners had already done on '[politicising masculinities](#)', '[mobilising men in practice](#)' and '[undressing patriarchy](#)' over the last 20 years.

On the basis of this experience, the programme developed a thesis about backlash as an epochal form of crisis management, in which a range of forces have exploited the widespread sense of proliferating crises (political, economic, ecological) and associated anxieties and insecurities. Backlash actors have been effective in framing people's insecurities in gendered terms, including manufactured 'crises of masculinity', and in narrating solutions that claim to 'fix' the gender order at three symbolic sites, namely 'the body', 'the family' and 'the nation'.

Programme partners discussed this thesis and saw the need to distinguish between different types of backlash actors, not least because contemporary anti-gender politics cannot be reduced to a reactive pushback on progress in gender equality. Anti-gender forces are engaged in a range of political moves: reactive (lashing back), pre-emptive (delaying or forestalling progress), proactive (organising for a different future) and opportunistic (mobilising support for accessing power). In these differing ways, different backlash actors are playing a longer game for power – not unlike chess – and aiming to advance their material interests within a volatile world.

[The programme convenor conceptualised Backlash Chess as a participatory analytical tool](#) to examine the diversity of backlash actors in a given context and their different strategic moves. The pawns amongst the chessmen make up a wide array of groups and actors reacting within this divisive politics, and they effectively become played (and often sacrificed) to protect the interests of more powerful actors. Triggered by insecurity or resentment, they are easily manipulated with stories and discourse about current crises (often selectively reflected). The more powerful players in the back row engage in calculated and long-term strategies for securing power and protecting their allies. Aside from highly visible opportunistic populist politicians, they include conservative or fundamentalist religious actors, ethno-nationalist or fascist authoritarian political groups, and hyper-capitalist interests, including key online platform capital actors.

Backlash Chessmen



Pawns, foot-soldiers: Men's rights groups, manosphere communities, illiberal CSOs



Kings and Queens: Patriarchal populist authoritarian leaders, aspiring dictators



Bishops/Mullahs: Religious fundamentalists, aspiring theocrats



Knights: Ethno-nationalist, mythopoetic neofascists and racist movements



Towers/Rooks: Private wealth, hyper-capitalists, aristocrats and economic elites

Image Description: Backlashmen Chessmen i.e. players in Backlash Chess, a participatory analytical tool to examine the diversity of backlash actors in various contexts.

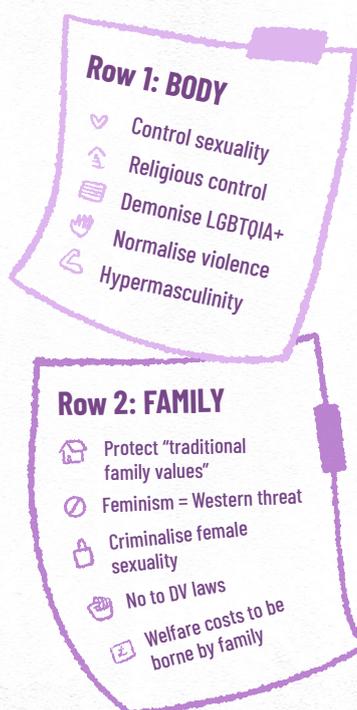
The tool was tested with Countering Backlash partners and others, including JPGSPH in Dhaka in 2022, a highly international group of students in MA Gender and Development in 2023 at IDS, and during a conference on Cross-Regional Dialogues on Countering Backlash at AiW in Beirut in 2023. The game can be used in trainings, in CSO strategic planning or campaign development, or in social science research.



Image Description: Country and regional group-work, playing chess/Shatranj on backlash in South Asia, Middle East/ Balkans, Palestine and Lebanon at a conference in Beirut, 2023 © J Edström

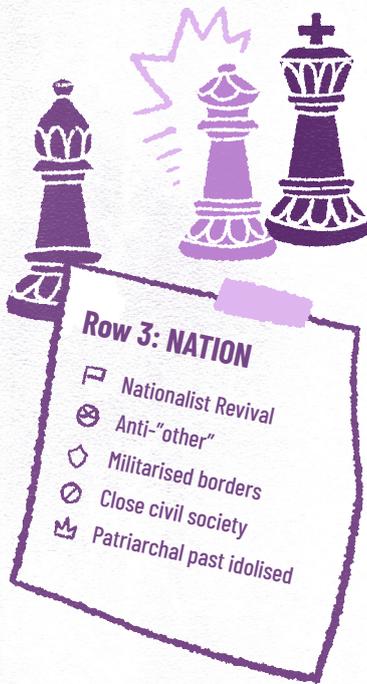
The most visible chessmen engaged in backlash politics often live and play locally in different national contexts, which is also where this game or exercise is more readily played and articulated. However, they typically also have broader regional and international connections, forming alliances between themselves, and with opportunistic populist politicians and other protagonists, to broaden their support bases. So, the networks are importantly also transnational, sharing tactics, messaging, ideologies, narratives and funding. Contrasting and comparing how similar types of actors in different countries deploy similar discourse and narratives is a powerful technique for highlighting how these resonant narratives work across different settings.

The different types of chessmen can move up the territory/the board into sites on the 1st, 2nd and 3rd rows, the sites of body, family and nation, respectively:



Body: The kinds of discourse and narratives used by different chessmen about the body, for example, include language to; demonise LGBTQIA+ sexuality (e.g. Uganda, Russia), framing it as 'immoral' (e.g. Egypt, Turkey), using the power of religious doctrines over personal status laws affecting women (e.g. Lebanon, India), privileging certain bodies' rights over others' (e.g. a postulated 'right to life' of an unborn foetus vs actual women's or girls' bodily rights), normalising domestic violence, promotion of racialised hyper-masculinity and femininity, or increasing media content supporting patriarchy, machismo, homophobia and biological essentialism.

Family: At this site, certain faith-linked groups claim that alien 'gender ideology' is destroying the 'traditional' family, and what they claim to be 'divinely ordained' order and social hierarchies, thus also target sexual minority rights in name of 'traditional family values.' A range of chessmen criminalise female sexuality outside of marriage (e.g. South Asia) and conservative politicians resist or roll back legislation on domestic violence or same sex marriage. Certain politicians often present feminism as a 'Western' or colonial imposition, decrying it



as atheist and 'anti-family'. And, certain capitalist interest and neo-conservative politicians argue for dismantling the welfare state, with the privatisation of social protection and other social policies, thus increasing the burden on families to bear greater portions of social costs (e.g. Lebanon).

Nation: In terms of the nation, a rise in authoritarianism along with increasing restrictions on civil society and rights-based discourse is evident. Masculinist ethnonationalist actors promote racialised forms of male supremacy (as white/Hindu/Slavic/Ottoman/etc.), denying ethnic or religious diversity and demonising primitive patriarchies of the racialised 'Other'. Populist actors push for a 'revival' of national identity, often with regional or faith-based inflections (e.g., 'Africanism') to counter the legacy of colonialism, or to rebuild old empires (e.g., Slavic/Hindu/Ottoman). Patriarchally patriotic discourses of protection, closing national borders and increasing military capabilities deploy hyper-masculine nationalist rhetoric and promote 'border-guard masculinities', appealing to some mythologised patriarchal past within anti-foreign or anti-global discourse.



Image Description: Nay El-Rahi explains Shatranj-analysis of Lebanese chessmen, assisted by Jerker Edström © J Edström

Discerning different types of actors and their strategic moves in the discursive sites of body, family and nation enables an analysis of the different political agendas at work in backlash. This makes clear the tensions or contradictions between such agendas; different types of actors' underlying interests may not always converge. As [participants in the piloting of Backlash Chess agreed](#), exposing such tensions or contradictions is an important strategy in countering backlash. Participants also noted that it is also useful to reflect on the emotive power of backlash discourse to understand its appeal. Anxiety may be a powerful affective force, but it is not the only one – positive and inclusive language and stories can also be motivating and move people in a more hopeful and calmer direction.

Gender justice defenders and other progressive actors are already developing discourse and narratives in more or less strategic ways, which move in more positive and less divisive directions. [Backlash Chess has a second stage](#), in which the range of progressive actors involved in countering backlash are also analysed and explored. Whilst the game has (at least) two sides, the second stage has not yet been extensively tested, and it is important to encourage adaptation in doing so. It may not be a case of simply developing language which 'refutes' the backlash chessmen's moves (because emotion rather than reason is the key to its power), but rather reframes the supposed problems presented – in enlightening, positive ways. For example, in countering the confines of 'traditional families', how can we speak in more appealing, inclusive and equitable terms of homes, households and co-habitation? How can we challenge oppressive discourse about 'the nation' with a more positive and moving language that extends imaginaries of our countries, homelands and worlds? [The programme has developed guidance on these progressive counter-moves](#) in confronting patriarchal backlash.

Chaturanga/ شطرنج /Shatranj/Chess

BL Players Sites →	Body	Family	Nation	Nation	Family	Body	← Sites CJ Players
 Pawns <i>(Padati/ Bhata)</i> Men's rights groups Manosphere groups • e.g., ___	Increased gender-based violence, & trivialising domestic violence. Popular mobilisation against feminism in the body politic	Accuse 'gender ideology' of destroying traditional family, and as violating social harmony.	The Indian Hindu 'everyman' as robbed of opportunities and due respect by global and feminist forces				Pro-/Fem Groups • e.g., ___ • e.g., ___
 King & Queen <i>(Raja/Mantri)</i> Aspiring autocrats Populist leaders • e.g., ___	Big-man macho performances of political leaders, e.g. Modi's "56-inch chest"	Paternalistic appeal to idealised Indian family values and patriarchal national past	Backsliding on democracy & restricting civic space. Anti-global & anti-minority nationalist discourse				Progress Leaders • e.g., ___ • e.g., ___
 Bishop/Mullah <i>(Raja/ Elephant)</i> Faith powerbrokers, Fundamentalists • e.g., ___	Power of religious doctrine over personal status laws affecting women	Restrict or criminalise female sexuality outside of marriage, & same-sex marriage	Promoting Hindutva male supremacy, denying diversity. 'Revival' of Hindu identity				Thought Leaders • e.g., ___ • e.g., ___
 Knight <i>(Ashva/Horse)</i> Ethno-nationalists, Fascists, militarists • e.g., ___	Cultural promotion of Hindutva hyper-masculinity and femininity	Backlash to feminism: as a 'western', colonial, atheist & anti-Indian-family ideology	Incr. militarisation & use hyper-masculine nationalist rhetoric, vs. legacy of colonialism & 'Islam'				Peacemakers • e.g., ___ • e.g., ___
 Rook/Tower <i>(Ratha/Chariot)</i> Some wealthy elites, Hyper-capitalists • e.g., ___	Media supporting patriarchy, machismo and biological essentialism	Privatisation of the welfare state, social protection, & increase the burden on family & women's unpaid care work to bear social costs	Opting out of multi-lateral regulation of global economy (e.g. taxation, worker and environmental protection or rights)				Feminist Funders • e.g., ___ • e.g., ___
Site fixes →	Body	Family	Nation	Nation	Family	Body	← Site disruptions

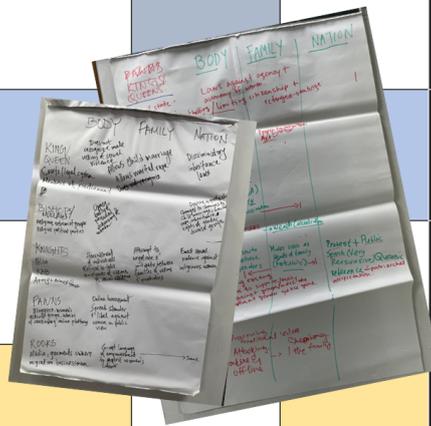


Image Description: An example of how to use the Backlash Chess tool. Photo credit: Jerker Edström

At least four **key insights** have emerged from the use of Backlash Chess to analyse backlash actors' strategic moves and their discourse about bodies, families and nations, namely:

- Different types of actors coalesce in opposition to gender, but their broader aims and underlying interests are sometimes in tension or conflict.
- Their narratives portray so-called 'gender ideology' as political, but they politicise and weaponise gender for their own divisive social agendas.
- They appeal to mythologised pasts, but are often nihilistic about the future, so are fundamentally negative about change – trading on fear.
- Backlash discourse is typically anti-global/xenophobic, but it is also – and increasingly – transnationally funded and organised.

With these insights in mind, efforts to counter backlash must foreground a more hopeful, progressive vision, with emotionally compelling narratives of bodily autonomy, family diversity and national inclusion, which celebrate social solidarity in support of collective action for a more just world.

THEME 4

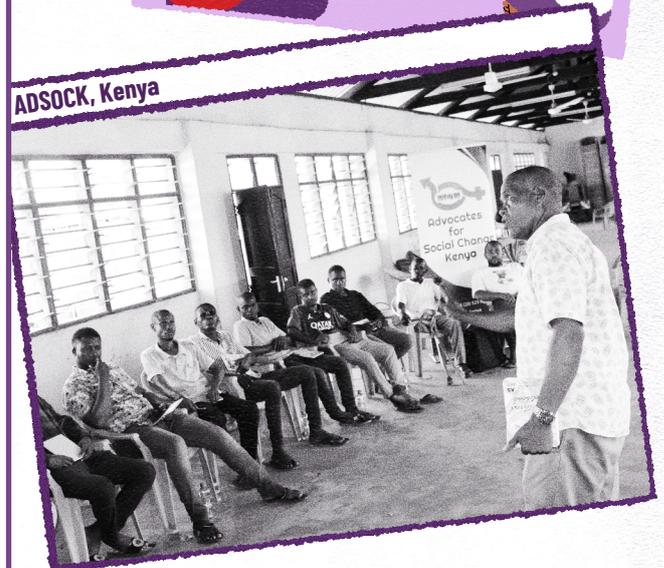
DEVELOPING CREATIVE APPROACHES

There is clear evidence that patriarchal backlash is intensifying in many societies. This includes: the electoral success of authoritarian leaders; growing political influence of religious fundamentalisms; rollbacks of policy progress on gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights; escalation of online misogyny and homo/trans-phobia; as well as politically-targeted technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) against gender justice activists and [women human rights defenders](#). Given this intensification, it is apparent that current ways of working with men and boys on gender equality may no longer be sufficient and that new and more creative approaches will be needed. One key focus for the work of Patriarchy Strand partners has been to investigate and test out innovative and creative approaches to mobilising men's interest in and support for countering backlash.

The following **insights** have arisen from this work:

Build solidarity for social change:

Developing creative approaches to strengthening solidarities for collective action for social change has been a key focus of several partners' work. The [Practice Story](#) from India details the work of MASVAW's HQ Fellows in [drawing on the constitutional principle of 'fraternity'](#) to counter politically-directed religious polarisation between Hindu and Muslim communities, and the practices of violent and patriarchal Hindu supremacism that enact it. In Kenya, ADSOCK has worked to strengthen intergenerational solidarity between younger and older men to counter not only the gender but also generational dynamics fuelling patriarchal backlash. ADSOCK's [Practice Story](#) discusses the use of intergenerational dialogue forums, which involve cultural storytelling and practices of trust-building and deep listening in order to foster greater solidarity toward a vision of gender equality and social justice. In contexts of intensified backlash, and the gender and other social hierarchies and divisions that backlash fuels, building multiple forms of solidarity to challenge these hierarchies and divisions is an urgent priority.



Use interactive tools to foster self-reflection and peer accountability: Patriarchy Strand partners have used creative approaches to explore the ways in which men's personal self-reflection and peer accountability can be strengthened to counter backlash. In [Bangladesh](#), JPGSPH made innovative use of interactive role plays and [social media 'meme' discussions to open up more honest conversations](#) among young men (in informal settlements and university settings) about the limits of their male allyship, and how such allyship in support of women's demands for gender equality could be strengthened.



Use storytelling to change the narrative: The success of anti-gender forces in changing the narrative on gender, equality and human rights, and challenging [the international agreements and commitments to which this narrative gave rise, has been widely noted](#). In reflecting on their work, Patriarchy Strand partners agreed that efforts to reclaim and reshape narratives on gender and equality must be central to the work of countering backlash. In [Kenya](#), ADSOCK has used a range of narrative-based techniques, including storytelling, community theatre and cultural references, to craft a narrative of not only inter-gender, but also intergenerational solidarity in support of gender equality, which resonates with longstanding cultural stories of collective life in the communities with which they work.



PRACTICE STORY

Strengthening Social Solidarity in Politically Polarised India

With the rise of a patriarchal Hindu nationalism, in which [national identity is fused with an overtly masculinised religious resurgence](#), efforts to mobilise men in support of gender equality has become increasingly difficult in UP. [Using a PAR methodology](#), SAHAYOG and CHSJ convened a group of seven MASVAW gender activists – the Co-Travelers, HQ – to explore ways of addressing social polarisation and aggressive masculinities. The social activists involved were known as HQ Fellows.

Through a series of facilitated discussions, including an [Action Research Workshop](#) and two Reflection Meetings, the HQ Fellows recognised the need to find new ways to address aggressive masculinities and religious polarisation at the community level. As a result of their research and reflection on this polarisation, they realised that there were still many signs of social and religious co-existence in their work areas:



Many poor rural communities share religious shrines that are sacred for both Hindus and Muslims.



Muslim and Hindu farming families often share input resources like seeds, farmyard manure, irrigation facilities and so on, and cultivate their fields together.



It is not uncommon for businesses to be jointly owned by Hindu and Muslim partners.



Many Muslims are either artisans or crafts persons such as tailors, carpenters, potters and their regular customers and clients are often Hindus.



Many local fairs and festivals involve participation by both Hindus and Muslims on equal terms.



Local dialects and languages are common to both Muslims and Hindus, and there are many shared poetry and musical traditions in Hindi and Urdu (languages associated with Hindus and Muslims respectively) where both Hindu and Muslim exponents were equally skilled in both traditions.

As social activists and development workers, the HQ Fellows were initially reluctant to engage with religious tropes in their work. However, they realised that there were undertones of religion and faith in nearly all aspects of life in rural Uttar Pradesh. This did not mean that these were all exclusive traditions. One HQ Fellow very eloquently described the ways in which religion works horizontally, creating different but equal groups within a community, unlike caste, which operates vertically, creating hierarchical divisions in society. While people had different religious faiths and affiliations, historically this did not necessarily entail hierarchies of power. The HQ Fellows agreed that it is only recently that the idea of one religion being superior had been introduced. They also noted that this view of Hindu supremacy is accompanied and enabled by an aggressive Hindu masculinity and a stigmatisation of Muslim masculinity as sexually deviant. The use of masculinities in this way to deepen religious polarisation has impeded the work of doing gender equality work with men across religious differences.

Based on these reflections, HQ Fellows became convinced that social solidarity was achievable through social and cultural means as they reached out to new people and implemented newer tools and techniques and messages for social mobilisation. Changing political and economic conditions also meant that new approaches to social mobilisation were needed. Their work had hitherto focused on raising community awareness of rights and entitlements to government services and disbursements, but such work was now increasingly difficult. An authoritarian turn in local government meant that officials no longer agreed to meet delegations from the community or discuss their demands. Begun during Covid-19, the government's free ration scheme had also ensured that the rural poor felt beholden to state 'benevolence' and reluctant to make rights-based demands.

However, HQ Fellows were not willing to abandon the rights-based approaches because it was a core principle. During discussions, it became clear that social solidarity [could be understood as contributing to 'fraternity'](#) which was a key Constitutional principle. Once the group accepted 'fraternity' was an important aspect of promoting Constitutional rights, they made small adaptations in their regular

programmes to include discussions on social solidarity, fraternity and the Constitution. For example, one Fellow changed the venue of Ambedkar Jayanti celebrations. Dr Ambedkar is considered the 'father' of the Indian Constitution, but since he belonged to the depressed or Scheduled castes, his birth anniversary is celebrated by Dalits. In this case the celebration was organised in a common space and both Dalits and non-Dalits participated, and the idea of fraternity was at the core. Cultural events like Holi, Eid and Diwali were celebrated jointly. In one case Hindu and Muslim women celebrated Holi the spring festival, by showering each other with flowers.

This focus on social solidarity as a way to challenge religious polarisation, and the hierarchy of masculinities that this polarisation relies on and reinforces, generated several important insights for countering backlash work:

- **Solidarity depends on familiarity:** Joint celebrations brought Muslim and Hindu community members closer together, helping to overcome the social segregation that has been fuelled in recent years by government policy and political rhetoric. Restoring such familiarity is an important foundation for promoting greater social solidarity. Several community members shared that they had been missing these interactions with one another and started taking their own initiative to organise similar events.
- **Solidarity fosters rights-based resistance:** Through their interactions with a newer and wider range of social actors, the HQ Fellows made new friends in the community who also were upset with the religious polarisation and hatred that was being promoted by powerful forces. However, they were reluctant to voice their concerns since these forces were often aggressive in their repression of dissent. Through framing social solidarity in terms of the Constitutional principle of fraternity, HQ Fellows were able to validate and support community resistance to religious polarisation as a rights-based demand for equality under the Constitution.

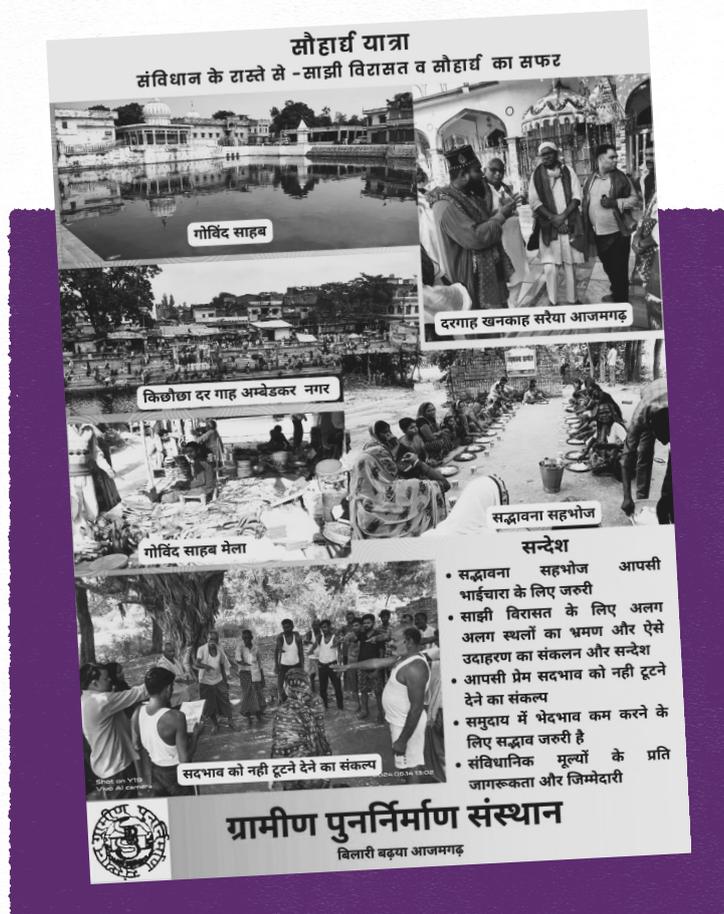


Image Description: Poster by an HQ Fellow showing initiatives to promote social solidarity. Pictures clockwise from top left: The shrine of Govindsahab a Hindu reform saint; A dargah (Muslim shrine) popular among both Muslims and Hindus; Sadbhavna Sahbhoj – Friendship Feast where everyone contributes and eats together; Unity Pledge at a workshop on social solidarity; A village fair with artisans and customers from all religions; Kicchauchasahib a religious shrine popular for persons with mental health issues.

- **Fraternity also involves challenging hierarchical masculinities:** Framing social solidarity in terms of Constitutional fraternity enabled HQ Fellows to identify and address the ways in which Hindu nationalism deepens and depends not only on men's patriarchal control over women but also on an ideology of dominant Hindu masculinity and deviant, subordinate Muslim masculinity. Challenging such hierarchies of masculinities thus becomes an important way in which to counter the uses of religious polarisation in the backlash underway in contemporary India.

THEME 5

WORKING ACROSS ONLINE/OFFLINE SPACES

The spread of digital technologies into most aspects of people's lives means that online and offline experiences are increasingly entangled and mutually dependent. With the dramatic expansion in smartphone use in recent years, political discourse, economic activity (both production and consumption), and social interaction in many societies are now online/offline hybrids, with reverberations between the physical and the digital. Nowhere is this clearer than in the rapidly proliferating ways in which digital technologies are being used to perpetrate GBV in both digital and physical spaces. TFGBV has become an focus of policy and programmatic concern, not least because many different forms of TFGBV, including gendered disinformation, hate speech and digital harassment are widely used by backlash actors. Research in a growing number of countries is also highlighting the influence of an online ecosystem of sites, channels, and web-based discussion groups focused on 'men's issues' and organised mainly around misogyny and anti-feminism, commonly referred to as the 'manosphere'. Studies are showing that manosphere sites and influencers present themselves as sources of advice and support for men, especially young men, as a gateway for recruiting them into misogynistic worldviews, and that this pathway is algorithmically amplified.

In Bangladesh and Kenya, Patriarchy Strand partners have addressed online/offline interactions to better understand and counter backlash in their contexts, discussed in more detail in the Practice Stories below. Insights arising from this work include the need to:



SAFE SPACES

Create safer spaces both online and offline for men: The work of both JPGSPH and ADSOCK highlights the need to create spaces and processes for men to come together, both online and offline, to share their exposure to, experiences of, and interest in, misogynistic messaging. In addressing issues of digital literacy and emotional self-awareness, such spaces can help to foster solidarities among men for gender justice agendas.



Respond rapidly to disinformation and hate speech: The harmful impact of online anti-feminist content on men's offline behaviour is, in part, a function of the speed with which disinformation can spread through digital channels. ADSOCK is using social listening tools and collaborating with a network of gender justice organisations to track online disinformation and hate speech, respond quickly with correct information and counter-messaging that reveals the political agendas driving disinformation, and work with concerned social media platforms to remove false and harmful content.



Use emotionally compelling, contextually relevant messaging and framing: Through research and programming, both ADSOCK and JPGSPH have learned the importance of understanding the emotional appeals of anti-feminist messaging for many men to craft emotionally resonant counter-messaging. Making an emotional connection with men to counter backlash requires being sensitive to local contexts and concerns. Tools and technical guidance on addressing TFGBV remain dominated by global North perspectives, and the work of Patriarchy Strand partners highlights the need for more South-South learning.



Strengthen support and safety systems for staff: Those who work to counter backlash often become explicit targets of intensified attacks by backlash actors. Support systems and online/offline safety training are needed to support staff involved in researching and countering backlash.



PRACTICE STORY

Understanding Patriarchal Dynamics and Promoting Healthy Masculinities Across Online/Offline Spaces in Bangladesh

Despite the clear necessity, there is a lack of evidence-building and mobilisation to address issues of online abuse and [TFGBV faced by women and gender-diverse populations](#). This is especially urgent, given that different forms of TFGBV are widely used in anti-feminist backlash across the world, which should be understood not merely as episodic reactions to feminist gains and demands, but as a continuous structural process which fuels and sustains oppressive power dynamics.

To address this gap, IDS conducted a 6-month pilot study to explore the the phenomenon of [online gender-based violence](#), involving [JPGSPH](#) and other partners across five countries in 2021. As part of this pilot study, [netnography was employed as a method](#) to observe and understand the discussions and engagement which take place on public anti-feminist platforms, analysing content created and shared, language of comments and public posts, the kind of content which became '[viral](#)' and the nature of [online misogyny](#). The growth of these platforms has become a conspicuous phenomenon observed over time. In order to capture their growth and understand the spikes in their activity over a period of time, a software called [CrowdTangle](#) was used to track, analyse, and report on the content in a select number of public groups.

Online content analysis was undertaken to observe the varied commentary and reactions on news media posts, pages of prominent figures, and Facebook accounts of influencers instigating backlash and spreading misinformation. The research study was continued throughout 2021-2022 by JPGSPH researchers. To contextualise the research methodology and corroborate the online evidence, key informant interviews were conducted with young feminists and organisations, many of whom have an active social media presence. This research highlighted the following issues:



Trend toward online backlash: There is a gradual and well-organised shift of anti-feminist backlash from physical spaces on to digital platforms with more emboldened misogynistic rhetoric influenced by Western pseudo-science, misinformation, and patriarchal interpretations of dominant religious and cultural beliefs or norms.



Digital backlash takes many forms: Digital backlash manifests through targeted social media campaigns, trolling, doxing, and public calls for boycotts, often fuelled by viral content or news exposing digital abuses. This escalation contributes to widespread misogyny in both public and private spaces.



Online and offline backlash are mutually reinforcing: Online observations of Facebook groups and key informant interviews showed that the growth of these groups also intensifies offline backlash, including direct death threats, account blocking, mass reporting, and doxing, significantly impacting the private lives of women and gender-diverse people.



The **manosphere** is both global and local: The rise of men-only groups and online activities centred on generating localised backlash against feminism and women's rights in the digital public space, signals a formation of Bangladesh's manosphere in line with worldwide trends. There is a global rise in online GBV and galvanisation of support towards 'men's rights' which reinforce narrow patriarchal-capitalist narratives of gendered roles of the family, community, and nation.

In conducting this research study, one concern was the issue of informed consent, given that researchers were analysing user posts and behaviours without direct interaction. There is an [ongoing discussion within the global research community about ethical standards and protocols for studying TFGBV](#). Additionally, the study highlighted a sharp ideological divide between the researchers, who themselves were young men in Dhaka advocating for emancipation and universal rights, and their peers who were propagating strident anti-feminist opinions. Immersing themselves in deeply misogynistic digital spaces led to constant anxiety for the researchers, who feared being exposed as infiltrators, doxxed, or mistakenly perceived as endorsing such views due to their engagement with the content.

"I avoided leaving a paper trail knowing my views are on the polar opposite of what we found and any kind of intrusion will be costly and my account might be hacked. If discovered, they might paint me as an agent or use my name to spread false information."



Researcher, 25 y/o



Researcher, 27 y/o

"We had to be very cautious not to have our names enjoined with these groups. A colleague was surprised that we were actively following this group, was puzzled why were members of these groups in the first place."

The pervasiveness of anti-feminist backlash narratives and the rise of technology-facilitated violence prompt critical considerations for feminist movements across contexts as to what would work to counter such backlash. Activists, researchers, and community organisers, among many others, find themselves at a critical juncture – especially in global South contexts – where the language of anti-feminist backlash is intertwined with a purportedly anti-colonial, anti-Western protectionism of women's bodies, local values, and morality.

Key **insights** from this research study include the following:

- Stronger **South-South collaborations** between progressive actors and researchers are needed to counter transnational anti-gender forces. Rather than only relying on Western-led interventions and research methodologies on both online and offline spaces, it is important for researchers in the global South to foster modes of collaboration to counter the ingrained practices of digital misogyny which are spreading rapidly and with much more effect due to widespread information sharing amongst backlash actors. Only through greater South-South learning and solidarity can effective strategies to combat disinformation campaigns on social media be developed.
- There is a critical need to foster **safe spaces for men online**. The exploration of online spaces to understand the interactions of misogyny, patriarchal dynamics, and masculinities also show how important it is to foster safe spaces for men online. Such spaces are needed, so that vulnerabilities and diverse forms of masculine norms can be discussed, and restrictive gender norms demystified. This is also an essential starting point for building solidarities among men and by men for gender justice agendas.



PRACTICE STORY

Working Across Online/Offline Spaces in Kenya

Kenya is facing an intensifying patriarchal backlash, notably in online spaces where women in public life, including politicians, journalists, and activists, face cyber-bullying and harassment, doxing, online misogyny, threats, misinformation, and disinformation. Anti-gender groups advance patriarchal agendas by spreading malicious and false information about feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements and gender equality initiatives, with the aim of discrediting them. This remains the biggest challenge facing gender justice actors and organisations involved in countering backlash work in Kenya. Whenever women speak out against sexism, they are [repeatedly met with coordinated attacks from online mobs](#), aiming to downplay their claims and silence them through harassment and intimidation. [Homophobic and transphobic violence](#) is also on the rise and being used by backlash actors (both individuals and organisations) to punish and silence those who openly reject the patriarchal imposition of compulsory heterosexuality and fixed female/male sex assignment.

Another common strategy used by conservative critics of gender equality programming and anti-gender actors is to use the 'what about men?' card to claim that gender equality policies and initiatives are unfair to men and an attack on so-called 'traditional' African values. This framing appears to have influenced public opinion and become a significant obstacle to further progress on gender equality and women's empowerment. When men do speak up to challenge this framing, as well as online misogyny more generally as allies in solidarity with women, they also become targets of digital violence. Working with men and boys since 2001 to support gender equality, ADSOCK's staff and activists are increasingly being met with online attacks from groups and individuals whose main agenda is to maintain the status quo that prioritises male supremacy and dominance.

In response, ADSOCK recognised the need to bridge online and offline advocacy, and with support from the Countering Backlash programme, has focused on integrating digital activism with community engagement, ensuring a synchronised approach, combining pressure and persuasion to advance the gender equality agenda and to counter patriarchal backlash online. Strategies to do so include:



Monitoring online conversations: [ADSOCK has used social listening as part of an early warning system to identify potential threats or misinformation](#) and to be able to respond quickly to such backlash. Based on past and current experience, a rapid response is essential in order to minimise harm, and this involves putting in place systems to quickly identify who is best placed to respond, which channels should be used, and what messages will resonate with specific target audiences.



Countering dis/misinformation: ADSOCK intentionally collaborates with other like-minded organisations and individuals working within the gender equality space to build a strong network of support and amplify counter-speech in the digital space to counter backlash. Much of this collaborative work is focused on raising public awareness of the need for fact-checking and working with concerned social media platforms to remove false and harmful content.



Sharing educational content: ADSOCK constantly shares educational content aimed at debunking gender myths, through organised online petitions as well as hosted X spaces and Facebook Live discussions. The organisation also facilitates digital storytelling initiatives where survivors of SGBV and GBV and activists can safely share experiences and learn from each other on their journey to greater resilience.



Internal capacity building: ADSOCK has also prioritised in-house sensitisation trainings in order to equip staff with the knowledge and skills they need to identify and respond to online harassment and misinformation. Preparing the team to effectively deal with cases of online backlash is an ongoing prerequisite for all their work.



Psychosocial support: Recognising the emotional toll of online backlash and the need for increased self-care and resilience, ADSOCK channels efforts towards supporting individuals who are facing such harassment through psychosocial support and by offering resources for online safety and wellness.

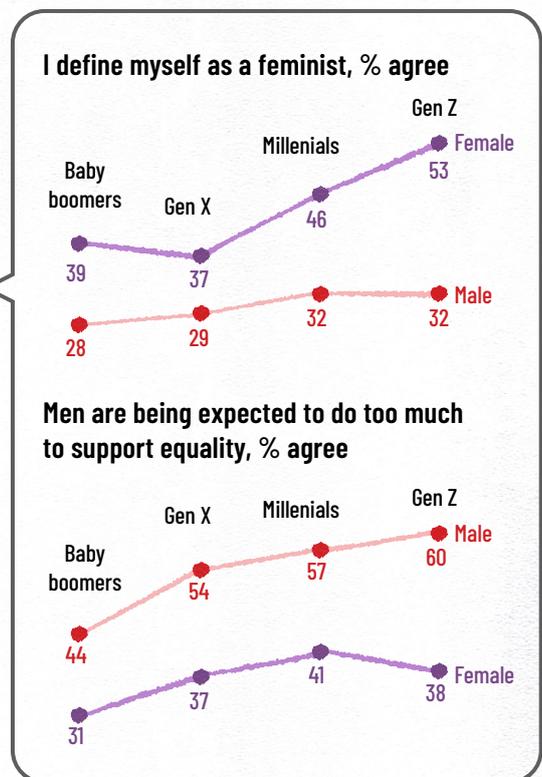
All of the above have led to heightened awareness, with over 3,400 monthly online impressions, increased community-led action against GBV, and strengthened digital and offline networks advocating for gender equality. Lessons learned include the importance of using the right language and framing of the issues for different audiences, the effectiveness of combining digital and face-to-face engagement, and the need for sustained advocacy efforts to maintain momentum.

THEME 6

WORKING WITH GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Gender equality work with boys and young men has been a longstanding focus of gender programming under the rubric of 'male engagement'. The rationale for this focus is that it is important to shape the gender socialisation of male youth in support of gender equality and that young men, compared to older men, will be more open to gender equality messaging. There is some evidence that gender transformative programming with boys and young men can be effective in promoting more gender equitable attitudes and practices.

But there is also a growing body of research revealing a more complex generational picture of male support for or opposition to gender equality. Studies of the online manosphere, and in particular the cultural prominence and commercial success of misogynistic male 'influencers', highlight an apparent trend toward increased opposition to gender equality and feminism among young men in many societies. A 2025 survey of nearly 24,000 people across 30 countries found that, of all the generations surveyed, it was among the youngest generation that men, compared to women, were most likely to respond negatively to a range of questions relating to support for gender equality. Recent election results in a range of countries show increasing levels of support for anti-feminist right-wing parties among young men. Research based on the last wave of the European Election Study (EES), collected in late spring 2024 in all countries participating in the European Parliament elections, found that *'the increase in voting for the far right between 2019 and 2024 is similar for men and women, [but] young men have seen a much stronger increase in considering voting for the far right'* (Abou-Chadi 2024: 5).



At the same time, young men have been prominent in the worldwide wave of social protests of recent years, such as the 'Gen Z' protests in Kenya in 2024. Fuelled by public anger at economic precarity, official corruption, and state violence, young men are drawn to the streets to protest their blocked life prospects and pathways to male adulthood. In these conditions, it is easy for anti-gender forces to incite feelings of aggrieved male entitlement, directing men's anger toward 'women's empowerment' as the cause of their disempowerment. But many young men are also protesting the patriarchal rule of older men, whose prolonged grip on power in many societies blocks democratic progress for people of all genders.

Patriarchy Strand partners have explored the gender dynamics of generational differences, as discussed in the Practice Stories from [Kenya](#) and [India](#). Insights arising from this work include the importance of:



Facilitating cross-generational dialogues on gender issues: ADSOCK in Kenya brought younger and older men together to reflect on the attitudes, behaviours and social norms which contribute to men's use of violence and patriarchal backlash. These intergenerational dialogue forums fostered greater awareness that gender equality is not just a 'women's issue' but rather a societal issue, which requires inter-gender and intergenerational solidarity to address.



Using cultural approaches to question the patriarchal status quo: Making use of community theatre (ADSOCK in Kenya) and Community Fairs (SAHAYOG/CHSJ in India) activated young men's interest in reflecting on the harms of the patriarchal status quo, not only for women and girls but also for men and boys.



Reaching young men through social media: ADSOCK makes extensive use of social media channels in its messaging to young people on countering backlash. In India, some HQ Fellows integrated work on digital literacy and responsibility into their work with young men on social solidarity for gender equality.



PRACTICE STORY

Working with Generational Dynamics in Kenya

Age is significant when it comes to resistance to gender equality in Kenya. Older generations tend to uphold patriarchal social norms, growing up at a time when gender roles were more rigidly defined and were seen as natural and divinely ordained, or simply the best way for society to function. From this perspective, gender equality can often be seen as a loss for them rather than a gain for society as a whole. The situation is different for younger generations, given the changes in Kenyan society over the last 30 years or more. [Substantial if slow progress in advancing gender equality](#) has opened new opportunities for women and girls, as well as challenging rigid social hierarchies and fostering expectations of greater social equality, not only between genders but also between generations. Growing up in this context, there are opportunities for younger men to question the negative consequences of social hierarchies and power imbalances, structured by age as well as gender. At the same time, worsening economic conditions and a political system dominated by a tiny elite have led to widespread frustration and anger at the stalled prospects for social progress, [which exploded in the Gen Z protests of 2024](#).

These conditions can make communication, between genders and between generations, difficult. Patriarchal systems tend to benefit older generations, particularly men, by granting them greater power and privilege, and therefore they may be reluctant to relinquish this power, even if it means greater equality for all. Resistance to gender equality by older generations is now combining with

a widespread frustration among younger men at their blocked life progress, fuelling an intensified patriarchal backlash. Creating meaningful dialogue between genders and generations to foster mutual understanding and greater solidarity is pivotal to the ongoing work of countering patriarchal backlash. To this end, ADSOCK creates platforms for women and men as well as the young and the old to come together and share their experiences and perspectives in a safe, non-threatening and conducive environment for active interactions that ensure the valuing of divergent views and voices.

“As a proud Maasai and a son of a nomad, my culture and heritage have always been the core of my identity. Growing up, I was immersed in the rich traditions of my people, from deep connection to nature to the value of bravery, respect and unity. However, through training with ADSOCK, I came to understand that while our culture is a source of pride, certain practices needed to change for the betterment of our community.”

– Paul Tirike, Male Ally from Kajiado County, where dialogue forums and trainings have taken place

Intergenerational dialogues create an opportunity for the elderly and the young to meet and interact, sharing experiences and ideas and learning from one another. A key starting point for ADSOCK’s design and use of intergenerational dialogues to counter patriarchal backlash is that overcoming intergenerational discord and disconnect requires a commitment to empathetic listening and to nurturing a desire to find common ground. Through inter-gender and inter-generational dialogues in 16 Kenyan counties between April 2024 and February 2025, ADSOCK facilitated conversations between elders, youth, and policymakers, with these forums allowing community leaders to hear first-hand the experiences of young women and men.

Sixteen dialogue forums involving thirty participants each were convened by ADSOCK, bringing on board men and women of different ages from the target counties. These dialogues used a range of approaches, including storytelling, role-play, and case studies, as well as brainstorming and collaborative action planning, to engage participants in the process of unpacking issues of inequality, discriminatory norms, and patriarchy, and in collaborative action planning to promote sustainable change. These forums were facilitated by ADSOCK staff assisted by community advocates from the host communities. Key **strategies** included:



Storytelling: During the dialogue forums, participants employed the power of storytelling to vividly illustrate the lived experiences of patriarchal backlash, fostering empathy and shared understanding across age groups. By sharing personal experiences, individual men and women gave accounts of how gender norms and societal expectations have changed over the years, citing changes in the social, education, economic, and political arenas as being major influences on this change.



Cultural references: Familiar cultural references were used by both participants and moderators during the dialogue forums to elicit personal reflection, create a sense of shared identity, bridge generational gaps, and provoke discussion. This use of cultural references helped establish a foundation for understanding complex issues around patriarchal backlash while creating a shared sense of belonging among participants. Proverbs, expressions, and folklore that are drawn from a shared cultural knowledge and that convey cultural values and beliefs were invoked in the learning process for more relatable learning experiences by the participants.



Community theatre: A range of [community theatre techniques](#) were used to critically examine power dynamics, privilege, and the ways in which gender roles are reinforced by institutions and social interactions in daily life. Community theatre proved to be effective in translating political issues, such as patriarchal systems and structures that perpetuate gender inequality, into everyday concerns.



Image Description: Inter-generational dialogue forum in Samburu County, with young men (morans) and community elders from the area. *Photo Credit: Advocates for Social Change-Kenya*

In recognition of the fact that social change requires sustained collective action, these dialogue forums served as a starting point for building bridges between generations and genders to create a more equitable and just society. At the core of all the conversations during each of these forums was the conviction that gender equality is not just a 'women's issue' but rather a societal issue that requires the involvement of everyone. ADSOCK has used dialogue forums to foster intergenerational solidarity by encouraging allyship towards the realisation of gender equality. In doing so, the dialogue forums presented an opportunity for individual and collective reflection on attitudes, behaviours, and social norms which contribute to men's use of violence and patriarchal backlash. Most of the participants in the intergenerational dialogue forums reported an increased understanding of intergenerational perspectives on gender equality, with approximately 95 per cent of them agreeing that the forums created a safe space for open and honest dialogue. The dialogue forums have demonstrated the value of bringing people of different generations and genders together and using cultural storytelling and practices of trust-building and deep listening to foster greater solidarity toward a vision of gender equality and social justice.



PRACTICE STORY

Working On Fraternity with Young Men and Boys in India

The gender backlash in India is closely tied to politically-motivated religious polarisation. [Hindu nationalism, in which national identity is fused with an overtly masculinised religious resurgence](#), celebrates a supremacist Hindu masculinity, which exercises 'benevolent' patriarchal control over Hindu women to protect them from the alleged sexual threat of Muslim men and their supposed sexual deviancy. Social media misinformation and disinformation campaigns have been key strategies for fuelling this masculinised religious polarisation. Especially related to religion, such 'fake news' campaigns are a recent phenomenon in India, but they have proven effective in feeding off and

deepening existing prejudices. Researchers have also noted that the youth who are experiencing greater disruptions in their gender role expectations are more susceptible to such polarising ideas, not least young men who are struggling to fulfil social expectations of masculinity in a context of growing [economic inequality and precarity](#).

Young men and boys are thus an important focus of work to counter backlash in India. [MASVAW](#) has been working with men and boys on violence prevention and gender equality in UP for many years. Recognising the challenges facing this work in a context of growing religious polarisation, [SAHAYOG and CHSJ](#) convened a group of seven MASVAW gender activists (HQ Fellows) to explore ways of addressing such polarisation and the aggressive masculinities that accompany it.

Through collective reflection and discussion, the [HQ Fellows identified the constitutional principle of 'fraternity'](#) as the basis on which to challenge religious polarisation and foster greater social solidarity between Muslims and Hindus in their local communities. Some of the HQ Fellows took on the challenge of integrating work on building social solidarity through strengthening fraternity into their work with younger people. Such youth-focused work has particular challenges. Unlike with older men, the younger men did not have personal histories of solidarity or coexistence among communities before the rise of politically-motivated religious polarisation. At the same time, young people are also more exposed to social media and 'fake news'. In some places, the HQ Fellows noted that young men, many of whom were migrant labourers in bigger cities, returned to their villages with ideas of religious polarisation which the older men did not have.

In response, HQ Fellows developed a range of **strategies** to address issues of solidaristic fraternity in their work with young men and adolescent boys:

- **Linking fraternity to nationhood:** 'Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav' was a 75 week-long celebration of the 75th anniversary of Indian Independence held between March 2021 and August 2023. It provided the HQ Fellows with an opportunity for integrating messages around fraternity into their campaigns with young people. This included campaign activities such as the Bandhutwa Mela (Fraternity Fairs) and Bandhutwa Chaupal (Fraternity Conversations), to discuss the idea of fraternity and its significance. They encouraged the youth to look for signs of solidarity and coexistence in their village and surroundings. The youth were also encouraged to talk to some village seniors to learn more about past practices of solidarity between religious communities
- **Challenging stereotypical masculinities:** Another innovation was the introduction of sessions on fraternity and coexistence within the existing 'gender mela' framework that HQ Fellows had been implementing earlier. 'Gender Melas' (Gender Fairs) are celebrations with adolescent boys

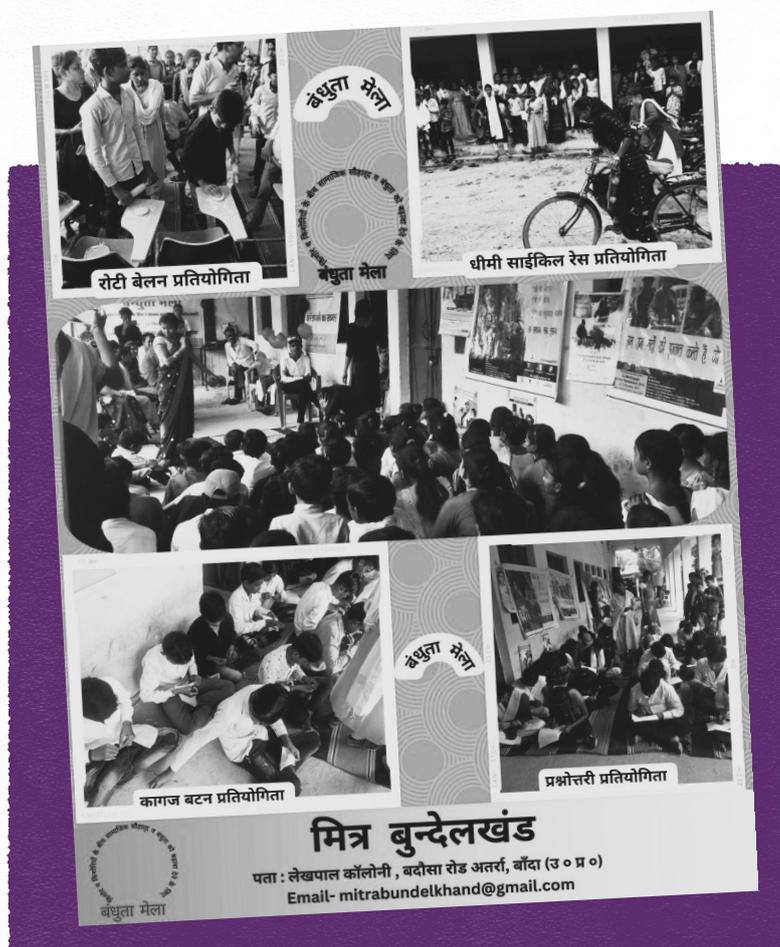


Image Description: Poster by an HQ Fellow showing initiatives with youth, title: "Fostering Friendships and Fraternity Among Young People". Pictures clockwise from top left: Boys learn making roti (flat bread); Slow Cycling race for girls; Session on Fraternity; Quiz contest on gender and social solidarity; Boys learn to sew buttons.

and girls where several games and activities are organised to promote the idea of breaking gender role stereotypes. These include needle-work competition and roti-making for boys, and slow-cycling and fix-the-fused-bulb race for girls. These activities were augmented by quizzes on topics such as the Constitution and 'Sajhi Virasat'.

- **Strengthening media literacy and digital safety:** Some HQ Fellows integrated work on solidaristic fraternity and digital awareness of 'fake news' into their ongoing work on gender equality, digital inclusion and safety with young people. This reinforced the work that HQ Fellows had already been doing to increase girls' access to mobile phones and prevent digital harassment by working with adolescent boys. HQ Fellows started including discussions on 'fake news' and ways to verify such news, especially before sharing such posts, with the boys. Discussions were organised with boys on how to be responsible digital users both for gender equality and promoting social solidarity.

Some **signs of change** have already been noted from this work with younger people, and this includes changes both in gender-related behaviours and in social solidarity. This includes boys participating in domestic work, supporting their sisters to have greater mobility outside their homes, sharing mobile phone access with their sisters, helping their sisters with schoolwork, joint celebrations among young people on festivals like Eid and Holi, and greater familiarity with local histories of shared traditions. Some of the young people have also started sharing videos of shared traditions with each other.

THEME 7

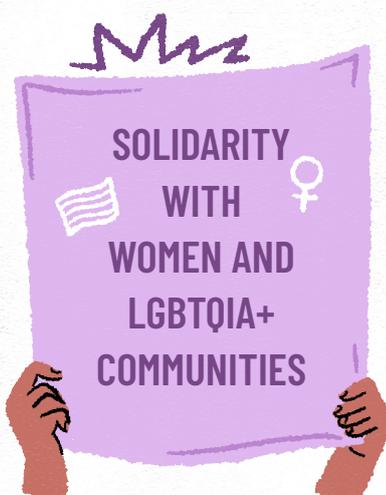
STRENGTHENING SOLIDARITY PRACTICES



There has long been an emphasis within gender equality work on strengthening men's allyship in support of women's demands for equal rights. The MenEngage Alliance, a global network of organisations and individuals working with men and boys for gender equality, [supports its members to be accountable allies](#) in order to strengthen collaborations and build trust across movements for gender justice and to be more effective in working on gender equality, and women's and LGBTQIA+ rights. [Guidance developed by UNFPA lists specific ways that men can be better allies for gender equality](#), and [research is also highlighting the range of strategies that can be used to mobilise men](#) as allies to counter gender-based violence and promote gender equality.

7 WAYS MEN CAN BE BETTER ALLIES FOR GENDER EQUALITY

1. Actively listen to women's perspectives.
2. Reflect on your own power and privilege as a man.
3. Credit your female co-workers' ideas fairly.



Allyship work is based on the belief that members of dominant social groups, in this case men, have a responsibility to support efforts to challenge the norms, policies and practices that privilege them and oppress others, in this case women and LGBTQIA+ people. On the understanding that institutionalised oppression will persist until members of dominant social groups become actively involved in ending it, allyship work with men often grounds its vision of ending patriarchal domination in appeals to men's familial and personal relationships, urging that men be better allies to women and LGBTQIA+ family members, friends, and work colleagues. Such appeals are becoming more urgent, given rollbacks on hard-won gains in women's and LGBTQIA+ rights in some countries, and the widespread re-normalisation of misogyny and homo/transphobia in public and political discourse across the world.

Based on the work of the Patriarchy Strand partners, and shared reflections on this work by partners at virtual and in-person convenings, the following **insights** relating to men's allyship in countering backlash are noteworthy:



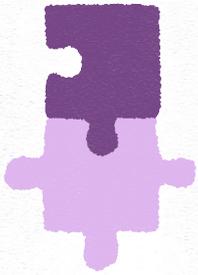
From allyship to solidarity: Male allyship can be understood and practised in different ways, but it remains true that it is commonly framed in terms of men supporting or helping women. As many partners noted, this framing can be problematic, reinforcing a sense of women needing men's support and implying that men need not see themselves as agents or beneficiaries of change in efforts to promote gender equality. Enlisting men's involvement in countering backlash is better framed in terms of men's solidarity with women and LGBTQIA+ people in struggles for gender justice, a solidarity that calls for men's individual and collective action inspired by a shared vision of and commitment to a more just world for people of all genders.



From binary to intersectional understandings of gender power: As JPGSPH's [work](#) in Bangladesh makes clear, it is important to recognise that men's experiences and expressions of patriarchal masculinities are shaped by their positioning in multiple hierarchies of power. Strengthening men's solidarity practices for gender justice requires an intersectional understanding of their lived experience of gender power.



From rhetoric to action: It is also clear from partners' work in Bangladesh, Kenya, and India that efforts to strengthen men's allyship/solidarity must pay attention to the frequent gap between what men say and what they do. This requires creating spaces for honest conversations about the barriers that can prevent men from acting upon stated commitments to allyship in order to identify personal and collective strategies to overcome these barriers. This in turn calls for more emphasis on peer support and skills-building to push, inspire, and enable men to be more accountable in follow through on commitments to solidarity practices.



PRACTICE STORY

Exploring opportunities for allyship among youth in informal settlements and male university students in Bangladesh

As part of its Countering Backlash project, [JPGSPH](#) has looked at how to conceptualise and foster men's [allyship](#) in ways that are inclusive, nuanced, and rooted in the realities of the communities it seeks to engage. This work must start by meeting people where they are at and fostering unthreatening environments for dialogue in order to move closer to a society where everyone has a stake in the fight for justice.

During the course of researching young men's lived experiences and embodiment of masculinities, it became apparent that traditional research methods were proving inadequate. Using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions when seeking out men's perceptions of gender justice and of being allies for women's rights produced limited, hesitant responses. When speaking about issues faced by women, men seemed unable to feel or acknowledge that they were, at some level, responsible for the conditions which normalised or legitimised violence against women or restrictive practices of gender roles.

To counter this, the JPGSPH team decided to use more interactive research methods, including role-play sessions and '[meme discussion sessions](#)'. With **young men and adolescents in the informal settlements**, interactive role plays allowed participants to step into different scenarios, exploring how they might respond to situations involving gender-based discrimination, harassment, or backlash. These scenarios ranged from playing out an issue of harassment in the community to a man being isolated from his peers and family due to anxieties around not being 'man enough'. This approach revealed a stark contrast between what men said about allyship and what they did in practice. In one-to-one interviews, the young men would profess being against harassment and GBV and said they would take action against it if needed. Using interactive role plays brought out richer, more honest conversations. During the role plays, young men revealed how frequently they witness such harassment of women but how often they feel unable to intervene. Young men were more willing to share their struggles, contradictions, and uncertainties when engaged in role-playing or group discussions rather than in simply answering direct questions.

“During the interviews, we often heard men articulate what they thought we wanted to hear – statements about supporting gender equality or in plain words, being supportive of aspirations of their mothers or sisters. But it was in the role-play sessions where the real shift happened. We saw the hesitation, saw them experience the discomfort and go through moments of realisation when they confronted their own contradictions. It was in those interactions, where they had to step into someone else’s shoes or unpack the memes they casually scrolled past, that the conversations became real. It was about being honest regarding how they felt in their conflicted positionally of wanting to be allies while being constrained by societal expectations of masculine behaviour.”



Meme discussion sessions were used with **young male students in private and public universities**. The process involved compiling a series of publicly available memes sharing anti-feminist ideas and mocking feminists/female celebrities or feminist movements. The research team then developed a specific set of questions for group discussion to explore participants’ thoughts and reactions towards anti-feminist content online and the meanings and motivations they assigned to allyship in response to such content. Together, the young men and researchers analysed the world of anti-feminist content on social media sites, unpacking the underlying messages and exploring how they reinforced harmful stereotypes of masculinity, and legitimised anti-feminist ideologies. This process helped the men critically reflect on their own consumption and sharing of such content, fostering a more nuanced understanding of how online spaces shape attitudes and behaviours.



Image Description: A reflection circle from a half-day session with adolescent boys in Kallyanpur on exploring ‘what allyship would look like’ based on specific scenarios of injustices occurring in their context being conducted by JPGSPH researchers. *Photo Credit: Raiyan Islam Kaiko, Documentary Photographer, Bangladesh*

This approach helped in identifying how young men and adolescent boys express and perceive backlash and their ability to become allies to gender justice movements. This is both in physical spaces where young men's perceptions and identities are shaped by the precarious economic conditions in which they live, as well as in online spaces where specific, localised perceptions of patriarchal masculinity and femininity dominate conversations on gender.

Key **insights** emerging from this research include the following:

- It can be challenging to **strike the right balance between including men and empowering women**. One of the emerging challenges was the difficulty of 'including' men in feminist discourse without reinforcing patriarchal structures. The researchers noted that male allyship, while essential, must be approached with caution to avoid centring men's voices over women's experiences. At the same time, the study highlighted the potential for men to become powerful advocates for gender justice when they are engaged in ways that resonate with their lived realities.
- The idea of male allyship was often **co-opted or misunderstood**. Some men saw it as a performative act, while others struggled to define what it meant to be an ally in a way that felt authentic and impactful. This blurriness underscored the need for clearer, more localised frameworks for understanding allyship.
- The conversation around allyship, even during interactive sessions, was framed by a **binary understanding of gender** and as such has left out conversations on the stigma and other issues around gender diversity and the more urgent need for solidarity for those who are marginalised.
- From interactions with young men over the period of this project, it is clear that the **development of solidarity** in relation to issues of gender justice are deeply shaped by men's ability to have spaces where they are able to be vulnerable and honest with each other and themselves, and to develop communities of care and peer support.

THEME 8

RESPONDING TO MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

There is growing concern about the links between men's, and especially young men's, mental and emotional health concerns and their support for backlash forces and ideas. [Research on men's participation in anti-feminist and misogynistic online forums and sites, often referred to as the manosphere](#), does show some correlation with men's self-reported isolation, depression, and anxiety. It is significant that many online anti-gender actors and influencers brand themselves as providers of self-help guidance and emotional support for men. It is also the case that conventional understandings of gender roles and differences in many societies have been upended, not only by progress, however uneven and limited, on women's rights, but also by economic restructuring, leaving many men unable to fulfil societal expectations of 'breadwinner' manhood. As Countering Backlash partners found in their work, this has left many young men confused about masculine identity, social roles, and personal relationships. The impacts of Covid-19 are only now being fully understood, but it seems clear that the pandemic not only intensified feelings of isolation and disconnection, but also significantly increased online interaction, and thus men's exposure to online anti-feminist messaging and organising.

At the same time, many feminist activists and [scholars reject a simplistic account of backlash](#) in terms of a purported '[crisis of masculinity](#)'. Not only does such an account ignore the many ways in which men continue to be privileged by patriarchal norms, practices, and policies, but it also appears to excuse men from responsibility for contributing to rather than countering widespread and longstanding societal misogyny. Scholars associated with [US-based Institute for Research on Male Supremacism \(IRMS\)](#), researching the violence perpetrated by men identifying as incels ('involuntary celibates'), have noted the growing tendency to explain this misogynistic violence in terms of incel men's self-reported mental health problems. [But they insist that '\[m\]isogyny and misogynistic motivated violence are not caused by mental illness, poor mental health, or autism, but rather the result of misogynist and patriarchal structures'](#) (Kelly et al. 2024: 105).

Men's own experiences of patriarchal violence, however, are important to consider in efforts to counter backlash. The patriarchal violence that enacts and entrenches backlash reaffirms the logic of masculine domination and feminine subjugation. But this same logic underpins men's use of sexual violence against other men; such violence feminises men as rape-able and sexualises them as 'other' (that is, as non-heterosexual). Through its [work](#) with male survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, RLP in Uganda has drawn attention to the links between misogyny and homophobia in the violence that maintains patriarchal hierarchies. Challenging this violence is an urgent priority for countering backlash in Uganda, as elsewhere, and insights from RLP's work, as discussed by partners in the Countering Backlash programme, highlight the need to:

THE MANOSPHERE

"SELF-HELP" FOR MEN

- Anti-feminism
- Return to traditional values
- Patriarchy

"GUIDANCE" FOR MEN

- Hypermasculinity = strength
- LGBTQIA+ = immoral
- Bring back gender roles!

"SUPPORT" FOR MEN

- Blame women
- Men are "victims"
- No to women's rights movements

Amplified by Covid-19



Break the silence of male survivors: All survivors of patriarchal violence need mental health support to heal from its trauma, not least male survivors who can feel doubly shamed by being feminised and sexualised as other. Supporting male survivors to speak out about this shame can help to reveal the misogyny and homophobia at work in patriarchal backlash.



Link collective healing with collective advocacy: In Uganda, peer support groups for male survivors have become advocacy groups, demanding a different future for people of all genders. Where backlash actors appeal to nostalgia for a patriarchal past or visions of a reinvigorated patriarchal future, male survivors can contribute to stronger collective action for gender justice and sexual rights for all.



PRACTICE STORY

Supporting male survivors amid backlash in Uganda

RLP has been providing legal assistance and advocacy services to refugees and asylum seekers in [Uganda](#) since 1997. Working with survivors, both female and male, of SGBV, torture, and other forms of trauma has become an increasing focus of RLP's work, [given that sexual violence is a feature of many recent and ongoing conflicts in Africa](#). Recognising the extent of refugee men's suffering from male-perpetrated SGBV led RLP to initiate specific services for male survivors, who remain heavily stigmatised in a society that associates vulnerability to violence with femininity and whose needs are largely neglected by humanitarian policy and programming. A comprehensive programme to support male survivors of sexual violence has been developed in settlements for Congolese and South Sudanese refugees, which includes individual and group counselling sessions, medical care and treatment, and advocacy support to access justice and reparations. Work with community leaders and other stakeholders has helped to raise awareness about the issue of male-on-male sexual violence and to challenge the stigma and silence that often surrounds it.

A key aspect of RLP's work on male-on-male sexual violence has been to provide space and support for male SGBV survivors to organise their own collective healing and advocacy through a network of peer support groups, which provide a safe space for male survivors to share their experiences and receive support from others who have gone through similar experiences. [MOHRAU](#) was formed by a group of male survivors receiving RLP services, and [RLP has continued to support this initiative by providing technical assistance](#), South-South exchanges, and trainings on media work for advocacy. Another component of RLP's support to male survivors' collective healing and advocacy has been to use qualitative research to better understand their challenges and needs in terms of emotional, psychological, and social well-being, as well as the specific benefits of peer support and collective advocacy by and for male survivors.

"Mutual support seems to enable simultaneous group and individual healing. It also involves challenging the sources of their marginalisation, where a collective questioning of traditional patriarchal norms of male supremacy and invulnerability also helps to break their isolation: their healing is intrinsically political, and their activism profoundly therapeutic."

– From [2018 research study with 36 MOHRAU members and four of their female partners](#)

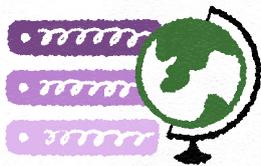
Research by RLP has highlighted the links between male-on-male sexual violence and the preservation of patriarchal norms of hierarchy and domination. Men's use of sexual violence against other men reaffirms the logic of masculine domination and feminine subjugation; this violence feminises men as rape-able and sexualises them as 'other' (that is, as non-heterosexual in a context of rising homophobia). In a context of growing patriarchal backlash in Uganda, RLP saw the need to [examine further the experiences of refugee male SGBV survivors in order to better understand how therapeutic activism by male survivors](#) might contribute to challenging the misogyny and homophobia that fuel backlash.

As part of the Countering Backlash programme, RLP undertook a study with South Sudanese survivors of male-on-male rape in a refugee settlement context in Adjumani, Uganda. Through snowball sampling, 21 South Sudanese male survivors of rape, ranging in age from 23 to 47 years, were recruited from refugee settlements in Adjumani district. These participants represented a diverse range of ethnic and regional backgrounds within South Sudan. Eleven survivors had finished primary school education, seven of the survivors had finished secondary education, and 3 survivors had no formal education. Four survivors were married but three of them had abandoned their families, one was still in contact with his family in South Sudan. One survivor was married, and sixteen survivors were unmarried.

The **study design** included:



Rigorous ethical standards, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and the 'do no harm' principle. Referral pathways to culturally appropriate support services were established before data collection began, ensuring participant safety and well-being.



A **culturally sensitive and contextually grounded methodology**, using in-depth narrative interviews and phenomenological analysis to understand the complex interplay between conflict-related trauma and socio-cultural factors affecting their emotional, psychological, and social realities.



Trauma-informed narrative-based interviewing techniques, emphasising active listening, empathy, and respect for individual stories, allowing participants to share their experiences in their own words, at their own pace. The researcher employed a phenomenological approach, seeking to understand the lived experiences of male survivors, including;



Direct observation to facilitate and explore the non-verbal expression of the survivors. The researcher maintained reflexive journals, documenting his own biases, assumptions, and emotional responses, ensuring transparency and critical self-awareness. The research explicitly acknowledges the influence of local belief systems and spiritual practices on how male survivors understand and cope with their experiences.



Data analysis involving **thematic and narrative analysis**, focusing on identifying recurring patterns, cultural meanings, and individual interpretations of trauma. This process was interwoven with a deep contextual analysis, examining the specific conflict dynamics, socio-cultural factors, and institutional responses that shaped the experiences of the survivors.

The **findings** from the study highlight several issues relating to sexual violence and patriarchal backlash, including:

- **Shame:** Sexual violence inflicts deep psychological scars, many of which are invisible and unspoken by survivors. This shame can be intensified for male survivors, who face additional barriers to seeking help due to societal expectations that equate masculinity with power and invulnerability. As one male survivor said, speaking of those who raped him:

"They took more than my land; they took my dignity. I can't speak of it, the shame is too heavy, the words too sharp. I move among these people, but I am a ghost in my own life, haunted by what they did."



- **Personal and social silence:** Shame not only prevents individual survivors from speaking out about their experiences, but also fosters a broader social silence about men's use of sexual violence, not only against women and girls, but also against men and boys. This silence serves to keep patriarchal domination in place.
- **Healing is political:** Supporting survivors of all genders to speak out about their suffering not only can help their healing, but can also challenge the patriarchal norms of violence and domination at the heart of the current backlash. Highlighting the prevalence and impacts of male-on-male rape makes clear the links between misogyny and homophobia, and can help to foster stronger collective action for gender justice and sexual rights to better counter the current backlash.

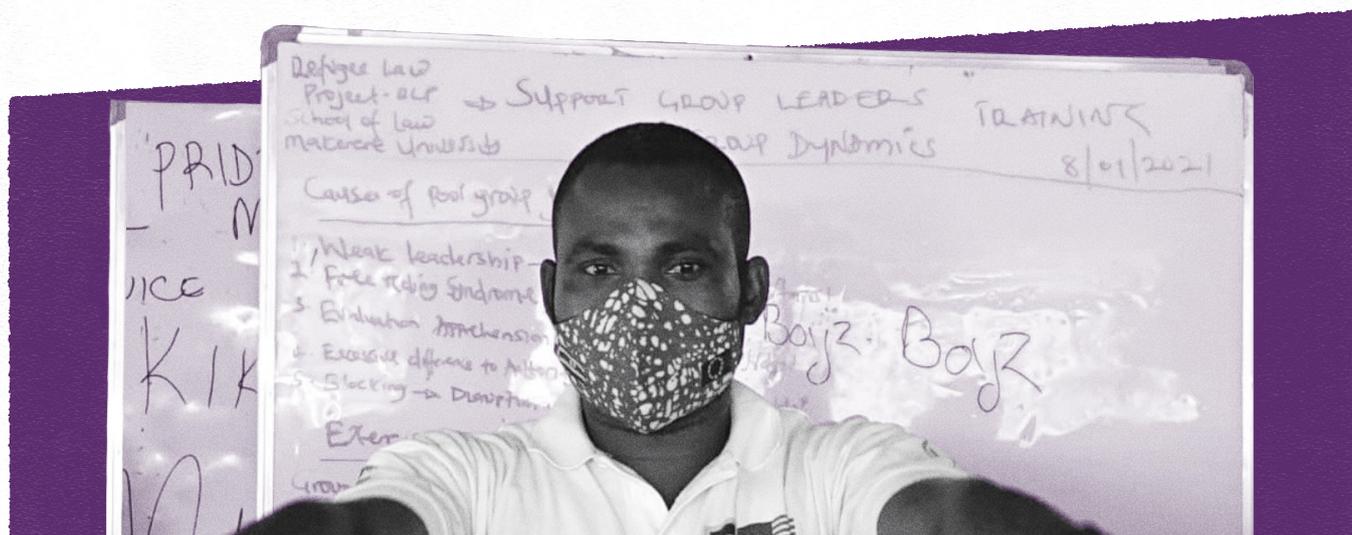


Image Description: Male survivor participating in group dynamic and leadership training. *Photo credit: Refugee Law Project*

These findings will be shared with the affected communities through culturally appropriate formats, such as storytelling circles and community dialogues, ensuring that the information reaches a wider audience. Local stakeholders, including community leaders, traditional healers, and service providers, will be actively involved in the dissemination process. The research aims to contribute to a broader cultural shift, challenging patriarchal notions of masculinity and promoting a more supportive environment for all survivors of sexual violence.

CONCLUSION

This publication has provided tools, stories and insights for ‘troubling masculinities’ in patriarchal backlash – from across our partnerships between Bangladesh, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Türkiye, Uganda and the UK. As flagged in the introduction above, different ways of troubling masculinities in this include: exploring ways in which men troubled in/about their masculinity (and lives) are mobilised in backlash; and the trouble that deployments of ideals of masculinity cause in backlash; as well as troubling our own framings and understandings of men and masculinity in relation to progress and pushback; and troubling how we work with men and masculinities in countering anti-feminist backlash, for better raising critical consciousness, accountability and stronger solidarities.



1/ INSIGHTS FOR LEARNING FROM OUR PAST WORK

- ▶ Recognising the distance travelled
- ▶ Understanding the limitations of the field
- ▶ Seeing our own roles in the current dynamics

A starting point for understanding the problem of the ‘current moment’ has been learning about past frustrations and challenges, as well as what has worked from earlier work. The backsliding on sustainable development goals (SDGs), and a broader depoliticisation in gender and development, with technocratic NGO-isation has taken much energy out of social justice movements. Meanwhile, most progressive development actors have missed the ground shifting under them and backlash has taken them by surprise. There has not been enough attention paid to how much work on gender equality (whether women’s empowerment or engaging men and boys) has been very binary in framing, nor to differences of power between different types of men, women or others, all of which has itself facilitated backlash.

2/ INSIGHTS FOR CONTEXTUALISING BACKLASH

- ▶ Assessing both continuity and change
- ▶ Investigating intersectional masculinities
- ▶ Understanding conditions of violence and trauma

Understanding both the continuities and discontinuities in current manifestations of backlash is important for 'contextualising backlash'. For instance, we need to see how crises are being felt and exploited emotionally in different contexts, such as the uses of aggressive masculinities and religious polarisation by Hindu nationalists in India, or how the patriarchal sectarian (or sextarian) system in Lebanon continues to subordinate women with patriarchal kin relationships. Men's experiences and expressions of masculinities are shaped by their positioning within multiple relations of power in each context (such as in relation to economic, generational, and religious inequalities and difference), which affect their leaning toward and involvement in backlash. A contextually relevant understanding of backlash must also consider conditions of violence and trauma, linked to historical and current conflicts, such as the way in which experiences of male survivors of sexual violence in Uganda highlight how misogyny and homophobia interact in backlash.

3/ INSIGHTS ON THE COMPLEXITY OF BACKLASH

- ▶ Emotional appeals of backlash actors exploiting crises
- ▶ Political tensions between backlash actors
- ▶ Transnational organising of anti-feminist consensus

Across differing contexts, backlash actors exploit 'crisis emotions', namely the anxiety and fear linked to multiple crises (political, economic, health, ecological). Backlash forces have been effective in framing people's insecurities in gendered terms and in narrating solutions that claim to 'fix' the sense of crisis through renewing gender hierarchies. This shared emotional appeal serves also to mask tensions and potential political fault lines within backlash coalitions (religious vs secular, conservative vs libertarian, neoliberal vs protectionist). Such fractures are possible entry points for countering backlash. Despite often being framed in nationalist terms, backlash is increasingly transnationally organised and funded, fuelled by the global rise of the online 'manosphere'. Working through new or/and old conservative civil society networks, certain religious and capitalist groups and anxious states turning increasingly authoritarian, backlash actors are attempting to forge a new anti-feminist consensus. Countering backlash demands organising at all levels to revitalise a more inclusive feminist social justice politics that is responsive to the very real crises being faced by so many.

4/ INSIGHTS FOR CREATIVE APPROACHES TO INSPIRE MEN

- ▶ Building solidarity for social change
- ▶ Interactive tools for self-reflection and accountability
- ▶ Storytelling to change the narrative

It is urgent to develop creative approaches to strengthening solidarities for gender justice in the face of backlash, where gender and other hierarchies are being exploited and divisions reinforced. Good examples from this programme include the use of the constitutional principle of 'fraternity' to counter politically-directed religious polarisation between communities in India, or the use of intergenerational dialogue forums in Kenya, which involve cultural storytelling, deep listening, and trust-building to foster solidarity toward more shared visions of equality and justice. A creative approach to working on strengthening men's self-awareness, reflectivity, and accountability in countering backlash is the use of interactive role plays and social media 'meme' discussions in Bangladesh, which can facilitate more honest conversations among young men about masculinities, the limits of their male allyship, and how their support of women's demands for gender equality could be strengthened. Many of these are narrative-based techniques to craft emotionally accessible, culturally resonant narratives of intergender and intergenerational solidarity, but also across income groups and faith-identified communities.

5/ INSIGHTS FROM WORKING OFFLINE/ONLINE

- ▶ Create safer spaces both online and offline for men
- ▶ Respond rapidly to disinformation and hate speech
- ▶ Use emotionally compelling messaging and framing
- ▶ Strengthen support and safety systems for staff

There is an urgent need to create spaces and processes for men to come together, both online and offline, to share their experiences of misogynistic messaging and build interest and skills for challenging this and to foster solidarities. In this, digital literacy and self-awareness also need to be addressed. The harmful impact of online anti-feminist content on men's behaviour (on- and offline) is partly a function of the speed with which disinformation can spread. We have seen from Kenya how using social listening tools and collectively tracking online hate speech and disinformation can enable quick responses with correct information and counter-messaging, and how work with concerned social media platforms can help to remove false and harmful content. Partners understand the emotional appeals of anti-feminist messaging for many men and have thus learned the importance of crafting emotionally resonant counter-messaging. Those who work to counter backlash often become targets of attacks, so support systems and online/offline safety training are needed to support staff and activists involved. Tools and guidance on addressing online attacks and violence remain dominated by global North perspectives, and we need far more South-South learning.

6/ INSIGHTS ON GENERATIONAL DYNAMICS

- ▶ Facilitating cross-generational dialogues on gender
- ▶ Using cultural approaches to question the status quo
- ▶ Reaching young men through social media

Backlash actors are mobilising younger men and there is a trend of these men being more resistant to gender equality issues. In working with generational differences, it has become urgent to reach out to the 'moveable middle' and foster dialogues across generations, using culturally resonant approaches as well as engaging through social media. Lessons include from Kenya and India, where younger and older men were brought together to reflect on the attitudes, behaviours, and social norms specifically in relation to patriarchal backlash, which fostered greater awareness that it is not just a 'women's issue' but rather a societal problem, needing both inter-gender and intergenerational solidarity. Community theatre (in Kenya) and community fairs (in India) were helpful in raising young men's interest in reflecting on the harms of the patriarchal status quo, not only for women and girls but also for men and boys. In Kenya, we learned of the extensive use of social media channels in messaging to young people on countering backlash, and, in India, some HQ Fellows integrated work on digital literacy and responsibility into their work with young men on social solidarity for gender equality.

7/ INSIGHTS ON MEN'S ALLYSHIP

- ▶ From allyship to solidarity
- ▶ From binary to intersectional understandings of gender and power
- ▶ From rhetoric to action

Male allyship can be understood and practised in different ways, but it remains true that it is commonly framed in terms of men supporting or helping women. This can be problematic, reinforcing a sense of women needing men's protection and implying that men need not see themselves as agents or beneficiaries of change in efforts to promote gender equality. Enlisting men's involvement in countering backlash is better framed in terms of men's solidarity with women and LGBTQI+ people in struggles for gender justice, a solidarity that calls for men's individual and collective action inspired by a shared vision of and commitment to a more just world for people of all genders. As found in Bangladesh, it is important to recognise that men's identification in relation to patriarchal masculinities are shaped by their positioning in multiple hierarchies of power. Thus, strengthening men's solidarity practices for gender justice requires an intersectional understanding of their lived experience of gendered power. It is also clear from partners' work in Bangladesh, Kenya, and India that efforts to strengthen men's allyship/solidarity must attend to the frequent gap between what is said and what is done. This requires creating spaces for honest conversations about the barriers that can prevent men from acting upon stated commitments to allyship, and to identify personal and collective strategies to overcome these barriers. More emphasis is needed on peer support and skills-building to push, inspire and enable men to be more accountable in follow through on commitments to solidarity practices.

8/ INSIGHTS FOR TAKING CARE OF TRAUMA

- ▶ Break the silence of male survivors
- ▶ Link collective healing with collective advocacy

In speaking to the emotional wellbeing of actors in countering backlash, we need to balance visibilising people's trauma with not putting them in harm's way. Our understanding of backlash is evolving, so we also need to deepen and develop our understanding of trauma. All survivors of patriarchal violence need mental health support to heal from its trauma, not least male survivors who can feel doubly shamed by being feminised and sexualised as other. Supporting male survivors to speak out about this shame can help to reveal the misogyny and homophobia at work in patriarchal backlash. In Uganda, peer support groups for male survivors have become advocacy groups, demanding a different future for people of all genders. Where backlash actors appeal to nostalgia for a patriarchal past or visions of a reinvigorated patriarchal future, male survivors can contribute to stronger collective action for gender justice and sexual rights for all.

To understand the current moment of backlash, we must focus more strongly on troubling masculinities to learn better from history and our roles in it – both achievements and failures – and contextualise as well as explore the complexities of backlash against equality, the patriarchal dynamics of which increasingly stretch from local to global levels (networks, resource flows, ideologies, technologies, and methodologies). In responding to counter these actors and forces, we also need to trouble our ways of working with men and boys as well as with women, girls, and other gendered communities. We need more creative approaches, which bridge the worlds of online and offline with greater safety and resilience. We must trouble the ways in which gender and masculinities get treated in binary, categorical terms, and work more intersectionally in new ways across generations and movements for social justice, to challenge the hierarchies and exclusions being reinforced in backlash, whilst moving from chivalric notions of allyship to solidarity through meaningful action. Recognising the role of crises and emotions in current dynamics of backlash, we must work with more care and adopt more open and inclusive approaches to trauma-response and emotional wellbeing, break the silences around all survivors of patriarchal violence – including male and other less visible survivors of SGBV – and practice open solidarities in ways which defuse hate and refuse to be limited by the shackles of handed-down notions of sex and gender.

**COUNTERING
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RECLAIMING
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