

Editorial Note

The Global Rise of Anti-Gender Movements and Feminist Resistance Strategies: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

*In recent years, there has been a noticeable surge in anti-gender and anti-feminist discourses in international politics. Politicians, policymakers, and diverse societal actors in various countries challenge or reject feminist ideas and gender-related concepts, as well as support policy changes that erode the structures and institutions that have been instrumental in upholding women's rights, promoting gender equality, and protecting the rights of LGBTQ people. The special issue of *Politikon: The IAPSS Journal of Political Science* seeks to explore the multifaceted nature of these discourses, examining their origins, implications, and potential impacts on domestic, regional, and international levels. Additionally, it aims to identify strategies and opportunities for feminist resistance and advocacy in the face of the backlash.*

Keywords: Anti-gender Movements; Feminist Resistance; Feminist Movements; Gender Politics; Transnational Solidarity; Right-wing Populism

Introduction

With the multiplying global divisions around feminism and gender equality in recent years, pro- and anti-gender equality discourses play an increasingly meaningful role in national and international “politics of belonging” (Yuval-Davis 2006). A growing number of states incorporate pro-gender equality principles not only into their domestic agendas but also into their foreign policies and diplomatic practices (Aggestam, Rasamond, and Hedling 2024). Many international organizations—from the United Nations to the World Bank—

institutionalize and mainstream gender equality discourses, weaving them into the fabric of international development strategies. At the same time, nationally and internationally a diverse array of political actors contests these normative changes.

Authoritarian states, such as Russia, act as “normative antipreneurs,” actively resisting the assimilation of pro-gender equality norms and feminist concepts, not only within their borders but also on the international stage (Edenborg 2023; Kuteleva 2024; Voss 2019). In many democracies, norms tied to anti-feminism and patriarchy—homophobia, transphobia, and anti-abortion stances—are experiencing a resurgence, closely intertwined with the rise of far-right ideologies (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). Various transnational movements actively challenge same-sex marriage, sex education, and other phenomena they perceive as dangerous manifestations of “gender ideologies” (Harsin 2018; Rothermel 2020). Populist politicians further exploit these sentiments during election campaigns, capitalizing on criticism of feminist and gender equality movements (Avelar et al. 2022; Junn 2017; Vučković Juroš, Dobrotić, and Fleg 2020). Moreover, by allowing the convergence of agendas between conservative actors in the religious and political fields, the anti-gender discourses function as a “symbolic glue,” giving ideological binding to reactionary initiatives and facilitating systems of alliances (Kováts and Pöim 2015; Corrêa, Paternotte, and House 2023).

This special issue *Politikon: The IAPSS Journal of Political Science* stands at a critical juncture, examining these trends through six scholarly contributions. The studies reveal shared mechanisms in the operation of these movements, including media normalization and transnational circulation of anti-gender narratives, while situating them within specific socio-political histories. They also highlight feminist responses and resistance strategies, from digital media activism to grassroots organizing, showing how feminist movements navigate between institutionalization and radical politics while building transnational solidarity networks. The tensions between these opposing forces—anti-gender mobilization and feminist resistance—emerge as key sites for understanding contemporary gender politics.

Structure and Methodological Approaches

The issue opens with Sona Baldrian’s organizational autoethnography examining Armenia’s women’s NGOs after the 2018 regime change. Her firsthand account of how increased foreign aid has reshaped NGO-state relations provides crucial insights into NGOization processes. Similarly, Mariana Fagundes-Ausani conducts multi-site ethnography of feminist media outlets in Brazil and France, enriching her analysis with in-

depth stakeholder interviews. She examines structures and hierarchies within feminist communities and emphasizes strategies they develop to promote gender equality and combat hate speech online.

Anamaria Hanžek's, Ugo Laquière's and Jo Church's contributions further highlight that online spaces emerge as crucial sites for shaping and disseminating contemporary socio-political discourses. Laquière's study highlights Twitter as a platform where anti-gender narratives are propagated by heterogeneous coalitions, ranging from conservative to far-right actors, leveraging digital tools for visibility and mobilization. Similarly, Church examines how trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) Facebook groups foster "intimate publics" by generating a sense of belonging rooted in exclusionary and reactionary ideologies. Hanžek complements this perspective by analyzing Croatian online media's role in framing and mainstreaming conservative ideas, particularly through its portrayal of the "Be Manly" men's rights movement. Collectively, these studies underscore the dual role of online spaces as tools for mobilization and as sites where public perceptions of gender and social movements are constructed, contested, and negotiated.

Finally, Nađa Bobičić and Vanja Petrović employ discourse analysis to examine key historical documents from 1990s Serbia, revealing how post-socialist transitions shaped gender politics. Their work demonstrates how historical context remains crucial for understanding contemporary anti-gender movements and how seemingly "new" anti-gender rhetoric often recycles and repackages older nationalist, religious, and militarist ideologies.

The six contributions employ diverse yet complementary methodological approaches to study anti-gender movements and feminist responses. This methodological diversity enables examination of anti-gender movements from multiple angles, combining traditional qualitative approaches with innovative digital methods and integrating researcher positionality.

Evolving Landscape of Anti-Feminist and Anti-Gender Movements

This special issue explains how opposition to the so-called "gender ideology" serves as a unifying force, bringing together seemingly disparate actors and agendas. Contributors identify a complex landscape of anti-feminist and anti-gender actors across different contexts, revealing both continuity with traditional opposition to gender equality and the emergence of new forms of resistance.

Religious institutions, conservative political parties, and right-wing media continue to spearhead anti-feminist and anti-gender movements, with social media enabling broader

coordination of local, national, and transnational campaigns. Digital activists and influencers have become central figures in these efforts. The findings confirm that movement's focus has notably shifted from opposing same-sex marriage and adoption to targeting transgender rights, frequently employing "child protection" narratives to forge new coalitions.

Drawing on theoretical frameworks developed by Judith Butler (through 2024) and Andrea Pető (2015), contributors demonstrate how these movements mobilize diverse groups—including parent organizations, self-described "gender-critical" feminists, and some LGB advocacy groups—through tactics that exploit fear and moral panic while masking their fundamental opposition to feminist advancement and gender equality. Church's analysis of TERF communities in Australia reveals how they build collective identity around a phantasmic threat to "biological women," while Bobičić and Petrović trace how Serbian nationalist discourse construct "gender ideology" as a phantom menace to national survival and traditional family structures. Bobičić and Petrović argue that anti-feminist and anti-gender discourses incorporate the "rhetoric used to justify regional wars" and racialized demographic anxieties. Bobičić and Petrović's analysis resonate with Laquière's examination of Francophone anti-gender campaigns that amplify their messages, integrating transphobia with anti-wokism and anti-Islam narratives. Together, Church, Bobičić and Petrović, and Laquière show how anti-feminist and anti-gender movements strategically deploy overlapping systems of exclusion to consolidate their support among diverse reactionary actors.

These contributions also demonstrate how theoretical engagements with right-wing populism, nationalism, and fascism can help to unpack the political stakes and implications of anti-gender movements. By situating anti-feminist and anti-gender movements within broader political trends, the authors are able to critique not just their immediate targets (like transgender rights or reproductive freedoms) but also their wider political functions in bolstering conservative, patriarchal, and racialized power structures. The use of concepts like fascism (Butler 2025; Stanley 2018) and "fachosphere" (Albertini and Doucet 2016) provides powerful theoretical lenses for illuminating the authoritarian and exclusionary logics at work in many anti-gender discourses and mobilizations.

The evolution of anti-gender discourses has also affected established feminist spaces. In Serbia, Bobičić and Petrović note that even longstanding feminist organizations have seen some members adopt gender-critical positions. This shift within established feminist spaces signals the movement's ability to influence previously progressive organizations. Similarly, in Armenia, Baldrian describes how some feminist NGOs avoid addressing transgender rights

under the guise of specialization. She argues it is “a strategic fault to assume Armenian women’s NGOs are open to queer issues.” Fagundes-Ausani’s study of feminist digital media in Brazil and France highlights how conflicts between trans-inclusive and trans-exclusionary feminists can weaken feminist movements’ ability to mount effective opposition to anti-gender campaigns. These internal divisions within feminist spaces weaken collective resistance against conservative forces, as anti-gender movements strategically deepen these rifts to undermine feminist solidarity.

Feminist Resistance Strategies and Challenges

How feminist movements respond to opposition varies significantly by context. This special issue highlights various feminist and queer resistance strategies across different contexts, revealing tensions between institutional and grassroots approaches.

Solidarity emerges as critical focus, underscoring its role as a cornerstone of feminist resilience in the face of adversity, while also acknowledging the challenges to unity within feminist movements. Fagundes-Ausani shows how confronting anti-feminist violence, notwithstanding its emotional toll, fosters cohesion and mutual support within feminist collectives. Similarly, Bobičić and Petrović document enduring solidarity in Serbia’s feminist scene, where activists maintain unity and shared purpose despite decades of opposition.

However, Baldrian’s analysis of Armenia presents a contrasting reality where solidarity is often fractured. Armenian women’s NGOs frequently compete rather than collaborate, with institutionalization and professionalization creating tensions that impede collective action. Baldrian’s piece reveals the complexities within feminist movements, where external pressures and internal dynamics can either foster cohesion or deepen divisions. Together, these perspectives across Armenia, Brazil, France, and Serbia underscore the pivotal yet fragile role of solidarity in shaping the trajectories of feminist activism.

Another crucial theme emerging from the analysis of feminist resistance is how feminist movements navigate hostile environments through strategic self-silencing. Baldrian shows how Armenian women’s NGOs avoid public spaces in favor of state-level advocacy, trading grassroots engagement for reduced risk of anti-gender attacks. Fagundes-Ausani documents personal strategies among feminist activists, from maintaining private social media profiles to avoiding feminist identification in NGO work. These strategies reveal the complex trade-offs between safety and visibility in contemporary feminist activism.

Conclusion

This special issue illuminates the complex dynamics between rising anti-gender movements and feminist resistance strategies across diverse global contexts. The contributions collectively demonstrate how opposition to gender equality has become a powerful unifying force, bringing together various conservative actors while simultaneously creating new divisions within established feminist spaces.

The research reveals several critical insights about contemporary gender politics. First, anti-gender movements have evolved significantly, shifting their focus from opposing same-sex marriage to targeting transgender rights, often through sophisticated digital strategies and “child protection” narratives. These movements demonstrate remarkable adaptability in building coalitions across religious, political, and ideological lines, effectively leveraging social media and digital platforms to amplify their message.

Second, the impact of these movements extends beyond their immediate targets, affecting the cohesion of feminist spaces themselves. The cases of established feminist organizations adopting gender-critical positions highlight how anti-gender discourse can infiltrate and fragment previously progressive spaces. This internal division presents a significant challenge to feminist solidarity and collective resistance.

Third, feminist resistance strategies vary considerably across contexts, revealing a complex balance between institutional survival and grassroots activism. While some movements have maintained strong solidarity in the face of opposition, others face fragmentation due to competition and institutional pressures. The emergence of strategic self-silencing as a survival mechanism, while potentially effective for individual safety, raises important questions about the long-term implications for feminist visibility and advocacy.

Looking forward, these findings suggest that the future of feminist movements will depend on their ability to navigate several key challenges: maintaining solidarity while acknowledging internal differences, balancing safety with visibility, and developing effective strategies to counter sophisticated anti-gender campaigns. The research also underscores the importance of understanding these struggles within their specific historical and social contexts while recognizing the transnational nature of both anti-gender movements and feminist resistance. In sum, this special issue ultimately contributes to our understanding of how gender politics shapes and is shaped by broader political trends, from right-wing populism to digital activism, while highlighting the ongoing importance of feminist solidarity and resistance in the face of organized opposition.

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