

Engaging men and boys to counter the backlash on gender equality, human rights, and democracy

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Background

On 12th March, 2026 - a high level Side Event was convened at CSW70, gathering Government representatives, UN agencies, researchers and civil society actors to examine the growing backlash against human rights, gender equality and democracy, and to identify political strategies from a men and masculinities lens to counter this formidable challenge. The event marked the launch of the new report: [*Progressive Policy Approaches to Effectively Engage Men and Boys in Countering Backlash on Rights, Gender Equality and Democracy*](#), developed by the **Men, Masculinities and Countering Backlash Collective** -in collaboration with Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI), Fundación para

Estudio e Investigación de la Mujer (FEIM), Institute for Development Studies (IDS), the Feminist Foreign Policy Collaborative (FFPC) and other partners. The discussions aimed to deepen understanding of how patriarchal masculinities shape anti-rights mobilization and ideologies, democratic erosion, and political resistance to gender equality. It also identified policy, political and institutional approaches to advance coordinated, accountable, and gender-transformative responses (from the individual to the systemic level) with men and boys as part of the solution to countering the backlash. **This summary document is shared under Chatham House Rules.**

The Evolution of Backlash in the Political Sphere

Backlash against gender equality is not new, but it has become increasingly coordinated, institutionalized and well-resourced. It now operates as a structured political project aimed at protecting patriarchal power relations across laws, institutions, public discourse and society. These practices represent deliberate strategies to undermine dignity, gender equality, social and climate justice, and democratic values. Increasingly, the amplifying backlash witnessed within technological platforms and by influencers from men's rights or misogynistic groups and actors in the manosphere are in close echo and/or direct coordination with the messaging and tactics being advanced by strongman politicians and other political actors, making their reach and scope even more pervasive. Backlash at the societal level and backlash at the political level are deeply linked and leveraging each other's aims to further drive backlash agendas and narratives into the world.

Policy rollbacks, discriminatory laws and political violence

“Backlash is no longer isolated resistance to gender equality, but an increasingly coordinated political project that uses misinformation, fear and institutional power to reinforce patriarchal norms and undermine feminist and democratic gains.”

- The systemic rollback of policies, laws, budget allocations and international norms aimed at upholding women's rights, human rights, democratic governance, international diplomacy and climate mitigation and adaptation are being witnessed worldwide.

- Evidence points to the fact that such forms of backlash are increasing across both democratic and authoritarian political settings.
- Backlash actors in the political sphere often utilize coordinated messaging that frame progressive policies, norms and laws as incompatible with cultural or religious values, and national interest and sovereignty.
- In many contexts, opposition to sexual and reproductive health and rights legislation, and increasingly, new and emergent anti-LGBTIQ legislation are serving as key political focal points to anchor backlash organizing across actors and contexts.
- In politics, repression at a State level, targeting feminist activists, women's human rights defenders, and civil society organizations through surveillance, criminalisation, threats, and violence, are increasing across the spectrum of online and offline spaces.
- Women, LGBTIQ and other marginalized political leaders are attacked, discredited and institutional violence is inflicted upon them, seeking to remove them from the political sphere.

State-sponsored misinformation and anti-rights messaging

- The narratives used by backlash actors - within political parties, heads of Government, Ministries, diplomatic leaders and other political institutions - echo many of the same messages put forward by men's rights, misogynistic and other anti-feminist groups, blaming and scapegoating women, girls, LGBTIQ people, and other marginalized communities, including immigrants, for economic, social or political challenges faced by the State.
- Additionally, they often rely on fear, uncertainty at a global, geo-political, regional or national level, moral anxiety and emotionally charged messaging linked to the body, family and nation in order to mobilize resistance to gender equality, human rights and democratic values.
- Cultural narratives and messaging around stereotypical socio-cultural roles do not simply reflect social attitudes; they actively function as instruments of political strategy that shift public opinion, reshape policy formulations and consolidate support among persuadable groups for political actions.
- The spread of misinformation from the level of State and through political leaders themselves, portray feminism and gender equality as threats to family values, culture, national identity, or men's rights and power.

Precarity of the State as an opening for backlash to take hold - including in conflict-affected regions

“In conflict and post-conflict settings, backlash is often embedded in militarization and inequality, where the collapse of institutions means laws are no longer enforced, services and safeguards for women and girls stop functioning, and gendered violence and harm increase sharply and women's bodies become the weapon of war”

- Backlash takes different forms across socio-political and economic systems contexts, particularly across the conflict and post-conflict settings where it is often embedded within militarization, structural patriarchy and state fragility rather than expressed only through formal policy rollback.
- Legal protections and gender equality frameworks that exist formally may become ineffective under conditions of instability and governance collapse, exposing the gap between policy commitments and lived realities.
- In these contexts, conflict itself can function as a form of backlash, particularly in conflict and post-conflict settings where impunity and weakened justice systems intensify risks and justifications of sexual and gender-based violence.
- Backlash actors in the political sphere can also aim to dismantle institutions, weaken protections as a means to increase opportunities for the normalization of eroding democratic values and rule, evading responsibilities for human rights and normalizing gendered and other intersecting forms of oppression, violence and inequality.

Men, Masculinities and Countering Backlash: From Politics to Policies

Setting the tone for the joint exploration of solutions, a collective recognition was raised: Gender transformative and intersectional work to engage men and boys and transform patriarchal masculinities has remained fragmented as isolated, **short-term and small-scale interventions**. This must change. **Evidence has demonstrated the effectiveness of impactful anti-patriarchal work on men and masculinities** that works accountably and alongside feminist and other social justice movements. With anti-rights and backlash actors evolving their mobilization and strategies to operate in increasingly structural, political, institutional, and ideological ways, there is an **urgent need for feminist and progressive actors to come together and develop equally coordinated agendas, actions and strategies** that can reinforce one another across sectors, institutions, and movements in order to respond to backlash more effectively.

Three interconnected strategies emerged as central to countering backlash:

- Engaging men and boys to support in countering the backlash and in shifting narratives and modeling positive expressions and examples of manhood
- Working with men in positions of power, and supporting their role as agents of change in institutional and policy reform and in dismantling masculinist and patriarchal institutions
- Movement and coalition building among feminist actors, including those working to engage men and boys, and alongside UN Agencies, Governments, Academia and other CSOs, movements and activists for more impact.

Men as boys as agents of change in countering backlash

“There’s a lot of talk about men as allies, but that’s almost alienating — it says men and boys are only doing it for others. But it’s also about doing it for themselves, for a better world for all of us.”

- **Engaging men and boys as a key strategy for addressing backlash:** Transforming patriarchal masculinities requires institutionalized, accountable, and long-term approaches embedded within political systems, educational institutions, workplaces, communities, and governance structures.
- **Men and boys as gendered beings with a stake in equality, democracy and human rights:** This reflects a broader shift away from understanding men merely as “allies” to women’s rights and gender equality. The framing of men and boys only as supporters of women’s rights risks externalizing gender justice as something done “for others” or, essentialization of boys and men. Instead, discussions emphasized that men and boys are themselves situated within patriarchal systems that both privilege and harm them across relational and structural dimensions. Gender equality is not a zero-sum game and men and boys have a stake in advancing it. This perspective highlights their responsibility not only to challenge the systems, attitudes, and behaviours that sustain inequality, but also to contribute actively to their transformation.
- **Reframing the position of men and boys as political and social actors, and co-strugglers:** Men and boys identities, relationships, and institutional roles are shaped by gendered power relations and intersecting inequalities. There must be a recognition of the potential risk of engagements becoming superficial or depoliticized if it does not directly confront how power and privilege are granted as unearned privileges and later institutionalized across policies and systems. Work on transforming patriarchal masculinities “*has to be accountable, institutionalised, and structural*”.
- **Anti-rights and backlash movements have been particularly effective in mobilising and radicalising boys, young men, and men more broadly in support of their agendas requiring counter strategies to meet this backsliding.** In this context, there was a strong call for the intersectional, feminist field of those seeking to engage men and boys to strengthen its collective voice, political positioning, and strategic engagement as part of the broader feminist and human rights movements.

Strategic Recommendations

1. **Reframing the entry point:** The discussion emphasised that engaging men and boys should be seen as an integral part of gender-transformative work. It called for recognising **men and boys as gendered beings with real and intersecting needs, not simply as obstacles or passive supporters**. It also highlighted key policy entry points, including media and digital spaces (and countering “manosphere” narratives through platform accountability and positive role model campaigns), public health and mental health systems, workplace gender equality policies, and climate action through addressing patriarchal masculinities linked to extraction and environmental harm.

2. **Community-based and school-based approaches:** Evidence from programming highlighted that more effective engagement goes beyond awareness-raising. Participants emphasized feminist systems change approaches that combine sustained work at the relational level with efforts to address the structural conditions, institutions, and norms that reproduce gender inequality. These include peer-to-peer reflection in schools, where boys and girls critically explore norms of masculinity, and community-based engagement that works through trusted actors such as religious and cultural leaders to open pathways for change within existing social structures. **Work with men and boys to transform patriarchal masculinities should be situated within broader social protection and health systems to ensure that shifts in attitudes are connected to protection and support in practice.**

3. **Using narratives strategically:** Experience from contexts of polarisation showed that backlash movements often use emotionally charged narratives around family, culture, religion and national identity to mobilise men and boys and frame feminism and gender equality as a threat. In response, effective approaches focus on reinterpreting cultural and symbolic references in more inclusive and egalitarian ways, as well as critically challenging and transforming those that reproduce stereotypes or inequality. This includes building cross-community solidarity and grounding messages in shared values such as fraternity, coexistence and constitutional equality. A key lesson is that narratives are not neutral—they are political tools—and must be actively engaged rather than avoided, with strategies adapted carefully to context.

Working with men in positions of power and shifting masculinist political institutions

“I see myself as a civil society covert agent within the government, working internally to shift institutional cultures, policies, and practices”. High-level Government Official

- **Propensity of work with men and boys to center on marginalized men in the Global South, rather than with men in positions of power across political institutions.** The majority of the work that currently exists in the field is about work with “**poor and marginalised population or geographical locations**”, particularly true within the international development sector and this has created a major gap when it comes to working with those who serve as gatekeepers of systems, i.e. working with men in positions of institutional and political power. Participants also emphasised that backlash is often reinforced and reproduced through laws, institutional cultures, and decision-making systems that remain shaped by patriarchy, in all its manifestations. Gender-transformative approaches to work with men and boys therefore requires working not only at the community level, but also with men in power within state institutions, political leadership, and governance systems, in order to achieve feminist systems change from within. Institutional transformation depends not only on external advocacy, but also on actors within systems who are willing to drive change from within and contribute to making institutions and governance systems more feminist and gender-just.

Countering backlash against gender equality requires gender-transformative approaches to be embedded in institutions. This means not only adopting progressive policies and repealing discriminatory ones, but also strengthening governance systems, accountability mechanisms and political incentives so that work with men and boys is sustained, enforceable and supported over the long term. The adoption of the CSW70 Agreed Conclusions by a challenging vote and after much contention, further underscored that multilateralism remains a contested but essential arena for sustaining global gender equality norms.

- **Provincial models embedding change within institutions:** One of the most compelling examples of institutionalization comes from long-term government-led work in a province in Spain where engagement on masculinities has been systematically embedded within public policy over an extended period. Rather than treating work with men and boys as a project-based or time-bound intervention, it has been integrated into the core mandate of public institutions and reinforced through legal obligations requiring public authorities to actively promote gender-equal norms and practices. The significance of this model lies not only in its longevity, but in its shift of responsibility from individual programmes to the state as an institutional actor accountable for transformation. This reconfiguration of responsibility reframes gender equality as a governance principle rather than a discretionary policy choice. Evidence from this experience suggests that sustained institutional investment can contribute to gradual shifts in social norms and the normalisation of egalitarian masculinities at scale. It also points to a broader structural relationship between strong equality institutions and greater resilience to anti-rights and backlash-driven political forces, indicating that institutional **depth may play a protective role in sustaining gender equality gains over time.**
- **Feminist foreign policy as an institutional framework:** Feminist foreign policies were identified as essential infrastructures for sustaining gender equality gains in contexts of increasing political volatility. While feminist foreign policy (FFP) provides a shared principled foundation, comparative experiences demonstrate that durability depends less on articulation of values and more on how deeply they are embedded within state systems that can endure the changing of political parties. Five interlinked mechanisms were identified as critical for securing this embedding of FFP: *legislative and administrative anchoring; dedicated institutional architecture; protected budget allocations; senior leadership accountability, and sustained capacity-building across the civil service.* Together, these mechanisms shift feminist commitments from declarative policy positions into operational state capacity, ensuring continuity across political cycles and resistance to shifts in leadership. The discussions further highlighted that effectiveness depends on how these mechanisms are operationalised to transform power relations rather than simply expand inclusion. The key point is that engagement with men and boys must be structurally integrated in ways that directly link participation to accountability for gender equality outcomes, rather than treating inclusion as an end in itself. This requires institutional arrangements that translate participation into enforceable commitments, clear resource allocation, and measurable responsibilities within governance systems.
- **Securing parity rules in parliamentary operational and meeting structures:** There is a need to focus on parity as a democratic shift from numerical representation toward institutional legitimacy. Parity is not only understood as equal numbers of men and women in parliaments, but as a mechanism for strengthening representation and policymaking by ensuring that legislative bodies

reflect the societies they serve. From this perspective, equal political participation is essential to sustaining parliaments as “people’s institutions” rather than technocratic spaces detached from social realities. The institutionalisation of parity rules across parliamentary structures therefore reflects an effort to normalise gender-inclusive governance as a foundational democratic standard, rather than a corrective measure. This reinforces parity as a democratic principle underpinning institutional legitimacy and representative governance, requiring its consistent institutionalisation across parliamentary rules, processes, and accountability systems.

Coalition-building as a structural response to the multi-front backlash

- **Integration of men and masculinities within feminist coalitions:** The discussions highlighted that work with men and boys is increasingly recognised as integral to coalition-building, yet remains unevenly embedded within feminist strategies. Much of this work continues to be small-scale and short-term, limiting its contribution to sustained movement infrastructure. This reflects a structural gap between strategic recognition and institutional integration, where work on transforming patriarchal masculinities is not yet consistently positioned as part of core feminist coalition architecture.
- **Intergenerational sustainability and normative continuity:** Concerns about losing younger generations of men to anti-equality narratives were framed as an issue of long-term movement sustainability rather than short-term outreach. Coalition-building in this sense extends beyond institutional coordination to the maintenance of normative legitimacy and intergenerational transmission of gender equality values in increasingly contested political and digital environments.
- **Coalition-building as normative, behavioural, and institutional alignment:** Coalition-building was further understood as extending beyond formal partnerships to include shared norms, lived experience, and accountability mechanisms. Effective engagement requires institutional coordination, behaviour change efforts, and strong feminist civil society leadership and coalition building so that collaboration works at both structural and cultural levels.
- **Structural funding asymmetries shaping coalition effectiveness:** A recurring concern was the significant resource imbalance between well-funded backlash actors and under-resourced feminist movements. This financial asymmetry was identified as a structural constraint on coalition effectiveness, reinforcing fragmentation and limiting scalability. The implication is that coalition-building is contingent on sustainable funding architectures, including long-term core financing, coordinated investment in masculinities work, and reduced competition across feminist actors.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The discussions led to a set of clear recommendations and calls to action, which **intended to strengthen the connection between policy, funding, and movement work so that efforts to work with men and boys to advance gender equality are more effective and sustainable.**

For Policymakers and Governments

- Establish or strengthen dedicated institutional mandates and budget lines for working with men and boys and transforming patriarchal masculinities within gender equality frameworks.
- Embed feminist foreign policy principles through legislative, architectural, budgetary, leadership, and capacity-building mechanisms.
- Defend agreed language at multilateral fora and resist efforts to reopen or dilute foundational gender commitments.
- Engage male politicians and parliamentarians through peer dialogue, intergenerational programmes, and social-behavioural change approaches.

For Donors and Funding Bodies

- Provide long-term, core, flexible funding to frontline feminist and gender-transformative organisations, not only short-term project grants
- Match the resourcing levels of backlash actors — who invest in political infrastructure, cultural influence, and long-term relationship building.
- Conduct rigorous gender analysis to identify gaps and set clear indicators for the work with men and boys as a strategic objective.
- Ensure funding for engaging men and boys does not displace funding for women-led feminist organisations.

For Civil Society and Movement Actors

- Build cross-movement alliances that bring together gender justice, climate, democracy, LGBTQI+ rights, and human rights constituencies.
- Adopt contextual, narrative-based counter-strategies that use local symbols of nation, family, and belonging to build inclusive — rather than exclusionary — identities.
- Scale and platform positive role models for men and boys, particularly in digital spaces dominated by harmful influencers.
- Hold big tech accountable for enabling online gender-based violence and misogynistic content.
- Prioritise survivor-centred approaches in all programming inclusive of gender-transformative work with men and boys.
- Avoid internal competition; share resources, strategies, and evidence across the field.

For Researchers and Knowledge Producers

- Continue to document and analyse the tactics, funding, and networks behind organised backlash movements.
- Translate complex research into accessible, actionable tools for practitioners and policymakers.
- Develop and test contextualised, evidence-based approaches to work with men and boys in conflict, post-conflict, and politically hostile environments.