

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Special issue introduction: Contemporary international anti-feminism

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Abstract

In recent years, conservative governments and their civil society allies have undermined international women's rights treaties and SOGI rights initiatives and challenged domestic rights protections. The articles in this special issue grapple with these trends by analysing the ideologies, discourses, and strategies of contemporary anti-feminism in global and comparative contexts. Several prominent patterns emerge: the core significance of social hierarchy and biological essentialism to anti-feminist conservative thought; the polarizing demonization of feminists by religious conservatives and populist nationalists; the appropriation of rights discourses and advocacy tactics by anti-feminist campaigns; and the strategic importance of law and legal language as a terrain of rights contestation. Taken together, this research suggests that anti-feminism is not incidental to reactionary anti-democratic politics, but instead a constitutive element of political movements that seek to naturalize inequality and legally enforce conformity with conservative social norms.

Keywords: international law; feminism; hierarchy; polarization; right-wing populism; SOGI rights; women's rights

I. Introduction

Across the globe, liberal democracy is threatened by resurgent authoritarianism and emergent forms of right-wing populism. Leaders such as Donald Trump in the United States, Vladimir Putin in Russia, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Narendra Modi in India, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and fellow travellers are increasingly hostile to both the domestic and international rule of law and the legal protection of human rights and freedoms that sustain diverse, equitable, and inclusive polities. Antipathy to women's rights, and to sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) rights, is especially intense. In recent years, conservative governments and their civil society allies have sought to undermine international women's rights treaties and SOGI rights initiatives, and challenged domestic rights protections. The articles in this special issue grapple with these trends by analyzing the ideologies, discourses, and strategies of contemporary anti-feminism in global and comparative contexts.

In their article, Jelena Cupać and Irem Ebetürk examine anti-feminist NGOs at the United Nations, demonstrating how they have been socialized to competitively mimic and contest women's rights advocacy. Rebecca Sanders and Laura Dudley Jenkins trace efforts by 'patriarchal populists' to control, alter and delete the language of women's rights in international law and policy. Gunnar Sigvaldason and Silja Bára R. Ómarsdóttir analyze opposition to abortion rights in Iceland and explore what this reveals about conservative politics and ideology. Finally, Aytek Dibavar takes a heterodox approach to arguing for a decolonial social reproduction theory of feminism to counter misogyny and racism.

This research builds on a growing body of scholarship on women's rights contestation, including work on transnational right-wing politics (Buss and Herman 2003; Butler 2006; Bob 2012); efforts to undermine women's and SOGI rights in international organizations and law (Chappell 2006; Cupać and Ebetürk 2020; Ebetürk 2018; Goetz 2020; Kantola and Emanuela 2020; Sanders 2018; Sanders and Jenkins 2021; Sandler and Goetz 2020; Shameem 2017, 2021; Stoeckl and Medvedeva 2018; Voss 2018, 2019; Yamin, Datta and Andion 2017); the role of gender in regional and comparative contexts (Biroli and Caminotti 2020; Doğangün 2020; Lavizzari and Prearo 2019; Mos 2018; Payne and De Souza Santos 2020; Un 2019; Verloo and Paternotte 2018; Vida 2019; Zaremberg, Tab-bush and Friedman 2021); and the dynamics of anti-feminist human rights backlash and democratic decline (Denkowski, Bernarding and Lunz 2021; Gilligan and Richards 2018; Graff, Kapur and Walters 2019; Korolczuk 2020; Krizsán and Roggeband 2018; Krizsán and Roggeband 2021; Roggeband 2018, 2019; Roggeband and Krizsán 2020; Vinjamuri 2017; Zalewski and Runyan 2020). From this literature, several prominent patterns emerge, which are taken up, elaborated and investigated by the authors in this special issue: the core significance of social hierarchy and biological essentialism to anti-feminist conservative thought; the polarizing demonization of feminists by religious conservatives and populist nationalists; the appropriation of rights discourses and advocacy tactics by anti-feminist campaigns; and the strategic importance of law and legal language as a terrain of rights contestation. Taken together, this research suggests that anti-feminism is not incidental to reactionary anti-democratic politics, but instead a constitutive element of political movements that seek to naturalize inequality and legally enforce conformity with conservative social norms.

II. Hierarchy and essentialism

While there are many contending feminisms, all include a basic commitment to women's social, political and economic equality; women's right to control their sexuality and reproduction; women's freedom from violence and exploitation; and women's ability to transcend restrictive religious and cultural norms. For feminists, women's inequality is not natural; rather, it is a product of patriarchal social structures and misogynist attitudes that must be altered through social, political and legal change.

In contrast, numerous traditions of right-wing thought, from traditional religious conservatism to newer forms of nationalist populism, profess a belief in social hierarchy and biologically essential sex differences and inequalities. Understanding the salience of these theoretical commitments is important because it highlights the fundamentally reactionary nature of contemporary anti-feminist politics. Pushback against perceived threats to hierarchy and 'natural' order fuel hostility to feminism. Hierarchy preservation – or opposition to 'equality gone too far' – is a theme that can be found across movements against women's rights that draws together a variety of social motivations

(such as a varied assortment of religious conservatives and political conservatives), even though these are not always or inevitably aligned (Sigvaldason and Ómarsdóttir in this issue).

Sigvaldason and Ómarsdóttir observe that for conservative anti-feminists, ‘we are basically egotistic creatures’ and ‘life should be seen as a struggle, where some are better suited for leadership or to dominate others’. In this view, society does not consist of equal persons, but of those naturally disposed to fulfil distinct and ‘complementary’ social roles (Sanders and Jenkins 2021). These roles are intensely gendered, granting men dominance in public life and leadership, and assigning women subordinate status in these domains while emphasizing their valued role as caregivers. From this perspective, efforts to affirmatively ameliorate inequality through expanding women’s political and social power undermines the natural order. In practice, maintaining a gendered social hierarchy entails opposition to women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights, and comprehensive sexuality education, which dangerously allow women to autonomously reject traditional marriage and motherhood.

The growing international ‘anti-gender’ movement promotes biological essentialism. This movement insists that people do not have socially constructed gender roles or identities; instead, they have biologically immutable sex differences that should be enforced coercively through law. Opposition to gender incorporates hostility to the affirmation and equality rights of transgender and non-binary persons. It also often includes rejection of all forms of non-conformity with traditional religious and cultural gender norms by women and men, such as engaging in same-sex intimate relationships or same-sex parenting, forgoing childbearing, or engaging in non-normative forms of speech, work, sex or dress. In this sense, commitments to hierarchy and essentialism are deeply imbricated and form part of a broader ‘anti-gender’ world-view that abhors pluralistic, inclusive democracy and respect for diversity and difference (Corredor 2019; Darakchi 2019; Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Kováts and Pöim 2015; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Paternotte and Kuhar 2018; Sosa 2021; Wilkinson 2021).

Against the alleged corruption and perversion wrought by changing notions of gender, anti-feminists endorse the protection of the ‘natural family’ along with nationalist natalism that promotes childbearing and motherhood. As with many anti-feminist frames, this has been championed by the Catholic Church and its UN mission, the Holy See (Korolczuk 2016). In this issue, Sanders and Jenkins trace how advocacy of the ‘natural family’ is a consistent frame employed by far-right anti-feminist NGOs such as the World Congress of Families. Cupać and Ebetürk discuss the natural family as a ‘unifying master frame’ pitted against the feminist frame of gender and related concepts.

A shared commitment to hierarchy and essentialism helps account for the strange bedfellows that often comprise anti-feminist coalitions. These beliefs draw together Protestant Evangelicals, Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians with conservative Muslims, creating alliances between American, Middle Eastern, African, Asian and post-Soviet states such as the Group of Friends of the Family or the signatories of the anti-abortion rights Geneva Consensus Declaration on Promoting Women’s Health and Strengthening the Family, as Sanders and Jenkins discuss. It is no accident that many states that actively oppose gender justice are also autocracies with poor human rights records. As Sigvaldason and Ómarsdóttir suggest in their article, ‘This anti-feminist trend is ... part of a larger political trend, as are xenophobia, racism and homophobia, where conservatives and reactionaries of various sorts have joined forces to resist the expansion of rights and liberties to include all citizens or undermine existing rights and liberties.’

III. Enmity and polarization

The politics of enmity is central to contemporary conservative and populist movements, which seek a malign foe against which to posit the promise of national restoration. As Sanders and Jenkins discuss, right-wing populist ‘retrotopian’ fantasies promise to make the nation great again while pitting the interests of the ‘pure people’ against a cast of corrupting enemies, who must be cleansed. Many threatening figures have filled this role through time: immigrants, racial and religious minorities, socialists, ‘globalists’, the media, and that most amorphous of categories, ‘elites’.

While populism is not inherently misogynistic (Moghadam and Kaftan 2019; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2015), today’s right-wing ‘patriarchal populists’ blend populism with sexism and increasingly deem feminists and sexual minorities dangerous, corrupting ‘enemies of the people’ (Graff and Korolczuk 2021; Kaul 2021; Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Sanders and Jenkins, this issue). Feminists are accused of emasculating men, lowering national birth rates, promoting sexual deviance and advancing ‘elite’ interests. False allegations about the dangers of contraception, abortion or LGBTIQ+ rights generate moral panics; meanwhile, antisemitic conspiracy theories obsessively target progressive philanthropist George Soros. Populist leaders, particularly those who adopt a strongman persona, perform aggressive masculinity (Casullo 2019; Eksi and Wood 2019), use explicitly sexist language, discursively promote violence against women or are themselves perpetrators of such violence (Ben-Ghiat 2020; Sanders and Jenkins, this issue). Other right-wing populist leaders portray women as helpless victims of minority men in order to rally majoritarian nationalists and spark ‘defensive’ acts of horrific violence (Basu 2018). As a result, women’s human rights defenders and their allies around the world face threats and harassment from governments, paramilitaries, religious leaders, and ‘trolls’ (Zillén and Pruth 2021).

Beyond threatening the physical safety of feminists, the politics of enmity drives political polarization with implications for national and global governance (Cupać and Ebetürk 2021; Symons and Altman 2015). Compromise, so crucial for international agreements, is becoming increasingly fraught. Cupać and Ebetürk explicitly discuss polarization, arguing that feminists and anti-feminists at the United Nations now espouse a zero-sum mentality and depict competing perspectives as evil. This bodes poorly for efforts to progressively develop international women’s rights norms through iterative processes of legal, political and cultural negotiation.

IV. Rights appropriation

Contemporary anti-feminism has a complex posture towards human rights. Political commitments to hierarchy and biological essentialism push against notions of individual equality and freedom. Women’s rights are threatening because they disrupt hierarchical social order and traditional values. Thus, while not all feminisms are liberal, and in fact many feminisms profoundly contest liberal individualism, capitalism and imperialism (Dibivar in this issue), contemporary anti-feminism is a decidedly illiberal political movement.

Yet the current contestation and rejection of women’s rights rarely abandons the concept of rights altogether. Instead, anti-feminists undermine women’s rights by downplaying the legitimacy of women’s rights, by stripping women’s rights of substantive commitments to gender justice or by invoking competing rights narratives (Bob 2019; Corredor 2021; Sanders 2018; Schneiker 2019). Conservatives jettison the indivisibility of

human rights, instead positioning contending rights claims either in opposition or in order of priority. For example, in their article, Cupać and Ebetürk quote Alliance Defending Freedom International's distinction between what they call 'fundamental freedoms' and the 'roar of false rights' and discuss conservative attacks on the principle of the 'indivisibility, interrelatedness, and equal application' of human rights. The Trump administration's Commission on Unalienable Rights suggested that women's and health rights constituted a new form of 'ad hoc' rights meriting less consideration than truly 'unalienable' rights articulated in the 1776 Bill of Rights or the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (see Sanders and Jenkins in this issue). Anti-feminists' hierarchical world-view applies not only to societies but also to a hierarchy of rights themselves.

A related mode of appropriating human rights is to argue against women's or SOGI rights in the name of other types of rights, a strategy critiqued in several articles in this special issue. For instance, Sanders and Jenkins document conservative efforts to contest the indivisibility of rights by claiming that women's and SOGI rights undermine religious freedom rights. In addition to religious freedom, other rights used to attack sexual and reproductive health rights include parental rights, children's rights and the right to life (Cupać and Ebetürk, this issue) as well as disability rights, men's rights and fathers' rights (Sigvaldason and Ómarsdóttir, this issue). These appeals instrumentalize selected rights to fight other rights, rather than embracing the indivisible centrality of women's rights to all other rights. Thus, rights themselves are subject to polarization.

V. Legal contestation

If hierarchy and essentialism form core commitments of contemporary anti-feminism, and promotion of polarization and appropriation of rights frames are central means of promoting anti-feminist politics, law-making is the socio-political terrain on which battles over women's rights are increasingly being fought (Sanders and Jenkins, this issue). Law is a crucial source of legitimacy in contemporary global politics (Hurd 2017), while human rights are articulated and protected primarily through law. Often, the goal of even the most grassroots human rights movement is to enact change through law – locally, nationally and internationally. At the same time, despite ideological hostility to liberal legalism, illiberal actors have increasingly learned to use law to consolidate power via 'autocratic legalism' (Scheppele 2018). It is thus not surprising that efforts to contest, manipulate and control law run through the articles in this special issue.

Tracing opposition to the liberalization of abortion in Iceland, in their article, Sigvaldason and Ómarsdóttir show how legal contestation is shaped by the domestic political environment. In this 'feminist paradise', conservative actors have sought to rhetorically recognize women's self-determination while deploying 'perversity, futility and jeopardy arguments' against progressively reforming abortion laws. In this way, they have creatively embedded universal conservative commitments in contextually resonant ways and displayed political skill in attempting to stall and block change.

Fearing erosion of values and status, conservative NGOs have increasingly entered the UN policy-making space, engaging in what Cupać and Ebetürk theorize as 'competitive mimicry' of feminist NGOs. Competitive mimicry is a process of socialization in which anti-feminists mirror the actions and strategies of their feminist antagonists. To do this, they engage in the aforementioned appropriation of human rights discourses, as well as offering scientific, seemingly neutral and technocratic justifications for their policy preferences. Moreover, like feminists, anti-feminists pursue the production of 'soft

law': non-binding, but nonetheless influential interpretations, resolutions and declarations. They produce 'shadow reports' and lobby policy-makers to advance and block outcome documents. While this process has socialized conservative NGOs into the regulative rules of UN policy-making, it has not inculcated constitutive normative commitments to the progressive human rights regime. Accordingly, 'This degree of socialization has allowed conservative NGOs to turn antifeminist pushback into anti-feminist backlash, which has, in turn, spurred a polarizing dynamic in the UN' (Cupać and Ebetürk, this issue).

Likewise, Sanders and Jenkins document efforts by politicians, states and NGOs to 'spoil' (Sanders 2018) international women's rights legal norms through manipulating language. Conservative actors control what women's rights advocates can say by leveraging foreign aid funds, evidenced by the United States' Mexico City Policy or 'global gag rule'. They alter normative meanings by redefining and reframing rights and seek to delete words, such as 'sexual and reproductive health and rights' and even 'gender', from UN treaties, declarations and outcome documents. In doing so, they highlight the importance, but also the contingent vulnerability, of feminist efforts to shape international legal commitments through the international legal lexicon.

These examples of legal contestation point to the vital importance of continuing to embed explicit women's rights in law, as well as giving those rights content by perpetually reinforcing shared feminist legal interpretations. Otherwise, rights can be stripped of their gender justice content or risk displacement by alternative counter-norms as anti-feminist actors work to institutionalize their competing political preferences.

VI. Remedies and responses

Taken together, the articles in the special issue present a panorama of conservative and populist attacks on the legal recognition and protection of women's and SOGI rights. We have suggested that this is not only a threat to women and sexual minorities, but a deeper challenge to pluralistic democracy. What remedies and responses have feminists pursued?

Embedding explicit women's rights protections in law

Adding or reinforcing explicit legal protections for women's and SOGI rights remains key. In their article, Cupać and Ebetürk discuss how feminists succeeded in getting the United Nations to explicitly articulate and respond to the toll of gender-based violence, the impacts of armed conflict on women and girls, and the centrality of gender equality to the Sustainable Development Goals. Sanders and Jenkins document efforts to forge and protect feminist understandings of legal language in UN documents, with direct implications for women's ability to legally benefit from rights protections. Both articles show how conservative actors now wordsmith UN documents for this reason, to restrict further legal protections that would advance gender equity. At the national level in the context of Iceland, Sigvaldason and Ómarsdóttir discuss abortion opponents' arguments for leaving policies protecting abortion vague, while women's rights advocates stress the need to update abortion law to more specifically protect sexual and reproductive health and rights. Their research shows that relying on common practice rather than clear legal articulations to defend women's sexual and reproductive health rights is risky, given the rise of illiberal politics.

Advancing historical, critical, and intersectional feminisms

Dibivar takes on a broad spectrum of challenges to feminism, including from within the neoliberal academy. She criticizes scholarship that fails to engage with historical, material, economic, political and social structures in different regions of the world and neglects the complex interplay between gender, race and class. Arguing against the tokenistic commodification of identity, generalizations and simplifications that ignore context and history, performative diversity politics, and demands for cultural conformity that shut down diverse opinion and experiences, Dibivar calls for ‘a decolonial social reproductive feminist theory [that] is able to locate the analysis of the hierarchy of human beings... within a value, reproduction and historical material *longue durée*’. Likewise, questioning demands for ‘cultural authenticity’ voiced by religious, patriarchal populist and nationalist leaders to reinforce and defend supposedly traditional gender roles is crucial, both within and outside the academy. Feminists – whether scholars, activists or UN professionals – need to recommit to a reproductive justice attuned to inequalities based not just on gender, but also race and class, as recent work on maternal mortality points out (Kendall 2020). A ‘feminism for the 99%’ is necessary to counter and supersede elite and neoliberal feminisms, which make an easy target for antifeminist coalitions and are unable to address the needs of all women: ‘feminism must rise to the occasion of the current crisis’ (Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser 2019: 80).

Further research

For scholars, it remains critical to identify the evolving stakeholders and political networks driving opposition to women’s rights; the ideologies and agendas underpinning anti-feminist claims; the strategies and tactics deployed to roll back women’s rights; and the efficacy of these efforts. Anti-feminists learned from feminists, and feminists can in turn draw from the playbook of these ‘counter-actors’ by, for instance, expanding networks of supportive state allies or reframing their moral claims (Chappell 2006). More gendered analyses of de-democratization (Krizsán and Roggeband 2021) and the growth of autocratic and discriminatory legalism (de la Torre 2017; Scheppele 2013, 2018) are needed to scrutinize the relationship between domestic and international attacks on women’s rights. How, and to what extent, are attempts to transform laws and legal culture at the domestic level (Hollis-Brusky and Wilson 2020) spreading to other countries or being scaled up to UN and other international fora (Roggeband 2019)? Moreover, scholars should investigate the interoperability of religious, populist and nationalist contestation, including points of overlap and tension. The articles collected here shed light on many of these questions, but much work still remains to be done.

VII. Conclusion

Together, the authors in this issue provide analyses of the institutional, rhetorical and normative challenges to women’s rights posed by national, international and transnational opponents. Several highlight how sexual and reproductive health and rights are centrally under attack. The transnational alignment of anti-feminist religious conservatives, populist leaders, NGOs and illiberal states has resulted in increasing coordination to undermine or undo longstanding women’s rights, for instance by deploying parallel arguments against feminism in the name of tradition, nation or religion, and by

leveraging the tools of global law and policy-making. In Cupać and Ebetürk's articulation, anti-feminists are using 'cosmopolitan methods' to advance 'parochial' values. While patriarchal populists deride feminist 'elites' and denigrate global governance, they are working to shape international law with increasing sophistication and resources. This reactionary transnationalism is hard to fight, putting women's rights advocates on the defensive. Understanding these challenges to feminism, equality and pluralism is essential.

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