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# The personal is global political: The antifeminist backlash in the United Nations

Jelena Cupać and Irem Ebetürk

## Abstract

Antifeminist mobilisation is growing in the United Nations. It is led by a coalition of certain post-Soviet, Catholic, and Islamic states; the United States; the Vatican; conservative nongovernmental organisations, occasionally joined by the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation, the League of Arab States, the UN Africa Group, and the G77. Uniting them is the aim of restoring the 'natural family' and opposing 'gender ideology'. The group has become increasingly strategic, and its impact can already be seen in a number of UN fora, including the Security Council. By surveying feminist notions of backlash and comparing them to Alter and Zürn's definition of 'backlash politics', the article gauges whether the group's activities can be characterised as such politics. The conclusion is that they can, suggesting that we are looking at a group with the potential to alter not only the global course of women's rights but also how politics is done within the UN.

## Keywords

antifeminism, backlash, family, gender, transnational movements, United Nations, women's rights

## Introduction

In April 2019, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2467, a ninth resolution in its Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. The purpose of the resolution was to strengthen efforts in combating sexual violence in conflict, including providing victims with greater legal assurances and services. Unlike its predecessors, Resolution 2467 generated considerable controversy. It was adopted after 4 weeks of tumultuous negotiations and fierce debates in the media. The controversial issue was the use of the words 'sexual and reproductive health'. These words, however, were not new. They had been used in numerous previous UN documents, including WPS Resolution 2106. However, the US administration under President Donald Trump sees these words as a

Author note: Order of authorship is alphabetical and shows equal authorship.

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euphemism for abortion and other methods of pregnancy termination and wants them eliminated from the UN documents. Threatening veto, the United States thus demanded 'sexual and reproductive health' be deleted from Resolution 2467. The threat worked, and Security Council members ultimately conceded to a watered-down version of the resolution.

This episode is the latest and most publicly visible case of attempts to push against women's rights in the United Nations (UN). Such attempts first started in the early 1990s when a loose antifeminist group formed opposing women's rights advocates who were becoming increasingly successful globally. Often referred to as the 'Unholy Alliance', the group is now much more organised and it includes actors as diverse as post-Soviet, Catholic, and Islamic states; the United States; the Vatican; conservative non-governmental organisation (NGOs), occasionally joined by regional organisations and groupings such as the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation, the League of Arab States, the UN Africa Group, and the G77 (Goetz, 2015; Shameem, 2017; for G77, see Girard, 2014). A joint opposition to 'gender ideology' and the aim of restoring the 'natural family' unite the alliance. In recent years, its members have intensified their activities in the UN Human Rights Council, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), and the Security Council. It is in these fora that they have had the most success in halting and reversing the course of women's rights. It should be noted that the family alliance is part of a larger trend towards right-wing moments organising and acting transnationally (Bob, 2012).

Our aim in this article is to gauge whether the challenge this antifeminist alliance poses to women's rights in the UN can be characterised as backlash politics. Why does this label matter? What difference does it make if we choose it over, say, contentious politics? As Alter and Zürn (2020, this issue) class it in the introduction to this Special Issue, backlash politics is a variant of contentious politics. However, it is its extraordinary variant, one that has a potential of triggering a considerable change in social and political systems. Characterising the current challenge to women's rights in the UN as backlash would therefore signal a potential halt, even reversal, of an agenda that has steadily progressed and diffused globally for the past 30 years. More generally, it would signal a change in how politics is done within the UN; namely, that it is no longer predominantly progressive groups that organise transnationally and advocate within the organisation, but that conservative groups have learned how to play the very same game, turning the UN into a genuine political arena from which non-progressive and non-liberal norms can also be issued (Cupać and Ebetürk, 2020). This change, in turn, might have implications for how we think about the current contestation of the liberal international order, given that in the domain of women's rights we are not observing a backlash against an international organisation but a potential backlash inside of it.

We proceed in four steps. First, we briefly survey the extensive feminist literature engaging the concept of backlash. We observe that, despite seeing backlash as a pervasive social phenomenon, this literature has not yet employed the backlash framework to the international contestation of women's rights. This omission might be because feminist scholars using this framework have no interest in this level of analysis, but it might also be due to such backlash not existing at all. To check whether this is the case, in the second part of the article we develop a 'gauging tool' by surveying feminist definitions of backlash and comparing them to Alter and Zürn's three-part composite definition proposed in this Special Issue. In the third section, we employ this 'gauging tool' to the ongoing contestation of women's rights in the UN. We find evidence that this contestation can indeed be characterised as backlash politics. In the fourth and final sections, we discuss the

implications of this characterisation for the UN women's rights agenda, the politics inside the UN, and the liberal international order more generally. Namely, we explore what it means to have a reluctant but increasingly successful transnational group challenge the progressive notion of women's rights not by rejecting multilateralism and norm-based governance but by embracing it.

## The pervasiveness of antifeminism: From personal to global

For feminist scholars, backlash is a socially pervasive phenomenon. Men backlash against women in private affairs (Chesney-Lind, 2006; Girard, 2009; Laidler and Mann, 2008; Minaker and Snider, 2006) fathers backlash against legislation tackling violence against women (Dragiewicz, 2008, 2011), family-oriented women backlash against feminists (Steuter, 1992), men's rights groups backlash against perceived advantages of women (Jordan, 2016), and pro-family and pro-life groups backlash against birth control and abortion (Anderson, 1998; Harrison and Rowley, 2011). Feminist scholars also find backlash in resistance to laws protecting women (Dragiewicz, 2011; Meda, 2017), in objections against gendered conceptions of crime (Dragiewicz, 2011), in everyday pushback against the use of 'alternative reproduction technologies' (Northup, 1998), in structural barriers against feminist scholarship (Cudd and Superson, 2002), and in gender discrimination in the workplace (Burke, 2014; Burke and Black, 1997). Finally, representations of women in the media provide feminist scholars with a broad area for investigating antifeminist backlash (see, for example, Faludi, 1991; Mendes, 2011; Van Wormer, 2008).

As can be observed from these studies, despite using the term backlash extensively, feminist scholars limit their inquiry to various social levels within state borders. However, in recent years, antifeminism has made strides on the global stage. Groups in the European Union, Latin America, and Russia increasingly protest against same-sex marriage, abortion, progressive notions of gender, and sex education (Corredor, 2019; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018; Prosinger, 2019). While these protests take place in domestic contexts, the fact that they are unfolding at the same time, that their organisers communicate with each other, and that they all mobilise against so-called 'gender ideology' points to their transnational and global character (Grezebalska et al., 2018; Kováts, 2017, 2018; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). Transnational antifeminist mobilisation has been particularly well-coordinated in Europe. In early 2018, protests were organised in several European countries in opposition to the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, known as the Istanbul Convention. The protesters' main claim was that the Convention had a hidden agenda of dismantling traditional family and legalising same-sex marriage.

However, the UN is where we see the highest level of transnational antifeminist mobilisation. This mobilisation is not new; it has been there since the early 1990s. But it is only since the second half of the 2000s that it has intensified concerning the number of involved actors, scale, reach, and strategies (Goetz, 2020: 165). In the beginning, the Vatican, a few Catholic states, and conservative NGOs were the main contesters of women's rights. Today, the front is much larger as it also includes Islamic, and post-Soviet states, the United States, and sometimes joined by groups such as the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation, the League of Arab States, the UN Africa Group, and the G77. The front came about through various groupings and events. Since 2004 many of them have been active in commemorating the UN's International Day of the Family and the International Year of the Family. In 2008, conservative NGOs formed the UN Family Rights Caucus

and, in 2015, 25 UN member states[1] established the Group of the Friends of the Family. World Conferences organised by the World Congress of Families, the US-based Christian right coalition, have also been instrumental in the front's formation. Between 1997 and 2012, the Congress organised only five of these conferences; since 2012, it organises them yearly.

The 'natural family' and 'gender ideology' are the frames around which this diverse group unites (Carlson and Mero, 2007; Shameem, 2017; Slater, 2009; see also United Families International (UFI) and C-Fam websites). A family, they argue, is a natural unit consisting of a mother, a father, and their children. The chief adversary of such a family is found in 'gender ideology' and its insistence on things such as birth control, same-sex marriage, and diversity of gender identities. The group also describes the UN's agenda as carrying a 'cultural imperialist' mission that imposes radical feminism detached from the reality of ordinary women (Soelberg, 2011). They argue that this agenda is detrimental not only to women but also to children, men, societies, state sovereignty, and even global politics, and that the 'natural family' is the only antidote. 'Natural family' is, to use their words, 'essential to the development of nations, eradication of poverty, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality, and multiple other facets in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals' (Family Watch International, 2017). The strategies the group employs include, among other things, influencing the language used in UN documents, preventing feminists from participating in UN fora, and lobbying undecided states on issues related to women and gender (Goetz, 2015; Shameem, 2017).

Human rights and women's rights organisations are increasingly anxious about the activities of this broad alliance. In 2015, the Foundation of The Observatory on the Universality of Rights (OURs) strongly urged feminist activists to take the alliance's mobilisation seriously as its 'increased impact, frequency, coordination, resources, and support' were becoming more and more visible (Shameem, 2017: 10). It is not uncommon for the similar assessments to use the term backlash explicitly. Marking International Women's Day in 2017, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein (2017), asserted that 'we are now seeing a backlash against women's rights, a backlash that hurts us all'. The term can also be found in a number of reports and opinion pieces published by women's rights NGOs (Crossette, 2013; Datta, 2018; Marler and Shameem, 2016; Prosinger, 2019; Shameem, 2017) and scholars (Butler, 2019; Goetz, 2015). Surprisingly, however, there is not yet scholarship that looks at international antifeminist mobilisation through the backlash framework. The little existent scholarship on this issue adopts social movements and norm contestation perspectives (Chappell, 2006; Corredor, 2019; Roggeband, 2019; Sanders, 2018). In the remainder of the article, we thus set to examine whether the current antifeminist mobilisation in the UN can indeed be cast as backlash politics. To do so, we first survey feminist notions of backlash and compare them to Alter and Zürn's definition proposed in this Special Issue.

## What is antifeminist backlash?

Despite using the term backlash extensively, few feminist scholars tackle it conceptually. Susan Faludi popularised the term with her 1991 book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. However, Faludi did not offer a feminist definition of backlash. Instead, she drew on Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab who defined backlash as a 'reaction by groups which are declining in a felt sense of importance, influence, and power' (cited in Faludi, 1991: 243). Faludi was more interested in describing how

antifeminist backlash plays out. By focusing on US media and politics during the 1980s, she observed that it consists not only in an open contestation of women's equality but also in the use of rhetorical tactics that simultaneously recognise and delegitimise feminism. In her words:

> [b]ehind this celebration of the American women's victory, behind the news, cheerfully and endlessly repeated, that the struggle for women's rights is won, another message flashes. You might be free and equal now, it says to women, but you have never been more miserable. (Faludi, 1991: 1)

Backlashers thus commonly blame women's progress for causing 'female burnout', 'infertility epidemics', 'emasculation', 'neglected children', and 'moral collapse'. Faludi is also credited with observing that antifeminist backlash is not a one-off phenomenon but a 'perpetual viral condition in our culture' emerging every time a feminist movement makes tangible progress (Faludi, 1991: 10).

Triggers, manifestations, and historical recurrence have also been central in the work of other feminist scholars engaging with the backlash concept. Sylvia Walby (1993, 1997) sees the antifeminist backlash as more than resistance to feminism or an attempt to slow its progress. It is, first and foremost, she argues, a determination of patriarchal forces to reaffirm, maintain, and increase the subordination of women, a determination that is recurrent, historically contingent, and culturally contextualised. Concerning the manifestation of backlash, Abby Ferber (2007) observes that backlash strategies are no longer only about openly discriminatory laws but also about subtle ways of appropriating the language of liberal equality.

Jane Mansbridge and Shauna Shames propose an explicit and rare definition of backlash. Backlash, they argue, is 'the use of coercive power to regain lost power as capacity' (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008: 626). 'Power as capacity' refers to the power inherent in a legitimate social order, such as the power of men in an uncontested patriarchal society. In contrast, 'coercive power' is a reactionary power social groups employ either to protect or to restore their power as capacity. Accordingly, for Mansbridge and Shames, backlash is a response to something another has done (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008: 627). While they do not discuss in detail how this response plays out, or what exactly is coercive about it, they nonetheless suggest that it can take different forms: subtle and covert (e.g. ridicule, condemnation, and censure), or covert and violent (e.g. assassination, rape, beatings) (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008: 625–629). With their definition, Mansbridge and Shames analytically separate backlash from persuasion. Therefore, while they recognise that an antifeminist reaction might also result from certain groups seeing feminist ideology as wrong, they nonetheless want to reserve the term backlash for the situations where power as capacity is threatened or lost, and coercive power is used to protect or to recover it. They justify this position pragmatically. It is, they argue, 'more amenable to investigation' and can 'help investigators sort out what is going on' (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008: 633).

Despite these exceptions, feminist scholars show overall little interest in a strict definition of backlash. Their use of the term in relation to different social levels and issues indicates that they are keen to see a greater number of developments as antifeminist backlash. Overall, they also show little interest in differentiating backlash from phenomena such as persuasion or contestation. For many feminist scholars, it is thus unproblematic to label any challenge to women's rights, no matter how overt, covert, big, or small, as a backlash.

A debate concerning postfeminism is interesting in this regard. Feminist scholars disagree as to whether postfeminism – a perspective that sees gender equality as important but already achieved – is a version of antifeminist backlash or a version of feminism. For many it is a covert antifeminist backlash (see, for example, Braithwaite, 2004; McRobbie, 2004; Vint, 2007). Sherryl Vint labels it a 'new backlash', different from Faludi's 'old backlash' (Vint, 2007). The 'old backlash', Vint argues, vilified feminism for urging women to sacrifice their happiness for independence. In contrast, the 'new backlash' seeks to persuade women that they have nothing to complain about, that they have already achieved all their rights. The 'new backlash' thus seeks to distance women from feminism by portraying it as anachronistic (Vint, 2007: 162). It should not be overlooked that there are few feminists who do not see postfeminism as another backlash strategy (see Braithwaite, 2004; Jordan, 2016). They maintain that those who do 'deny the possibility of multiple meanings and layers of feminist theori[s]ing and politics' and, in so doing, even dissuade younger women from feminism (Braithwaite, 2004).

How do these feminist notions of backlash relate to Alter and Zürn's definition of backlash politics advanced in this Special Issue? Alter and Zürn (2020, this issue) propose a composite definition that includes three necessary components: a retrograde objective of recovering the past, an extraordinary challenge to a dominant script, and reaching the threshold level of entering public discourse, and three frequent companions: an emotive element that might include a dose of nostalgia, taboo-breaking and new political strategies, and institutional reshaping. Few feminist scholars would object to labelling a case of antifeminist politics that has these components as backlash. However, they would likely object to such politics being denied this label if one or more of these components were missing. This is because, for most feminist scholars, whether something is backlash is not only an analytical issue but also a political one. Using backlash synonymously with anything deemed antifeminist is mostly unproblematic from this view, since it fulfils the role of alerting them to all the places and ways women's progress is being stumped.

Therefore, despite their attempt to advance a neutral definition of backlash, Alter and Zürn should be mindful of the role the label backlash plays for researchers who cannot easily claim impartiality towards their subject matter, such as those who study LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) rights, far-right groups, or environmental politics. This is, however, not to say that feminist scholars cannot benefit from Alter and Zürn's definition. The threshold definition the two authors propose can aid feminist scholars in 'measuring' the intensity of overt antifeminist backlash. If a case of antifeminist politics fulfils Alter and Zürn's criteria, then it can be argued that we are dealing with a potentially transformative social force. And it is in this sense that we intend to use both the feminist and Alter and Zürn's notions of backlash: if the current antifeminist mobilisation in the UN adheres to feminist conceptions, we can indeed characterise it as such; if it fulfils Alter and Zürn's criteria, we are looking at a social force with a significant transformative potential.

## Antifeminist mobilisation in the United Nations: A backlash?

If feminist notions of backlash are adopted, there is little doubt that the current antifeminist mobilisation in the UN is backlash. For one, as Faludi, Walby, and Mansbridge and Shames observe, backlash is likely when feminist successes are tangible. Indeed, in the past several decades, the women's movement has been notoriously successful globally.

Since the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, the movement has built a strong transnational alliance, it has institutionalised a gender equality framework in the UN, and it has pushed successfully for domestic legislation on women's rights (Berkovitch and Bradley, 1999; Cole, 2013; Cole and Perrier, 2019; Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Paxton et al., 2006; Wotipka and Ramirez, 2008).

For feminist scholars, the backlash to these successes is, first and foremost, a reaction to the real or perceived loss of importance, influence, and power (or 'power as capacity' in Mansbridge and Shauna's definition). In general terms, feminist successes are a threat to patriarchal structures, processes, and beliefs (Walby, 1993, 1997) However, given UN antifeminist group's diversity, it is difficult to specify without thorough research what each of its members loses as women's rights groups succeed. For some, loss is more international; for others, it is more domestic. Accordingly, while Muslim countries are reacting to the potential of fast-diffusing gender equality norms to disrupt their societies' traditional order, the Vatican is responding to the global loss of authority over reproductive matters. For its part, Russia might be using the UN antifeminist mobilisation as a way of recovering lost international prestige following the Soviet Union's collapse. For the United States, it is an expression of domestic politics in which conservatives seek to protect their values by, among other things, fending off international impact on domestic legislation. As observed by UFI in their explanation of why advocacy in the UN matters, there are various cases in which the US courts refer to UN documents, leading to losses for 'defenders of natural family' (UFI, 2010).

As we saw, feminist scholars are not restrictive concerning the manifestation of antifeminist backlash. This backlash, they hold, can be overt or covert; it can be subtle or violent. How antifeminism plays out seems, therefore, not to be a strong criterion of backlash politics in feminist scholarship. It is only Mansbridge and Shames, with their differentiation of backlash from persuasion, and certain feminist scholars separating backlash from postfeminism, that ask for a more restrictive view of backlash. That being said, the current antifeminist mobilisation in the UN is neither persuasion nor postfeminism. As far as persuasion is concerned, these groups are not trying to change their opponent's minds, nor, for that matter, are they seeking compromise (Ebetürk and Cupać, 2020). Alan Carlson, the organiser of the World Congress of Families and one of the group's chief ideologists, is adamant that there can only be one meaning of family; one that is both natural and universal (Carlson, 1994). The antifeminist strategies in the UN are also not a case of postfeminism. The group does not argue that women's rights had already been achieved and that gender issues should, therefore, be depoliticised. On the contrary, the group is deeply troubled by the conceptual separation of sex from gender, such concepts as 'sexual orientation' and 'reproductive health and rights of women', and is actively seeking to suppress them. Overall, given the reactionary nature of the current UN antifeminist mobilisation, and the fact that it is neither a case of persuasion nor of postfeminism, there are good reasons to characterise this mobilisation as backlash from the perspective of feminist literature. The question now is whether it can also be characterised as such according to Alter and Zürn's conceptually more restrictive definition.

One of the necessary elements of backlash politics for Alter and Zürn is a retrograde objective of recovering the past. For the UN antifeminist groups, this past is when the family was the primary unit of society. They do not refer to a specific time frame when this was the case but construct the family as universal and natural. This notion of family is particularly pronounced in documents of conservative NGOs, and the UN high-level events concerning the family (UN Web TV, 2016, 2019). The theme of the 2017 World

Congress of Families in Budapest was 'Make Families Strong Again'. While different members of the group have different ideas of the golden time of the family, they are united in seeing family as a unit consisting of a male, a female, and their children. Their further commonality is the idea that the male should head the household, while the domestic arena should be a female domain. The title of a workshop organised by the World Congress of Families in 2012 – 'Authentic Women and Rediscovering Homemaking' – illustrates well this retrograde understanding of the division of labour. Finally, from their perspective, the current moment is a human-made anomaly. Carlson (1994, 2000) thus writes that the natural family declines only through deliberate efforts of individuals and ideological movements.

The UN antifeminist group's idea of the natural family also includes the prioritisation of the family over individuals. Reference to this can be found in their many speeches and documents. In the World Congress of Families in 2018, a speaker called for the replacement of individual rights with family rights (Michel, 2018), while the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, emphasised the importance of family 'in the face of growing individualism' (Barthélemy, 2018). In a document explaining why the 'anti-family movement' is so prevalent in the UN, the UFI describes the supporters of individual rights as Goliath (Christensen, 2011). In 2014, the UN Family Rights Caucus asked the UN Human Rights Council to 'resist pressures to focus solely on individual rights to the detriment of the family unit' in the context of domestic violence (Shameem, 2017: 44). Accordingly, the UN antifeminist group challenges one of the core features of the dominant script – the primacy of the individual over collective rights (Boli and Thomas, 1999: 36; Elliott, 2007; Meyer, 2010) – which is another feature of Alter and Zürn's definition of backlash politics.

The final requirement of Alter and Zürn's notion of backlash politics is that such politics reaches the threshold level of entering public discourse. In recent years, the UN antifeminist groups have been very successful in making their voices heard, both inside and outside of the UN. The most recent example is their success in deleting references to sexual and reproductive health in Security Council Resolution 2467. While feminist groups have been aware of the group's antifeminist efforts for a long time, Resolution 2467 brought it to the awareness of people beyond the UN as it was widely discussed in the media. The group has also managed to set the tone in various other UN fora. Many women's organisations report that they are now on the defence; they are engaged in protecting their achievements rather than advancing their agenda further (Goetz, 2015). US conservative NGOs are particularly influential, having expanded their reach with Trump's election. Julian Borger and Liz Ford (2019) report that these groups are now able to dictate their causes to US delegates in the UN. For instance, C-Fam contacted Nikki Haley's staff and gave them line-by-line instructions on issues of sexual and reproductive health for a CSW annual conference. As a result, they have been successful in changing certain UN documents. For instance, family rights, rather than human rights of the individual members of the family, have become a part of several Human Rights Council declarations in 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017 (Shameem, 2017). In 2016, a reference to 'the family' was made in the final text of the Agreed Conclusions of the CSW, and it was promptly referred to as agreed language. Antifeminist groups have also made sure to 'mainstream' family within the CSW by linking it to development and human trafficking.

All things considered, we hold that the current UN antifeminist mobilisation can be characterised as a backlash. It adheres both to the feminist notion of backlash and Alter and Zürn's more restrictive definition. Alter and Zürn's frequent companions of backlash

politics can also be identified. Family being constructed in an emotionally charged way is one example. When speaking about it, antifeminist backlashers often refer to love and evoke it nostalgically (UN Web TV, 2016). We see taboo-breaking, new political strategies, and institutional reshaping in their attempts to exclude feminist NGOs from CSW meetings in which these NGOs have participated for decades (Goetz, 2015) and in 'cyber-bullying', such as when 3000 anti-abortion text messages were sent to a UN diplomat during the CSW's 2019 annual meeting. All this indicates that a social force with a significant transformative potential is now active in the UN. In the subsequent concluding section, we reflect on the implications this force might have on UN women's rights agenda, the politics inside the UN, and the liberal international order more generally.

## Conclusion: Consequences of antifeminist backlash in the United Nations

Antifeminist groups did not enter the international arena because they harbour a genuine internationalist orientation. Rather, they entered it because that is where the threat to the patriarchal values, status, identity, and power was now coming from. Yet, once they were there, they learned fast how to 'play the game' (Cupać and Ebetürk, 2020). Recent successes of antifeminist groups in the UN can, therefore, be attributed to their intensified transnational connections and their increasingly strategic behaviour. But these successes, including the backlash politics that underpins them, are also in large part a consequence of a well-used opportunity structure created by the current surge of populist and authoritarian leaders. Herein also lies a peculiarity: while these leaders increasingly challenge the liberal international order premised on multilateralism and rule-based governance, antifeminist groups in the UN have so far backlashed mostly against the liberal and progressive content of gender norms. In other words, they seem to be embracing both multilateralism and rule-based governance, as long as rules and norms are to their liking.

What can be inferred about the future of women's rights, politics inside the UN, and perhaps even the international liberal order as a whole, from this observation of a growing group of reluctant transnational actors embracing backlash politics not by rejecting international authority but by accepting it? In other words, what is the transformative potential of UN antifeminist backlashers, a potential we, in agreement with Alter and Zürn, see as justifying conceptual separation of backlash politics from ordinary contentious politics? To begin with, these backlashers are unlikely to wither away any time soon, even if UN women's rights groups succeed in counter-mobilising, or the opportunity structure that precipitated their success collapses. We make this claim based on the fact that antifeminist backlashers now form a fairly strong transnational network that in many ways mimics the one maintained by women's rights groups (Cupać and Ebetürk, 2020). Like women's rights groups, they have overcome their differences by unifying around a single frame; they have used world conferences to come up with this frame and to strengthen their network; they have carefully studied the UN's language so as to frame their proposals in an institutionally resonant way (UFI, 2019); they have aggressively lobbied sympathetic or undecided decision-makers; and, finally, they have sought to prevent their opponents from participating in decision-making fora.

All this makes UN antifeminist groups a force to be reckoned with; a force that is increasingly transforming the UN from a site in which progressive groups are the main agenda setters into a site of genuine political struggle between two opposing transnational networks (see, for example, Zürn et al., 2012). In fact, we might be observing a 'gender

rights vs natural family' cleavage forming inside the UN, a cleavage that will not necessarily reshape the UN system but how politics is done within it. Amplifying this possibility is the fact that this polarising dynamic can already be observed in other UN areas, namely in disability rights, same-sex relationships, the prohibition of torture, affirmative action, gun control, and indigenous rights (Goetz, 2020). From a feminist perspective, this cleavage might be interpreted as pervasive dormant patriarchy now becoming visible and influential. Some scholars go so far as to suggest that all progressive 20th century movements are resistance to patriarchy and its emotional underpinnings, and all counter-movements are the patriarchy's reaction (Gilligan and Richards, 2018). The implications of this interplay in the long run are yet to be seen. It might 'democratise' the UN (and the international order as a whole) such that its liberal and progressive bias is no longer a given. Yet it might also lead to a fundamentally different social order, one in which 'natural family' and related values win over women's rights.

## Funding

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## Note

1.  The Group of Friends of the Family consists of the following states: Bangladesh, Belarus, Comoros, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Libya, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Yemen, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

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