REFRACT CAFE: OCTOBER 08, 2025

TOPIC: Gender Backlash and Rising Authoritarianism in Fragile Contexts

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(HELD UNDER CHATHAM HOUSE RULE)

Understanding the Interplay of Gender Backlash and Authoritarianism

The latest ReFrACT Café explored the complex interconnections between rising authoritarianism and the global resurgence of gender backlash. The discussion underscored a disturbing trend: over 70% of the world's population now lives under some form of autocracy. This expansion of authoritarian rule is not occurring in isolation—it is accompanied by a concerted backlash against women's and LGBTQ+ rights.

The speaker emphasized that gender backlash should not be seen as a series of isolated incidents, but rather as a deliberate political strategy integral to maintaining and expanding authoritarian power. It manifests through multiple mechanisms—discursive attacks on gender equality ("gender bashing"), symbolic gestures masking repression ("gender-washing"), and the co-optation of civil society spaces. Together, these strategies form part of a broader attempt to reinforce traditional power hierarchies and control public discourse.

The Global Landscape: Coercion, Co-optation, and Control

The speaker presented evidence of the growing convergence between authoritarianism and anti-gender movements across different regions. Populist leaders have increasingly relied on masculinist and anti-gender narratives to frame equality movements as existential threats. In some contexts, the military and security apparatus have even been enlisted to "defend" national identity against so-called "woke politics."

Beyond national borders, transnational alliances are shaping the contours of this backlash. Church-organized NGOs (CHONGOs) are proliferating, often serving as intermediaries for conservative religious agendas while providing alternative social services that compete with rights-based organizations. At the same time, governments have established their own NGOs (GONGOs) to occupy civic space and control activist agendas.

This dynamic has proven particularly effective in fragile political environments, where authoritarian regimes reward loyal actors and suppress dissenting ones. Examples from African contexts illustrate how apparent reforms—such as gender quotas or the appointment of women to high office—can be manipulated to consolidate power. Such symbolic measures create an illusion of progress that is often rewarded by the international community, despite masking deepening repression.

Recent developments in some countries illustrate how this strategy operates simultaneously on domestic and international levels: commitments to anti-abortion declarations, enactment of antiLGBTQ+ laws, and the influence of global networks—spanning from religious institutions to state actors—combine to reinforce illiberal governance models.

Policy Challenges: Between Engagement and Non-Legitimisation

A central challenge identified during the discussion is how to engage meaningfully in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian contexts without legitimizing repressive regimes. Cutting aid or disengaging entirely risks abandoning local civil society actors who depend on external support. Yet engagement without critical reflection can inadvertently validate the very systems that restrict freedoms.

This dilemma is compounded by the transnational nature of gender backlash. Anti-gender narratives are increasingly coordinated, well-funded, and embedded within global institutions. At the same time, donor and development communities remain fragmented, often treating gender backlash as a secondary issue rather than as a structural pillar of authoritarianism.

Participants also highlighted an ethical tension: international actors must balance the urgency of defending universal rights with sensitivity to local political and cultural contexts. Efforts perceived as externally imposed can provoke nationalist resistance and strengthen illiberal movements. The challenge, therefore, lies in sustaining principled engagement that empowers local actors without reinforcing the hierarchies authoritarianism seeks to maintain.

Policy Recommendations

The speaker proposed several ways forward for policymakers, donors, and practitioners:

1. **Reclaim the Language of Gender:** Be vigilant about the dilution of concepts. The tendency to substitute "gender" with "sex" in pursuit of consensus undermines the transformative agenda of gender equality.

2. **Invest in Implementation, Not Just Commitments:** Move beyond rhetorical support. Resources should focus on ensuring that legal and institutional commitments translate into real progress on the ground.

3. **Support Independent Civil Society:** Provide long-term, flexible funding to locally led organizations that maintain autonomy from state or religious control. Independent CSOs not only expand civic space but also provide vital intelligence on evolving local dynamics.

4. **Engage Beyond the Formal Sphere:** Recognize and collaborate with informal and community-level leaders, including those outside formal political or NGO structures.

5. **Address Disinformation and Knowledge Production:** Counter anti-gender narratives with evidence-based research, public education, and the amplification of local voices. Support for feminist and inclusive knowledge networks is essential to challenge coordinated illiberal campaigns.

6. **Acknowledge Donor Divisions and Build Coherence:** Donor institutions are not monolithic. Understanding internal differences and aligning strategies across funding bodies can prevent fragmentation and enhance policy coherence.

Conclusion

The discussion concluded that the rise of authoritarianism and the gender backlash are mutually reinforcing phenomena that cannot be addressed separately. The global challenge lies in supporting independent, context-driven initiatives that defend rights and freedoms without legitimizing repressive systems.

Sustained vigilance, solidarity across borders, and a commitment to long-term engagement are essential if gender equality and democratic governance are to be defended against the growing tide of illiberalism.

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