Various Perspectives on the 'War on Gender': A Thematic Collection

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Svatoňová, Eva, Baginová, Mina. 2024. Various Perspectives on the 'War on Gender': A Thematic Collection. *Gender a výzkum / Gender and Research* 25 (1): 2–11, https://doi.org/10.13060/gav.2024.003.

The undeclared war against women

In 1991, American feminist and award-winning journalist Susan Faludi published an influential book titled *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. In this work, she examined a reactionary discourse prevalent in the media and cultural products that emerged during the 1980s. The central motif of this discourse depicted women as being profoundly unhappy despite having ostensibly achieved the freedoms championed by the women's movement of the 1970s. The discourse blamed feminism for 'producing' masses of single professional women who were prioritising their careers over family life, suffering burn-out and depression, succumbing to an 'infertility epidemic', and grieving over a 'man shortage'. In other words, the discourse claimed that 'women were enslaved by their own liberation' (Faludi 1993: 2).

Faludi characterised this phenomenon as a cultural shift resulting from a process wherein the discourse of the 1970s American Christian Right gained political and social legitimacy and subsequently permeated popular culture. Utilising statistical evidence, Faludi effectively deconstructed this discourse by illustrating that many of the demands of the women's movement were nullified either shortly before or soon after feminists succeeded in actualising them. As Faludi put it bluntly: 'the anti-feminist backlash has been set off not by women`s achievement of full equality but by the increased possibility that they might win it' (ibid.: 14). She went on to argue that the proponents of the backlashes used the fear of change as a threat even before any major changes had occurred. What she described then was not an organised movement but a cultural turn, which almost seemed apolitical: `It is most powerful

when it goes private, when it lodges inside a woman's mind and turns her vision inward, until she imagines the pressure is all in her head, until she begins to enforce the backlash, too – on herself' (ibid.: 16).

The rise of a powerful new movement

Three decades later, it can be concluded that the 'unorganised, apolitical' backlash has not succeeded in deterring feminist actors from pursuing change. Despite the cultural milieu described by Faludi, they have achieved significant outcomes, including the enactment of laws addressing violence against women, the creation of programmes and shelters for battered women, and the transformation of the public discourse on women's roles in society, contraception, women's pleasure, abortion, and in some contexts also the binary opposition of sexes and beauty stereotypes. The list of accomplishments continues to grow. Additionally, the movement has also managed to develop various streams of feminist thought that, while critical of one another, have facilitated lively and opinionated debate among their proponents. Discussions have emerged between liberal feminists and socialist feminists, as well as between white feminists and those advocating for the inclusion of women who do not fit the white, middle-class, heterosexual stereotype of a woman. Disputes arose also between feminists advocating for state intervention to protect victims of gender-based violence and proponents of abolition feminism. Additionally, discussion has also arisen among Western feminists and postcolonial feminists, who criticise the former for excluding their perspectives from feminist struggles.

Amid the ongoing debates among feminists regarding the optimal strategies for women's liberation and resisting patriarchy, a new and more formidable form of backlash has emerged. This time, it transcends the traditional apolitical discourse embedded in the cultural products depicted by Faludi. Although anti-feminist cultural artefacts continue to be produced, there is a noticeable rise in the prominence of a powerful, well-organised, and well-funded network of actors known under the label of the anti-gender movement (Graff, Korolczuk 2022) or as anti-gender campaigners (Kuhar, Paternotte 2017). These actors systematically endeavour not only to prevent the implementation of reforms that could improve the lives of women and queer people but also to dismantle existing rights for women and LGBTQAI+ communities.

In the 2010s, anti-gender discourse came to be increasingly instrumentalised by populist far right parties and leaders globally. Defence of the 'traditional family' against the 'gender and LGBTQIA+ ideology' became notoriously associated with leaders such as, to name just a few, Donald Trump, Victor Orbán, Jair Bolsonaro, and Giorgia Meloni. These leaders became the most prominent examples of this owing to their illiberal tendencies, use of extreme statements, and populist rhetorical style.

However, it is important to note that many liberal and conservative actors have deployed anti-gender discourse as well. In Czechia, for instance, Prime Minister Petr Fiala, who is from a liberal democratic party and is not at all viewed as a 'far right populist' by political scientists and commentators, made a public statement in which he praised Donald Trump for fighting gender ideology.[1]

The fact that political elites exploited anti-gender discourse to gain office led them to subsequently incorporate this discourse into public policies. Thus, over the past decade, we have witnessed how the efforts of anti-gender actors have yielded several tangible outcomes in the form of attacks on reproductive rights and human rights. Most notable among these are the tightening of abortion policies in Poland and the United States, the prevention of the ratification of the European Council's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention) in several countries (Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria), and the withdrawal of Turkey from the convention, after having already ratified it in the past. The anti-gender movement was also involved in preventing the introduction of same-sex marriage or partnership in countries such as Czechia and Slovakia, while Hungary, where anti-genderism is the politics of the official government, enacted several laws discriminating against LGBTQAI+ individuals. Particularly significant were the homophobic laws introduced in Russia and the extremely harsh anti-gay laws prescribing the death penalty for certain same-sex acts introduced in Uganda in May 2023. Finally, an indirect but tangible effect of the discourse is the rise in physical attacks on LGBTQIA+ people and feminist activists and scholars.

The state of the art

Although in the early 2010s scholars tended to treat and interpret the attacks on 'gender' as representative of their individual national public spheres, anti-genderism is now recognised as a truly global phenomenon. Investigative research by scholars, activists, and journalists has revealed that not only do the actors who engage in instrumentalising this discourse use strikingly similar arguments, rhetorical strategies, and public relations tactics (Graff, Korolczuk 2022), but they also participate in international alliances and convene and share tactics at international conferences (Buss, Herman 2003; Power 2010), and they are often funded by the same donors (Datta 2021).

The phenomenon of anti-genderism gained the attention of European academics, activists, and the media in the first half of 2010s, as they began to observe the rise

[1] https://pravybreh.cz/populismus-neni-budoucnost-konzervatismu-deset-poznamek-k-americkym-volbam/

of a new discourse that warned of societal decline and moral decay. This increasingly more popular discourse is centred on the concept of the 'traditional family'. The coalition of proponents of this discourse, comprising civil society actors, intellectuals, clerics, and politicians, argues that the family – defined as a unit consisting of a man, a woman, and their biological children – is the foundation of society. They contend that this institution is in extreme danger and at risk of extinction due to an assault by a pernicious 'gender ideology'.

Within this discourse, 'gender ideology' is employed as an umbrella term and signifier for the perceived deterioration of society's moral values. This deterioration is attributed to the claims and demands of the new left, particularly feminist and gay rights movements, and to the sexual revolution. As Kuhar and Patternote put it in their seminal work, 'gender ideology is a term initially created to oppose women's and LGBT rights activism as well as scholarship deconstructing essentialist and naturalistic assumptions about gender and sexuality. (…) It regards gender as the ideological matrix of a set of abhorred ethical and social reforms, namely sexual and reproductive rights, same-sex marriage and adoption, new reproductive technologies, sex education, gender mainstreaming, protection against gender violence and others. Ignoring the history of the notion, "gender ideology" authors rely heavily on John Money's problematic experiments and erroneously consider Judith Butler as the mother of "gender ideology"' (Kuhar, Paternotte 2017: 5).

The intellectual roots

Since the early 2010s, this phenomenon has been rigorously examined from multiple perspectives, and it would be misleading to claim that we lack knowledge about the discourse itself and the actors who actively engage in its dissemination. On the contrary, a growing body of literature is illuminating the specific facets of this discourse. Existing research has delved into its intellectual foundations, identifying key signifiers such as the concepts of 'complementarity', 'culture of death', and the purported 'Catholic anthropology' found in the official writings of Popes and the Vatican (Case 2016; 2019). Another body of work has examined the work and role of conservative intellectuals such as German sociologist Gabrielle Kuby or French psychoanalyst Tony Anatrella (for a comprehensive overview, see Kuhar, Paternotte 2017).

Important insights have been provided by research on the neoconservatism of the American Christian Right, which has been identified as an actor that has developed important rhetorical strategies later used by the anti-gender movement, including the need to protect the family (Buss, Herman 2003). This branch of research was crucial for understanding the link between these groups of religious fundamentalists calling for greater state control over people's moral values and lifestyle and the intellectuals

and politicians who were promoting neoliberal reforms and politics in an attempt to reduce the role of the state and govern according to market criteria (Brown 2006; Cooper 2017). The authors convincingly manifest how such an intersection produces the forces of de-democratisation. Thanks to this work we can understand the role of the proponents of neoconservatism, the predecessor of the 'anti-gender' discourse, in the ideological shift to neoliberalism. As Brown has importantly pointed out, neoconservatism is a political formation that is neither ideologically nor socially unified. According to her, it is born out of a literally unholy alliance that is 'only unevenly and opportunistically religious' and includes 'intellectuals and anti-intellectuals, secular Jews and evangelical Christians, chamber musicians turned Sovietologists, political theory professors, turned policy wonks, angry white men, and righteous black ones' (Brown 2006: 696).

As Melinda Cooper (2017) demonstrates, the rise in the popularity of neoconservative ideology was a reaction to the so-called crisis of the family, manifested by the growing number of divorces and single mothers. Cooper argues that the instrumentalisation of neoconservative discourse by neoliberals has been driven by pragmatism: 'Neoliberals are particularly concerned about the enormous social costs that derive from the breakdown of the stable Fordist family: the cost that have been incurred, for example, by women who opt for no-fault divorce, women who have children out of wedlock or those who engage in unprotected sex without private insurance; and the fact that these costs accrue to the government and taxpayer rather than the private family' (Cooper 2017: 9). In other words, neoliberals have been advocating for the promotion of conservative family values as a strategy to diminish the financial burden on the welfare state, as they expect that individuals within the family unit will be responsible for one another's care and overall well-being. According to this ideology, the private family should serve as the primary source of economic security and a comprehensive alternative to the welfare state.

Transnational networking and the development of anti-gender rhetoric

Scholars such as Margaret Power (2010) and Doris E. Buss and Didi Herman (2003) have demonstrated how this neoconservative discourse was disseminated through transnational networking and cooperation, emphasising the role of transnational conferences, particularly those organised by the United Nations. The contemporary frameworks through which actors convey traditional ideas diverge from earlier models by incorporating a critical concept that was absent from the 1970s discourse: 'gender ideology'. This inclusion has led to the movement being characterised as the 'anti-gender' movement (Kuhar, Paternotte 2017). Despite its numerous variations

and refinements, this discourse has undergone only minor changes since its inception in the 1970s. In fact, anti-gender discourse is essentially a repackaging of old ideas. Like the American Christian Right of the 1970s and 1980s, anti-gender actors denounce the hegemony of anti-discrimination and egalitarian ideas in the public sphere, including the media, art, and education. They decry the 'social engineering' they associate with socialism and liberal democratic egalitarian projects such as anti-discrimination initiatives, the gender quota, affirmative action, initiatives tackling violence against women, legal access to abortion, same-sex marriage, and the possibility of same-sex partners raising children. In other words, they mourn the good old patriarchal days in which marriage was a union between a man and a woman, homosexuality was illegal, and it was deemed unacceptable for romantic relationships to form between white and non-white people, and they strive to bring those days back not only by opposing gender and sexuality progressive politics, but also by lobbying for the revocation of laws already introduced that were fought for by feminist and LGBTQAI+ rights activists.

The development of the discourse's crucial notion of 'gender ideology' is a side effect of the mainstreaming of the concept of 'gender', which has transitioned from feminist theoretical literature into mainstream discourse. The wider acceptance of the concept became more than evident when it was utilised during the UN's World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 (McIntosh, Finkle 1995). The notion 'gender ideology' is claimed to have emerged in reaction to this particular conference (Kuhar, Paternotte 2017).

An important branch of research analysing transnational networks focuses on the development of anti-genderism in post-Soviet Russia, where the discourse has evolved into a geopolitical instrument. This became starkly evident in the discourse utilised by Russian propaganda during its conflict with Ukraine. However, the Russian iteration of this discourse can be traced back to the 1990s, when representatives of the American Christian Right began collaborating with Russian conservatives and members of the Russian Orthodox Church. This cooperation culminated in the establishment of the World Congress of Families (WCF), an umbrella organisation that hosts regular conferences featuring prominent figures such as political leaders, clerics, and activists within the anti-gender movement. The inaugural WCF meeting, held in Prague in 1997, was attended by 700 individuals. Since then, attendance has grown substantially, with the most recent international congress in Mexico drawing over 8,000 participants.

Just as Brown described neoconservatives as an unholy alliance selectively instrumentalising religion, what we nowadays label the 'anti-gender movement' can be seen as a coalition of various actors with ideologically and politically different backgrounds. As Kováts (2017) demonstrated in her groundbreaking analysis of anti-genderism in Hungary, the composition of the anti-gender coalition mirrors the composition of the

neoconservative movement described by Brown. She argues that the coalition consists of actors with very different ideological backgrounds for whom the notion of gender functions as the 'symbolic glue' that holds the alliance together. Rather than sharing ideological and political programmes, these groups share a common enemy.

The contribution of this thematic collection

While substantial research has focused on deconstructing anti-gender discourse and elucidating the strategies employed by its proponents, there is a notable gap in our understanding of the demand side. Pablo Gusmeroli and Luca Trappolin address this gap within the Italian context in their article. They present findings from qualitative interviews conducted with mothers and teachers who, despite not being activists themselves, participated in anti-gender conferences.

The authors interpret these narratives as strategies employed by participants to defend their ethical educational competence against emerging norms of sexual democracy. They argue that these women position themselves and construct their legitimacy in response to the perceived risk of symbolic marginalisation within the educational field. By adopting a perspective 'from below', Gusmeroli and Trappolin avoid portraying the interviewed teachers and parents as mere cultural and religious subjects manipulated by anti-gender leaders. Instead, they are depicted as social actors actively engaged in cultural and social struggles with significant stakes.

Ecem Nazlı Üçok, like the aforementioned scholars, employs a qualitative in-depth interview methodology. However, her research shifts the focus to the lived experiences of those most affected by the discourse: Polish activist women who have migrated from Poland. Üçok's work explores the intersection of personal experiences, political contexts, and feminist activism, emphasising the concept of affective dissonance. Her research highlights the significance of understanding the emotional dimensions of activism and the role of affective solidarity in motivating collective action.

As a Turkish academic who left Turkey to pursue research in gender studies amidst political threats from the Turkish government, Üçok vividly describes developing a bond of solidarity with Polish feminist activists. Despite their diverse backgrounds, they found common ground in their shared struggles, fostering a sense of 'sisterly solidarity'. Her work enriches the literature by providing a micro-level perspective on the pathways to activism and illuminating an unexpected consequence of anti-gender politics: the emergence of a new generation of activists who have become radicalised in response to increasing oppression.

Üçok's findings, derived from her collected data, present compelling testimonies of feminist activism under hostile conditions perpetuated by the far-right governing party, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice). The testimonies reveal the intense

pressure and fear experienced by these activists, including threats to their lives as they campaigned for women's and LGBTQIA+ rights in Poland. Her research offers critical insights into the emotional and psychological toll of activism in repressive environments, contributing to a deeper understanding of the dynamics driving contemporary feminist movements.

Finally, the concluding article in this thematic collection is by Altanay Kambekova, who applies a decolonial perspective to analyse the anti-gender movement and politics in Kazakhstan. Kambekova argues that despite the global reach of this phenomenon, there exists a notable geographic imbalance in research attention, with Central Asia remaining notably underrepresented. She asserts that the manifestation of anti-gender discourse in this region is shaped by what she terms 'double coloniality', wherein these nations contend with enduring influences from Russia, itself positioned in a subordinate role within Western coloniality frameworks. Kambekova illustrates how postcolonial sentiments have been appropriated within official state discourse and aligned with anti-gender rhetoric in the context of Kazakhstan.

The three articles in this thematic section approach the topic from diverse perspectives, collectively illustrating the pervasive nature of anti-gender discourse in the daily lives of ordinary citizens. This discourse affects a spectrum of individuals, from conservative parents and teachers to activists, feminists, and marginalised groups such as women and queer individuals. As this discourse has transitioned from the margins of religious fundamentalist groups into mainstream discourse, influencing voting behaviour and increasingly translating into discriminatory policies that contravene human rights agendas, there is a pressing need to comprehend its resonance among various demographic groups and the factors driving its adoption.

Final remarks

Coincidentally, the poststructuralist philosopher Judith Butler, who is often portrayed as the 'mother' of gender ideology because of her influential book *Gender Trouble*, published a book titled *Who's Afraid of Gender?* the same year of this special collection which we originally planned to title *Who's Afraid of Gender?* as well. In the book, they describe the global scene of the anti-gender movement and provide an overview of the various streams and views that exist within the diverse coalition of anti-gender actors. Their book, however, was inspired more by a psychoanalytical approach as their aim was to deconstruct the different public statements made by anti-gender actors. They describe the fear of gender as 'a phantasm' and equate the anti-gender ideology that is constituent for the movement with fascism. They understand this 'phantasm' as a psychosocial phenomenon and a site where 'intimate fears and anxieties become socially organized to incite political passions' (Butler 2024: 9).

Butler admits that there are many reasons to fear our world today. Among the most urgent, they list climate change, forced migration, wars, and neoliberal economies that are accelerating inequality. They point out that the political right effectively ignores these threats and 'exploits' different sort of fears: challenges to patriarchal power and social structures within the state, civil society, and the heteronormative family unit. In other words, Butler claims that there are legitimate anxieties and fears among the world`s populations, but the right displaces them by blaming them on 'gender'. They argue that 'for gender to be identified as a threat to all of life, civilization, society, thought, and the like, it has to gather up a wide range of anxieties – no matter how they contradict one another – package them into a single bundle, and subsume them under a single name' (Butler 2024: 5). Butler describes the instrumentalisation of the anti-gender ideology by states, churches, and political movements as a purely dishonest strategy, the aim of which is to frighten people 'to come back into their ranks, to accept censorship, and to externalize their fear and hatred onto vulnerable people' (Butler 2024: 6).

We concur with Butler's assertion that anti-gender ideology is a signal of broader social crises beyond the issues of gender equality. However, it is our contention that their book does not adequately engage with the perspectives of feminist and pro-gender advocates. Consequently, it overlooks the nuanced dynamics between these positions, neglecting significant aspects of contemporary feminist politics, including its institutionalisation, NGOisation, and the power dynamics of global capitalism. Furthermore, we contend that the psychoanalytical framework Butler employs needs to be supplemented with research that addresses the demand side – namely, the individuals who find resonance with this discourse. Solely relying on Butler's analysis risks dismissing these individuals' perspectives as mere instances of false consciousness. This was the original aim of this thematic section. While this thematic section was initially conceived to be devoted to articles focusing on the demand side of anti-gender discourse, fewer submissions utilising this perspective were received than expected. This highlights a significant gap in current research that requires further investigation.

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