



REWRITING POWER: THE METAPOLITICS OF GENDER, IDENTITY, AND GLOBAL LEGITIMACY IN THE AGE OF FRAGMENTED GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

This article investigates the complex interplay between gender politics, identity, and global legitimacy in the contemporary era marked by fragmented governance. It explores how anti-gender mobilizations and backlash against progressive gender norms have become pivotal in reshaping political and social orders internationally. The study analyzes transnational conservative networks, rising illiberal populism, demographic anxieties, and global geopolitical realignments that challenge gender equality, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights, undermining democratic norms and renewing cultural-political contestations over identity. Through review of recent legislative trends, activist repression, and coalition-building at multilateral institutions, the paper demonstrates how metapolitical struggles over gender both reflect and drive processes of democratic erosion and redefined power configurations.

Introduction

Over the past decade, global politics have witnessed a marked rise in anti-gender campaigns—movements that contest the legitimacy of feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and broader gender equality initiatives. This backlash is multifaceted, connected to demographic crises, rising authoritarian populism, and transnational conservative networks that promote traditional gender norms as foundational for national and cultural integrity. Fragmented governance structures, characterized by weakening state authority and proliferating non-state actors, provide fertile ground for these contestations, complicating efforts to uphold progressive gender norms. This article aims to map this metapolitical



phenomenon by synthesizing empirical and theoretical research on anti-gender mobilizations, their impact on identity politics, and repercussions for global legitimacy.

The Rise of Anti-Gender Backlash in Fragmented Governance Contexts

Anti-gender activism has experienced a significant surge across the globe over the past decade, driven by a complex interplay of political, cultural, and socio-economic factors. This resurgence of conservative mobilizations challenges the progressive gains made in gender equality, sexual rights, and LGBTQ+ inclusion, transforming these issues into focal points of cultural conflict and political contention. The phenomenon is particularly pronounced in settings characterized by fragmented governance—a landscape where democratic institutions are weakened, state authority is uneven, and political polarization impedes cohesive policy-making.

Political Dynamics and Institutional Weaknesses: In many regions, weakened democratic institutions create a fertile environment for anti-gender actors to advance their agendas. When judicial independence is compromised or legislative bodies are subject to partisan control, the capacity to protect minority rights, including those of women and LGBTQ+ individuals, diminishes considerably [Korolczuk et al., 2024]. Governments emboldened by populist narratives often frame gender and sexual rights as foreign impositions or threats to national sovereignty, employing nationalist rhetoric to justify restrictive legislation. Such political strategies facilitate the mobilization of grassroots and elite supporters alike, consolidating power under the guise of protecting traditional values.

Polarization and Social Divisions: Polarized societal landscapes further exacerbate anti-gender movements. In deeply divided societies, political actors and social groups mobilize around oppositional identities—traditional versus modern, national versus global, religious versus secular—that frequently deploy gender politics as a battleground. For example, in the United States, states controlled by conservative administrations have enacted bans on gender identity education in public schools, framing these policies as safeguarding "family values" and protecting children from ideological influence [Carnegie



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Endowment, 2025]. Similar trends are observed in Eastern Europe, where governments leverage anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric to bolster nationalist and religious narratives, intensifying societal rifts.

Case Studies of Anti-Gender Legislation. Hungary: One of the most prominent examples is Hungary's comprehensive ban on Budapest Pride in 2021. Government officials framed the event as incompatible with national cultural values and traditional family structures, citing concerns over "child protection." The legislation also included measures that restrict the portrayal and discussion of LGBTQ+ issues in the media, schools, and public spaces. Such policies exemplify how legal measures target not only public expressions of gender diversity but also attempt to curtail the symbolic and cultural visibility of marginalized groups [Korolczuk et al., 2024].

Eastern Europe: Several countries in Eastern Europe, including Poland and Romania, have enacted restrictive laws on transgender rights, such as bans on gender-affirming healthcare or restrictions on changing legal gender documents. These legal measures are often justified by claims to preserve societal "order" and uphold traditional family ideals. These moves often face strong opposition from civil society, but the governmental pushbacks exemplify how fragmented governance allows for authoritarian-leaning policies that undermine trans rights under the pretext of cultural sovereignty.

United States: In the US, the proliferation of state-level bans on gender identity education and restrictions on trans healthcare exemplifies how polarized federalism creates a patchwork of protections and restrictions. These policies are often driven by electoral considerations, resonating with conservative electoral bases that view gender liberalization as a threat to religious and cultural norms [Carnegie Endowment, 2025]. **Global Setbacks in Reproductive Rights:** At the international level, setbacks in reproductive rights—such as the recent overturning of abortion rights in certain jurisdictions—are emblematic of how fragmented governance structures and shifting geopolitical alliances influence policies that directly impact gender equality. These setbacks often occur amid fierce ideological battles that see reproductive and sexual rights as central to broader cultural and religious conflicts. **Strategies and Rhetoric of Anti-Gender Actors:** Anti-gender movements utilize sophisticated narratives and strategic



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framing to legitimize their actions. They often portray themselves as defenders of "traditional" values, family, and morality, framing progressive gender policies as threats to societal cohesion. This rhetoric is reinforced through misinformation campaigns, religious appeals, and the manipulation of fears related to demographic decline, gender confusion, and the erosion of cultural identity [Korolczuk et al., 2024]. Social media platforms have amplified these narratives, enabling coordinated campaigns that mobilize supporters, spread misinformation, and intimidate opponents. Digital spaces serve as battlegrounds for cultural wars, where anti-gender actors project their influence beyond national borders, transcending local contexts to foster transnational networks dedicated to resisting gender equality agendas [Korolczuk et al., 2024].

Implications for Democracy and Human Rights: The rise of anti-gender activism in fragmented governance settings has profound implications for democracy and human rights. It threatens the foundational principles of equality, non-discrimination, and individual liberty by criminalizing or marginalizing communities based on gender and sexual orientation. Moreover, the curtailment of civic space hinders activism, stifles debate, and weakens institutional capacity to uphold human rights standards internationally [Korolczuk et al., 2024].

Table 1. Key Legislative Trends in Anti-Gender Backlash (2015-2025)

Region	Notable Policy Actions	Description
Eastern Europe	Ban on Pride, restrictions on LGBTQ rights	Hungary bans Pride; laws restrict legal recognition of transgender people
United States	State-level bans on gender identity teaching	Multiple states ban gender and sexuality education in public schools
Latin America	Attempts to roll back abortion rights	Introduced but stalled restrictive abortion legislation
Africa	Introduction of anti-LGBTQ laws	New criminalization of same-sex conduct in various countries

Source: Adapted from Korolczuk et al. (2024); Carnegie Endowment (2025)



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The backlash increasingly employs digital misinformation and surveillance, targeting activists through harassment and violence, which threatens democratic participation and pluralism (Korolczuk et al., 2024; Carnegie Endowment, 2025).

Contemporary anti-gender movements articulate opposition to gender equality as part of defending traditional identities perceived to be under threat from globalization, Western liberalism, and multiculturalism. They frame feminism and LGBTQ rights as foreign impositions undermining national social cohesion, thus fueling nationalist populist projects seeking legitimacy.

Fragmented governance systems allow multiple actors—state, non-state, and transnational networks—to deploy traditional gender norms as symbols of national identity and sovereignty. Progressive gender politics are cast as threats to cultural and political stability, prompting legal and extralegal repression to suppress opposition. This metapolitical contestation influences international negotiations and norm-building at multilateral institutions, where gender equality agendas face growing resistance, exemplified by debates at the UN and the rise of alternative coalitions like the Geneva Consensus Declaration promoting conservative family values.

Socioeconomic and demographic drivers intensify anti-gender politics, especially economic precarity, status anxieties among men, and demographic decline. Younger men in developed countries often show lower support for gender equality, linking opposition to perceived threats to traditional masculinity and economic status. From an academic perspective, intersectional analyses of gender highlight complex vectors of power beyond gender alone, factoring in race, class, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, and other identities. Transnational feminism critiques globalization and colonial legacies embedded in Western feminism, underscoring the diverse and context-specific understandings of gender and sexuality globally. This scholarship calls attention to the role of globalization and nationalist populism in shaping the contestation around gender norms and identities across borders.

In summary, anti-gender movements serve as reactionary forces against progressive gender politics, framing such politics as threats to traditional national identities and social cohesion in an increasingly globalized world.



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These dynamics shape both domestic and international legitimacy struggles, impacting policy, societal norms, and multilateral gender equality efforts. If a detailed visual or conceptual framework like "Figure 1. Dynamics of Anti-Gender Backlash and Legitimacy" is needed, it would emphasize multiple governance actors, traditional gender norms symbolizing national identity, framing of progressive gender politics as cultural threats, and repression tactics affecting global gender norm-building processes.

Declining birthrates in East Asia and Europe have become a source of national demographic anxiety, fueling intensified conservative gender messaging. Governments and political actors in these regions increasingly link low fertility to women's growing independence, career ambitions, and the rejection of traditional gender roles. This rhetoric positions feminism and gender equality advances as antagonistic to national survival and demographic stability, framing them as culprits behind the demographic decline. In response to shrinking populations and aging societies, many governments have adopted pro-natalist policies aimed at reversing these trends. However, these policies are often intertwined with anti-feminist discourses that idealize traditional family structures and gender roles. Such policies encourage women primarily to embrace motherhood and domestic responsibilities over personal or professional aspirations, thereby reinforcing conservative and sometimes reactionary gender norms. This dynamic is evident in countries like Hungary, Russia, Poland in Europe and South Korea, Japan, and China in East Asia, with state-led campaigns promoting motherhood and discouraging feminist activism perceived as undermining family values. The framing of demographic decline as a crisis threatening national identity and economic stability has been leveraged by right-wing populist and nationalist movements. These movements use pro-natalist rhetoric as a political tool to mobilize support around a restoration of traditional gender roles, equating women's reproductive role with national duty. This politicization intensifies resistance to feminist and LGBTQ rights by portraying these movements as threats to birthrates and hence national survival. Additionally, the intersection of demographic concerns and anti-gender rhetoric contributes to policy approaches that sometimes limit women's reproductive freedom and autonomy, reducing them to instruments of national demographic



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strategy rather than agents of their own choices. Such pro-natalist initiatives have raised criticism for undermining women's rights and reinforcing patriarchal control under the guise of addressing population decline.

In sum, the fertility crisis in East Asia and Europe is not only a demographic issue but also a cultural and political battleground where gender equality and women's rights are contested within broader nationalist and conservative projects. The linkage of pro-natalist policies to anti-feminist political rhetoric exemplifies how demographic anxieties can strengthen reactionary gender ideologies that seek to reassert traditional identities and social orders in an era of global change.

Global Transnational Networks and Strategic Organizing

The anti-gender backlash is not isolated but part of a transnationally connected movement involving religious groups, conservative politicians, and NGOs sharing resources and strategies globally (Korolczuk et al., 2024). Anti-gender activism today is highly professionalized and coordinated, influencing policies across continents.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The metapolitics of gender in the era of fragmented governance represents a deep-rooted conflict over identity, power, and legitimacy within global politics. Anti-gender movements pose a significant threat to democratic values by undermining gender equality, which is increasingly recognized as a core component of democratic societies. These movements often align with far-right populist and nationalist projects that use divisive gender issues to consolidate power, restrict civil society space, silence opposition, and erode liberal democratic institutions. This backlash against gender equality is not isolated but deeply intertwined with broader democratic backsliding. Anti-gender rhetoric and policies frequently dismantle gender equality laws and institutions, weaken enforcement mechanisms, and replace accountability structures with conservative alternatives. These anti-gender actors tend to have greater political and financial resources, enabling them to challenge progressive gender policies effectively. The erosion of gender equality rights is thus both a symptom and



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driver of democratic decline, with far-reaching consequences for human rights, social justice, and inclusive governance. Future scholarship and policy efforts need to address these challenges through a dual focus on the local and global dimensions of anti-gender backlash. Promoting inclusive democratic spaces that safeguard gender equality and other intersecting rights is crucial in complex fractured governance environments. This means reinforcing institutional accountability, supporting civil society and feminist movements, countering misinformation, and ensuring multilateral institutions uphold commitments to gender justice. Only by recognizing the interconnectedness of gender equality and democracy can efforts to resist authoritarianism and promote global legitimacy be effectively advanced.

In conclusion, addressing the metapolitics of gender requires sustained engagement with the political economies of identity, power, and legitimacy struggles that transcend national borders. This involves building coalitions across local, national, and international arenas to defend and advance gender equality as a foundational democratic value and counteract the accelerating anti-gender backlash that threatens democratic resilience worldwide.

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11. Analyses of the role of nationalist populism in weaponizing gender issues to mobilize support and legitimate authoritarian agendas.
12. Policy-oriented literature emphasizing the necessity for inclusive democratic spaces and intersectional approaches to counter anti-gender backlash in complex governance contexts.