

Backlash against and resistance to feminist peacebuilding

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BACKLASH AGAINST AND RESISTANCE TO FEMINIST PEACEBUILDING

Irem Demirci // Clara Perras // Victoria Scheyer // Simone Wisotzki

PRIF Report 6/2023

BACKLASH AGAINST AND RESISTANCE TO FEMINIST PEACEBUILDING

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Peace Research Institute Frankfurt
Leibniz-Institut für
Friedens- und Konfliktforschung



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Cover:

Street art in Kabul, Graffitis depicting themes of anti-corruption, women's rights and education and anti-terrorism in Afghanistan. Photo taken August 6, 2021.

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The relevance of gender-sensitive human rights for effective and long-lasting peacebuilding has been demonstrated by numerous feminist studies. While there is ample research on the role and relevance of gender-sensitive peacebuilding, the issues of backlash against and resistance to those rights and gender equality more broadly in this context has received little systematic attention. In our project, we asked how and to what extent the realisation of gender-sensitive human rights policies in peacebuilding efforts experience such backlash or resistance. By gender-sensitive human rights we not only mean women's rights. We mean frequently neglected rights that are specifically relevant to women and LGBTIQ+ people. These rights include sexual health and reproductive rights, domestic and conflict-related sexual violence, but also land rights. For this explorative research project, we conducted a total of 33 interviews, clustered in different stakeholder groups in various regions and countries of the world. We interviewed peacebuilding activists, peacebuilding experts, non-governmental organisations concentrating on gender-sensitive peacebuilding, as well as stakeholders from international and regional organisations.

Peacebuilding not only encompasses state-centric and UN-led peacebuilding efforts, but also includes broader peacebuilding activities such as human rights advocacy, reconciliation, peace negotiations, mediation and reconstruction efforts in post-conflict situations. Our findings clearly demonstrate that backlash against and resistance to gender equality occur at different levels and result from the actions of different stakeholders. A prominent example of such backlash aiming at the erosion of gender-sensitive human rights norms is the revival of the death penalty against LGBTIQ+ people in Uganda. However, our interview partners frequently stressed the continuum of violence that gender-sensitive human rights defenders face, starting with hate speech in social media and ending in them and their families receiving death threats. One interview partner from South Sudan told us that such threats often result in having to either work underground with strict security measures or leaving the job entirely. One of our core findings is that gender backlash not only targets the erosion of a norm but also encompasses the threat or enactment of violence against gender-sensitive human rights defenders. Activists experience such diverse forms of violence simply because they participate in the 'doing of gender'.

Beyond the prominent examples of gender backlash, our interview partners far more frequently point to forms of resistance, embedded in institutional practices, that are subtler and more difficult to identify. For the sake of clarity, we introduced a typology differentiating between institutional and individual resistance, appearing in either explicit or implicit forms. Explicit institutional resistance often understands gender as women and focuses on this group in peacebuilding efforts rather than identifying other marginalised groups and people facing gender persecution such as LGBTIQ+. This results in an artificially created competition between gender-sensitive human rights. In international organisations, such as the EU, there is explicit resistance against the inclusion of gender-sensitive language in policies, such as reference to sexual and reproductive health rights. On a more individual level of explicit resistance, people in positions of power ignore the relevance of a differentiated gender perspective at all stages of peacebuilding. Implicit forms of resistance often appear as a lack of political will to include gender-sensitive human rights or a lack of knowledge about the principles of gender equality.

Our interview partners, and here the feminist peace activists in particular, often pointed to the structural forms and root causes of this backlash against and resistance to gender. Much has been said and written about the concept of liberal peacebuilding failing to take into account or even reproducing inher-

ently gendered and colonial power dynamics. Patriarchal norms deeply embedded in the existing peacebuilding architecture and societies around the globe drive such resistance and gender backlash. Part of this liberal understanding of gender equality is the focus on protecting women as well as treating them as victims with no agency and limited space of participation. This coincides with the failure to identify power structures in peacebuilding processes and to provide local stakeholders with meaningful agency. Moreover, neoliberal approaches to peacebuilding reinforce unjust and patriarchal power structures. Civil society activists experience different forms of backlash against gender-sensitive human rights as a framing of 'gender equality as a product of the West' and therefore worth resisting. Gender equality becomes the side of a power struggle between local and international agency resulting in resistance from authoritarian governments, but sometimes also from local women. Forms of (neo)colonialism can also be identified in unjust legal systems which, for example, prevent indigenous women from owning land or criminalise and ban gender and sexual diversity based on former colonial legal traditions.

Our interview partners described backlash and resistance in almost all spaces, including the international community (UN agencies and international NGOs, such as in Kosovo and Afghanistan); national authoritarian and conservative governments, such as Uganda or Yemen; far-right political parties and religious, extremist and militant groups, such as the Taliban or evangelical extremists; but also from within their own communities, such as from colleagues, fellow feminist activists, family members or local heads of communities.

When we conducted the interviews, we also asked all relevant stakeholders about strategies to mitigate the effects of gender backlash and resistance in peacebuilding. First and foremost, gender-sensitive human rights advocates need safety and protection, which requires strategies for how to cooperate with activists without exposing them, particularly those from the LGBTIQ+ community. Moreover, strategic and long-term cooperation between the feminist and gender-inclusive stakeholders at all levels makes for a strong movement. Importantly, gender-sensitive, inclusive, bottom-up and context-specific body of knowledge has to be built in order to understand not only the challenges, but the needs of the people affected. This includes identifying unjust colonial and patriarchal power structures which inhibit the engagement of gender-sensitive stakeholders. Such knowledge dissemination also needs to include men/boys at the international, national and local levels. Last, but not least, gender backlash and also the myriad forms of resistance have to be made visible as a structural problem and also as an increasingly serious issue to which more scholarly and political attention needs to be devoted, both in democracies and in post-conflict states.

Lastly, we discussed the emerging trend of feminist foreign policies as a counter-strategy to backlash against and resistance to gender equality in peacebuilding. Many of our interview partners were quite critical of the German effort to establish a feminist foreign policy. The litmus test, therefore, remains the rigid, meaningful and inclusive implementation of such a policy, which also needs to identify the structural causes of gender injustice, such as colonial continuities and patriarchy. The clearest missing link is the flanking of a feminist foreign policy with a feminist domestic policy, which would include the gendered violence and injustices on Europe's external borders and granting people confronted with gender persecution the right to seek asylum.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, and especially since the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted its first resolution acknowledging and incorporating gendered perspectives in peace and conflict, UNSCR 1325,¹ it seemed as if gender equality policies in peacebuilding would progress steadily. There is much evidence that considering gender in peacebuilding processes leads to longer-lasting peace agreements, and, moreover, incorporating gender equality and substantial participation of women in peacebuilding and peace agreements are crucial for achieving social justice for everyone (Duncanson 2016; Paffenholz et al. 2016). Recent commitments by states to a distinctively feminist foreign policy have enhanced the visibility of gendered aspects of peace and security. However, recent developments such as the deterioration of women's human rights in Afghanistan or Yemen or the harsh anti-LGBTQI law enacted in Uganda exemplify the increased resistance to and backlash against gender equality on a global scale – including in or affecting peacebuilding (Cupać/Ebetürk 2020).

Resistance and backlash are not limited to reactionary or conflict-affected regions but can be observed in a variety of political and social spaces in multiple forms, contexts, and institutions, such as the United Nations (UN) or national governments. For example, the reversal of Sweden's feminist foreign policy by the newly elected right-leaning government in 2022 is not only a national backlash, but is already having an impact on feminist peacebuilding initiatives in conflict-affected regions. Another well-known example is the ninth follow-up resolution of UNSCR 1325 forming the Women, Peace and Security Agenda (WPS Agenda) 2467 introduced by Germany in 2019 during the annual open debate on WPS in the UNSC (Wisotzki 2019). In this open debate, the United States (US) administration under President Trump pushed against 'sexual and reproductive health' language and threatened to use its veto in the final adoption. This resulted in a watered-down version, also due to opposition from other permanent member states of the UNSC such as China and Russia (Scheyer/Kumskova 2023).

This PRIF Report explores the multiple forms of resistance to and backlash against gender equality and gender-sensitive human rights in peacebuilding processes. It asks how peacebuilders understand and perceive resistance to and backlash against the realisation of gender-sensitive human rights in peacebuilding. The report also highlights the counter-measures and strategies employed by peacebuilders to cope with such resistance and backlash. Finally, it also examines how our interviewees expect recently announced feminist foreign policies to impact gender-sensitive human rights in peacebuilding. This PRIF Report is the first summary of a one-year pilot project funded by the German Foundation for Peace Research (DSF).²

1 UNSCR 1325 was adopted in October 2020 by the UNSC to acknowledge that peace and conflict is gendered and is the starting point of the Agenda Women, Peace and Security (WPS). The latter consists of ten resolutions to increase the visibility of conflict-related sexual violence, the need to protect women in war, the need to ensure meaningful participation of women in peace processes, the need to prevent armed conflict, as well as the link between gender and post-conflict settings and humanitarian responses.

2 This report is based on a pilot research project financed by the German Foundation for Peace Research. See <https://bundesstiftung-friedensforschung.de/blog/widerstaende-und-rueckschritte-in-der-realisation-von-gendersensiblen-menschenrechten-in-der-friedensfoerderung/> (August 31, 2023).

We understand resistance to gender-sensitive human rights as processes or practices aimed at hindering the implementation of specific norms, which may already start at the discursive level. It includes obstructing the implementation of gender equality norms or attempting to maintain the status quo of institutional practice (Flood et al. 2020; Mergaert/Lombardo 2014). Backlash, in contrast, encompasses a regress, an active reversal or erosion of existing gender equality or gender-sensitive human rights norms (Alter/Zürn 2020; Corredor 2021). Prominent examples of backlashes are Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, Uganda's new bill criminalising homosexuality, or the announcement by the new Swedish government that it was scrapping its feminist foreign policy (Budo-Scholtz 2023; OHCHR 2021; George 2022).

Besides violence experienced by women human rights defenders, there is less research interest in the resistance and backlash hindering the realisation of gender-sensitive human rights in peacebuilding, despite the fact that such actions are observed in the daily operational and political work of peacebuilders and on an institutional level. We argue that it is important to understand the complex situations in which feminist and LGBTQI+ peacebuilders do their work and the challenges they face, as well as how they navigate between international and local institutions and actors. These specific instances of resistance and backlash have not yet been systematically researched from the perspective of the peacebuilders themselves. This report identifies the stakeholders as local peacebuilding activists, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), international organisations and peacebuilding scholars.

1.1 GENDER-SENSITIVE HUMAN RIGHTS AND FEMINIST PEACEBUILDING

The beginnings of the UN's peacebuilding efforts in the 1992 *Agenda for Peace* introduced by former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, was largely gender-blind (Adeogun/Mthuki 2018; Martin de Almagro 2023). As a result of the 1995 World Conference on Women and its adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, as well as the strong advocacy work by women's rights and feminist civil society organisations, the UN acknowledged the importance of including women and gender equality in peacebuilding. Through the adoption of the landmark UNSCR 1325 in 2000 and the subsequent WPS Agenda, a gender mainstreaming approach to peacebuilding missions, policies and programming evolved. Since then, nine additional UNSC resolutions, 105 National Action Plans (NAPs),³ Arria meetings with conflict-affected women, as well as UN Secretary General (SG) reports on the status of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) have facilitated the development of some forms of feminist governance in peacebuilding (Scheyer/Kumskova 2023). While the WPS Agenda is undoubtedly meaningful for peacebuilding efforts as it provides a broad framework of gender-sensitive human rights and gender equality norms, a marked discrepancy between norms and their implementation and feminist criticism continues to exist.

³ For an overview of the countries that have passed NAPs, see <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/>. Germany has since passed three NAPs. For the most recent of these, see: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blueprint/servlet/blob/610626/d7d78947490f454a5342c1dff737a474/aktionsplan1325-engl-data.pdf> (August 31, 2023).

Peacebuilding, including the WPS Agenda, is often criticised for its top-down approach and pre-determined goals and structures as a continuation of colonial and Western practices (see Chapter 2 on liberal peacebuilding). Critics also malign the Agenda's failure to reallocate power in peacebuilding processes and criticise it for preventing the meaningful agency of independent states and populations in the Global South (Chishti 2020; Achilleos-Sarll/Chilmeran 2020; Hudson 2012; Spivak/Harasym 1990). Scholars from feminist International Political Economy (IPE) add to the critique by pointing to the unjust macroeconomic structures in which peacebuilding takes place (True 2012). Multinational corporations but also post-war reconstruction projects frequently rely on informal work or short-term contracts, which prevent women and LGBTIQ+ people from achieving everyday security and stability through an adequate income (de Almagro/Ryan 2019: 1069). Moreover, the social construction of the informal sector as 'deviant' in peacebuilding programmes obscures the ways in which the Global North profits from this sector, e.g. in the form of the care chain accessing cheap female care labour for Northern countries. However, feminist scholars in IPE also highlight the interdependency between formal/informal economies, which both serve as instruments of women's empowerment within local communities (Nordstrom 2010). Hudson (2016: 204) also underlines the relevance of local-donor complicity. While the liberal feminist epistemology of pushing the rights of certain groups of women often only allows for a focus on specific issues, such as CRSV, women's NGOs gain enough legitimacy to raise other issues such as access to land, marriage and succession.

A feminist perspective on peacebuilding not only highlights and criticises the absence of women and other groups subject to structural discrimination, as well as the lack of gender-sensitive aspects in peace processes. Feminist peacebuilding points to the relevance of the agency and demands of these groups 'the necessary power and resources to generate their own conflict-resolution and peace-making initiatives' (de Almagro 2023: 227). Feminist peacebuilding aims to 'address the specific insecurities and the continuum of violence experienced by women and sexual minorities before and in the aftermath of conflict and to eliminate gender hierarchies and other oppressive structures that exist prior to, and exacerbated, violent conflict – including poverty and inequality' (de Almagro 2023). A feminist definition of violence encompasses aspects of physical, structural as well as discursive violence and goes beyond the frequently constructed confinement of violence to war (Yadav/Horn 2021; True 2020). This report builds upon a feminist understanding of violence but also of peace and peacebuilding, which considers people's everyday lived experiences, structural and institutional power imbalances, and seeks to 'push peacebuilding beyond the absence of armed-violence' towards justice and equal distribution of resources (Premaratna/Rajkopal 2021: 261).

Thus, besides the fact that peace agreements are more sustainable when women and diverse social groups are included, applying a gender-sensitive peacebuilding framework is the right and just thing to do. We refer to peacebuilding not only as state-centric and UN-led processes in post-conflict settings, but apply a broader understanding of peacebuilding activities, which includes aspects such as human rights advocacy, reconciliation, negotiations, mediation and reconstruction. We see gender-sensitive human rights as those that acknowledge and act upon differences between and gendered needs of individuals, also taking into account other identity categories such as race/gender/ethnicity/class or sexuality (Klapeer 2016; Rahman 2014; Kapur 2006). Based on this definition and the results of our interviews, we identified four specific groups of rights, which are crucial concepts of

gender-sensitive human rights and thus of particular relevance to our study: (1) sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) differ depending on gender identity and sexual orientation (Lind 2009; Swimelar 2016); (2) protection against domestic violence and against CRSV; (3) LGBTQI+ rights; and (4) women's land rights.⁴

One of our interview partners, a peacebuilding activist from Colombia, emphasised the importance of ensuring that gender equality norms are part of peacebuilding processes and agreements so that human rights defenders can hold governments accountable for protecting these rights. She states in her interview: 'Human rights defenders will ask for these rights and achieve rights for people. But peacebuilders will create the conditions for those rights to be achieved' (Peacebuilder 4). She went on to emphasise that peacebuilding actors need to be precise and careful in how they formulate the demands in peace agreements and peacebuilding processes to ensure human rights activists and lawyers can realise these rights later.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

This research project is based on principles of feminist research methodology (Björkdahl/Selimovic 2021; Ackerly/True 2008; Preissle/Han 2012). Guided by feminist research ethics, such as attentive listening to and learning from our interview partners, we aimed at building trustful relationships and attempted to mitigate existing power imbalances in our interviews.

The study involved 33 interviews in total, clustered in different stakeholder groups in various regions of the world. We selected the interview partners based on their work in feminist human rights/peacebuilding, but also through a snowball effect and networks in the peacebuilding sector. We interviewed 13 INGOs with a focus on women's rights or feminism; four NGOs that specifically work from a lesbian, gay, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+)⁵ perspective in the field of peace and conflict or human rights; five international and regional institutions, such as UN agencies, the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU); seven local peacebuilding activists, and four scholars in the field of gender and peacebuilding. The interviews were mainly conducted online using a semi-structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was structured in five main parts, where we asked our interview partners about their *definition* of gender-sensitive human rights; their *experience with resistance*; *their experience with backlash*; the *strategies* they employed to deal with this resistance and backlash; and finally their prognosis regarding whether *feminist foreign policies* could contribute to countering backlash. The interviews were conducted with representatives of the agencies or NGOs, largely in their paid working hours as we wanted to avoid burdening feminist activists with exploitative unpaid

4 We use these four groups for analytical purposes and do not claim to cover all gender-sensitive human rights. From a feminist perspective, peacebuilding efforts must also include gender-sensitive economic, social and cultural human rights in order to tackle the root causes of conflict. See Ogg/Craker 2021: 194.

5 The + includes other gender identities, sexual orientations and gender characteristics not explicitly listed here.

political care work. For the analysis of our interview material, we applied a content analysis based on deductively and inductively developed categories, searching for forms of resistance and backlash.⁶

The situatedness of this research project in a German peace research institute, funded by the German peace research foundation, and our own positionalities as researchers from the Global North informs our analysis and knowledge production. Therefore, we aimed to highlight the voices from our interview partners and thus balance the unequal power relations between researcher and practitioner. During our research and based on receiving a rejection from one requested interview partner in the Global South, we recognised that there was a need to allocate funds for grassroots activists and interview partners, not only to compensate them for their time, but to contribute to the redistribution of the unequally distributed resources for research resulting from the North/South divide. Any continuation of this research will thus require allocating funding for interview partners and for close cooperation with local researchers and institutions. Having learned so much from this research project ourselves, we hope that this report contributes to the knowledge needed to counter the diverse forms of resistance and backlash that our interview partners face in their courageous work as peace-builders, enabling them to resist the resistance.

1.3 A TYPOLOGY OF RESISTANCE AND GENDER BACKLASH

The terms resistance, backlash or pushback in the context of realising gender equality norms are often used interchangeably for describing practices, actions, processes and discourses that are against gender equality or gender-sensitive policies. In fact, research suggests that resistance and backlash is typical of or even inevitable in processes of enhancing social change, such as social justice and gender equality (Faludi 1991). We argue that we need to differentiate between backlash and resistance as they can have very different effects and different measures are required to counter and prevent them. While backlash is commonly defined as a reaction against emancipatory political objectives, the term also focuses on the contestation or even erosion of gender equality norms and gender-sensitive human rights. Such backlash not only aims at destroying gender-sensitive human rights norms, but as our interview partners have highlighted, also include threat or other forms of physical violence against gender-sensitive human rights defenders. Backlash aims at the reversal or regression (Alter/Zürn 2020; Deitelhoff 2020) of gender equality and gender-sensitive human rights norms, such as the lowering of the minimum age of marriage in Bangladesh, Iraq, Tanzania and Turkey (Ebeturk 2018) or the ban on education for women and girls in Afghanistan. Regression and 'backlash' imply active pushback that can include policies but might also involve violent attacks or the threat of the use of violence and reversal of legally enshrined gender-sensitive human rights and their practices (Alter/Zürn 2020; Flood et al. 2020; Mergaert/Lombardo 2014).

Resistance is often manifested as a more inactive or passive response to the challenging of existing hierarchies of power or the status quo, e.g. as bureaucratic inertia (Flood et. al 2020). Mergaert and Lombardo (2014: 3), who have studied bureaucratic resistance to gender mainstreaming in the EU,

6 For further information, see our typology in Chapter 1.3.

describe resistance as the ‘opposition to the change that gender mainstreaming promotes’. Hence, resistance at different levels of bureaucracy and politics include hindering the implementation of gender equality norms through institutional or formal procedural measures and attempts to maintain the status quo of institutional practice (Flood et al. 2020; Mergaert/Lombardo 2014). Mergaert and Lombardo (2014: 7) identify four main types of resistance, which are either individual or institutional, implicit or explicit. The institutional type of resistance builds on feminist institutionalism and perceives institutions as gendered, becoming a component of resistance themselves (Acker 1992). A gendered institution based on patriarchal values benefits ideas and norms such as competition, hierarchy or efficiency, and disadvantages women or fails to provide its employees with support for their care work. Patriarchal institutions lead to the reproduction of gendered practices and norms that appear to be ‘normal’ and are not perceived as resistance. Institutional resistance can be explicit or implicit, either through action or inaction in opposing or hindering further progress towards gender equality.

To analyse the resistance and backlash against gender-sensitive human rights, we adapt the following typology for studying the different forms of resistance in peacebuilding and combine it with a typology of backlash.

Typology	Features
Backlash	
Regression/reversal	Actively aiming or succeeding at reversing gender-sensitive human rights policies and norms
Threat of or actual violent attack	Discursive attacks, legal prosecution, threats of violence and physical violence against activists who pursue gender-sensitive human rights policies
Resistance	
Institutional Resistance revealed by a pattern of aggregated action or inaction that is systematically repeated and that suggests a collective orchestration to oppose gender change.	Implicit. Resistance not overtly manifested, which can be verified by observing the extent to which actors, in their discourses and inactions or inadequate actions, distance themselves from the goal of gender equality or gender-sensitive human rights. Explicit. Resistance expressed overtly when actors oppose gender equality or gender-sensitive human rights initiatives through their action and discourses, or do not do what they ought to in order to advance gender equality even when they are made aware of gender equality commitments.
Individual Resistance expressed through the action or inaction of an individual to oppose gender change.	Implicit. Resistance not overtly manifested, which can be verified by observing the extent to which actors, in their discourses and inactions or inadequate actions, distance themselves from the goal of gender equality. Explicit. Resistance expressed overtly when actors oppose gender equality initiatives through their action and statements, or do not do what they ought to in order to advance gender equality even when they are made aware of gender equality commitments.

These different forms of resistance to and backlash against gender-sensitive human rights can manifest in several types, on different levels and be executed by several different actors. Due to the close networks between actors and institutions but also the fact that actions cut across different levels, practices of resistance sometimes overlap and are therefore not clear cut and distinct from one another. However, this report is unique in that it brings together many different actors that resist gender-sensitive human rights and hence tries to cut across the international, national and local levels. The actors that are most commonly mentioned as being responsible for backlash are state actors (e.g. governments and ministers), religious and church groups (e.g. Taliban, evangelicals, clerics), conservative, right-wing and far-right parties or groups, pro-Russian actors, anti-democratic actors, UN missions and agencies, multinational corporations, community and traditional leaders, local actors, police and security forces, traditional and conservative women's groups, and also coalitions of these actors. This typology offers a way to understand types of backlash and resistance systematically and structurally, which includes a broad spectrum of the different levels and actors.

2. THE MYRIAD POWER STRUCTURES: PATRIARCHAL NORMS AND THE COLONIALITY OF THE INTERNATIONAL PEACEBUILDING ARCHITECTURE

Peacebuilding does not happen in isolation but is embedded in social, political and economic systems. Peacebuilding governance, policies and processes, as well as the realisation of gender-sensitive human rights have to be understood as acting within an international society that largely rests on patriarchal power structures and more specifically constructs a hierarchical North/South and international/local divide. In the literature, scholars refer to this as liberal peacebuilding. The concept of liberal peace is associated with the intervention of external international actors who seek to create peace in local conflict contexts based on liberal values, such as democracy and a market economy (Mac Ginty 2011; Paris 2010; Newman 2009; Richmond 2006). Liberal peacebuilding often fails to contribute to just societal relations partly because it is underpinned by colonial and gendered power dynamics (Martin de Almagro/Ryan 2019; Goetz/Jenkins 2017; Smith 2015; Goetz/Jenkins 2016; Väyrynen 2004; Handrahan 2004). It is in this constructed North/South, international/local or 'developed/under-developed' divide, in which patriarchal norms and values have to be considered as structural factors pertaining to resistance and backlash.

The findings from our interviews show that the structural conditions of peacebuilding, i.e. patriarchal norms and the continuation of colonial logics or mindsets embedded in liberal peacebuilding, are relevant for understanding the root causes of resistance and backlash. As such, actors perceive not only the peacebuilding system itself as a component of structural resistance, but also the way social, political and economic systems are structured, creating the very environment in which peacebuilding takes place. Non-governmental organisations highlighted the ongoing top-down decision-making and policy formulation in peacebuilding in the countries of the Global North and UN headquarters, which neglected to factor in the perspectives of ordinary people – especially the women affected – as a structural problem. 'Because it comes from up here. It is top-down [...]' is how one interview partner from a transnational feminist NGO expressed their concerns (INGO 13). The result of top-down decision-making is that local voices are marginalised and the people or governments experiencing

conflict or war are denied agency. The process of international policymaking and gender equality programming by donors often fails to acknowledge the importance of local authorities, contexts, local conflicts, needs and actors in encompassing context-specific gender equality. Secondly, it limits the agency and possibilities of women peacebuilders. This top-down decision-making, as one of our interview partners explained, is a result of economic and geopolitical interests that encompass peacebuilding: 'You have to see who benefits. [...] This is the critical question that for me the UN should be asking. It is dominated by geopolitical interests rather than the "we the people" part [...]' (ibid.).

Such exclusionary practices that are part of liberal peacebuilding also result in a certain form of resistance. A transnational peace NGO explained that the WPS Agenda was rejected by women peacebuilders in Aceh, Indonesia, because it simply did not respond to the needs of the women. Consequently, the women's human rights activists themselves resisted the WPS Agenda as it failed to address the needs and agency of women on the ground. An Afghan women's rights activist we interviewed explained the resistance to the international community, providing another example: '[...] They have betrayed our Afghan woman. Afghan women have been telling them [the international community] for at least ten years, from 2010, to be careful with the Taliban, to not let the women lose what they have achieved' (Activist 1). This form of resistance to peacebuilding measures and actors then manifests itself, for example, in co-optation, ignorance, open refusal, but also in the development of alternative measures (Richmond/Mitchell 2011; Kappler/Richmond 2011). Furthermore, peacebuilding activists from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have problematised the construction of the North/South divide. They explained how the North/South power divide has led governments to justify the resistance to gender-sensitive human rights by framing gender equality as a product of the West. '[...] they always think that I am just talking about this to please the West' (Activist 7). Consequently, gender-sensitive human rights are constructed as an alleged symbol of the North/South dichotomy and have been falsely used by governments in the South to counter the top-down power structure and interventions.

Lastly, we identify the current and still rigid patriarchal gender norms and roles in all societies as structural root causes of resistance. These include firstly, understanding gender politics as the participation of women; secondly, perceiving women as victims of war and conflict and denying their agency; and thirdly, seeing gender as a relational social construct and thus limiting it to men and women, neglecting the realities and rights of LGBTQI+ people. One example from our interviews shows that this binary narrative characterises women in a certain manner based on underlying gender norms: '[...] even when you have women who are fighters, their role is ignored because that is not how we talk about the role of women' (INGO 13). Binary and 'traditional' understandings of gender as men and women with specific roles in society results in women being treated as weak victims with no agency. In other words, relevant actors do not perceive them as agents of peace and legitimate participants: 'It is about the value of men and women, do we even have enough women for peace negotiations, if that is the mentality from the beginning. It is a barrier from before you are even born because you are a woman [...]' (INGO 3).

Peacebuilding actors have often raised the concern that resistance and backlash stem from the broader gendered and racist structures, norms and values of the societies in which peacebuilding

takes place. It is therefore important to acknowledge that peacebuilding as a political programme does not take place in a vacuum. Peacebuilding practices and processes are navigated within a myriad power structures of different scales, whether international, national or local, and it is within these conditions that this project is located with the aim of understanding resistance to and backlash against gender-sensitive human rights in practice.

3. BACKLASH AGAINST GENDER-SENSITIVE HUMAN RIGHTS IN PEACEBUILDING

‘Afghanistan is a very, very striking example since the Taliban came to power. It’s the only country in the world where women don’t hold a single political office. They are completely ousted from public life. Some of our colleagues speak of a radical gender apartheid and others of a public femicide, because women are massively pushed back from all areas’ (INGO 2).

Peacebuilding actors describe different forms of backlash, with different levels of intensity and escalation. This report defines backlash as twofold. Firstly, it is understood as being manifest in different forms of violence – including the threat of violence – against advocates for gender-sensitive human rights and secondly, it is seen as the attempted or successful regression, even erosion of gender-sensitive human rights policies and norms. In this section, the report discusses these two types of experience of backlash.

3.1 VIOLENCE AGAINST ACTORS/HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

‘If you’re challenging people in positions of power and you’re threatening their power and disrupting that power, you’re going to get backlash’ (INGO 4).

The findings of this report show that *state- and government-sponsored violence* against feminist and women’s human rights defenders is perceived as a key form of backlash. Peacebuilding activists have referred to several different forms of state-sponsored violence, including homophobic campaigns, oppression of activism and movements, and the introduction of discriminatory legal systems that violate the rights of activists and LGBTQI+ people. In Yemen for example, women and LGBTQI+ people face threats of litigation, arrests and torture, of discrimination and biased prosecution, to such an extent that LGBTQI+ people even face the death penalty. These ‘constant threats and hostility are at best demoralising; at worst, they lead to death’, stated one employee of a peacebuilding NGO in the Global North (INGO 11). Governments use violence as explicit acts of power and the ultimate form of control and oppression of social movements or critical discourse. In Saudi Arabia, the government threatens activists directly with arrests in order to silence them:

'They jail them immediately, as their way of telling women's rights activists, and [...] all human rights activists, and Saudis, your protesting will get you nowhere. In fact, it'll be the opposite. If we want to give you rights. We'll give you rights [...] but if you protest and demand them, we will jail you' (IO 4).

Beyond threats and attacks against individuals, direct state-sponsored violence also includes legal restrictions on or even the banning of NGOs. One expert told us about the case of a Ugandan NGO that was shut down by government authorities because they were accused of 'promoting homosexuality. And one of the ways in which they thought we were doing that, was by working with male survivors of sexual violence, who they mistakenly assumed were homosexual' (Expert 2). This attack by the government led to heightened violence at the community and individual level, as well as open harassment in neighbourhoods that had previously been safe for the NGO's staff.

Online harassment, criticism and discrediting, as well as mistreatment of activists and the delegitimisation of their work or the threat thereof are common experiences of many of our interview partners. 'Activists that are working to support victims of sexualised violence in conflict also receive threats like "we will rape you too"' (INGO 3). Non-governmental organisations that are funded by external actors are often labelled 'foreign agents' and discredited in public. Such forms of discrediting take place both offline and online and are also part of broader anti-colonial resentment. Social media platforms have become sites where peacebuilders face violent attacks in their everyday lives, including hacking, online harassment, trolling and hate speech. It is not only anti-gender equality groups or authoritarian governments that are perpetrating online violence, but attacks can also come from their own colleagues, friends or families as well. One peacebuilder from Afghanistan recounted that the Taliban, but also her own colleagues, attacked her on Twitter. Some tried to end her career in human rights work by writing: 'You should not hire her because you know she is misleading and misguiding' (Activist 1). Women human rights defenders frequently face attempts to sabotage their careers, even going as far as murder threats. One feminist peacebuilder from South Sudan told us that the only way she could continue her work for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) was to go underground, taking drastic measures to protect herself, such as sleeping in different houses every night. Activists who decide to speak internationally on behalf of their communities, e.g. in front of the UNSC face violence and murder threats because of the attention these platforms generate. In some cases, feminist activists have no other choice but to leave their country or stop their work.

The findings show that, on top of this, feminist peacebuilders and activists for gender-sensitive human rights face a *high risk of sexual and domestic violence*, their homes are raided, they are harassed and abused, and they are excluded from their families, peer groups and communities. Strategies of silencing LGBTQI+ people the threat of outing them without their consent or (false) public allegations that they are HIV-positive. At the extreme end of the spectrum are forms of violence such as murders and femicide. Activists often experience sexual violence and the perpetrators also aim to exploit the repercussions to intimidate the whole community. Shame and stigma are used as a tool against the victims: '[...] This is also something that we have detected that has been intentionally used by the perpetrators as a way to deter the person and the community from engaging in human

rights work” (IO 1). Hence, not only do acts of violence target the activists themselves, but also their families and communities.

A key consequence of this violence and the fear of violence is the non-representation or *non-participation of certain groups or topics*. This concerns, in particular, the LGBTQI+ community or the topic of sexual violence, more generally. As one interview partner explains: “This kind of visibility is simply connected with a very high risk and is very life-threatening and that’s why it’s so difficult” (Expert 4). Activists from these communities have to reflect on whether they really want to promote their human rights publicly or only act unofficially. On the other hand, if they are forced ‘to operate in the margins of society, of course they are more vulnerable to attacks, to threats, to repression and to the impunity that comes with it’ (IO 1), which shows once again that there is no real way out. In light of this, many of our interview partners did not further elaborate the content of the threats they received but explained instead that the social, legal and government structures they have to work in represent a threat of violence ‘it was either you step back and tone it down, or we are going to shut you down for good, end of story. [...] you’re just confronted with a much, much, much bigger power and structure. [...] It’s not an argument between peers’ (Expert 2).

In conclusion, feminist peacebuilders and women human rights defenders are ‘being targeted and excluded’, which manifests in high numbers of violent attacks in general and patterns of increased violence that comes with more visibility, e.g. in connection with participation in gay pride parades. Yet, our findings show that some people or communities, such as LGBTQI+ people, indigenous women, women of colour or feminist activists, are particularly affected by backlash because of their intersecting vulnerabilities and their identities. Often, these actors or groups are seen ‘as a threat to patriarchy [...]’ (IO 3). Avoiding the backlash seems impossible most of the time, ‘not just because people know who you are but also because it is your life. You are fighting for these things because you are a woman in that context or community. You cannot really escape’ (INGO 8).

3.2 REGRESSION/REVERSAL OF GENDER-SENSITIVE HUMAN RIGHTS

Backlash in peacebuilding has been defined as violence against gender-sensitive and feminist human rights defenders as well as the regression/reversal of gender-sensitive human rights in international politics but also in national policies that influence peacebuilding. Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention is a very public example, but it is just one of many. This report argues that backlash against gender-sensitive peacebuilding happens on the level of international and national policymaking, but also in the NGO space and on a community level.

On the level of international policymaking, *backlash against the expansion of international gender equality and feminist norms* is a topic that was raised in several interviews. Some examples of this are previous attempts, especially by women’s rights activists, to prevent the recognition of men and boy survivors of CRSV, and the content and further development of the WPS Agenda. UNSCR 2467 on ending sexual violence in conflict advanced by Germany in 2019 as part of the WPS Agenda is referred to as a regression of gender-sensitive language around reproductive rights that was already

agreed upon within the UN, because the US under the Trump administration threatened with a veto. In addition, the Russian attempt to bring in a new resolution during the 25th birthday of the WPS Agenda with regressive language compared to the already existing one also needs to be mentioned. This leads to a 'constant like niggling bottoms of a language of wording and fine-tuning and word-smithing', keeping progressive actors from advocating for progress because all they have to do 'is toe the line' (INGO 1). Overall, our interview partners confirmed that the dynamic environment in which gender norms are discussed is changing on several levels: 'I feel like it's a different dynamic, it's different actors in different multilateral bodies but it's a similar pattern of desire to not see any further progress and if anything is opened up, it's an opportunity to roll back' (ibid.).

Our findings show that political *developments in powerful states matter* and have an impact on peacebuilding contexts in the field of gender equality and women's human rights. The overturning of the national right to abortion in the US in 2022 represents not only a reversal of gender-sensitive human rights there, but heavily impacts actors in peacebuilding as well, as many organisations are dependent on funding from the US. Projects that might be even remotely associated with abortion rights are thus deprived of important funding opportunities. Russia's 'gay propaganda law' adopted in 2013, which intensified the already long-standing hostility towards LGBTQI+ people in the country and blocks access to education and support services, worsened the situation for this community in Russia. Moreover, 'this has spread like a wave to some of the former Warsaw Pact countries or other countries in Eastern Europe and has then also been taken up in the argumentation employed in the Global South' (LGBTQI+ NGO 2), thus also making things more precarious in peacebuilding contexts. The field of peacebuilding and peacebuilding research often underestimates the *interconnectedness of foreign and domestic policies*. However, these developments show 'how important it is to understand that domestic policy goes hand in hand with foreign policy. That the fact that so many domestic anti-gender movements are so strong and have so much influence has an impact' (Expert 4).

A very visible regression of gender-sensitive human rights is the reversal of legal frameworks and legal systems oppressing the rights of people with specific gender identities or reproductive rights. This has been identified as introducing and upholding *unjust legal systems*. Unjust legal systems refer mostly to country-specific legal systems that deprive women and especially indigenous women, including environmental activists, of their right to own land. In Colombia, discriminatory land rights and custom laws affect women of colour and indigenous women disproportionately and threaten their livelihoods and survival, not to mention SRHR, in post-conflict contexts or in peacebuilding processes. Unjust legal systems in formerly colonised countries can often be traced back to colonial rule, meaning that colonialism interfered with traditionally organised land ownership and heritage customs. The same applies to laws that criminalise or ban gender and sexual diversity.

The increase of right-wing parties, NGOs and governments, other conservative and anti-democratic actors and movements were also mentioned as a source of regression in all regions of the world. These actors are targeting international gender norms, for example 'you cannot mention CEDAW [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women] in Palestine, it is one of the targets in policy documents' (INGO 7). In other cases, such as Croatia, right-wing movements, in particular, target the Istanbul Convention. Other countries in the Balkans also faced regressions

closely linked to SRHR, including severe restrictions on abortion rights, prohibition of sex education or of the cessation of funding for healthcare services for marginalised groups. Colombia's peace deal, which contained a strong gender dimension and mentioned LGBTQI+ rights in the initial draft but was only adopted in a weakened and watered-down version, is described as a regression that 'is hard to recover from. [...] the impact of not being able to advance norms is big' (LGBTQI+ NGO 1). When it came to countries in the Middle East, interview partners highlighted a '[...] trade-off between human rights and women's rights', meaning that governments are willing to grant women certain rights or implement measures to protect women but 'at the same time [...] roll back the rights of LGBTQI+ and other communities, so at least they're doing something positive to keep the international community happy. [...] I think we see this in quite a few of the [...] populist regimes across the region. [...] I think it's an explicit strategy by the Egyptians to do this. It's an explicit strategy by the Saudis' (IO 4). One interview partner also said that sometimes 'you win and then you walk backwards but in bizarre ways'. Looking at Kenya for example, courts are not willing to grant LGBTQI+ people equality, but at the same time they are making a case to 'protect intersex people, [...] give intersex populations constitutional rights and do a national study' (LGBTQI+ NGO 1).

3.3 BACKLASH IN AFGHANISTAN AND YEMEN

This report briefly outlines two extreme examples of backlash in Afghanistan and Yemen. Both show the horrific repercussions of backlash resulting from extremist groups coming to power, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Houthi rebels in Yemen. However, both cases show that backlash against gender-sensitive human rights is multilayered and happens on all levels. Activists from both countries have described backlash from the international community, including the UN, online backlash and attacks from local communities, including from families, as well as direct attacks on activists. On top of this, the international political shift towards authoritarian and right-wing governments has a direct impact.

'The return of the Taliban has destroyed everything for women and girls.' (Activist 1)

With the Taliban's violent takeover in 2021, the process of severe backlash against women's rights in Afghanistan – or in the words of one of our interview partners 'the insane backlash' (INGO 9) began. Since then, the situation regarding gender-sensitive human rights has been incomparable with any other period in the country's past. The Taliban has conducted executions and arrests, inflicted torture, and almost entirely excluded women from public life, schools, universities and from working at the UN, as well as denying the existence of LGBTIQ+ people (Amnesty International, 2022). The famous quote of one woman in Afghanistan captures the situation: 'we are alive, but not living' (United Nations, 2023). Yet, international funding for work on gender-sensitive human rights has been discontinued and this has led to a lack of trust in the international community.

One of our interview partners described the change in the situation regarding sexual and domestic violence against women in detail

'[...] there was a system for these survivors, there was an independent Human Rights Commission, a Ministry of Women's Affairs, there was an Attorney General's Office in the Supreme Court, there were women's shelters. None of these exist anymore. There was a proper legal system, lawyers, judges, attorneys who were especially focused on helping to provide services to survivors of sexual and domestic violence. These systems do not exist anymore. They have been replaced by the so-called traditional courts that have been established by the Taliban. These courts are Mullahs, they know nothing about law, about human rights about violence' (Activist 1).

What makes the current situation even more difficult is the lack of data regarding the numbers of people facing sexual and domestic violence in Afghanistan.

The LGBTIQ+ community 'which has formed so slowly during the period of democratisation, is now suffering from very strong persecution' (LGBTIQ+ NGO 2). It is so dangerous for LGBTIQ+ people to be identified as such by the Taliban that many of them cannot even reach out to seek help for fear of risking their lives. One interview partner highlights the responsibility of external actors who supported the process of democracy and liberalisation 'because this has now been abruptly stopped, it is of course important that more help is provided and that this is clearly recognised as grounds for asylum' (ibid.).

Afghan women human rights defenders and peacebuilders face extreme forms of violence if they remain in the country. However, even after they have emigrated abroad, the backlash continues, as one interview partner described. Attacks on social media, over Twitter, continue to happen every day. Yet, these are not only perpetrated by the Taliban themselves, but also by men within the community. There have been several attempts to destroy activists' careers, including by spreading rumours and lies. Moreover, women peacebuilders continue to feel betrayed by the international community and describe its failure to help as another layer of backlash.

'Nobody cares about Yemen.' (Activist 7)

Yemen has seen an intense backlash against gender-sensitive human rights in its legal system as well as in the form of direct violence. The Yemen Civil War, which began at the end of 2014, has plunged the country into a dire situation where women and children suffer most.⁷ According to Human Rights Watch, the Houthis are conducting 'systematic violations of women's and girl's rights, including their rights to freedom of movement, freedom of expression, health, and work, as well as widespread discrimination' (Jafarnia, 2023). Violence not only targets women, but also LGBTIQ+ people. One interview partner specifically describes severe violence, including torture and imprisonment for LGBTIQ+ people: *'These women, they were in jail, and they were flogged 80 times and they were*

7 In this civil war, the Houthi rebel groups are fighting against the former Hadi government. Both parties receive support from the outside and from countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

tortured' (Activist 7). The new laws discriminate against women by taking away their agency and autonomy, such as by prohibiting women from travelling without the consent of their male guardian.

'So, you see a woman leader who is leading an NGO. She cannot travel without her son, who is only 19 years old, composing a document saying, okay, she can travel because she's divorced, and she doesn't have a husband' (ibid.).

Furthermore, women are banned from many areas of public life, such as cafes or restaurants and women and men cannot sit next to each other on buses.

Not only do these developments seriously affect many Yemeni women and LGBTQI+ people, but also humanitarian workers, human rights activists and peacebuilders – leaving women without access to help. Activists in exile are afraid of the consequences for local women if they publish their political demands and evidence. Activists who advocate for women's and LGBTQI+ rights face severe online and offline violence and are threatened and harassed when criticising human rights violations. Furthermore, activists and supportive family members often face rejection by their own families. For activists, the situation is especially difficult 'because nobody cares about Yemen. No media talks about it, so they don't feel any pressure from anyone. And yeah, they don't care' (ibid.).

Yemeni peacebuilders' and human rights activists' experiences of backlash are manifold, with backlash also described as coming from international organisations, more specifically the UN Special Envoy. The latter is said to have undermined the participation of women in the mediation process. In the words of one of our interview partners, they have been 'marginalizing women's voices and undermining their right to be at the table' (INGO 1). Lastly, another layer of backlash experienced stems from the international political shift to the far right. Since Sweden's far-right coalition government abandoned the country's feminist foreign policy and stopped its support for women's rights and LGBTQI+ issues, feminist peacebuilders in Yemen lost significant support from and contact with the Swedish government. 'It's a group of Yemeni women leaders, and before, we used to connect with Sweden, for example. But now, I haven't seen any intention from them to interact or anything' (ibid.). This interview partner sees these developments as being connected to the rise of right-wing governments and movements in Europe. 'But now the right wing, they have good relationships with dictators' (ibid.). Progressive movements in Yemen lost important allies in the international community which had helped them pressure those in power to implement gender-sensitive human rights.

4. RESISTANCE TO GENDER-SENSITIVE HUMAN RIGHTS IN PEACEBUILDING

In contrast to backlash in peacebuilding contexts, resistance takes a much subtler form and is sometimes difficult to identify due to the normalisation of patriarchal conditions in societies, politics or institutions. However, the experience of peacebuilding stakeholders shows that resistance to gender-sensitive human rights should not be underestimated. Resistance can slow down or completely

prevent progress in the development of gender equality. To understand the full spectrum of resistance from different actors, this report identifies different dimensions of resistance in peacebuilding stemming from institutional and individual practices and (in)actions. In essence, following Mergaert's and Lombardo's model (2014), this can be subdivided into two different dimensions of resistance: the implicit and the explicit.

4.1 IMPLICIT RESISTANCE TO GENDER-SENSITIVE HUMAN RIGHTS IN PEACEBUILDING

Implicit *institutional* resistance

Implicit resistance encompasses forms of resistance that are embedded in institutional structures and are not defined through actions but inaction or inadequate action including discourses that distance themselves from the goal of gender equality or gender-sensitive human rights (Maergert/Lombardo 2014). Our findings show that the implicit resistance named by peacebuilding actors can be grouped into four categories: 1) a lack of political will; 2) a lack of knowledge and inadequate knowledge; 3) silo mentality and partial issue thinking; and 4) a lack of gender-sensitive funding.

The *lack of political will or awareness* was described as implicit institutional resistance and was even referred to as 'the biggest resistance' to gender equality (Activist 6). Resistance in this form manifests in governmental attitudes, with the government either showing no interest in gender equality, disregarding gender-sensitive policy implementation as unimportant or refraining from implementing any of the policies they have adopted. One activist mentioned that 'They [the government] think it's not a priority' (Activist 7), others confirmed that the lack of political will to address or awareness of the topic impacts their own work: 'We didn't do a report on 1325, because before, when we did the report, nobody would read it' (Activist 6). The lack of political will was also emphasised by interview partners describing how governments' political commitments are often no more than empty words which they fail to turn into action or implementation strategies: '[...] they will always be rhetorically supportive, but actually nailing them down to do something about it [...] It is very hard to get them to do that' (IO 4). A member of staff from a UN agency clearly stated: 'We do not need more commitments. We know what to do. People are just not doing it' (IO 3).

The *lack of or inadequate knowledge* about gender sensitivity and the interwoven complexities of institutions and their processes often give the impression that some areas are gender neutral. Two of the examples presented by our interview partners were the infrastructure and the health sector. A lack of training and knowledge development for government employees, especially in foreign policy and peacebuilding, lead to inadequate programming, funding and implementation of gender-sensitive human rights work. 'You don't need to have knowledge about gender to start a career in foreign policy or development' (Activist 5). This also affects project design in international organisations and the absence of procedures to ensure staff are informed about how mainstreaming gender-sensitive human rights works was referred to as another side of institutional resistance. This specifically applies to the design of LGBTQI+ policies. One of our interview partners described the situation: '[...] a very basic lack of understanding of [...] questions around gender identities, sexual orientation and

how these do and do not relate to other phenomena like sexual violence' (Expert 2). Often institutions have no built-in mechanisms to ensure the programmes being developed have a gender focus, let alone acknowledge its importance. 'I have noticed that in some conflict analysis they were lacking gender dimensions, because we have not set the standards and we did not have a gender expert' (IO 2). Hence, institutions' expertise is often dependent on whether employees coincidentally have a personal interest in the topic of gender equality. Moreover, inadequate strategies and systems promote a culture of implicit resistance. One example is the emphasis on gender focal points in supposedly gender-sensitive systems, resulting in other employees lacking authority when it comes to gender issues. Furthermore, the strategies are characterised by a discrepancy between theory and practice.

Moreover, implicit resistance to the whole issue of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is linked to *inadequate knowledge* of the entire spectrum of violence and discrimination beyond the heteronormative majority. Peacebuilding stakeholders we spoke to referred to domestic violence, especially in LGBTQI+ communities, where people face more insecurity because of homophobia. '[...] I think that there is huge resistance to dealing with domestic violence, partly social and partly political, as it is still seen as a domestic question when actually it is a question of public safety' (INGO 10). Furthermore, inadequate knowledge or recognition leads to inclusive forms of gender discrimination being neglected: 'But there is very little consciousness about what it means to be discriminated against, to be not allowed to have the same rights as others because of cultural relations or patriarchal relations. We are in a very patriarchal society' (Activist 4). Interview partners further pointed to the impact of the normalisation of violence against women in all societies that tend to be overlooked in peacebuilding programming and local processes. When the realities of discrimination and forms of violence are not seen and acknowledged but neglected, the result is inaction. These effects are evident in the lack of diversity in peace processes: '[...] most peace processes are not diverse, but are usually amongst the men who are fighting and there is a minimal input from civil society and from women, so how can we construct anything that can be called an inclusive process?' (INGO 13). Yet, inclusive peace processes are essential for sustainable peace.⁸ Another consequence of missing knowledge was described as a lack of inclusive gender-sensitive monitoring systems. This is caused by failure to recognise the importance of generating gender-disaggregated data in monitoring and results in a lack of basic SGBV data or LGBTQI+-sensitive data on 'domestic violence cases within same sex couples or sexual violence against LGBT people' (LGBTQI+ NGO 4). Standardised systems do not ask for reports on SGBV or other gender-sensitive human rights violations. This may render some forms of violence invisible, such as domestic violence in same sex relationships, as the victims fear discrimination if they call the police.

Silo mentality and *partial issue thinking* have been characterised as examples of implicit resistance in institutional structures. Silo mentality refers to the practice of creating certain divisions in the overall goal of achieving gender equality. Thematic divisions have been described as the inability to understand the linkages between forms of violence or human rights. While some programmes only address CRSV, others work solely on SRHR. As a result thematic or organisational divisions within organisations create resistance to understanding the causality and prevention of CRSV. This can also

8 https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:3220/unu_cpr_inclusivity_in_peace_processes.pdf (August 31, 2023).

result in delaying or postponing the implementation of some rights and creating artificial competition between them, as well as with civil society organisations that work in one of the fields. The silo mentality or partial issue thinking of gender-sensitive human rights have led to the institutional practice of often just ticking the 'gender' box instead of engaging with the overall topic of gender equality in peacebuilding on a deeper level: 'They take mainstreaming as a "tick the boxes" exercise' (IO2).

Our findings show the effects of a *lack of gender-sensitive funding* on the realisation and promotion of human rights. Stakeholders explicitly mentioned that funds are not being allocated to gender projects, or are reallocated if other crises occur. One interview partner from an international feminist NGO describes how serious crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic or Russian aggression against Ukraine, has led many donors to cut budgets for feminist peacebuilding projects. 'Gender often falls off the table first' (INGO3) is how another representative from a peacebuilding NGO described the lack of funding as a form of resistance in peacebuilding. They also state that this is especially problematic, as backlash actors have quite good access to financial opportunities. Moreover, the organisational competition for funding is worth pointing out. Peacebuilding stakeholders have stressed that UN organisations are competing with civil society organisations for funding and this places pressure on NGOs to professionalise, which is accompanied by a lot of bureaucratic and administrative challenges for those local organisations.

Implicit individual resistance

Resistance in institutional contexts may, however, not always manifest as patterns of practice but can also come from individuals within institutional contexts or can take the form of individual opposition to changes in gender relations. Individuals can be anyone from within or outside institutional contexts, including leaders, health personnel or politicians.

Just as in institutional settings, resistance from individuals often manifest in inaction or inadequate action resulting from a personal *lack of understanding*. Yet, in distinction to a lack of institutional knowledge, lack of understanding was described as individuals failing to grasp what working on gender-sensitive human rights means, how it works in practice and that it is more than just working on the representation of women. Institutionally this can stem from a lack of training, but on the individual level we find that people often show no interest or even ignorance when it comes to the importance, effects and implications of gender sensitivity in peacebuilding. On the issue of responding adequately to cases of CRSV, it became evident that there 'are many levels on which there's a lack of understanding and lack of awareness. Some of it is intentional, some is unintentional, or just pure ignorance' (Expert 2). In this vein, one interview partner made clear that it does not help matters that most decision-makers in foreign, development or security policy are male and that the women that do occupy leadership positions in these areas 'are not gender champions' (IO 2). *Inadequate action* by individuals is often based on one-dimensional understanding of gender equality that leads to efforts being focused solely on strengthening women's rights. This can be very damaging for other marginalised groups, such as LGBTQI+, which do not receive the legal or medical support they need or gain access to emergency shelters. Inadequate design of programmes and funding schemes and inadequate implementation of both can often be traced back to individuals' lack of awareness and

traditional mindset according to which gender, sexuality and domestic violence belong in the 'private sphere', that is, in the home. Inadequate action by individuals may also result in peacebuilding spaces where implementation is limited to the professional capacity of individuals.

4.2 EXPLICIT RESISTANCE TO GENDER-SENSITIVE HUMAN RIGHTS IN PEACEBUILDING

Explicit *institutional* resistance

This report identifies explicit resistance on an institutional level against gender-sensitive peacebuilding that differs from implicit resistance in its action-oriented nature. Explicit and institutional resistance means opposition to gender equality or gender-sensitive human rights initiatives through the actions and discourses embedded in institutions, or inaction when it comes to advancing gender equality, especially when the institutions concerned are made aware of their gender equality commitments. The explicit resistance mentioned by the peacebuilding actors and practitioners we interviewed can be grouped into five different forms: 1) competition between gender-sensitive rights; 2) resistance to terminology; 3) the instrumentalisation of gender; 4) resistance to strategies; and 5) exclusion of civil society.

In the area of peacebuilding policy and project design, the *prioritisation of some gender-sensitive human rights over others and competition between those rights* constitutes explicit institutional resistance. This means that donors or decision-makers often understand gender to mean women, and prioritise the inclusion of one group of marginalised people, thereby systematically neglecting any other groups, such as the LGBTQI+ community or men and boys. LGBTQI+ issues are always at the bottom of the list of priorities. The problem is that this practice is seen as ticking the 'gender' box and as a result neglects the rights of others, especially overlapping forms of marginalisation, needs or insecurities. However, this practice not only applies to the neglect of certain marginalised groups, but also appears to be a regular occurrence within broader issues of gender sensitivity. Conflict-related sexual violence and wartime rape has become a topic acknowledged by both governments and international institutions, as it is an issue of protection and feeds into the patriarchal gender norms of women as victims of war. Hence, CRSV is perceived as a priority over other issues or reduced to something that only happens during wars with SRHR, such as access to safe abortion, being disregarded. Peacebuilding actors describe how there is resistance to any other 'gender' topic when governments are already working on CRSV. The isolation of this topic does not allow for thorough gender-sensitive planning of projects from a survivor-centred perspective or taking into account the time before and after the conflict. It also limits funding and hinders the implementation of other projects that would challenge gender norms and roles and allow women to be included as active agents of change. This perceived competition over rights is reflected on the institutional and financial levels. Scarce resources then lead to a form of competition between NGOs.

While laws have been identified as possessing a lot of power when it comes to resisting gender-sensitive human rights, explicit resistance takes place through institutional practices and discourses. Advocating for the inclusion of gender-sensitive human rights in peacebuilding can result in

explicit resistance just by *using terminology such as gender or feminism, SGBV or SRHR*. One employee of an EU institution stated,

‘we came across this obstacle when discussing the conclusion on WPS where a couple of member states said they don’t want gender in it. That’s bizarre but that’s where we’re going. My colleagues working on sexual and reproductive health rights say you have to be very careful how you include and present them in the programmes’ (IO 2).

There is evidence that language matters in the design and implementation of policies, not only in international organisations, such as in the UNSC around the WPS Agenda, but also in local peacebuilding activities and negotiations.

‘So, there is a tendency to view this [gender issues] through a rich country lens and to use the terms that are acceptable in wealthy countries. The term feminist is an interesting example but one of the things that we are learning is to be able to understand that the bar is not set by Western countries but that we need to look at the bars that are set in other countries’ (LGBTQI+ NGO 1).

Explicit opposition to certain wording is however very context specific. While in some contexts, the terms gender or feminism are completely avoided, other contexts require that anything related to sexuality is left out, while gender is acceptable. One representative of a regional political institution explains that while organising an event entitled ‘sexual and gender-based violence in conflict’, they encountered pushback against the term ‘sexual’ from some countries. In order to continue organising the event, they had to change the title to ‘gender-based violence’ (IO 2). However, the representative assured us that even though the title had been changed, there was no compromise on the content. A local peacebuilding NGO informed us that they cannot use the term ‘gender’ in their projects as there would be resistance from the groups they work with on the conflict.

‘We work with group-specific contexts, often then they are groups of men or women, or indigenous women, but they do not use the word gender at all as it could be framed as a “Western concept” that undermines indigenous people’s autonomy’ (Activist 2).

Hence, gender language can cause explicit resistance from local but also EU or governmental institutions in different peacebuilding contexts and processes.

Instrumentalising the concept of gender, through both politicisation and depoliticisation, is explicit resistance to gender equality. On the one hand, there is the depoliticisation of gender-sensitive human rights, which means that addressing SGBV in peacebuilding ‘is something you do at home and not in the political sphere’ (INGO3). Domestic violence or SRHR is often not addressed as a political but as a private issue. The resistance mainly occurs within policymaking and in international insti-

tutions, where gender issues and security issues are worked on separately. Pushing topics into the private sphere marginalises gender-sensitive rights and silences the women and LGBTQI+ communities affected by conflict.

On the other hand, politicisation is a strategic act carried out by political actors, especially governments or conservative parties, a pattern with the aim of resisting the implementation of gender-sensitive rights or of not addressing the issue at all in peacebuilding. For example, the politicisation of a 'gender intervention', where gender is portrayed as a Western concept, becomes a form of resistance to Western politics and its power. In other contexts, this strategy has been applied to LGBTQI+ rights, where 'LGBTQI+ rights are used to advance anti-EU propaganda' (Activist 6). Women's and LGBTQI+ rights become an instrument to consolidate anti-democratic and anti-human rights ideas. 'So much about them is not really about them', concluded an LGBTQI+ organisation from Eastern Europe, 'they have just found a platform to show rage against the system' (LGBTQI+ NGO 3).

Hence, there are strategies to explicitly *resist gender-sensitive human rights*. The 'wedge strategy' in this context is used by conservative actors with the aim of splitting feminist movements over the issue of LGBTQI+ rights and therefore weakening their efforts to implement gender-sensitive human rights. One interview partner explains that this strategy is used by right-wing or conservative parties to influence the opposition:

'If you accept trans rights, it's going to ruin women's spaces. This places a wedge between pro-LGBTQI progressives and certain parts of the women's community which have traditionally been allies. This is a wedge to peel off some of the support.' (LGBTQI+ NGO 1).

This leads to alliances that are purely strategic and not based on the shared values of the groups. Explicit strategies, such as the wedge strategy, create instability in the feminist movements. Another strategy to resist progress towards gender equality is to use gendered discourses for 'othering' processes, such as blaming 'violence against women' and 'domestic violence' on racialised men. Therefore, the blame is shifted to somewhere else outside their own state/group. While the topic seems to be a priority, it not only constructs the 'other' as violent and misogynist but also functions as strong resistance to the implementation of real advocacy and policy addressing gender-sensitive human rights.

Finally, peacebuilding actors perceive the *exclusion of civil society* from decision-making as well as peace processes as explicit institutional resistance to gender-sensitive human rights. Non-governmental organisations and local peacebuilders explain that even though they have been asking to join peace negotiations and advocate on several different platforms, they are still ignored. One organisation from Kosovo described the exclusion of all forms of civil society working with women, gender equality or LGBTQI+ issues as the strongest resistance they have experienced in their peace work. In this case, it was mainly high-ranking officials, not only from the government, but also the UN and the EU, who continuously ignored their requests and demands for gender equality and participation.

Explicit individual resistance

Peacebuilding actors have described several forms of explicit opposition by individuals to gender-sensitive human rights in peacebuilding. The individual explicit resistance identified in this report can be divided into three groups: 1) people in power denying rights; 2) the expression of misogynist and homophobic attitudes; and 3) ignorance of individuals. These individuals can be government officials and politicians, individuals working for international institutions, but also colleagues, religious leaders or family members.

Another form of ignorance towards gender-sensitive human rights is *individuals in power positions denying rights*, such as the right to abortion, despite the fact that this is legally enshrined in countries' human rights agendas. Activists have reported incidents of doctors refusing to perform abortions for survivors of sexual abuse, even though this was constitutional, which is tantamount to them ignoring the respective woman's rights.

Other examples of explicit individual resistance can be summarised under the category of *misogynist and homophobic attitudes* of governmental actors, members of extremist groups or other individuals. These include the public expression of anti-gender equality opinions, such as women should stay at home, women are not equal to men, or women are vulnerable and weak and therefore need to be protected by men, or portraying survivors of sexual violence as responsible for their suffering. Further, transphobic and homophobic attitudes are expressed, for example, through the framing of LGBTQI+ people as sick and needing treatment, homophobic comments in the workplace or declining support for LGBTQI+ movements. In the same vein, others describe tensions within feminist communities about the scope of discussions and programmes, where some are prioritising work on SRHR for cisgender women but explicitly exclude the reproductive health and rights of trans people.

Ignorance among individuals, especially diplomats or UN officials, also counts as individual and explicit resistance. One account tells how a diplomat from the office of the UN Special Envoy has continuously ignored activists' demands over the years, others describe how the demands of activists are devalued, being called 'naïve, we're being unrealistic' (INGO 1). Ignorance is a well-known strategy to avoid engaging in the topic of gender-sensitive human rights, but there are different reasons for it. It can simply stem from a lack of employee capacity, especially in governments, a lack of knowledge or a personal political view that opposes gender equality. Government officials have stated simply having 'no desire' to engage in gender-sensitive human rights. Ignorance, however, also led to active resistance by one EU official who stated that sexual assault is something that 'only happens in your head' (IO 2).

5. COUNTERING RESISTANCE/BACKLASH IN PEACEBUILDING

After identifying key areas of resistance and backlash, we asked our interview partners how they cope and deal with it. In this section, we highlight various strategies of different peacebuilding actors that help us understand what stakeholders are already doing. Simultaneously, these strategies function as *political recommendations* and guidelines. The analysis shows that certain strategies can be

applied to all actors, meaning activists, NGOs and policymakers; some can only be applied to NGOs and policymakers; and others are actor specific.

Strategy	Actors
Cooperate strategically and build alliances	All
Develop and disseminate context-specific and gender-sensitive knowledge	All
Flexible and gender-sensitive project funding and evaluation	Policymakers
Support and protect activists	NGOs and Policy-makers
Institutionalise diversity	
Advance advocacy work	
Work in a context-specific and gender-sensitive manner	NGOs
Actively develop strategies to counter backlash	
Protection and security	Activists
Increase visibility and attention	

5.1 COUNTER-STRATEGIES FOR ALL ACTORS

Strategic cooperation and alliance building

Effective and trusting cooperation based on shared values between like-minded feminist and gender-sensitive organisations, governments and advocates allows the different areas of expertise of diverse actors to be united in order to counter backlash. It enables flexible reactions, expands options for action, and increases political pressure, with NGOs being able to act as bridge builders between local organisations or activists and foreign government representatives, for instance. This helps to incorporate feminist demands into international politics and information can be imparted through informal networks or, depending on the context, it may be possible to move from the implementation level to the political level and develop solutions to resistance in consultations or government negotiations. Inclusive and diverse alliances are particularly effective in winning allies from socially powerful groups, such as local chiefs or government employees, also explicitly men and boys. The formation of alliances and strong networks within feminist civil society with the same feminist values can be an effective strategy to gain more visibility at all levels and to counter the wedge strategy of backlash actors.

Gender-sensitive and context-specific knowledge building

The willingness to learn, reflect on and rethink practices should be present in all peacebuilding processes at all levels and from all actors in order to be effective in the long term, including as a preventive measure against resistance. This extends to the importance of developing empathy and an intersectional understanding for diverse marginalised groups including the resistance they face. Knowledge building within societies is especially important in relation to LGBTQI+ rights because people who are not affected often have barely any awareness of the manifold human rights viola-

tions that LGBTQI+ persons are confronted with. Supporting low-threshold conversations between different local groups can be an effective initial approach to discuss and raise awareness of different understandings of gender. Building awareness of one's own rights can empower marginalised people and groups to develop an understanding of how certain social practices, such as child marriage, can have negative impacts on their rights. Knowledge is understood as a relevant empowerment factor, enabling people to deal with resistance first in their private environment, giving them the self-confidence to use their voices within their relationships, but also at the community level. To encourage conservative implementing partners to take different gender perspectives into account, it helps if people actively show willing to work on their own gender-sensitive knowledge internally. In contexts where religiously based resistance is common, building up theological and context-specific knowledge is needed in order to be able to develop good counter-arguments. It is therefore necessary to develop gender expertise within (international) NGOs, governments and donor organisations to help prevent resistance but also to prepare for and deal with possible backlash.

5.2 COUNTER-STRATEGIES FOR POLICYMAKERS: FUNDING AND EVALUATION

Although the focus of this report is on non-state peacebuilding actors, our interview partners articulated specific options and strategies for policymakers to deal with backlash. Most of these are presented in the next section as they are intertwined with NGO strategies but one that will be highlighted here is flexible and gender-sensitive funding with regards to government-sponsored projects. Our interview partners clearly affirm that this is necessary to create development structures that actually strengthen the representation of vulnerable groups. Concretely, this means that consistent human rights evaluations for development cooperation projects, as well as budget adjustments to allow for a robust gender analysis in each project are necessary. There is also a need to develop awareness that there are no gender-neutral areas/fields in peacebuilding and development cooperation.

Moreover, projects should not focus solely on those affected by violence, but should push for society-wide awareness and preventive measures. State actors should therefore expand their programmes to include LGBTQI+ rights under the premise that a partnership takes place on equal footing and that prefabricated solutions are not used, but that the regional circumstances are decisive and projects are developed together with local project partners at the beginning of each project phase. Project aims and strategies should be developed by those affected, while external actors should only play a supporting role.

5.3 COUNTER-STRATEGIES FOR NGOS/POLICYMAKERS: SUPPORT, INSTITUTIONALISE, ADVOCATE!

Support and protect local activists

Non-governmental organisations emphasise the importance of promoting meaningful participation of a diverse range of women and recognising them as agents of change at the global level, e.g. by

proposing women as experts and actively providing them with platforms for greater visibility. Robust mechanisms are also needed to ensure women's meaningful participation in peace negotiations and policy decisions in peacebuilding. This must not be dependent on diplomatic figures, such as UN Special Envoys, speaking for women or deciding when their voices are heard. The UN and its member states must question the organisation's role in this regard and finally live up to its promises regarding the WPS Agenda. Non-governmental organisations are also calling for the UN to commit to a zero-tolerance policy as a standard when it comes to meaningful participation of women in peace negotiations and peace processes. On the local level, supporting activists includes the provision of platforms for training, educational or exchange purposes but also protection. Non-governmental organisations feel responsible for balancing the risks between visibility through training programmes and the danger of backlash because of that visibility. Therefore, they try to provide adequate personal protection for people under threat, adapted to their particular needs and circumstances. In addition, policymakers must be aware that local activists put themselves at great risk when advocating for gender-sensitive human rights globally and that special protection measures are therefore necessary if they are invited to public events.

Institutionalising diversity and diversity knowledge

Non-governmental organisations highlight the importance of internal diversity measures to prevent resistance in the first place. Those must be institutionalised to be effective and sustainable. They include the formation of internal working groups to address gender, peace and security, and the provision of staff training. Inclusive understandings of gender when recruiting new employees can be ensured by integrating zero-tolerance clauses in contracts and asking candidates about their attitudes toward LGBTQI+ rights in their job interviews. In terms of government structures and institutions, diversity measures should be anchored in ministries and governments, a greater diversity of employees should be recruited and assessment centres should be adapted to social standards.

Advancing advocacy work

Non-governmental organisations use their political programmes or conduct human rights dialogues with different states to maintain constant political dialogue and pressure which is important for tackling resistance and backlash. These organisations see themselves in a mediator role, in which they support local activists in speaking before political decision-makers and articulating their demands. At the international level, NGOs are particularly concerned with increasing the visibility of gender-sensitive human rights through campaigns, public relations and workshops and challenging policymakers to take the perspective of feminist civil society as their starting point. They also comment on strategies or monitor and evaluate political processes.

On this basis, policymakers need to actively use their influence in contexts where gender-sensitive human rights are violated and exert pressure on malicious actors. In the case of LGBTQI+ rights, the Yogyakarta Plus Principles can be used as a binding basis for work in peacebuilding and development cooperation. Part of advocacy work also implies maintaining dialogue with states that show

resistance and using windows of opportunity, such as an EU candidacy that comes with specific requirements, to increase political pressure.

5.4 COUNTER-STRATEGIES FOR NGOS: CONTEXT-SPECIFIC STRATEGISING

Working in a context-specific and gender-sensitive manner

To counter narratives in which feminist values are allegedly interpreted as a Western import, acknowledging and listening to the gender expertise of local partner organisations is of utmost importance and should become a precondition to all actors. In this way, conversations about gender, local feminisms and resistance can be conducted locally and partners from the Global North act only as supporters and not as 'norm-givers'. In this position, they can support local conversations and bring actors together. Especially with regards to LGBTQI+ rights it is important to adhere to the 'do no harm' principle. This is necessary because the arguments of backlash actors against LGBTQI+ rights can vary greatly depending on the context. Others find it useful not to work explicitly on LGBTQI+ rights, but to include them under the broader theme of gender justice to avoid putting local activists at risk. In some cases, where backlash has already been experienced, it might even be advantageous to work unofficially and informally on gender-sensitive issues. Non-governmental organisations strategically select their arguments for gender-sensitive human rights. Depending on the context and actors addressed, justifications based on international frameworks, such as CEDAW or the WPS Agenda may be useful. In cases where those norms trigger resistance, more rational and efficiency-based arguments for greater gender equality can be made instead.

Actively developing strategies to counter backlash

Non-governmental organisations try not to just react to backlash, but rather to take action themselves, implementing their own agenda and taking a strong stance on gender-sensitive human rights. This includes addressing structural causes and developing preventive measures. Holistic, inclusive, low-threshold and early-start projects for the strengthening of gender-sensitive human rights, which also involve working with men and boys and are implemented on the level of the family, as well as with the community/local leadership, should be used as a benchmark for this approach. It can also be useful to start small and build projects in such a way that whole communities benefit from them, thus preventing local authorities from resisting implementation. In contexts where it is possible to take legal action against backlash actors, this strategy has been successful in the LGBTQI+ community.

5.5 COUNTER-STRATEGIES FOR ACTIVISTS: VISIBILITY VS PROTECTION

Increasing visibility and attracting attention

Peacebuilders rely on their activist work, campaigns and journalistic work as a central strategy for dealing with backlash and resistance. Social media platforms play a crucial role in this. Activists draw

attention to discriminatory and violent patriarchal social structures and traditions in their respective contexts and provide education on gender-sensitive human rights. In this way, they also counter the argument that gender is a 'Western' concept and instead discuss gender embedded in their local context. They also present and publicly announce their successes to increase the visibility of their work. Activists report success in their advocacy for women's rights when demands are clearly stated and particularly when they are embedded in the local legal framework that often exists to protect women against violence, but is not effectively implemented. Beyond this, activists also use public relations to expose the failures of countries and actors that are officially committed to gender-sensitive human rights but do not live up to their promises in practice. Activists living in exile continue their work outside their home countries and exert pressure to ensure that the international community takes their demands and concerns seriously.

Strengthening personal protection and security

Measures for physical protection against violent attacks include moving work underground or being less visible in public, avoiding public spaces and lone travel or seeking asylum in another country. Moreover, it is becoming more important to provide activists with protection in the digital space, as backlash actors are increasingly resorting to online violence against them. For those who face resistance and backlash in their daily work, including in their personal life, developing resilience and protecting their mental health is a key issue. Activists distance themselves from violence and attacks, try not to take them too seriously or ignore them.

6. FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY AS A COUNTER-STRATEGY TO RESISTANCE AND BACKLASH

Feminist peacebuilding and the specific focus on gender-sensitive human rights in foreign policy has received much more attention since some countries have introduced feminist foreign policies. Since these policies are, in many countries, including Germany, Spain and Canada, focused on peacebuilding, development and post-conflict reconstruction, in our interviews we asked peacebuilding stakeholders about their experience of feminist foreign policy, the impact it has and the role it plays in their daily work and whether they think feminist foreign policies can help to counter resistance and backlash in peacebuilding.

Generally, the opinions on feminist foreign policy and its impact on gender-sensitive peacebuilding were ambivalent. In many cases, stakeholders saw feminist foreign policy as '[...] a step in the right direction [...]' (INGO 13). This is due to the positive influence it has on policy discourses in general, increasing the visibility of gender equality and feminist peacebuilding values. Highlighting the power of language, a feminist foreign policy can help make feminist perspectives less of a taboo, allowing them to become part of broader policy discourse, as this is 'no longer seen as a crazy issue' (IO 3). Others see the emerging concept as a window of opportunity for civil society to access more support and funding opportunities. Most interview partners agree that adopting a feminist foreign policy can therefore be a strong political statement. Something else that is seen in a positive light

is that, in the case of Germany, feminist foreign policy is not only about women but also about the rights of marginalised groups and diversity. Another interviewee perceived feminist foreign policy as a response to the stigmatisation of LGBTQI+ people, as one central component of foreign policy is 'all human beings have worth' (LGBTQI+ NGO 1).

However, most interview partners express ambivalence when speaking about the impact of feminist foreign policy, questioning the meaningful implementation and the willingness of governments to take real action that goes beyond discourse. 'The FFP should always be presented between quotation marks. As far as I am aware, none of these are feminist foreign policies' (INGO 10). Especially with regards to implementation, interview partners repeatedly highlight how crucial it is to take purposeful action to fulfil the feminist promises and criticise the lack of action. For example, they feel that feminist expertise has been given more space, but they have not yet seen the real integration of this knowledge into practice:

'We are given more space, which is a noticeable effect. The extent to which it will be implemented, [...] is completely open. [...] Something has clearly changed at the discursive level, but it remains to be seen whether this will be implemented politically.' (Activist 5).

Others see feminist efforts as having been weakened because of government actors' lack of willingness to learn and reflect:

'However, we have clearly seen in the last four years that the AA and BMVG are much tougher in negotiations and much quicker with recommendations and also feel much smarter than everyone else. They are very rarely willing to compromise [...]. In such a setting, if the state wants to give us guidelines, it can lead to an enormous step backwards or to a very colonial discourse in the end' (INGO 11).

Some are critical that only the name of the policy has changed, making it no more than 'a branding exercise' (INGO 10), with the practice staying the same.

'It's similar to WPS. They're in competition over making a verbal or policy commitment towards women's rights, gender equality and WPS Agenda. [...] I am not sure how much that makes a difference in practice, because these countries were already in' (INGO 7).

In addition, the absence of linkages between foreign and domestic policy is criticised as it means feminist issues are promoted in public but structural violence at home is invisible. 'How can foreign policy work if it is not dovetailed with domestic policy. Only then is it helpful if the structural question of violence is not covered up in the same applies to care work and economic exploitation' (INGO 9).

One person raised the question of whether an anti-colonial feminist foreign policy is even possible, considering it is mainly implemented by European states. Others questioned the sustainability of such a policy due to the lack of structural anchoring and intersectionality of the concept, and the limited possibility of it moving beyond heteronormative standards. In one interview, the issue of diverse feminism was mentioned and reference made to some feminist policies being prioritized. It was proposed that one way of addressing this might be to frame foreign policy as a human rights-centred foreign policy. Whereas feminist language overall is seen as a positive development, in some cases it can have a negative impact, especially when working with conservative and potential backlash actors. In the words of one of our interlocutors: 'Then there's the question of whether it really does anything on the ground. Does this cool naming, which I personally find totally "sexy", bring anything to the actual work?' (INGO 11).

The questions and contradictions raised touch on some of the negative effects associated with the concept. One danger could be co-optation, meaning that every state could adopt a feminist foreign policy without acting on it or it could be instrumentalised to legitimate violence and militarisation. This could result in it becoming an 'international lip-service-thing' (INGO 8). In the same vein, criticism was also voiced that some countries were already acting against their feminist promises. Examples are international reactions to the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan or some countries being unable to honour their feminist commitments at home, such as in the case of the high rates of femicide in Mexico. Instead of declaring themselves feminists, these countries would 'be better off just doing the work. And then reflecting on whether their foreign policy can be described as feminist or something. The external forces do not care what it is called' (INGO 10).

Without the concept being systematically and structurally anchored, interview partners believe there is a danger that all the work that has already been done will come to nothing as soon as governments change and become more conservative. Moreover, the very basis on which feminist foreign policy is conceptualised by governments is also criticised, because the lack of data on LGBTQI+ lives makes it hard for any policy to map out their actual needs. Instead, policies can cause unintended harm because there is no central political instrument or data.

Some interview partners also explicitly mentioned feminist development policy, highlighting the positive effects on power structures, roles and understandings of gender, which – in case of backlash – could also facilitate a quicker response and raise awareness about potential resistance before it emerges. Others mention positive effects on the number of gender projects and increased funding opportunities. It also seems to lead to more cooperation with feminist civil society and therefore more possibilities to influence programming. In one interview, it was mentioned that on paper there is a clear inclusive understanding of gender, but in practice it is still mostly about women and girls.

7. CONCLUSION

Feminist peacebuilding and the realisation of gender-sensitive human rights in post-conflict situations remain fragile and contested endeavours. The findings of our project show that all of our inter-

view partners and peacebuilding stakeholders are confronted with diverse forms of resistance and a variety of backlash. Backlash and resistance exist at the level of international institutions, such as the UN or regional institutions, at the level of governments and their bureaucracies, at the level of NGOs and their transnational action networks as well as at national levels resulting from the counteractions of religious groups or grassroots organisations. However, they also exist within feminist movements themselves due to different understandings of gender and feminisms. Feminist research in this field has mostly concentrated on backlash in European politics, resistance to liberal peacebuilding or at the level of international organisations, such as the UN. Our project demonstrates that backlash and resistance regularly occur in the everyday political and operational work of peacebuilding actors – with some even facing life-threatening attacks on themselves and their families. Such backlash and resistance counteract and prevent the realisation of gender-sensitive human rights in peacebuilding contexts.

Our interviews with peacebuilding activists have shown the relevance of this issue and the urgent need to understand the positionality of feminist peacebuilders within the liberal peacebuilding architecture. Attempts at liberal peacebuilding are often perceived as perpetuating or sometimes even worsening post-conflict situations of impoverishment and inequality and exclude local actors, including states and civil society. Interview partners point to dominant patriarchal and postcolonial norms shaping liberal peacebuilding efforts. The perception of stereotypical and binary gender roles hinders the inclusion of female fighters in demobilisation programmes, and LGBTIQ+ people and the violence against them often remain invisible, too. Unjust legal systems resulting from colonial settlements do not allow women to gain or inherit land rights. The same applies to laws criminalising same sex relationships.

Backlash in post-conflict countries results in even further reversal of gender-sensitive human rights or gender equality norms. Not only do practices of backlash envisage the revision of existing laws, but are often accompanied by orchestrated state violence. A prominent example is the revival of the death penalty against LGBTIQ+ people in Uganda (Okiror 2023). Such state-sponsored violence often also targets non-governmental organisations working with LGBTIQ+, with employees being accused of complicity and receiving death threats. Feminist human-rights defenders have also stressed the bleak realities of a continuum of violence, starting with hate speech in social media and ending in genuinely life-threatening acts. An interview partner from South Sudan told us about threats of violence made against family members and described the only remaining option as being either to work underground with strict security measures or leaving their job. One of our core findings was that backlash does not only aim to erode or destroy gender-sensitive human rights norms, but is almost always accompanied by physical or discursive violence towards the very people defending these rights. In light of this, we would argue that the research on norm contestation with its focus on conflicts of application and validity falls short of grasping the complexities of backlash. Backlash in peacebuilding not only challenges the validity of a norm but seeks to erode this norm entirely. Moreover, the feminist human rights defenders of such a norm often experience the physical consequences of such campaigns.

This research project did not focus solely on backlash, but also took into account the often less visible forms of resistance. Implicit resistance appears in the form of a lack of awareness and knowledge or a lack of political will. Governments in recipient countries utter empty rhetoric and do not translate their words into political practice, but such resistance also manifests as a lack of interest on the individual level. Feminist peacebuilding activists underline the relevance of this political inertia, which is hard to overcome. If such anti-gender rhetoric appears in public discourses, this inertia might also result in practices of silence. The institutional obligation of gender mainstreaming often leads bureaucracies to just 'tick the gender box' instead of engaging with the implementation of gender-sensitive human rights on a deeper level.

Explicit resistance to the realisation of gender-sensitive human rights appears at the individual level in the form of the misogynist or homophobic attitudes of governmental officials. People in power positions deny gender-sensitive rights, such as sexual and reproductive health, even if they are legally enshrined in the country's human rights law. Explicit institutional resistance results in gender being interpreted as the inclusion of women and their needs being prioritised over the needs of other marginalised groups such as LGBTIQ+. The issue of 'gender' is also depicted as a 'liberal Western concept' and as unlawful interference in the sovereignty and local/religious traditions of the respective recipient country. Resistance also results in explicit hierarchies of gender-sensitive human rights. While conflict-related sexual violence and wartime rape are often perceived as legitimate human rights issues, sexual and reproductive health and rights and particularly abortion rights are denied a place on the political agenda of some post-conflict countries.

We also asked our interview partners about strategies to counter backlash and the diverse forms of resistance. Such counter-strategies can be broadly summarised as the formation of strategic alliances and strong networks among feminist civil society as well as systematic knowledge-building and dispersion among such networks. It remains crucial for the success of such strategies to also identify gender-sensitive men as cooperative partners and facilitators of knowledge dissemination. Knowledge about the inclusivity of gender-sensitive human rights remains a crucial empowerment factor. Such resistance must be dealt with first at the community level, where men and boys have to be included, as well, but also at the national and transnational levels. Besides this, such attempts at knowledge-building should focus on local or religious backgrounds and should seek to integrate these approaches into strategies to counter backlash and resistance. For donor countries, too, the development and dispersal of broad and in-depth gender expertise remains crucial. This task should be paired with a change in funding practices and project design. Making multi-year and flexible funding possible and implementing strong and continuous human rights evaluation throughout all project phases, as well as developing projects together with local partners from the outset are all necessary steps to prevent resistance and prepare for potential backlash. Intensive examination of systematic attempts to induce backlash could also further the development of adequate counter-strategies. More rigorous comparative research projects on regions, actors, countries and policy fields would be of value as well.

The emergence of an increasing number of feminist foreign policies in various different countries has been welcomed as a step in the right direction, but is also critically perceived as mere

window dressing. The litmus test remains the rigid implementation of political recommendations, such as in the case of Germany's realisation of the core guidelines of its Feminist Foreign Policy. These guidelines address thematic issues as well as ensuring that the German Foreign Office and embassies abroad have access to systematic and long-term gender-sensitive knowledge. Such a feminist foreign policy has to be intersectional and postcolonial, and needs to address the structural causes of gendered inequalities and injustices in peacebuilding processes. The close collaboration, participation and inclusion of feminist civil society has been named as the precondition for a feminist practice in peacebuilding. Consequently, a feminist foreign policy also needs to include principles of a feminist domestic policy. From this, it follows that one of the most important needs is the rigorous protection of human rights defenders, especially when they are confronted with the violent effects of backlash. Such a domestic policy should also include the granting of asylum rights because of gender-based persecution, such in the case of Afghanistan.

LIST OF INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED ONLINE, ANONYMISED

International non-governmental organisations (INGOS)	
INGO 1	07.06.2022
INGO 2	30.08.2022
INGO 3	16.09.2022
INGO 4	06.07.2022
INGO 6	21.06.2022
INGO 7	29.09.2022
INGO 8	04.07.2022
INGO 9	04.10.2022
INGO 10	29.08.2022
INGO 11	07.07.2022
INGO 12	07.07.2022
INGO 13	03.06.2022
International organisations (IOs)	
IO 1	30.08.2022
IO 2	09.09.2022
IO 3	23.11.2022
IO 4	03.11.2022
IO 5	21.12.2022
LGBTIQ+ non-governmental organisations (LGBTIQ+ NGOs)	
LGBTIQ+ NGO 1	15.09.2022
LGBTIQ+ NGO 2	10.10.2022
LGBTIQ+ NGO 3	05.10.2022
LGBTIQ+ NGO 4	11.10.2022
Peacebuilding and gender experts (Experts)	
Expert 1	02.09.2022
Expert 2	20.09.2022
Expert 3	04.10.2022
Expert 4	31.07.2022
Peacebuilding activists (Activists)	
Activist 1	08.09.2022
Activist 2	09.09.2022
Activist 3	18.10.2022
Activist 4	26.10.2022
Activist 5	10.06.2022
Activist 6	20.12.2022
Activist 7	24.11.2022

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AU	African Union
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CRSV	Conflict-Related Sexual Violence
EU	European Union
FFP	Feminist Foreign Policy
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organisations
IOs	International Organisations
IPE	International Political Economy
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NAPs	National Action Plans
SG	United Nations Secretary-General
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSCR 1325	United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325
US	United States
WPS Agenda	Women, Peace and Security Agenda

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BACKLASH AGAINST AND RESISTANCE TO FEMINIST PEACEBUILDING

Irem Demirci // Clara Perras //
Victoria Scheyer // Simone Wisotzki

In their PRIF Report the authors focus on the various forms of resistance to and backlash against gender equality and gender-sensitive human rights in peacebuilding processes. Based on 33 interviews with key stakeholders, they explore how peacebuilders understand and perceive resistance to and backlash against the realisation of gender-sensitive human rights in peacebuilding. The report also sheds light on the counter-measures and strategies used by peacebuilders. Finally, the authors discuss the impact of feminist foreign policy on gender-sensitive human rights in peacebuilding.

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