

Resistance and backlash to gender equality

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Received 17 March 2020. Revised 1 September 2020. Accepted 8 September 2020

Funding information

Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, 26335.

Abstract

Resistance to efforts to advance gender equality is a common feature of social life, whether in workplaces and other organisations or elsewhere. In this article, we review the typical character, dynamics of and contexts for resistance to gender equality measures. Resistance is an inevitable, although undesirable, response to efforts at progressive social change. Backlash and resistance to gender equality take common forms including: denial of the problem, disavowal of responsibility, inaction, appeasement, co-option and repression. Resistance may be individual or collective, formal or informal. Pushback against gender equality measures comes more often from members of the privileged group (men) than the disadvantaged group (women). Resistance is a predictable expression of the defence of institutionalised privilege, but it is also shaped by widespread discourses on “sex roles” and “post-feminism,” the methods adopted to advance gender equality and the contexts in which they take place. Understanding the character and dynamics of resistance and backlash is vital for preventing and reducing them.

KEYWORDS

backlash, feminism, gender, masculinity, privilege

1 | INTRODUCTION

Efforts to make progress toward gender inequality and end men’s violence against women typically meet resistance, both individual and collective, formal and informal. Backlash – resistance against progressive social change – is a common feature of the social world. When patterns of inequality and injustice shift, individuals and groups, particularly those advantaged by the status quo, resist. In this article, we explore the character and origins of resistance and backlash to

feminist initiatives. The article defines resistance and backlash, explores the typical forms that they take and identifies the structural, institutional and discursive forces which shape them.

2 | DEFINING BACKLASH AND RESISTANCE

The term “backlash” first was articulated half a century ago (Lipset & Raab 1970), yet the phenomenon has characterised social change and contests over structural inequality throughout history. Every social justice project meets resistance, whether focused on civil rights, economic injustice or gender equality (Faludi 1991; Burke 2005; Blais & Dupuis-Déri 2011; Blais & Dupuis-Déri 2012; Adelaabu 2014). Members of privileged groups seek to restore, maintain and increase their power and position. More generally, progressive efforts to change social and economic arrangements often elicit pushback.

The terms “backlash” and “resistance” can be used interchangeably to refer to any form of resistance toward progressive social change. Resistance is resistance *to* – it is an active pushing back against progressive and feminist programmes, policies and perspectives. Resistance is a subset of the many practices and processes, which sustain gender inequality, defined by opposition, challenge or pushback against efforts to build gender equality. There are many routine ways in which gender inequalities are produced and reproduced in organisations and elsewhere: formal and informal discrimination, unconscious bias, male–male peer relations that exclude women and so on (Flood & Pease 2005), and resistance is only one aspect of these. While our account may apply to a variety of historical contexts, we focus primarily on contemporary forms of resistance to gender equality efforts.

Resistance is a response to actual or perceived challenges to existing hierarchies of power. It is a reaction against progressive social change that seeks to prevent further change from happening and reverse those changes already achieved. A typical feature of backlash is the desire by some proponents to return to aspects of an idealised past in which structural inequality was normalised (Breines et al. 1978; Faludi 1991; Dragiewicz 2011; Blais & Dupuis-Déri 2012; Dragiewicz 2018). Backlash is a reaction against emancipatory political objectives, rather than the reversal of established hierarchies of power (Hawkesworth 1999).

Our definitions of backlash and resistance differ from some usages of these terms. Elsewhere, these terms have been defined more broadly, more narrowly or positively. Beginning with overly broad definitions, Faludi’s (1991) work popularised the term “backlash,” defining it as the “cultural counterreaction” to feminism, offering an understanding of “backlash” broader than the one adopted here as it included any media messaging contrary to feminism (Faludi 1991). “Resistance” in some accounts includes processes that preserve the status quo such as institutional inertia and lack of support in the form of non-engagement, understaffing, underbudgeting, insufficient gender training and so on (Davidson & Proudford 2008; Mergaert & Lombardo 2014). Neither of these definitions highlights the active opposition central to the notion of resistance, and both are too broad in including any cultural or institutional expressions of gender inequality, although it can be hard in practice to distinguish between resistance specifically to diversity initiatives and more general practices which sustain or intensify gender inequalities (Thomas & Plaut 2008). Other accounts of backlash are overly narrow, restricting its application only to the use of coercive power (either the threat of sanction or the use of force) to regain lost or threatened power (Mansbridge & Shames 2008), or focused particularly on organised, public resistance by anti-feminist men’s and fathers’ groups (Kaye & Tolmie 1998b; Dragiewicz 2011; Flood 2012). While organised “men’s rights” groups, Websites and campaigns are one of the most visible expressions

of anti-feminist backlash, our definition of backlash incorporates other forms of resistance as well. Finally, in our use, “resistance” is always negative and refers to opposition to gender equality initiatives, although we recognise that the term “resistance” is also used in a positive sense by some feminist and social justice advocates to describe desirable challenges to injustice.

3 | FEATURES OF BACKLASH AND RESISTANCE

Several further features of backlash and resistance are worth emphasising. Resistance to gender equality is inevitable, diverse and contextual, individual and collective, and more common from the privileged group (men) than from the disadvantaged group (women).

3.1 | Resistance is inevitable

Backlash and resistance are inevitable responses to social change. That is, wherever there is progressive social change, there will also be resistance. Backlash is to be expected in the face of the prospect of social change. In particular, members of privileged groups are likely to push back against change and defend the unequal status quo, because of their material and psychological investments in this (Goodman 2001; Curry-Stevens 2007; Allen & Rossatto 2009; Pease 2010; Castania et al. 2017). Although its controversial nature is sometimes glossed over in efforts to highlight the benefits of gender equality, “feminism is inherently controversial” because of the challenge it poses to established politics and power relations (Walby 2011).

In a sense then, backlash is a sign of progress, whereby changes to women’s status seem possible or are underway. A wide range of activities designed to reduce gender inequality have been incorporated into economics, politics and culture around the world, and these are increasingly adopted by the state (Walby 2011). It is the success of these feminist projects, rather than their failures, which has spawned anti-feminist backlash. However, backlash itself may be successful, with progress toward gender equality halted, slowed or reversed.

3.2 | Resistance takes typical forms

What forms do backlash and resistance to gender equality take? While types of backlash can be described in numerous ways, there are typical tactics, which recur across issues and historical periods (Agocs 1997; Godenzi 1999; Menzies 2007; Probst et al. 2008; Thomas & Plaut 2008; Lombardo & Mergaert 2013; Wiggins-Romesburg & Githens 2018):

- *Denial*: Denial of the problem or the legitimacy of the case for change.
- *Disavowal*: Refusal to recognise responsibility to address the problem or the change process for this problem.
- *Inaction*: Refusal to implement a change initiative.
- *Appeasement*: Efforts to placate or pacify those advocating for change in order to limit its impact.
- *Appropriation*: Simulating change while covertly undermining it.
- *Co-option*: Using the language of progressive frameworks and goals (“equality,” “rights,” “justice” and so on) to maintain unequal structures and practices.
- *Repression*: The reversal or dismantling of a change initiative once implementation has begun.
- *Violence*: The use of violence, harassment and abuse against subordinate groups.

Resistance thus ranges from passive blocking techniques which seek to maintain the status quo, to strategies which seek to minimise or co-opt change efforts, to active, aggressive opposition in order to restore the old order (Godenzi 1999; Probst et al. 2008; Smirthwaite 2009).

Denial of the problem or the case for changing it is a very common element of resistance to gender equality initiatives. Individuals and organisations may:

- Deny that the problem exists; minimise its extent, significance and impact; or rename and redefine it out of existence.
- Blame the problem on those who are the victims of it.
- Deny the credibility of the message on the basis that it is supposedly irrational, untruthful or exaggerated.
- Attack the credibility of the messengers of change by impugning their motives and marginalising them as a special interest group.
- Reverse the problem, adopting a victim position, claiming reverse discrimination, etc. (Agocs 1997; Johnson 2001).

One of the most common forms of backlash and resistance to gender equality efforts is the denial of privilege – the rejection of the claim that women are disadvantaged and men are privileged, or even the counter-claim that now it is men who are disadvantaged. Individuals may contest claims about gender inequality (Lombardo & Mergaert 2013). They may report feeling “tired” of diversity and inclusion initiatives (Bendick et al. 2001) or “sick of being blamed,” reflecting lack of awareness of their dominant group identities and privileges and the denial of inequality (Goodman 2001).

Claims of male victimisation and reverse discrimination also are common elements in resistance. Many men feel under threat from feminism and draw attention to what they see as forms of male disadvantage – to do with health, divorce and custody, and violence by women – as a defensive counter to this (Lingard 1998; Maddison 1999a; Maddison 1999b; Bacchi 2005; Meer 2013). Faced with feminist attention to sexist inequalities, some men (and women) exclaim, “What about the men?”, derailing and silencing conversations about misogyny and sexism (Bennett & Fox 2014).

Perhaps one of the most well-developed areas of anti-feminist backlash is centred on interpersonal violence. In the wake of four decades of feminist advocacy and scholarship on men’s violence against women and other forms of violence, resistance and backlash to this work also are well-established (Dragiewicz 2008; Flood 2010). Anti-feminists claim that women’s partner violence against men is just as common and serious as men’s against women, and there is some agreement with this in the wider community in Australia (VicHealth 2014). Men’s rights advocates thus endeavour to meet feminist claims with counter-claims, or try to delegitimise efforts to address men’s violence against women by characterising it as “male bashing” and “demonising men.”

Disavowal – the refusal to accept responsibility for dealing with the change process – overlaps with denial. Men may resist efforts to address gender inequality by maintaining that there is no problem because they have no conscious intent to oppress others, or they may acknowledge the problem but insist they are one of the “good guys” and have no need to change anything (Johnson 2001; Haddad & Lieberman 2002; Pease 2010; Adelabu 2014). Participants may adopt a cultural “othering” of the problems of gender inequality or violence against women, emphasising that it is other cultures and other people who have the problems (Lombardo & Mergaert 2013). Resistance therefore does not necessarily involve direct opposition or hostility to feminist

initiatives. In gender training for example, it may take the form of trivialising issues of gender inequality, for example through humour, lack of interest and non-participation (Lombardo & Mergaert 2013).

Organisations, too, may offer a series of excuses for inaction: “It is not my problem. I’m not responsible because I didn’t create it; it’s up to others to fix it,” “The issue will be dealt with when the disadvantaged groups change,” and “We can’t afford to deal with this issue at this time... There are other more pressing priorities” (Agocs 1997; Wiggins-Romesburg & Githens 2018). Refusing to implement changes that have been agreed to includes not allocating resources for the implementation of the change, not enforcing new policies, not setting standards or timeliness to monitor the change, co-opting the process by delegating the change to those who disagree with it and actively sabotaging the change process. Non-acting is described by Lombardo and Mergaert (2013) as an implicit form of institutional resistance, distinct from more explicit forms such as policy discourse and actions that are in opposition to the goal of promoting gender equality. Dismantling change processes that have already begun is an active form of repression and involves the shutting down of new policies (Agocs 1997).

While anti-feminist backlash has typical characteristics, there is also historical and cross-cultural diversity in the issues on which it focuses and the specific tactics it adopts, as we note further below.

3.3 | Resistance is both individual and collective, formal and informal

Resistance and backlash can be individual or collective. At the individual level, men in an organisation, for example, may voice opposition to or undermine gender equality initiatives. They may sit sullenly through a workshop, tear down a poster, criticise a programme coordinator behind her back or vote against a gender equality initiative at a board meeting. Resistance may be collective too, comprising collective efforts to challenge progress toward gender equality. This collective resistance may be formal (in the shape of anti-feminist “men’s rights” and “fathers’ rights” groups, petitions and legal action, and so on) (Flood 2004; Dragiewicz 2008; Flood 2010). It may be informal, as is the case when male friends or peers in a workplace or sporting club resist gender equality initiatives as a group or use online technologies to disrupt and “troll” gender equality forums or harass their advocates (Henry & Powell 2015; Vera-Gray 2017).

Backlash may be formal or informal at both the individual and collective levels. Resistance to gender equality initiatives has not had anywhere near the level of organisation visible for example in response to tobacco control, where the tobacco industry has adapted an array of formal strategies to resist control (Greenhalgh et al. 2018), but some similar strategies have been adopted by opponents of gender equality, including lobbying, media advocacy, rights groups and litigation.

Individual and institutional resistance are related and mutually constitutive. Institutional resistance intensifies and licences individual resistance. Individuals are more likely to resist particular initiatives when they perceive that their leaders and managers do not support the initiative (Chrobot-Mason et al. 2008). Individuals’ resistance to gender equality initiatives may reflect the sense that they have insufficient resources, time or knowledge, and thus may be less about their personal opposition to the work and more about lack of institutional support (Lombardo & Mergaert 2013).

Resistance can be directed at diverse targets, from the change message to the change agents (Agocs 1997). In gender training for example, individuals may challenge the credibility of messages about gender inequality, or they may question and defy the educators and trainers themselves (Lombardo & Mergaert 2013).

3.4 | Resistance comes more from men than women

Resistance to progressive social change is more likely to come from the people who are advantaged by the status quo. Men's resistance toward feminist efforts is well documented, for example, in defensiveness about and hostility toward efforts to address men's violence against women (Berkowitz 2004, Flood 2005–2006, Rich et al. 2010, Keller & Honea 2016). Men are less supportive of diversity programmes for minorities and more likely than women to respond with backlash (Kidder et al. 2004). However, women too resist progress toward gender equality, albeit less frequently than men. In addition, members of privileged groups may enlist members of disadvantaged groups to support their campaigns. For example, in electoral politics, high-income white men historically have used racist and anti-immigrant appeals to enlist poor white men in campaigns to reinforce structural inequality. Faced with emotive appeals to the threat from below, poor white men can be distracted from the inequitable distribution of resources that harms them the most (Inglehart & Norris 2016).

Men's greater likelihood than women's of engaging in backlash against gender equality is shaped by gendered attitudes. Men's attitudes toward gender are more conservative than women's, as both Australian and international studies show (Flood 2015). Men's recognition of sexism – their recognition of actions or situations as discriminatory toward women – is poorer than women's (Drury & Kaiser 2014). When men do notice sexist incidents, they are less likely than women to perceive them as discriminatory and potentially harmful for women (Becker & Swim 2011), and men are particularly unlikely to detect discrimination and recognise its severity when the sexism is more subtle (Drury & Kaiser 2014). Also, many men overestimate the extent to which their male peers agree with sexism (Fabiano et al. 2003; Stein 2007; Kilmartin et al. 2008; Hillenbrand-Gunn et al. 2010).

Privilege often is not visible to those who have it. A core aspect of the experience of dominance is the capacity to remain oblivious to the consequences of dominance (Davidson & Proudford 2008). Members of privileged groups thus often become angry and defensive when their privilege is challenged. People are more likely to be aware of their experience of oppression than conscious of their privilege. Thus, the reproduction of structural inequality does not require active intent on the part of the privileged (Pease 2010). Members of privileged groups become accustomed to the advantages that accrue to them, experiencing them as normal. As a result, they feel entitled to unearned advantages and experience loss of privilege as disempowerment or victimisation. Accordingly, members of privileged groups are often shocked and angry when their privilege is challenged (Pease 2010).

Women, as well as men, may resist and criticise gender equality initiatives (Steuter 1992). Women have led anti-suffrage campaigns (Marshall 1985; Thurner 1993), organised opposition to the U.S. Equal Rights Amendment (Frenier 1984; Marshall 1985) and taken part in contemporary forms of anti-feminism (Steuter 1992; McRobbie 2011; DeKeseredy et al. 2015). It is well documented that some young women offer widespread support for women's equality with men while, concurrently, rejecting the label "feminist" (Buschman & Lenart 1996; Negra & Tasker 2007). Analyses of women's anti-feminism find a number of reasons for their participation: ethical and moral concerns (Thurner 1993); opportunism (DeKeseredy et al. 2015); investment in class privilege and existing gender norms and family roles (Chafetz & Dworkin 1987); the belief that there is no more need for feminism because it has accomplished its goals (McRobbie 2011); and out of resignation (Dworkin 1983). Organisations seeking to promote gender equality should expect resistance from women as

well as men due to these varied interests and perceptions and the vilification of feminism in popular culture.

3.5 | Resistance is diverse

Backlash and resistance are diverse, contextual and historically specific. They are always situated within, and shaped by, the character and dynamics of gender and other features of the context – of the particular workplace, community, country and so on. For example, resistance to gender equality initiatives in one workplace or sporting club may differ from that in a different setting. In different contexts and periods, resistance is focused on different issues, has different dynamics and strategies and is triggered by different dimensions of social change (Ranchod-Nilsson 2008; Thomas 2008). Resistance to gender equality has both similarities to and differences from resistance in other areas of public health. Similarities include arguments about unnecessary intervention in “private” matters or civil liberties by a “nanny state,” community anxieties about gender and sexuality (as for HIV/AIDS) and consumer resistance to behaviour change, while there are differences in the extent to which resistance comes from powerful economic interests (Keleher 2017). Historically, anti-feminist backlash addresses key sites of patriarchal power such as electoral politics (Carlin & Winfrey 2009; Carroll 2009; Katz 2016), the family (Breines et al. 1978; Halperin-Kaddari & Freeman 2016), work (Burke 2005), violence against women (Girard 2009; Dragiewicz 2011), reproductive rights (Harrison & Rowley 2011) and schools (Mills 2003; Martino et al. 2009).

4 | THE ORIGINS OF BACKLASH AND RESISTANCE

Why do backlash and resistance to gender equality occur? While they have diverse roots and contexts, it is clear that backlash and resistance stem above all from defence of the privileges enjoyed by dominant groups. Anti-feminist backlash also is enabled by, or able to draw on, various popular ways of thinking about gender equality such as depoliticised notions of “sex roles,” men as victims and the idea that feminism is irrelevant because gender equality has been achieved.

4.1 | The defence of privilege

Men’s resistance toward gender equality is a predictable expression of their involvement in gender relations in general. Boys and men are socialised – in families, among peers, through media and so on – to adopt sexist understandings of gender and to take certain forms of privilege or entitlement for granted. Masculine social scripts inhibit men’s development of social justice attitudes and actions, because they encourage fear and hostility toward femininity and the suppression of empathy, nurturing and compassion (Davis & Wagner 2005). In short, men’s backlash and resistance are structured by the social construction of masculinity.

Among both men and women, opposition to gender equality initiatives is shaped by sexist norms – by the widespread acceptance of gender inequalities as biologically determined, inevitable or justified. Australian survey data for example show that significant proportions of men, and substantial but lower proportions of women, endorse gender-inequitable beliefs (VicHealth 2014), and this is likely then to inform discomfort with or hostility toward gender equality programmes.

Backlash and resistance are more likely among individuals who hold sexist norms, and in contexts characterised by sexism, gender segregation and male dominance.

More widely, any effort at change within an organisation or workplace will encounter resistance. Both individuals and organisations have inertia and habits, and any change threatens this. In the general phenomenon of “reactance,” the perception that a person is trying to change one’s attitude or manipulate oneself in some way leads to an attitude of resistance to the change advocated (Lombardo & Mergaert 2013). Social justice initiatives may bring fears of change, challenge belief systems and threaten people’s sense that they are good and caring and competent (Goodman 2001; Smirthwaite 2009). Resistance thus varies in the extent to which it is consciously ideological or explicitly political.

Backlash is, above all, a response by dominant groups who feel threatened by challenges to their privilege by disadvantaged groups (Watt 2007; Blais & Dupuis-Déri 2012). Men’s backlash to gender equality can be understood as “aggrieved entitlement” (Kimmel 2013; Vito et al. 2018). White men’s historic forms of entitlement are shifting, and they are increasingly forced to compete with women, racialised minority men and immigrants for jobs and resources to which they feel entitled. Because employment and breadwinner status are closely linked with traditional forms of masculinity (Adams & Coltrane 2005), thwarted entitlement threatens their core masculine identities, prompting feelings of humiliation and emasculation. In response, some seek to restore more traditional and patriarchal forms of manhood. While these men may not feel powerful as individuals, “they feel entitled to feel powerful” (Kimmel 2013).

Another way of understanding this is in terms of “masculine overcompensation.” Emerging research on social processes to do with masculinity finds that when men feel that masculinity has been threatened, whether at a personal level or a social level, some react with *overcompensation*. Faced with masculinity challenge, some men try to reclaim their masculine status or reassert masculinity by *overcompensation* (Pfeffer et al. 2016). They over-conform, demonstrating an exaggerated and stereotyped version of masculinity. Various experiments have found that if men feel that (their) masculinity has been threatened or denied, some then are more likely to express homophobia, support war efforts, express stronger dominance attitudes, blame rape victims and exonerate perpetrators (Munsch & Willer 2012), engage in harassment (Pfeffer et al. 2016), oppose transgender rights (Harrison & Michelson 2019) and support a masculine president (Carian & Sobotka 2018).

Performances of gender among men that sustain gender inequalities may take subtle forms. Recent scholarship documents the existence of “hybrid” masculinities among men that involve an apparent softening of or distancing from patriarchal masculinities and yet continue to sustain gendered privilege. Some young men with various forms of social privilege (often white, heterosexual, middle-class) distance themselves from “outdated” masculinities subject to feminist critique, and borrow strategically from the styles and identities associated with marginalised and subordinated masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe 2014). Studies in Australia, Iceland, the UK and the USA document that men may emphasise progressive attitudes and identities while also enacting traditionally masculine behaviours and attitudes (Arxer 2011; Matthews 2016; Schmitz & Haltom 2017; Jóhannsdóttir & Gíslason 2018; Elliott 2019; Eisen & Yamashita 2019). Such “hybrid” performances of gender, involving both distancing from and recuperation of hegemonic masculinity, do little to fundamentally alter masculine dominance and may indeed conceal systems of power and inequality (Bridges & Pascoe 2014).

Given that backlash represents the defence of privilege, it may intensify with progress toward gender equality. For example, there is evidence that increases in gender equality can prompt increases in men’s use of violence against women, as men threatened by women’s empowerment

use violence to reassert their dominance and control (Whaley 2001). As women begin to gain autonomy and status in relationships or at the community or societal levels, violence against them may initially increase, but is likely over time to reverse and decrease overall (Whaley et al. 2011).

4.2 | Discourses of “sex roles” and “equality”

Opposition to gender equality efforts has been enabled by some common but limited ways of framing gender and feminism. For example, anti-feminist claims that men are in fact disadvantaged relative to women were facilitated by early liberal feminist accounts of “sex roles.” When the second wave of feminism began in the 1960s, it comprised differing strands of feminism often described as liberal, socialist and radical, with liberal feminism emphasising the limitations of traditional “sex roles” for women. Advocates of “men’s liberation” argued that just as the female sex role constrained women, so too the male sex role constrained men, especially in the areas of health, emotional lives and relationships (Pleck & Sawyer 1974; Farrell 1974; Nichols 1975). These early accounts of “sex roles” lacked attention to wider patriarchal inequalities, and it is no coincidence that some men’s liberationists later became men’s rights advocates (e.g. Farrell 1993). Men’s rights advocates appropriated sex role theory to argue that men were more oppressed than women in relation to domestic violence, divorce, rape allegations, media representations and so on. On the other hand, more feminist accounts of men’s lives in Critical Masculinity Studies rejected the language and theories of sex roles (Connell 1987; Clatterbaugh 1990; Messner 1997).

Anti-feminist men’s and fathers’ rights advocates also have sought to use the language of “rights” and “equality” to push back against feminist gains (Kaye & Tolmie 1998a; Kaye & Tolmie 1998b; Flood 2010; Blais & Dupuis-Déri 2011). In family law, for example, men’s rights advocates have used a limited and formal notion of equality that is premised upon treating everyone the same (Dragiewicz 2011), within a context that draws upon standards that are based on the experiences of men. While many men’s rights advocates are vehemently critical of all forms of feminism, some more “moderate” forms of men’s rights advocates claim support for what they call “equity feminism” (Hoff Sommers 1994). Proponents of backlash have thus at times appropriated liberal notions of equality to advance their claims (Dragiewicz 2008).

4.3 | Males as in crisis, victims or hurt

Resistance to efforts to challenge male dominance has been informed and enabled by popular notions that boys or men are “in crisis.” The notion that males are in crisis (because of changes to work, education and family) is visible in popular media commentary, on anti-feminist men’s Websites (Schmitz & Kazyak 2016) and in backlash responses in particular areas such as boys’ education (Lingard 1998). In such accounts, now boys or men are framed as the “new disadvantaged” and masculinity is under siege as a result of feminist reforms. One version of anti-feminist backlash here involves essentialist appeals to men’s intrinsic natures or biology, drawing on evolutionary psychology theories (Blais & Dupuis-Déri 2012).

In recent years, the discourse of men’s needs has sometimes replaced the discourse of men’s rights as a more nuanced form of backlash. Injured masculinity and vulnerable men with unmet needs are framed as a men’s health problem that needs to be addressed. Thus, men’s health promotion has been appropriated to articulate men’s suffering (Salter 2016).

4.4 | The notion of “post-feminism”

A series of interrelated social changes in Western societies have intensified the possibilities for backlash responses, including shifts in the character of feminist advocacy, the emergence of a post-feminist sensibility and the rise of neoliberalism (Messner 2016). Despite the entry of feminists into the policymaking machinery of government, significant feminist organising on social media and the cultural popularity of some forms of feminism, 21st-century feminist organising at least in some countries has had a weaker organisational base and a less coherent policy agenda (Goss 2020). In addition, as feminism has been institutionalised and professionalised in some domains, its critical and change-making edge has been dulled (Hall & Rodriguez 2003; Negra & Tasker 2007; Gill & Scharff 2013). While a weakening of feminism should in one sense produce a decline in backlash, given that the threat to patriarchal privilege has lessened, it also creates opportunities for new discourses and tactics of backlash.

The decline in feminist collective advocacy has been paralleled by an increasing sense among men and women that feminism is no longer needed. In “post-feminist” discourse, women have attained equal rights with men, gender inequality and women’s oppression is in the past, and consequently, feminist activism is no longer required (Anderson 2014; Messner 2016). Overlapping with this, the rise of neoliberalism has promoted a pervasive emphasis on individual rights and the primacy of the economic market, further weakening the ability of feminists and others to call attention to structural inequalities and to social solutions for them (Cornwall et al. 2008; Oksala 2013; Rottenberg 2014).

4.5 | Ineffective teaching and learning

The likelihood of resistance to efforts to promote gender equality also is shaped by more specific features of these efforts and the contexts in which they take place. Resistance to teaching about gender equality has been most well documented in diversity training at workplaces, and in teaching on gender, race, sexuality and other axes of social inequality in university classrooms (Chrobot-Mason et al. 2008; Thomas & Plaut 2008). The degree of resistance to training on sexism and gender or other issues is shaped by the way the training is framed, the training’s content and process, the wider organisational context, and participants’ previous experiences and social locations. Diversity training is more likely to generate resistance when, for example:

- the training is seen as remedial or punitive;
- the participants have high levels of fear or anxiety about, or hostility toward the training and its consequences, including concerns about loss of a privileged status quo, fears about saying or doing the wrong thing, denial of the need for change and perceptions of threat related to social identity;
- the participants expect negative outcomes, such as embarrassment, anxiety, conflict or undesired changes in work behaviour;
- the training conditions involve passive instruction, large groups, unclear tasks or agenda, and inadequate facilitation;
- the organisational or corporate culture is unsupportive, with only weak connections between the training and organisational goals and objectives (Chrobot-Mason et al. 2008).

However, even the most well-designed and supported education and training on gender will provoke resistance among some participants and organisations, precisely because of its challenge to gendered norms, identities, practices and relations (Lombardo & Mergaert 2013).

5 | CONCLUSION

Whenever there are efforts to make progress toward gender justice, there is resistance: individual and collective, formal and informal. Knowing resistance's typical forms, dynamics and origins is valuable. It enables feminist advocates and organisations to be prepared for backlash and to have strategies in place for responding to or preventing its expression. At the same time, the goal is not necessarily the entire absence of resistance: if there is no discomfort among participants in gender training, no disquiet in an organisation undergoing change toward gender equality, this may suggest that no substantive change is being made. Backlash and resistance are the predictable expression of the defence of established and unjust patterns of gender, and understanding them strengthens efforts to dismantle systemic gender inequalities.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The report on which this article was based was commissioned by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) in Melbourne, Australia.

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How to cite this article: Flood M, Dragiewicz M, Pease B. Resistance and backlash to gender equality. *Aust J Soc Issues* 2021;56:393–408. doi: 10.1002/ajs4.137.