



“Responding to the New Backlash in Challenging Patriarchy”
Satellite Session for the MenEngage Global Symposium 2014
 Organized by **Akshara, Mumbai and Jagori, New Delhi**
 10 November, 2014
 Maple Room, Habitat Centre, New Delhi

During the introduction to the session, **Dr. Nandita Gandhi, (Co-Director, Akshara)** noted, *“How can you have a movement without resistance? If you are not challenging something, you are not going to see any friction.”* And that with the advent of globalization and the associated changes in social, economic and political contexts, new forms of backlash or resistance to positive change have come to the forefront, negatively impacting our work on gender equality and in challenging patriarchy.

For the women’s movement, there has always been a sense of “one step forward, two steps backwards.” Whenever small achievements are made, they are often accompanied by a reconfiguration of patriarchal forces, which sometimes result in an up front ‘backlash.’ It is thus necessary to explore the different forms of this resulting backlash in our countries, and the ways in which it is damaging to secular, progressive movements.



As such, the session convened an expert panel to consider the many ways that such backlash or resistance is understood to manifest itself across the globe, and furthermore, to visualize strategies for addressing it.

Sanjay Srivastava (Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India) suggested that what we may not necessarily wish to call what we are witnessing a “backlash,” but rather a “reinvention or resurfacing of different ideas”; the idea of the politics of tradition and heritage are resurfacing and manifesting themselves as a backlash. For instance, within the Indian context, the site of judiciary is increasingly referring to terms of “traditions,” and “notions of modesty” which in turn employs such values and norms in respect of judgments. The language of tradition is also reshaping ways by which traditions are defended in the context of growing urbanization. A 24 hour media presence presents particular views on what constitutes the ideal family and appropriate



gender roles. He added that newer men's groups have surfaced in defense of traditions and in contestation to women's notions of freedoms and autonomy.

Gloria Careaga (Professor, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico) affirmed that there is indeed resistance to change, and the neo-liberal framework has resulted in new forces reorganizing. In Latin America, the feminist proposal has not reached most women, and she noted that the current women's movement framework is that of urban educated women and men - a narrow segment of the population - thereby excluding sexual, trans-identities, indigenous women and others. She talked about the new geo-political perspective that needs to consider issues of organized crime, the emerging markets, religion, and urged participants to see the limits that we have on our own work; she highlighted the need for new forces to come together on broader perspectives, questions and new ideas, and take along different sectors of women and men along.

Other speakers suggested a much more tangible rendition of "backlash." **Michael Kimmel (Distinguished Professor, Stony Brook University, USA)** stated that although the backlash is *"annoying, it is not lethal for many"*; and that *"it is a reminder of how much progress has been made, although there is a long way to go."* As he described, much of this backlash takes place largely anonymously and online. He referred to the social media campaign on "Why I Am Not a Feminist," and messages that go to the younger generation of students, which state that "you do not need feminism anymore, as we have won." However, many youth come back experiencing discrimination at the workplace later. He also talked about how women are portrayed in the cyberspace through the video-games and that 30% players are women.

Jean Kemitare (Program Manager, Raising Voices, Uganda) described the very real backlash which is taking place in Ugandan society, particularly within the legal system. Recent progressive laws, including a Marriage and Divorce bill, were tabled after seeing fierce resistance from politicians, media and other communities. Additionally, an anti-pornography law- of a type not seen in the country since the 1970's- has given people on the street powers to act on women that are deemed to have "indecent clothing." She also raised the issues of religious fundamentalism and the notions of preserving *"our traditions."* The media too has been part of the backlash with anti-modern women sentiments. She talked about the unpoliticised civil society and positions against the gay community.



Lori Heise (Senior Lecturer, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, UK) warned against the overall "NGO-ization" of the women's movement. As the organizations which comprise the movement become increasingly technocratic, skills and political analysis become increasingly dampened. Within the context of Meso and Latin America, she also noted that there is an increasing rise of violent culture, and many of

those who are being targeted are conducting women's work. She highlighted the issues of increasing brutal femicides and impunity. Some of the violence they face is not necessary "backlash" - but some is specific punishment or retaliation against the claims women are making, and the spaces which they are trying to claim in the political sphere.

Suneeta Dhar, (Director, Jagori)

added that she saw familiar patterns to the backlash as well in this country – as women push back on the socio-cultural boundaries to assert their autonomy and agency. That the backlash is resulting in a process of reversals, led by fundamentalist and misogynist groups, in some areas where women's groups have made substantial legal gains, such as with regard to the Domestic Violence Act.



In the second half of the session, **Dr. Nandita Gandhi** asked the panelists to provide their perspectives on strategies that can be adopted to address these various forms of backlash.

Sanjay Srivastava and **Jean Kemitare** stressed the importance of a politicized NGO sector. As Srivastava stated, *"hope lies in a substantially politicized NGO sector."* He added that a counter-narrative is happening in some sectors, and there is need to break down the barriers between theory and practice, and move away from the mono-lithic gender identities being imposed by the nation-state and to talk about transgender and other sexual identities.

Additionally, Kemitare described the importance of collaboration between women's groups and men's groups, as well as between researchers and activists. The latter was a point shared by **Michael Kimmel**, who posed the question, *"How do I respond to backlash as an activist and as a professor and researcher? Researchers can ask activists who are facing this backlash, what do the activists need to know so that they can confront backlash better?"*

Gloria Careaga suggested the need for a new approach to violence and sexuality, asking *"why are we so focused on violence and not on sexuality?"* She also suggested the importance of recognizing that the change towards gender equity is a particularly painful process for both men and women, and that we must identify how people are dealing with these pains. She challenged the categorization of sexual and reproductive rights and the need to change terminology.

Following on Careaga's observation, **Lori Heise** noted that there are deep anxieties surrounding men's loss of power as the breakdown of the "patriarchal bargain" continues. In the context of Mesoamerica, an innovative and prevailing response by JASS has

been to form networks of women and human rights defenders, thereby creating a common identity and aligning a number of separate movements. She also emphasized the need for self care and address burn-out issues of HR defenders.

Session participants also had the opportunity to engage directly with the expert panel, and to propose important questions during the **Open Forum** moderated by **Suneeta Dhar**. A number of participants sought to address the role of capitalist economics in challenging patriarchy. That there are different forms of caste, race and religious hierarchies and mass movements are the answer and that inter-sectionalities are crucial in building a new world.

Jean Kemitare responded, “...*If we are working in a broader framework of justice, we also have to look at economic justice. Repressing other people’s rights plays into the system of poverty.*” A question was also raised about how to best allocate resources to engaging men and boys, particularly when doing so detracts funding from other women’s rights work and women’s organizing.

Lori Heise suggested, “*The easiest way we should think about it- how can we develop together with women’s groups and their allies - a statement for donors that sets out a series of expectations. If you are funding in this field and these are your goals - we need a set of principles that we craft together - to start a trickle down.*”



Participants, panelists, and organizers left the satellite session both with a more nuanced understanding of the forms of backlash which are prevailing across the globe, as well as potential new ideas for challenging its deleterious effects. The conversations raised in the session continued on throughout the duration of the MenEngage 2nd Global Symposium, and must also continue on within our communities.

Speakers:

Gloria Careaga (*Professor, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico*)

Lori Heise (*Senior Lecturer, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, UK*)

Jean Kemitare (*Program Manager, Raising Voices, Uganda*)

Dr. Michael Kimmel (*Distinguished Professor, Stony Brook University, USA*)

Dr. Sanjay Srivastava (*Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India*).

Moderated by: Dr. Nandita Gandhi (Co-Director, Akshara) and Suneeta Dhar (Director, Jagori)

Credits:

Minutes by **Dustin Smith** and photos: **Josefina Oraa and Adil Ali Jagori and Akshara teams for support**