Managing backlash and resistance

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Backlash & resistance: definitions

- Backlash / resistance: any form of resistance towards progressive social change
- With regard to gender, backlash / resistance maintains or reinforces gender inequalities
  - It is a subset of the many practices and processes which sustain gender inequality

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Characteristics of backlash

- An inevitable response to progressive social change
  - A sign of progress?
- Diverse, contextual, and historically specific
- Both individual and collective
- Both formal or informal
- More likely to come from the people who are advantaged by the status quo
  - Resistance to gender equality is more common by men than women

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Forms of backlash

- **Denial**: Denial of the problem or the legitimacy of the case for change
- **Disavowal**: Refusal to recognise responsibility
- **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) for reactionary ends
- **Repression**: Reversing or dismantling a change initiative
A continuum, from resistance to support
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Derailment BINGO</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>If You Won't Educate Me How Can I Learn</strong></td>
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<td><strong>If you weren't so hostile, people would listen to you</strong></td>
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<td><strong>You're Arguing With Opinions Not Fact</strong></td>
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<td><strong>You're Interrogating From The Wrong Perspective</strong></td>
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<td><strong>I Know Another Person From Your Group Who Disagrees</strong></td>
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<td><strong>You Are Damaging Your Cause By Being So Aggressive</strong></td>
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<td><strong>If You Really Cared About This You'd Teach Me</strong></td>
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<td><strong>But That Happens To Me Too</strong></td>
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<td><strong>I Was On Your Side But Your Anger Changed That</strong></td>
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<td><strong>I Don't find This Offensive</strong></td>
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<td><strong>You're Overly Sensitive</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Your Experience Is Not Representative Of Everyone</strong></td>
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<td><strong>You Are As Bad As We Are</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Stereotypes Exist 'Cause There Is Truth In Them</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Don't You Have More Important Issues To Think About</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Can You Prove Your Experience Is Widespread</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>You're As Bad As We Are</strong></td>
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<td><strong>You're Seeing Problems Where None Exist</strong></td>
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<td><strong>You Probably Just Misunderstood</strong></td>
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<td><strong>I Haven't Had It Easy Either, You Know</strong></td>
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<td><strong>You're Taking Things Too Personally</strong></td>
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<td><strong>I Don't Think You're As Marginalised As You Claim</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>But You're Not Like The Others In Your Group</strong></td>
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<td><strong>You're Too Emotional</strong></td>
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Denial (a common form of resistance)

• Deny that the problem exists; minimise its extent, significance, or 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
• Attack the credibility of the messengers of change
• Reverse the problem, adopting a victim position, claiming reverse discrimination, etc.

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Sources of backlash and resistance

- Fear of change. Inertia
- Sexist and violence-supportive attitudes. Socialised sexism
  - Particularly among men, but also women
  - Men’s recognition of sexism is poorer than women’s
- The defence of privilege
  - Men’s aggrieved entitlement
- The denial of privilege
- Wider trends:
  - Simplistic notions of ‘equality’
  - ‘Post-feminism’
  - Neoliberalism (an emphasis on individual rights and market solutions)
Aggrieved entitlement

“A GGRIEVED ENTITLEMENT”

A sense that those benefits that white men believed were their due have been snatched away
Responding to, and preventing, resistance

- *Framing strategies*: How to articulate, represent, or frame the initiative
- *Teaching and learning strategies*: How to teach about the initiative and engage people in coming to understand and support it
- *Organisational / institutional strategies*: How to involve individuals, institutions, and organisational policies, processes, and structures in the initiative
Exercise: Responding to resistance

How would you respond to statements like these?

1. Sure, violence against women is a problem, but what’s it got to do with me?
2. What about women’s violence against men?
3. This is just male-bashing.
Framing strategies

• Frame violence prevention within a robust feminist framework. Recognise that:
  • Gender is personal, interpersonal, and structural;
  • Gender is embedded in wider structures, institutions, and social arrangements;
  • Gender involves unequal relations of power and a pervasive pattern of male dominance;
  • Gender intersects with other forms of social difference and inequality.

• Agenda: reduce gender inequalities and build gender justice

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Framing strategies *cont’d*

• Articulate the rationale and benefits  
  • Draw on shared principles and goals, both organisational and personal  
• Anticipate and answer common resistant reactions  
• Emphasise that men will benefit  
  • Gender equality is ‘win-win’.  
  • Although men will lose unfair privileges.  
• Address claims about male disadvantage

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E.g., regarding gender and violence

• Acknowledge that, yes, men are routinely the victims of violence, and their perpetrators overwhelmingly are other men;

• Provide accessible critiques of inaccurate claims about female perpetration and male victimisation, including;
  • Accounts of the data on actual gender asymmetries in domestic or intimate partner violence, and
  • Critiques of the conceptual assumptions and methods in literature used to claim gender symmetry
Gender and DV: Key points

• The problem of domestic / family / intimate partner violence is largely a problem of violence by men, against women and children.

• Comparing men’s violence against female partners & ex-partners and women’s violence against male partners & ex-partners, men’s violence:
  • Is far more common
  • Has much worse impacts
  • Is far less likely to be in self-defence

• If we only ‘count violent acts’, males look like 1 in 3 or 4 of victims. But as soon as we look at impact, meaning, context, & history, we find profound gender contrasts.

Framing strategies *cont’d*

• Develop responses to other resistant understandings, e.g.
  • ‘Not all men’
  • ‘Why focus on violence against women rather than addressing all violence?’

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Critique anti-feminist backlash

1. Offer alternative analyses of the issues on which they focus
   - Speak to men’s pain.
   - Men’s rights and fathers’ rights advocates misdiagnose men’s pain and thus misprescribe the cure
   - Examples: violence against men, men’s health, suicide, etc.

2. Critique and discredit the backlash
   - It is a hostile and misogynist reassertion of patriarchal power
   - It offers a profoundly inaccurate account of gender
   - Its strategies and solutions are both dangerous for women and children and limiting for men themselves.
Critique anti-feminist backlash *cont’d*

3. Show that the backlash is harmful for men themselves
   - Men’s rights and fathers’ rights groups:
     - Neglect the forms of disadvantage or pain which men actually experience;
     - Blame the wrong target (women and feminism, not unhealthy and destructive models of manhood);
     - Do not generate appropriate services for men and antagonise potential supporters;
     - Taint as backlash the need to address genuine aspects of men’s experience.
Teaching and learning strategies

• Provide people with a balance of challenge and support:
  • Challenges to privilege
  • Support to foster personal and collective readiness to make change

• Create safe, respectful, and supportive environments for learning:
  • Clear structure and expectations; honest conversations; affirm people’s self-concepts; ensure that participants feel heard and respected; provide opportunities for frequent feedback; etc.
Teaching and learning strategies *cont’d*

- Teaching strategies: participatory, interactive
- Social justice pedagogies:
  - Use personal stories of privilege and oppression;
  - Role playing and simulations;
  - Real life situations and contexts;
  - Men listening to women and women’s experience;
  - Gather data;
  - Foster empathy;
  - Appeal to moral, ethical, or spiritual values
- Educators: skilled, compassionate, respectful
Organisational strategies

• Organisational support is critical in reducing and preventing resistance.
  • Resistance is more likely when there is little institutional support.
  • So...

• Secure support from key stakeholders in positions of power
• Address efforts specifically to those individuals and groups who are most likely to be resistant
• Form strategic partnerships and allies

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Conclusion

• There are effective ways to respond to, and indeed prevent, backlash and resistance.

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Online resources

- Engaging men in violence prevention: http://www.xyonline.net/content/violence-walking-four-some-xy%E2%80%99s-content

- Engaging men in building gender equality: https://xyonline.net/category/article-content/working-boys-and-men

- Articles, manuals, & other resources on violence against women: http://www.xyonline.net/category/article-content/violence

- Critiques of men’s rights and fathers’ rights: http://www.xyonline.net/category/article-content/mens-fathers-rights

- References on engaging men in violence prevention: http://www.xyonline.net/content/t-men's-anti-violence-education-and-activism

- References on engaging men in building gender equality: https://xyonline.net/books/bibliography/bibliography-26