

Un/knowing and un/doing sexuality and gender diversity: The global anti-gender movement against SOGIE rights and academic freedom

THE REPORT

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1. MORE THAN A 'BACKLASH'

Anti-gender movements are taking shape internationally, fuelling moral panic about growing LGBTIQ+ rights and visibility, comprehensive sex education in schools, and declining marriage and fertility rates. It is important to recognize that their actions do not merely constitute a 'backlash' against SOGIE rights. Rather, anti-gender efforts to defeat LGBTIQ+ and feminist advocacy involve complex transnational networks, international gatherings, well-resourced conservative think-tanks and research centers. While here the movement is referred to as 'anti-gender', activists and organizations who oppose SOGIE rights and Gender Studies typically refer to themselves in positive terms – as 'pro-family' or 'pro-life', or as protectors of the 'family values' which they claim are the foundation of all societies and "civilization".

2. ATTACKS ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Anti-gender activists claim that "gender theory" and "gender ideology" are anarchical forms of knowledge that create gender "confusion", disrupting so-called "traditional" values and contaminating the nation. It is based on this argument that anti-gender movements have been threatening gender researchers, programmes and institutions. These movements have been influential in many countries, impacting both tertiary and basic education systems. In Hungary, for instance, the government recently stripped Gender Studies of its national accreditation and funding. In Brazil, President Bolsonaro has promised to "combat gender ideology", and to "rescue our values" in his inaugural address. These attacks present a serious threat to the academic freedom of scholars and centres producing research and teaching about issues of gender and sexuality diversity and SOGIE rights.



3. THE COLONIAL ORIGINS OF ANTI-GENDER IDEOLOGY

In many countries, anti-gender campaigns claim that "gender", "gender ideology", and "gender theory" are forms of colonization in an effort to create suspicion and doubt about the legitimacy of LGBTIQ+ people and rights. However, as several anti-imperialist and decolonial scholars have shown, the notions of the gender binary and nuclear family supremacy were ideological mechanisms of colonial domination that informed the destruction of indigenous knowledge systems of gender, sexuality and family, and the simultaneous imposition of the gender binary and hierarchy as a strategy of establishing European dominance and authority. Their research has also shown that forms and expressions of gender and sexuality diversity were common in pre-colonial societies around the world, and it was only through colonial occupation that taboos, stigmas, and restrictions on homosexuality came to be entrenched in these societies.

4. FAR REACHING IMPLICATIONS

Anti-gender advocacy is not limited to SOGIE rights and Gender Studies. Rather, their campaigns are interconnected with issues of the economy, immigration, the environment, indigenous rights, land rights, and militarization that also shape national and geo-political power relations. As right-wing interests come together through anti-gender campaigning, they are consolidating a political base that is eager to thwart the equal rights of other historically oppressed minority groups on the basis of their race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, class, disability, and age. In their efforts to attack the academic freedom of Gender Studies scholars and educators, the anti-gender movements are showing that it is not only working to oppose equal rights, but to suppress forms of knowledge that are critical of power, dominance, and oppression.

MAIN POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Academic freedom policies need to be updated to reflect the contemporary role of the university within civil society, and should consider including protections for academics who pursue intellectual projects that address oppressive social dynamics.
2. Further research and investigation into the anti-gender movement is needed. Scholarly research into anti-gender campaigns can provide information helpful to academics and policy makers who are encountering anti-gender advocacy in their contexts.
3. Further research substantiating the argument that the gender binary and nuclear family were products of colonial ideology is important. This scholarship can contribute to the debunking of anti-gender claims that the gender binary, heterosexuality and nuclear family structure are 'natural', 'common-sense', or 'universal'.
4. SOGIE activists, organizations and other civil society groups need to be made aware of anti-gender political discourse and strategy. Greater awareness of the anti-gender movement will push forward the development of new strategies amongst LGBTIQ+ communities about the most effective ways of responding to attacks on SOGIE rights.
5. Scholars and civil society organizations should collaborate on campaigns to raise public awareness of the implications of anti-gender activism, not only for LGBTIQ+ communities, but for equal rights of women, racial and ethnic minorities, civil society, indigenous groups, and migrants.
6. There is a need for scholars conducting research on anti-gender movements to meet one another and to share knowledge and insights that can promote the advancement of theory and policy addressing anti-gender ideology and campaigns.
7. Conversations about academic freedom need to be reinvigorated in order to raise awareness in higher education about the ways in which academic freedom cannot be taken for granted. This could be achieved through dialogues and campaigns.

In Poland, right wing populist activists have characterised "gender" as "Ebola from Brussels" as a way of creating fear about the EU as "a coloniser and source of contagion, as it spreads the "virus of genderism," aiming to destroy the healthy body of the Polish nation (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018, p. 811).

In South Africa, despite formal constitutional protections, LGBTIQ+ students continue to experience disturbing levels of abuse against in both basic and tertiary education systems (OUT LGBT Well-Being, 2016).

In Brazil, President Bolsonaro's attacks on SOGIE rights and Gender Studies in the classroom have been paralleled by an increase in violent attacks on LGBTIQ+ people, with reports indicating that the death toll for the LGBTIQ+ population in the country has more than tripled in recent years (Telesur 2019).

In announcing the decision to dismantle Gender Studies programmes in Hungary, the Deputy Prime Minister, Zsolt Semjen, said that Gender Studies "has no business in universities" because it is "an ideology, not a science" (Oppenheim 2018).



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The full report can be accessed here saih.no/vart-arbeid/rapporter



National Union of Students in Norway