



**MenEngage Alliance**  
working with men and boys for gender equality

## **RESISTING BACKLASH:** Ways forward for MenEngage Alliance



## Acknowledgements

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# 1 Purpose and process

In its summary report on discussions at the 3rd MenEngage Global Symposium (the Ubuntu Symposium) during 2020-2021 on Backlash and Fundamentalism, MenEngage noted that:

***All around the world, there has been an intensification of anti-gender rhetoric, a regression in women's reproductive rights, and a shrinking of civil society space, all underpinned by a rise in authoritarian populism and fundamentalist movements both online and offline.***<sup>1</sup>

Identifying ways that the MenEngage Alliance can respond more effectively to these developments is an urgent priority, for MenEngage is the only global network of organisations “with a shared mission to end patriarchal power by working with men and boys and challenging harmful and rigid notions of masculinity, for gender and social justice.”<sup>2</sup> Given that the developments noted above mark an intensification and reassertion of patriarchal power, there is a continuing conversation across the Alliance about how MenEngage should respond.

In its forthcoming programme for 2025-2028, the MenEngage Alliance will prioritise support to its members' work in countering what is often termed “patriarchal backlash”. Over the next four year period, the Alliance will focus on developing a collective strategy on countering backlash and strengthening collective capabilities for effective mobilisation of men and boys through stronger processes and structures within the Alliance at all levels. In order to inform the development of this strategy, a consultative process with MenEngage Regional Networks and Board members was undertaken in late 2023 and 2024. This report summarizes the outcomes of this consultative process. Taking the

form of a 90-120 minute online focus group discussion, each consultation explored with participants the following three sets of issues:

The concerns they have about the different forms of patriarchal backlash that they encounter in their work and their impacts on feminist and LGBTQI+ movements;

Their responses to patriarchal backlash on which they want to build and how they want to improve their work and the work of MenEngage as a whole; and

The different kinds of needs (technical, organisational, financial, emotional) that must be met for MenEngage to be effective in countering patriarchal backlash.

This report summarizes the findings from seven consultations that were held with:

- MenEngage Alliance Board members
- MenEngage Europe (MEE)
- MenEngage Latin America
- MenEngage South Asia (MEASA)
- MenEngage Africa
- North American MenEngage Network, (NAMEN)
- Caribbean Male Action Network (CariMAN)

<sup>1</sup> <https://menengage.org/resources/backlash-and-fundamentalism-a-discussion-paper-of-the-ubuntu-symposium/> p7

<sup>2</sup> <https://menengage.org/about/core-principles/>

## 2 Background

In its summary report on discussions at the Ubuntu Symposium on Backlash and Fundamentalism, MenEngage observed that “patriarchal backlash is a new form of opposition to gender rights that has become more dynamic over the past few years.”<sup>3</sup> Events since then only confirm this, highlighting the many different forms that such opposition takes<sup>4</sup>:

**April 2021:** A global study of 850 women journalists by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) finds that nearly three in four respondents (73%) have experienced online violence, with threats of physical (25%) and sexual violence (18%) affecting significant numbers of the women journalists surveyed.<sup>5</sup>

**June 2022:** The United States Supreme Court overturns *Roe v. Wade*, which had guaranteed the constitutional right to abortion for almost 50 years.

**September 2022:** In a national referendum, Chile votes 62% to 38% to reject the text of a New Constitution proposed by the Constitutional Convention, which would have legalized abortion, required gender parity in government offices and established autonomous Indigenous territories. The success of the “No” campaign is widely attributed to online scare campaigns, linked to conservative and far-right groups, about unrestricted abortions and indigenous people gaining more rights than the rest of the nation, neither of which were accurate descriptions of the proposed reforms.

**December 2022:** The Indonesian Parliament passes a new criminal code containing provisions that, according to Human Rights Watch, “violate the rights of women, religious minorities, and

lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, and undermine rights to freedom of speech and association.”<sup>6</sup>

**January 2023:** In China, the revised Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests includes new regulations aimed at protecting women in the workplace, particularly against sexual harassment. But it also contains a provision that promotes the notion of “respecting family values” for women, and official discourse explicitly links support for family values to upholding women’s domestic roles within the family.

**March 2023:** The Ugandan Parliament passes the Anti-Homosexuality Act, criminalizing consensual same-sex conduct with penalties of up to life imprisonment, attempted homosexual acts with penalties of 10 years in prison, and the death penalty for those convicted of “aggravated homosexuality,” which includes repeated same sex acts and intercourse with a person younger than 18, older than 75, or a person with a disability.

**November 2023:** At the official signing ceremony in Samoa, 35 countries from Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific (ACP) refuse to sign the new partnership agreement between the European Union and 79 ACP countries, objecting to text on rights to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education as well as rights concerning sexual orientation and gender identity. Only after explicit language on these issues was removed, and replaced with a less specific commitment to implement existing international agreements, was a compromise reached to secure this legal framework affecting the lives of some two billion people.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <https://menengage.org/resources/backlash-and-fundamentalism-a-discussion-paper-of-the-ubuntu-symposium/> p6

<sup>4</sup> This list is indicative not comprehensive.

<sup>5</sup> Posetti, J. and N. Shabbir (2022). *The Chilling: A global study of online violence against women journalists*. Washington, DC: International Center for Journalists and UNESCO. <https://www.icfj.org/our-work/chilling-global-study-online-violence-against-women-journalists>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/08/indonesia-new-criminal-code-disastrous-rights>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/africa/news/holdouts-cast-shadow-over-new-eu-pact-with-african-caribbean-and-pacific-states/>

**November 2023:** A global study by the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation of the experiences of 458 women's rights and queer rights activists from 67 countries finds that three in four respondents have been threatened or harassed as a result of their activism, a 15 percentage-point increase from the same survey two years ago.<sup>8</sup> Almost 25 percent of activists have received death threats, and 58 percent of respondents state that governments are the main actors behind the threats they face; in some regions, the figure is 80 percent.

**November 2023:** Russia's Supreme Court rules that the "international LGBT movement" is an "extremist organisation," jeopardizing all forms of LGBTQI+ rights activism in the country.

**February 2024:** Protego, a project of the Institute of Women's Health, is formally launched in Uganda as a capacity-building initiative to support governments in operationalizing the anti-abortion Geneva Consensus Declaration (GCD)<sup>9</sup>. Only 51 countries currently allow abortion with no requirement for justification, despite the fact that comprehensive abortion care is included in the list of essential health care services published by WHO in 2020.<sup>10</sup>

**March 2024:** At the CSW 68th session, there is concerted pushback against gender-expansive language, with several Member States challenging long-established language on gender in the text, including "gender-based violence", and demonstrating little flexibility on issues related to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Despite the pushback, references to "gender-based violence" and "sexual and reproductive health" are eventually retained in the text. However, the Women's Rights Caucus (WRC) notes with concern "the presence of anti-rights actors, organising parallel events and

mobilizations at the CSW and lobbying missions to roll back on SRHR and rights of LGBTQI people."<sup>11</sup>

**May 2024:** In its flagship Laws on Us report, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association (ILGA) notes that the law is increasingly being used to suppress speech in relation to LGBTQI+ rights and issues; Jordan, Kyrgyzstan and Uganda have formally implemented legal provisions targeting the so-called "promotion" of "homosexuality". Belarus has begun to classify content related to sexual and gender diversity as "pornography". In addition, one-third of countries worldwide continue to criminalize consensual same-sex sexual acts: 60 UN member States by law, and 2 more *de facto*.<sup>12</sup>

**June 2024:** In Argentina, where the grassroots feminist Ni Una Menos movement first mobilized in 2015 to protest the crisis of femicides in the country and the social and economic conditions fueling this misogynistic violence, recently elected President Milei dissolves the government agency responsible for addressing gender equality, including gender-based violence.<sup>13</sup>

**June 2024:** The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) reports that it is tracking 527 anti-LGBTQI+ bills currently before state legislatures across the United States, the majority of which target transgender rights, and especially transgender youth.<sup>14</sup>

Progressive developments are also evident. In October this year, Claudia Sheinbaum will become the first female head of state in Mexico, where 12 of the country's 31 states have decriminalized abortion, with two more to come. The Ni Una Menos movement remains strong in Argentina, and this year held its ninth annual march, protesting the

<sup>8</sup> Pruthi, C. and E. Zillén (2023). Hope and Resistance Go Together: The State of Women Human Rights Defenders 2023. Stockholm, Sweden: The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. <https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/The-Kvinna-till-Kvinna-Foundation-The-state-of-women-human-rights-defenders-2023.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ipas.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Ipas-Protego-Operationalizing-the-Geneva-Consensus-Declaration-OPPPROE24.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <https://abortion-policies.srhr.org/?mapq=q1j>

<sup>11</sup> <https://fosfeminista.org/media/wrc-statement-on-the-csw68-agreed-conclusions/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://ilga.org/news/laws-on-us-2024-lgbt-human-rights/>. ILGA emphasizes that legality of same-sex sexual acts cannot be read as evidence of a safer living environment for people with diverse sexual orientations or gender identities or expressions. In many of the States where consensual same-sex sexual acts are legal, social stigmatization of people who are perceived as non-heterosexual or non-cisgender remains alarmingly high.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/blog/women-week-milei-administration-dissolves-argentinas-ministry-women>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights-2024>

government's backsliding on policies that tackle gender-based violence and anti-LGBTQI+ speech. Anti-femicide protests organised by women's rights activists erupted across Kenya in January 2024 to demand government action<sup>15</sup> and feminist organisations were prominently involved in the leadership of the #EndSARS mass protests against police brutality and corruption in Nigeria in 2020.<sup>16</sup>

Challenging the rightward drift of European politics, evident in the recent elections for the European Parliament, Donald Tusk was re-elected as Poland's Prime Minister in 2023 with a mandate to reverse the anti-gender policies and politics of the outgoing Law and Justice (PiS) party. In March this year, the Polish government released the initial draft of the Bill to amend the Penal Code, proposing up to three years imprisonment for inciting hatred based on sexual orientation and gender identity.<sup>17</sup> ILGA reports that four UN member States (Andorra, Estonia, Greece, and Slovenia) have recently made marriage equality a reality, and Nepal has issued an interim order to facilitate such unions. In the same period, Bolivia and Latvia legalized same-sex civil unions, and Japan has seen several prefectures follow suit. Since January 2023 five more UN member States have adopted legal gender recognition based on the principle of self-identification: Ecuador, Finland, Germany, New Zealand, and Spain—along with the state of Yucatán in Mexico.<sup>18</sup>

Notwithstanding such developments, it is clear that progress on gender justice and sexual rights continues to face many forms of backlash. A 2023 paper by ODI notes that a “global deterioration of progress on women's rights is taking the shape of a coordinated and well-funded backlash against gender equality, LGBTQI+ diversity and feminism,” which is “intimately connected to trends in authoritarian rollbacks to global

democracy.”<sup>19</sup> In a 2023 report, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) observes that:

***Globally, anti-gender actors and discourses have emerged in response to national and global policy developments relating to access to abortion, gender affirming care for transgender and intersex individuals, provision of CSE and the emergence of “gender studies” in secondary and tertiary education.***<sup>20</sup>

As the MenEngage Ubuntu symposium report states, backlash can be understood as comprising a spectrum of actions and reactions opposed to gender justice and sexual rights, which may or may not be tied to specific progress on these issues. Writing from Lebanon, Nay El Rahi and Fatima Antar from the Arab Institute for Women (AIW) at the Lebanese American University (LAU), a partner in the Institute of Development Studies' Countering Backlash programme, confirm this view. In the Lebanese context at least, “backlash is no longer a reactionary pushback or an anomaly, but should rather be conceptualised as a condition that is inherent within systems of oppression, and a built-in self-protective mechanism.”<sup>21</sup> In this sense, backlash can be understood as “pre-emptive [...] which works to prevent changes to the status quo and does not require an attempt to claim power.”<sup>22</sup>

Given that resistance to challenges, actual or potential, to the patriarchal status quo is inherent within patriarchal systems, the question arises as to what is new or different about contemporary forms and experiences of patriarchal resistance and backlash. Understanding the continuities and changes from what has historically always been true of patriarchal systems, however varied in different times and places, is crucial for any effective response moving forwards. The large and growing literature on

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/blog/women-week-record-protest-kenya-against-femicide>

<sup>16</sup> <https://cofemsocialchange.org/endsars-in-solidarity-with-nigerian-women-and-feminists/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://database.ilga.org/incitement-violence-lgbti>

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.alignplatform.org/resources/briefing-facing-backlash-p2>

<sup>20</sup> <https://cdn.unrisd.org/assets/library/papers/pdf-files/2023/wp-2023-4-anti-gender-movement.pdf> p1

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.ids.ac.uk/news/understanding-gender-backlash-through-southern-perspectives/> p153-154

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*. p154

*If resistance to challenges to the patriarchal status quo is as old as patriarchal systems themselves, then what is new are the ways in which digital technologies have energized and ramified such patriarchal resistance to progressive change.*

patriarchal backlash suggests three aspects of contemporary manifestations of backlash which pose a new or different challenge, namely:

- Intensification
- Organisation
- De-democratisation

## Intensification

If resistance to challenges to the patriarchal status quo is as old as patriarchal systems themselves, then what is new are the ways in which digital technologies have energized and ramified such patriarchal resistance to progressive change. By the end of 2023, almost 70 percent of the world's population were smartphone users.<sup>23</sup> Not only social life, but increasingly many aspects of people's economic and political lives are conducted online, where GBV is now widespread.<sup>24</sup>

Online GBV can take many forms, but with respect to the intensification of patriarchal backlash, it is how such violence is organised and perpetrated that is of great concern. There is now a growing body of research seeking to address this concern, much of it focused on the role of what is now commonly referred to as the "manosphere". This is an online ecosystem of disparate, overlapping and sometimes conflicting sites, channels and web-based discussion groups focused on "men's issues" and organised around misogyny and antifeminism. In the words of US scholar Jack Z. Bratich, the "manosphere is inherently a manspreading project: it seeks to infuse the totality of the digital

sphere with a technologically facilitated war on women."<sup>25</sup>

As research on the manosphere makes clear, what started as a largely anglophone phenomenon is now global, with studies looking at its manifestation in many different countries and languages. There is also some evidence about trends; those sites with more overtly misogynistic and violent content become more popular over time. One study found that older communities, such as Men's Rights Activists (MRA) and Pick Up Artists (PUA), are becoming less popular and active, while newer communities, like Incels, Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) and The Red Pill (TRP) are thriving. The study concluded that "analysis indicates that the newer communities in the Manosphere (Incels, MGTOW and TRP) are more toxic and misogynistic than the older ones (PUA, MRA), as theorized by previous literature."<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, research also suggests that technical aspects of digital platform operations, specifically the use of recommender algorithms to direct users to further content, serve to increase exposure to more misogynistic content. A 2024 experimental study, comparing users searching for masculine-normative content (e.g. sports) or manosphere-specific content, "were fed masculinist, anti-feminist and other extremist content and that, once the account showed interest by watching this sort of content, the amount rapidly increased."<sup>27</sup> The researchers also noted that content featuring 'Manfluencers' (male influencers) accounted for the vast majority of recommended videos in the dataset, demonstrating their centrality in the current manosphere ecosystem.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.statista.com/topics/840/smartphones/#topicOverview>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.ids.ac.uk/publications/global-evidence-on-the-prevalence-and-impact-of-online-gender-based-violence-ogbv/>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.commonnotions.org/on-microfascism>

<sup>26</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338737324\\_The\\_Evolution\\_of\\_the\\_Manosphere\\_Across\\_the\\_Web](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338737324_The_Evolution_of_the_Manosphere_Across_the_Web) p10

<sup>27</sup> <https://antibullyingcentre.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/DCU-Toxicity-Full-Report.pdf> p2

The operations of the manosphere exemplify the intensification of patriarchal backlash. It has networked misogynistic, homophobic and transphobic online attacks with unprecedented scale and speed. The orchestration of such attacks, many against feminist and LGBTQI+ activists as well as active and aspiring women politicians, is well documented. Research is also looking at the experiences of men and boys participating in this online ecosystem, seeking to explain the rise of the manosphere. One set of explanations focus on the technical aspects of digital platform operations; what are referred to as their affordances. In addition to their scale and speed, which enable online communities or ‘publics’ to form widely and quickly, it is both the anonymity and social permission granted through online peer groups that are highlighted as explaining the increase in men’s online misogynistic, homophobic and transphobic behavior.

and especially young men, as a gateway for recruiting them into misogynistic worldviews.

A third set of explanations, related to the other two, highlight the business model of what is increasingly referred to as platform capitalism, whose “attention economy” relies on maintaining users’ attention through emotional provocation, the more extreme the better. The manosphere, then, is in part at least the “monetization of male insecurity [which] not only serves to mainstream anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQ ideology, but may also function as a gateway to fringe Far-Right and other extreme worldviews.”<sup>29</sup> A recent paper on the links between neoliberalism and what it terms anti-gender conservatism emphasizes the importance of emotional incitement of politically utilizable affects (including fear, rage or disgust) that are effective in mobilising public support by ‘gripping’ subjects emotionally.<sup>30</sup>

### *The manosphere is in part at least the “monetization of male insecurity”*

A second set of explanations prefer to emphasize the ways in which a crisis of masculinity, however varied in origin (real or perceived), has fueled an intensely felt sense of grievance, anger and anxiety among a growing number of men. Online spaces in general, and the manosphere in particular, then become a place for finding community, seeking support, venting feelings and, for some, taking revenge. As the Ubuntu symposium discussion paper notes, “[o]f particular concern is the fact that these misogynistic spaces sometimes appeal to young people as a place of guidance, safety, and understanding among a group of peers.”<sup>28</sup> The intentionality of this appeal is important to note. Sites and influencers in the manosphere intentionally market themselves as sources of advice and support for men,

Addressing this emotional ‘grip’ will be central to any effective response to patriarchal backlash and resistance. In turn, this requires understanding the narratives used for this emotional incitement, which in the manosphere and online more generally include:

- Emasculation and male victimhood, usually attributed to the ‘success’ of feminism
- Reproductive threat from racialized Others, exploiting the loss of (majoritized) men’s virility
- Gender as an ideological threat to the ‘natural’ family and the social order it upholds

<sup>28</sup> <https://menengage.org/resources/backlash-and-fundamentalism-a-discussion-paper-of-the-ubuntu-symposium/> p8

<sup>29</sup> <https://antibullyingcentre.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/DCU-Toxicity-Full-Report.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/13569317.2021.1921937?needAccess=true>

- Anti-feminism as anti-establishment and as anti-colonialism
- Men ‘reclaiming’ their power as a form of both personal healing and saving society

These narratives have been central to the mobilization of men in support of patriarchal backlash and anti-gender organising, albeit to different degrees in different places. Developing counter-narratives will, in turn, be key to mobilising men in support of gender justice.

## Organisation

The second way in which contemporary manifestations of backlash are different to what has come before is its organisational form. What started as a movement organised by the Vatican and other religious groups in the mid-1990s has grown into a much wider set of interconnected coalitions. Surveying Latin America, Brazilian scholar and activist Sonia Corrêa notes that there is an “older Catholic anti-abortion political infra-structure” now “encircled by a relatively loose assemblage of conservative politicians, professionals, wealthy entrepreneurs, ultra-neoliberal think tanks, experts and activists, and in fewer cases open Nazi and Fascist groupings, military and police personnel and, specifically in Brazil, the Jewish Right linked to conservative Evangelism.”<sup>31</sup> In Europe, Neil Datta, founder and director of the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, emphasizes the links between religious fundamentalism, far-right fascist movements and populist forces in anti-gender organising.<sup>32</sup>

Since the early to mid-2010s, anti-gender ideas have won a broader appeal outside religious circles, being “incorporated into the political programmes of nationalist populist, illiberal and extreme rightwing parties and movements, and in some countries they have even made their way into

legislation and public policy (i.e. Brazil, Poland, Hungary and Russia).”<sup>33</sup> The narratives listed in the previous section have not only incited an emotional grip but also an organisational glue, binding an otherwise diverse set of actors and interests together. Writing from Eastern Europe, Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk characterize this as “an opportunistic synergy, a dynamic that includes political alliances, ideological affinities and organisational ties.”<sup>34</sup>

Significantly, they also note that “[t]hough male dominated, these formations count with significant numbers of women and have been extensively recruiting young people for national and international anti-abortion and anti-gender activism.”<sup>35</sup> While anti-gender activism focuses on national-level policy and legal change and frequently invokes narratives of national decline, the coalitions described above are “always plugged into transnational webs through which are shared common repertoires, strategies and money flows. Highly adaptable to context and circumstance, anti-gender formations are keen in grasping political opportunities.”<sup>36</sup> It is also noteworthy, as a recent paper by UNRISD makes clear, that “the ways in which both money and ideas flow in service of anti-gender advocacy within and between countries and stakeholders [...] defy more conventional North-South binaries and associated logics.”<sup>37</sup>

Not only has organisational form changed, but so too the strategies and professionalism of anti-gender organising. Sonia Corrêa emphasizes that “[a]nti-gender language is popular, versatile, and commonsense. It has left behind religious semantics to borrow arguments and tropes from biology, biomedicine, demography as democracy, citizenship and rights.”<sup>38</sup> The cooptation of a language of rights has been often noted; “[a]nti-gender actors are increasingly using rights-based arguments (including the right to

<sup>31</sup> <https://sxpolitics.org/summaries-of-country-case-studies/22094> p12-13

<sup>32</sup> <https://counteringbacklash.org/reinterpreting-the-global-tide-of-patriarchal-backlash/>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/13569317.2021.1921937?needAccess=true> p65

<sup>34</sup> <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/50542> p7

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid* p13

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid* p13

<sup>37</sup> <https://cdn.unrisd.org/assets/library/papers/pdf-files/2023-4-anti-gender-movement.pdf> p4

<sup>38</sup> <https://sxpolitics.org/summaries-of-country-case-studies/22094> p13

freedom of religion, free speech and human rights) to legitimate discrimination of non-heterosexual or transgender people.”<sup>39</sup> This cooptation is particularly significant in the strategy of norms-spoiling, which seeks to undermine the legitimacy of gender equality and women’s rights norms. As an ODI paper makes clear, such norms-spoiling activities are “sustained by an increasingly professionalised network of actors disseminating anti-rights narratives within UN systems and changing human rights discourse.”<sup>40</sup>

This emphasis on growing professionalism is highlighted in a recent paper for UNRISD, which notes that “anti-gender advocacy has professionalized, circulating money and ideas through ecosystems of pro-family think-tanks staffed by researchers with postgraduate degrees who are able to package and disseminate their messages using tools including peer-reviewed articles, webinars and reports.”<sup>41</sup> This professionalism is strategic, designed to align with “the technocratic language of the UN; notions of rigour, engaging in peer-review and claiming links with Higher Educational Institutions all help to ensure that the messaging may not be easily dismissed as partisan or representing the agenda(s) of particular donors, countries or institutions.”<sup>42</sup>

While the strategy of co-opting rights language has been widely studied, the UNRISD paper cautions that “investigations have largely overlooked the ways in which anti-gender actors are employing the language of “sustainability” and “development” in their efforts to justify their opposition to women’s reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, and LGBTIQ+ rights.”<sup>43</sup> The authors also note that the narrative framing strategies used by anti-gender forces have in some ways been facilitated by the emphases and omissions of international agreements

themselves. This includes the ways in which women’s rights and gender equality goals are discussed in global declarations and instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) or the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which can “lend themselves to being adapted to suit heteronormative pro-family discourses.”<sup>44</sup> Positioning the (implicitly heteronormative) family as the bedrock of social development opens space for such discourses. As the UNRISD paper makes clear, “[e]xhortations to amplify the natural family, limit misinterpretation and avoid civilisational collapse through reference to UN instruments is only possible because both the UDHR and the SDGs themselves do not have any references to LGBTIQ+ people.”<sup>45</sup>

## De-democratisation

The success in recent years of authoritarian leaders and parties across the world, making use of an “anti-gender” politics to win and consolidate power, is now well documented. Scholars Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk note that the “politics of reproduction, kinship and hierarchy of power between genders are always at the center of anti-gender campaigns” and that “what is really at stake here is the social status of men in general and the role of the father in the family.”<sup>46</sup> But they also make clear that the patriarchal masculinities so central to the anti-gender movement are being deployed in service of a broader attack on human rights, democratic processes and social justice. As they emphasize, it is important to “conceptualize the recent struggles over “gender” as part of a broader conflict, where what is truly at stake is the future of democracy.”<sup>47</sup> There is a growing body of research documenting the links between anti-gender forces and what has been referred to as “democratic backsliding.”<sup>48</sup>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/13569317.2021.1921937?needAccess=true> p65

<sup>40</sup> <https://odi.org/en/publications/feminist-responses-to-norm-spoiling-united-nations/> p1

<sup>41</sup> <https://cdn.unrisd.org/assets/library/papers/pdf-files/2023/wp-2023-4-anti-gender-movement.pdf> p2

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* p12

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p13

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p2

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* p15

<sup>46</sup> <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/50542> p6

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* p3

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Discussion-paper-Democratic-backsliding-and-the-backlash-against-womens-rights-en.pdf>

*The patriarchal masculinities so central to the anti-gender movement are being deployed in service of a broader attack on human rights, democratic processes and social justice.*

Analyses of the anti-gender movement in Latin America echo this view. While the movement is widely understood to comprise a “transnational constellation of actors working to preserve the heteropatriarchal sex and gender power hierarchy in all areas of social, political, economic, and cultural life,”<sup>49</sup> Sonia Corrêa emphasizes that “anti-gender politics are not just about promoting law and policy regressions in relation to gender, sexuality, and abortion laws.”<sup>50</sup> Rather, it is clear that “the investment, made by these crusades in the preservation or restoration of deeply racialized and unequal gender and sexuality orders, lies at the core of democratic erosions and extreme conservative shifts sweeping across the regional landscape.”<sup>51</sup>

The use of anti-gender narratives and organising in the service of de-democratisation has prompted many commentators to conceptualize such narratives and organising more broadly as constituting an anti-rights agenda. Such a framing is useful in drawing attention to the ways in which these narratives and associated anti-gender organising is bound up with attacks on human rights more generally, and especially the rights of marginalized and racialized groups. This framing also highlights the sometimes complicated gender politics of anti-rights narratives and organising. The anti-immigration campaigns and policies across many parts of Europe, implicitly or explicitly Islamophobic, are often articulated in terms of the threat posed by the “primitive patriarchies” of immigrants to (implicitly white) women and their rights. Similarly in India, where as scholar Kalpana Wilson points out, the anti-Muslim racism of Hindutva ideology

counterposes the “notion of women’s empowerment/naari shakti as something authentically Hindu” with “figure of the excessively patriarchal Muslim man onto whom gendered oppression and violence is continuously displaced.”<sup>52</sup>

In both cases, there is a racialization of patriarchal masculinities to deny the rights of minoritized communities, which at the same time invokes the imperative of (majoritized) male protection and the associated narratives of reproductive threat, emasculation and social disorder listed above. As Kalpana Wilson notes, Hindutva ideology celebrates Hindu women’s empowerment, at the same time as calling for the replacement of India’s Constitution and the rights embedded in it with “the Manusmriti, a Hindu text which explicitly states that women must be under the control of a man, whether father, husband or son, throughout their lives, and dehumanises oppressed castes and queer people.”<sup>53</sup> As scholars have emphasized, this racialization of patriarchal masculinities is also implicated in the widespread support of women for Hindutva’s patriarchal ideology, whose vision of gender hierarchy is structured by caste-based, ethno-religious oppression of minoritized communities.<sup>54</sup>

The emphasis on patriarchal backlash as part of a broader anti-rights agenda is important in highlighting these intersectional dimensions of backlash. At the same time, it is also important to stay focused on the goals of such an anti-rights agenda, which is to consolidate elite male power through attacks on democratic rights, processes and cultures. The patriarchal politics of de-democratisation takes many forms,

<sup>49</sup> <https://cdn.unrisd.org/assets/library/papers/pdf-files/2023/wp-2023-4-anti-gender-movement.pdf> p3-4

<sup>50</sup> <https://sxpolitics.org/summaries-of-country-case-studies/22094> p14

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p14

<sup>52</sup> <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2023/03/29/narratives-of-transnational-resistance-in-pakistan-and-india/>

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

<sup>54</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/16118944221110725>

from increasing restrictions on feminist and LGBTQI+ civil society groups to the use of violence to exclude and marginalize women from politics and public life. Violence against women in politics (VAWP) is widespread, and in many societies increasing, partly in response to women's increased demands for legal and political rights and leadership roles within political institutions that remain highly patriarchal.<sup>55</sup> The presence of women within political leadership remains distinctly gendered in many societies. Even though women's representation among cabinet ministers has quadrupled over the last 25 years,<sup>56</sup> women continue to be confined largely to "social" ministries and parliamentary committees and inadequately represented in security, economic, and defence bodies within governments,

including threats and coercion in general.<sup>59</sup> An intersectional analysis makes clear that women from marginalized communities, whether linked to race/ethnicity, class position, dis/ability status, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity/expression, often face more frequent and more intense violence related to their participation and leadership in politics and public life.

Once again, it is important to note that the de-democratisation in which patriarchal backlash and anti-gender organising is enlisted has, in many ways, been legitimized by existing and historical democratic deficits. In Latin America, Sonia Corrêa characterizes these deficits in terms of "the persistence of multiple forms of social and institutional authoritarianism, manifested as classism, ethno-racism,

*The patriarchal politics of de-democratisation takes many forms, from increasing restrictions on feminist and LGBTQI+ civil society groups to the use of violence to exclude and marginalize women from politics and public life.*

which tend to be seen as men's 'natural' responsibility.<sup>57</sup>

A 2023 paper from ODI makes clear that the "digital sphere is increasingly saturated with misogynist content – with targeted online and offline attacks on women in politics during electoral campaigns weakening democratic process, as data from Kenya's General Election in 2022 shows."<sup>58</sup> A 2018 National Democratic Institute (NDI) study on violence against women in political parties revealed that 20 percent of respondents had faced physical violence while carrying out party functions, and 86 percent had experienced psychological violence,

sexism, but also, and not less relevant, the resilient specter of military tutelage of politics."<sup>60</sup> More generally, the democratic deficits and structural inequalities caused by decades of neoliberal governance have opened up space for anti-gender forces to offer "a particular political response to the de-democratizing effects of corporate power and neoliberal global governance, namely the restoration of stable – and 'natural' – categories of masculinity and femininity, which are seen as the bedrock of society and of human civilization."<sup>61</sup>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/9/egm-report-violence-against-women-in-politics>

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/desa/world%E2%80%99s-women-2020>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/03/women-in-politics-map-2023>

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.alignplatform.org/resources/briefing-facing-backlash-p6>

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.ndi.org/publications/no-party-violence-analyzing-violence-against-women-political-parties>

<sup>60</sup> <https://sxpolitics.org/summaries-of-country-case-studies/22094-p17>

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/13569317.2021.1921937?needAccess=true> p78

# 3 Findings: Concerns

*“We need to help set the terms for how backlash is discussed”*

*- MenEngage Board Consultation*

The consultations with MenEngage Regional Networks and Board members generated a set of findings which reflect the themes and issues of intensification, organisation and de-democratisation discussed above as well as the continuing challenges of doing anti-patriarchal work with men and boys which MenEngage members have for many years addressed. The consultative process first asked participants to reflect on and discuss their concerns about the forms and impacts of patriarchal backlash and resistance that they were encountering. The following concerns were highlighted.

## Action to reverse policy gains on SRHR and comprehensive sexuality education

Participants across all the consultations expressed grave concern at the range of actions being taken to reverse policy gains on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and comprehensive sexuality education. Unsurprisingly, there were differences between regions in terms of types of action being taken and policy issues being addressed. Within the scope of this consultative process it was not possible to fully map these differences but such a mapping would be invaluable for MenEngage moving forwards in order to guide a more strategic response. Participants did note that anti-gender forces are often strategic themselves in terms of prioritizing issues which can divide feminist and progressive movements, for example in the focus on transgender rights which has proven divisive within women's rights organising in a number of countries.

Across all regions, participants expressed concern about the targeting

of educational settings by anti-gender actors, and the rollbacks, actual and attempted, of progress made on comprehensive sexuality education. The need for MenEngage to be involved in efforts to defend and expand policy gains on gender and sexuality education in schools was emphasized. There was also a widespread concern about the underlying narrative of the 'traditional' family that was being used to promote policy rollbacks on SRHR and comprehensive sexuality education.

Within this narrative on family values there are a number of related issues being linked or articulated together. These include the existence of 'natural' gender roles and hierarchies within the family, male authority in the family as a model for social order, reproduction as an expression of masculine virility and feminine care, and the family as the container within which to protect the innocence of children. Participants noted the many ways in which these "family values" are deployed in the service of patriarchal backlash and resistance, for example in the ways in which the insistence on the family as the privileged space of protection and care is being used to minimize or deny the widespread nature of men's use of violence within the family against both women and children.

## Targeting of LGBTQI+ communities

Some participants emphasized the significance of attacks on LGBTQI+ communities and their human rights as part of the broader phenomenon of patriarchal backlash and resistance. They noted the contradictions that often underpin such attacks; they are launched in defence of what are claimed to be 'traditional values' against a 'neo-

colonial' imposition of 'western' values, but then rely on colonial-era legislation, which itself had been used to suppress diverse expressions of genders and sexualities in many pre-colonial societies across Asia, Africa and the Americas. It should be noted, as a paper for UNRISD does, that mainstream development discourse in its "assumptions of a 'backward Global South that does not embody the values of a more 'progressive' West/North" has inadvertently opened up space for this anti-colonial framing of hostility to LGBTQI+ rights.<sup>62</sup> Exploiting the association of gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights with the West/North has enabled anti-gender actors to re-assert a heteronormative patriarchy by claiming it as traditional.

panic' is to "keep people in gender boxes." The NAMEN consultation noted how often the anti-transgender 'moral panic' is framed in terms of protecting children from the fabricated threat of 'predatory' LGBTQI+ people and 'corrupting' gender ideology. This all has the effect of policing the behaviors of people of all genders and sexualities to conform to a heteropatriarchal norm.

In the Africa consultation, this policing effect was highlighted; it was noted that the term "gay" is used as a slur to marginalize both male and female politicians and public figures. Participants in the South Asia consultation pointed out that Ministries/ Departments of Women and/or Gender across the region tend to remain confined within a very binary discourse

*One participant emphasized that the intent and effect of the anti-transgender 'moral panic' is to "keep people in gender boxes."*

Participants noted such attacks on LGBTQI+ communities continue to have devastating impacts on people within those communities, with an increase in police brutality in the enforcement of anti-LGBTQI+ laws being observed in a number of places. In what amounts to a form of 'lawfare' against LGBTQI+ communities, the Africa consultation for example noted the "warping of the judiciary" that has accompanied the imposition of more draconian legislation against LGBTQI+ people. The role played by transnational anti-gender networks in funding, and in some cases drafting, such anti-LGBTQI+ legislation was also highlighted.

The hostile legal, policy and media environment for LGBTQI+ rights also serves to reinforce the male-female gender binary and its hetero/cis-normative hierarchies of power. In the consultation with CariMAN, one participant emphasized that the intent and effect of the anti-transgender 'moral

of gender, which still largely equates gender with "women's issues" and which is mostly silent on LGBTQI+ rights and issues. As participants across different consultations agreed, overcoming this silencing will continue to be a critical priority for MenEngage in its efforts to confront patriarchal backlash and resistance more effectively.

## **Attacks on feminist and LGBTQI+ activists as part of de-democratisation**

The theme of de-democratisation, and the roles played by patriarchal backlash and anti-gender organising within this, was frequently mentioned. Participants in the MenEngage Europe consultation noted the significance of anti-gender rhetoric and policies in the rightward turn of politics in a number of countries, clearly evident in the recent elections for the European Parliament. The South Asia consultation discussed the ways in

<sup>62</sup> <https://cdn.unrisd.org/assets/library/papers/pdf-files/2023/wp-2023-4-anti-gender-movement.pdf> p6

which the administrative climate for work on gender and sexual justice has changed in recent years in several countries. One participant from India insisted that the “government is blocking us” by refusing to work with some progressive civil society organisations, especially women’s rights organisations. He and others noted that Hindutva ideology is the biggest problem, shutting down spaces for discussion of gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights; in some areas, tertiary educational institutions are now prohibiting discussion of rights-based issues.

The CariMAN consultation similarly noted the increasingly hostile government environment for work on gender and sexual justice in many

Chile, Colombia and Mexico are themselves pushing back against the reversal of the celebrated Pink Tide of left-leaning governments in Latin America in the first decade or so of this century. On the other hand, participants noted the rise of authoritarian leaders elsewhere (e.g. Argentina, El Salvador) and their explicitly patriarchal politics. The role of disinformation campaigns in the rise and rule of such leaders was noted, and other consultations highlighted the use of broadcast and social media to harass and attack politicians and activists fighting for women’s and LGBTQI+ rights. NAMEN participants noted the increase in online hate speech, especially against gender and sexual minorities, and in South Asia participants expressed concern about

*Participants commented on the creation of “men’s desks” within Ministries of Gender/Women as indicating a regressive development, in that their implicit and sometimes explicit rationale is that “men have been left behind”, a narrative that is at the heart of patriarchal backlash the world over.*

places; one participant said that it “almost feels like 10 years backwards.” Participants commented on the creation of “men’s desks” within Ministries of Gender/Women as indicating a regressive development, in that their implicit and sometimes explicit rationale is that “men have been left behind”, a narrative that is at the heart of patriarchal backlash the world over. Linked to this, participants commented on government backing for International Men’s Day in a number of Caribbean countries as signaling a further mainstreaming of this “male victimhood” narrative. There was a useful discussion about how to understand and respond to this widespread discourse of a “crisis in masculinity”, to be discussed further below.

The Latin America consultation discussed the complexity of democracy, rights and anti-gender organising across the continent. Progressive governments, albeit to different degrees, in Brazil,

the rise in “cyberbullying”, with women’s and LGBTQI+ rights activists being frequently targeted with online harassment, including abusive messages, trolling, and doxxing.

Such attacks, as a number of participants emphasized, have served to fracture progressive movements in many places, with organisations fearful to speak out and risk being targeted. This fracturing contrasts with the growing organisation, and associated resourcing and professionalism, of anti-gender forces as discussed above. “We are on the defensive” as one NAMEN participant put it. Across the different consultations, there was a common concern that MenEngage needs to do more to collaborate with other progressive organisations in confronting this de-democratisation and in particular challenging the rise of media disinformation campaigns being used to attack activists for women’s and LGBTQI+ rights.

***“I think that the battle for the cultural interpretation of contemporary male malaise is being won by the extreme right”***

*- MenEngage Latin America Consultation*

## **Exploiting narratives and coopting language to attack gender justice**

The use of narrative strategies to shape the climate of public opinion and conditions for policy-making is widely practiced, and research evidence highlights the success of anti-gender forces in creating and sharing anti-feminist narratives. This evidence was borne out by the consultations for this report. Participants from South Asia commented on anti-gender campaigns using both cultural and religious narratives to resist changes in gender relations. Such campaigns depict gender equality as a threat to social harmony and family integrity, label feminism and feminists as anti-men, and rally men around the idea of preserving traditional societal structures. In South Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America participants noted the significance of conservative religious groups framing gender equality initiatives as incompatible with religious principles.

The significance of transnational organising among conservative and fundamentalist religious groups in promoting these narratives is noteworthy, not least because they are often tied to a claim that ‘traditional values’ of a country and/or region must be defended against a neo-colonial imposition of ‘alien’ values from the Global North/West. In formerly colonized nations, this is clearly a resonant narrative. Participants in South Asia, Africa and the Caribbean especially drew attention to the success of this anti-colonial framing of anti-feminism and opposition to LGBTQI+ rights. In India, the feminist movement is often framed as an attack on traditional Indian values, portraying it as a Western import that disrupts the societal fabric. Anti-feminist groups mobilize men by appealing to their role as protectors of these values and political leaders often use

nationalist rhetoric that links traditional masculinity with the idea of a strong, sovereign nation, positioning gender equality advocates as opponents of national unity.

This use of patriarchal masculinities to link defence of ‘traditional’ family values with national security is not new, but has been re-energized in an era of declining legitimacy for economic globalization in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Participants in the Board consultation noted that the norms-spoiling efforts at the UN and other international fora by anti-gender forces are often framed as a defence of national sovereignty against the threat posed by a globalized elite. In this narrative, the ‘natural’ family, which is explicitly heteronormative and implicitly patriarchal, is the bedrock of national security, whose reproductive vitality must be defended against the threats of abortion, contraception and sexuality education. Participants in the Europe consultation emphasized the role that anti-LGBTQI+ and in particular anti-transgender narratives have played in forging this link between the ‘natural’ family and national security. In a region with often rapidly declining birth rates and widely discussed fears of a “demographic winter”, these narratives clearly resonate. They enable anti-feminism and anti-LGBTQI+ rights to be framed as a matter of existential survival; no wonder then that, as several participants noted, even the word “gender” has become unmentionable in official circles in a number of countries.

Not only have anti-gender actors managed to censor the use of

***Anti-feminist groups mobilize men by appealing to their role as protectors of [traditional] values and political leaders often use nationalist rhetoric that links traditional masculinity with the idea of a strong, sovereign nation, positioning gender equality advocates as opponents of national unity.***

terminology that is central to feminist and LGBTQI+ rights work, but they are also co-opting the language of rights itself, as noted in the Background section. This use of “rights” narratives in the service of patriarchal backlash and resistance was noted across the regional consultations, and participants in the Board consultation emphasized the urgency for MenEngage to counter this co-optation. In work emerging from the Countering Backlash programme of the Institute of Development Studies, this has been conceptualized as “discourse capture”, in which progressive discourse is co-opted and manipulated to serve right-wing agendas through re-signifying, shifting, mimicking, and twisting discourse.<sup>63</sup> Further discussion across the membership of MenEngage is needed to explore the operations of these different discourse practices in differing contexts and how they might be countered and resisted.

Part of our resistance, as several participants were keen to emphasize, is to remember that discourse is never fully captured but always contested, not least because ideologies and the institutions associated with them are never monolithic. As one participant in the Latin America consultation noted, evangelicals in Argentina are by no means all united behind the anti-gender politics of President Milei; the Federation of Evangelical institutions in Argentina declared itself against Milei during the election campaign at least. Remembering, analyzing and working with this heterogeneity and complexity are key components of any effective response to patriarchal backlash and resistance.

## Weaponizing men’s grievances and anxieties

Many participants across different consultations expressed serious concern about the ways in which men’s grievances and anxieties are being exploited and manipulated by anti-gender forces. As several noted, the ability of MenEngage members to connect with men and discuss the harms

of patriarchal masculinities will depend on how these grievances and anxieties are understood and addressed.

The ways in which such grievances and anxieties are framed is critically important, as anti-gender actors well understand. In contexts where progress on women’s rights has been made and men’s previously undisputed power and privilege questioned, then the task for anti-patriarchal work with men is to challenge and support men to come to terms with any sense of loss of privilege and see the gains of greater gender

*Participants across different consultations expressed serious concern about the ways in which men’s grievances and anxieties are being exploited and manipulated by anti-gender forces.*

equality. Where men’s grievance is one of “aggrieved entitlement”, then the task for MenEngage is to work with men on ‘unlearning’ this male entitlement. In all the consultations, participants discussed how widespread was the narrative of men being “left behind” and how commonly, in both media discourse as well as everyday conversations, this was blamed on women and feminism; as one participant in the Africa consultation said, they see a growing narrative of “women have all the rights.”

Profound changes in global, regional and national economies have left many people behind. In 2022, the International Labour Organization (ILO) reported that 58 percent of those employed were in informal employment, amounting to around 2 billion workers in what were termed “precarious jobs”. As long ago as 2008, Raewyn Connell was warning that in “third-world cities there has been a de-institutionalization of economic life that has left very large numbers of

<sup>63</sup> [https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/articles/journal\\_contribution/Nothing\\_is\\_as\\_it\\_Seems\\_Discourse\\_Capture\\_and\\_Backlash\\_Politics/26434708?file=48214954](https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/articles/journal_contribution/Nothing_is_as_it_Seems_Discourse_Capture_and_Backlash_Politics/26434708?file=48214954)

young men in precarious conditions.”<sup>64</sup> Accompanying this informalization of employment has been a significant restructuring of rural economies in many regions, with the rise of agribusiness and corporate consolidation of land ownership affecting millions of small landholders. These changes clearly have gendered impacts, given the association of wage-earning and land-holding with masculinity in many societies, although this association itself is bound up in complex ways with histories of industrial capitalism and European colonialism. But these changes in the political economy of masculinity, generating an apparently widely shared feeling of male loss in many societies, are clearly not the result of a feminist social transformation, but rather the consequence of neoliberal restructuring

are salaried, they are poor and, in that sense, their privileges are not clearly perceived and the whole sensation of loss is felt.” Another participant added that these gendered economic grievances have meshed with a feeling of political disenfranchisement, partly as a result of the democratic deficits discussed in the Background section above; as they said, “when I refer to democratic dissatisfaction, it is the loss of legitimacy and credibility of a democratic regime.” In turn, these linked economic and political grievances have “generated an accumulation of frustrations and discomforts of impotence.”

Several participants across different consultations noted that anti-gender forces continue to be effective in not only tapping into these frustrations and

*Changes in the political economy of masculinity, generating an apparently widely shared feeling of male loss in many societies, are clearly not the result of a feminist social transformation, but rather the consequence of neoliberal restructuring of social relations across the world.*

of social relations across the world. In fact, as Connell also makes clear, “[t]here are many situations where groups of men may see their interest as more closely aligned with the women in their communities than with other men.”<sup>65</sup>

Working with men to unpack not only the gendered but also classed-ed and racialized dimensions of their experiences and feelings of being “left behind” must continue to be a key focus of MenEngage’s response to patriarchal backlash and resistance. This was a clear message from the Latin American consultation, in which it was noted that the electoral support, especially among men, for right-wing and explicitly anti-gender President Milei is linked to men’s perceptions of economic conditions. As one participant said, “[e]ven though they

emotions of male anger, resentment and impotence, but also in providing “a canned explanation that is much more digestible for them than the uncomfortable explanation that we want to propose to them from feminisms and masculinities,” as a participant in the Latin America consultation put it. In the Europe consultation, participants observed that it has become apparently radical to be anti-feminist in contexts where feminism has achieved a degree of official recognition, thereby enabling anti-gender forces to frame anti-feminism as a rejection of a discredited political and economic establishment. As one participant said, “we face the political challenge of not being identified with the establishment (e.g. EU).” Another emphasized that it was important to reach out and connect with

<sup>64</sup> <https://xyonline.net/sites/xyonline.net/files/Connell%2C%20A%20Thousand%20Miles%20From%20Kind%2008.pdf> p248

<sup>65</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267446862\\_Change\\_Among\\_the\\_Gatekeepers\\_Men\\_Masculinities\\_and\\_Gender\\_Equality\\_in\\_the\\_Global\\_Arena](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267446862_Change_Among_the_Gatekeepers_Men_Masculinities_and_Gender_Equality_in_the_Global_Arena) p1809

**Participants urged that male-focused gender equality work needs to do more to both recognize and address the complicated feelings that men may have about political, economic and social conditions.**

the anti-establishment feelings of many young men, remembering that the anti-feminist expressions of these feelings may not necessarily indicate a deeper misogyny but rather the social narrative in which they have been encouraged to express these feelings. Helping to change this social narrative is an urgent priority for MenEngage.

Across many of the consultations, participants urged that male-focused gender equality work needs to do more to both recognize and address the complicated feelings that men may have about political, economic and social conditions. In this regard, they emphasized the need to pay more attention to issues of mental health. This was clearly highlighted in the NAMEN consultation, in which participants noted the impacts of economic restructuring, digital technologies and, more recently, the COVID-19 epidemic in creating a growing problem of male isolation, depression and anxiety. Here too, anti-gender actors appear to provide “canned explanations”; it is significant that many sites on the Manosphere package themselves in the form of providing self-help guidance and emotional support for men. As one participant in the Board consultation put it, “young men are finding community in all the wrong places.”

The worldwide extent and severity of mental health problems are beginning to be recognized. As a recent report from the World Health Organization (WHO) points out, the male suicide rate in Africa is the highest of all regions at 18 per 100,000, while the global male average is 12.2 per 100,000 people. Acknowledging

this reality however does not necessarily mean that an apparent rise in anti-feminist sentiment among men in many societies can simply be attributed to their mental health challenges. After all, the conditions described above impact the mental health of people of all genders and sexualities, albeit in differing and complex ways. The links between men’s mental health and men’s anti-feminism are clearly affected by many factors, not least the patriarchal norms and normalization of misogyny that persist in many societies. This point is made clearly by scholars associated with the Institute for Research on Male Supremacism (IRMS) and researching the violence perpetrated by men identifying as incels (“involuntary celibates”). Noting the growing tendency to explain this misogynistic violence in terms of incel men’s self-reported mental health problems, the IRMS scholars emphasize that “[m]isogyny and misogynistic motivated violence are not caused by mental illness, poor mental health, or autism, but rather the result of misogynist and patriarchal structures.”<sup>66</sup> As they continue:

***In order to productively deal with decidedly antifeminist and misogynist movements, we argue that what is required instead is greater critical feminist awareness about how misogyny and male supremacy is not an individual characteristic of some men, which sometimes turn violent, but rather a systemic underpinning of most societies, which easily interlinks with other systems of oppression.***<sup>67</sup>

That being said, it is also clear, as many participants emphasized, that a “critical feminist awareness” must also take account of the ways in which anti-feminist forces are exploiting men’s emotional as well as material experiences of current conditions. As a participant in the Africa consultation said, “men are crying out for this work” and as another in the NAMEN discussion added, “we need to build positive communities for men.”

<sup>66</sup> <https://pt.icct.nl/article/victim-violent-vulnerable-feminist-response-incel-radicalisation-scale> p105

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p109

# 4 Findings: Responses

*“There is a lot of analysis, but less strategising”*

- MenEngage Europe Consultation

The second area of enquiry with consultation participants concerned their responses to patriarchal backlash and anti-gender organising; both the responses on which they wanted to build and how they wanted to improve their work and the work of MenEngage as a whole. The following themes emerged from the consultative process.

## Be more strategic

Dealing with patriarchal resistance is nothing new for the member organisations of MenEngage; it is a central concern of their work. But the specific concerns arising from the current context of intensified and more organised backlash in many societies did lead many participants to highlight the need for MenEngage members to be more strategic in their work with men and boys. Given both the sense of urgency that many participants felt about the need for MenEngage's work to be more effective, as well as the limited resources available for this work, the consensus was that resources needed to be targeted more strategically. In practice, across different consultations, the consensus was that a more focused effort to work with disaffected young men was required.

The consultative process did not have sufficient time to probe this strategic choice more thoroughly, and what this could mean in different regions. Clearly, the demographic profile of most countries means that “young men” is still an extremely large constituency to target, and the meaning of “disaffected” would need to be clarified for specific contexts. But there was general agreement that part of the intensification of backlash that many

societies are experiencing is linked to the success of anti-feminist narratives and anti-gender organising with growing numbers of young men, who feel disaffected about political, economic and social conditions. The orthodox view of generational changes in gender attitudes used to be that the younger generation of men would be more progressive than older generations, but latest survey data suggests a more complex picture, with young men in some societies being more resistant to gender equality than their fathers and grandfathers.<sup>68</sup>

Many MenEngage member organisations have long experience and deep expertise in youth-focused gender equality work with men and boys, whether in educational settings, out-of-school programmes and fatherhood interventions. Creating the policy environment that can support this work remains a challenge in many places, but progress has undoubtedly been made. Participants emphasized the need for a more intersectional approach to this work, however, such that the sources of political, economic and social disaffection can be better understood and tackled. Given the significance of social media in the lives of young people, and the threats posed by the manosphere, there was also an expressed need for MenEngage to strengthen members' skills in working with and through different media platforms to engage young men.

## Connect better with men and boys

Linked to the above, many participants highlighted the need to find ways to

<sup>68</sup> <https://hdr.undp.org/content/2023-gender-social-norms-index-gsni#/indicies/GSNI>

connect better with men and boys, such that MenEngage members can be more effective in challenging patriarchal masculinities. For some this meant using a more accessible and 'everyday' language to talk about our vision of gender justice and social progress; some participants expressed concern that at least some of MenEngage's public communications use an 'insider' language familiar to progressive NGOs but which can feel off-putting to many of the communities with whom MenEngage members are seeking to connect. Part of using the right language to connect better with men and boys, as participants in the Europe consultation noted, is listening better not only to what men are concerned about but also how those concerns are expressed. Other suggestions for ways to connect better with men and boys included:

**Using the right messengers:** In the CariMAN consultation, participants emphasized the need to recruit and support peer educators from within communities, as one example of using the "right messengers" to connect and communicate better with men and boys. Peers were defined in terms of both gender and age, and the need to train young men to talk to other young men

More generally, the emphasis on finding and using the "right messengers" has implications for many of the strategies used by MenEngage members to connect with men and boys, in both offline and online spaces.

**Connecting emotionally and spiritually:** In the Latin America consultation in particular, it was emphasized that MenEngage work on backlash could be improved by doing more to counter the emotional 'grip' of anti-gender organising. Several participants urged the need to connect better with many men's feelings of anger and anxiety and find ways to redirect these feelings toward appropriate targets for the MenEngage feminist systems change agenda. Given the role of religious groups in anti-gender organising, several participants noted the value of connecting with men on a more spiritual/mythical level and opening up conversations about deeply held values in relation to visions of justice. As one participant reflected on how their work had changed, "there was a significant component of the mythical, religious, spiritual dimension that we had not explored, which we have begun to work on based on our ethical and political positions."

*Several participants urged the need to connect better with many men's feelings of anger and anxiety and find ways to redirect these feelings toward appropriate targets for the MenEngage feminist systems change agenda.*

was highlighted. On the other hand, some participants cautioned that a narrowly understood peer education approach ran the risk of reinforcing the idea that men only listen to other men and do not listen to women. Part of the work of connecting with men and boys around issues of patriarchal masculinities is creating spaces and processes for dialog between people of different gender identities, so that those who are privileged by patriarchal norms are exposed to the experiences and views of those who suffer from them.

## **Support and challenge men and boys to change**

Creating spaces and processes to support and challenge men and boys to change has long been a mainstay of male-focused gender equality work. Across and beyond MenEngage, there is now considerable experience and expertise, as well as a documented evidence base, with group-based education approaches that combine consciousness-raising on issues of

gender and power with skills building for both personal and social change. Participants in all of the consultations emphasized the continuing centrality of this work to MenEngage efforts to resist patriarchal backlash and counter anti-gender organising, and the need to expand such work significantly to reach what is often referred to as the “movable middle”. Other suggestions for ways to improve direct work with men and boys included:

**Focusing more explicitly on issues of sexuality:** Restricting or eliminating sexuality education in schools has become a significant target of anti-gender organising in many countries. While MenEngage members are not resourced and mandated to meet this need, several participants did note that anti-patriarchal work with young men

health challenges, as well as referrals to appropriate services if available. As several noted, this is all the more important in contexts where men are drawn to the manosphere seeking a sense of community and guidance on emotional self-care.

**Making more use of the creative arts to ‘move’ men to change:** Group-based education approaches and awareness-raising activities continue to be the main strategies used in male-focused gender equality work. In the CariMAN consultation in particular, it was emphasized that these strategies have been enhanced when Caribbean cultural practices, such as the use of community theater, art-making and music production, have been integrated into them; “this is how we can reach people where they are,” as one participant said.

*For many participants, the most significant way in which MenEngage can strengthen its response to patriarchal backlash and resistance is to strengthen its internal capacities and external partnerships to work creatively with and through the media.*

could do more to open up conversations about sexuality, power and consent, especially in the context of the documented increase of online sexualized violence against women. In relation to this, linking discussions of gender equality with the LGBTQI+ rights agenda was also identified as a priority.

**Focusing more explicitly on mental health issues:** Many participants highlighted the need to create more spaces for men and boys to discuss their mental health challenges and seek support. Once again, it is clear that MenEngage members are not resourced and mandated to provide professional mental health services. But as participants in the South Asia consultation made clear, existing group education approaches could be revised to facilitate more open discussion of men’s emotional needs and mental

## Work creatively with and through media

In all of the consultations, it was noted that anti-gender actors have made effective use of both broadcast and social media to craft and disseminate anti-feminist narratives, including misogynistic, homophobic and transphobic disinformation. For many participants, the most significant way in which MenEngage can strengthen its response to patriarchal backlash and resistance is to strengthen its internal capacities and external partnerships to work creatively with and through the media. In the NAMEN consultation, one participant emphasized the “need to combat MAGA loudness” and develop a media strategy that can touch men emotionally.

The need for a media strategy was also highlighted in the Europe consultation. As several participants noted, this could include partnering with mainstream broadcast media to promote MenEngage's work and develop messaging that resonates with different constituencies of men and boys. The need to develop tools to work directly with young men as both media consumers and producers was also emphasized. Similar points were made in the South Asia consultation, with one participant saying that National Networks and the MEASA Regional Network needed to generate more 'content' for use on social media platforms, including images, stories and vignettes.

## **Show up as accountable allies in movements for gender justice and social justice**

MenEngage has made significant progress in recent years in establishing standards for and guidance on practices of accountability to ensure that, at all levels, the Alliance can ally effectively and ethically with women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights movements, and progressive social justice movements more generally. Participants across all of the consultations welcomed this progress, emphasizing that the apparent strength and growing professionalism of anti-gender organising can only be properly countered through gender

*The apparent strength and growing professionalism of anti-gender organising can only be properly countered through gender justice and social justice movement organising.*

The importance of influencing the influencers in order to help shape prevailing narratives about gender, power and justice was highlighted by a number of participants. In the CariMAN consultation, this was framed in terms of targeting social media 'influencers' in order to reshape the narrative of what feminism is and highlight the co-benefits of feminism for all genders. In the MEASA consultation, participants noted the need to work more directly with media institutions to promote the portrayal of diverse and positive representations of men and boys who support gender equality, as well as to develop strategies to counter misinformation and negative stereotypes propagated by anti-gender movements in all social media platforms. This emphasis on the importance of work with the media was echoed in the Board consultation, in which it was noted that MenEngage should seek to learn lessons from other sectors about their media engagement work.

justice and social justice movement organising. The continuing challenge for MenEngage is to identify the best ways in which it can contribute to such organising at national, regional and global levels.

At the global level, important work has been done by the Global Secretariat and the Advocacy Working Group (AWG) to ally with women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights movements in defending and extending the gains already made in international agreements and conventions, and resisting the norms-spoiling efforts at CSW and elsewhere. Many participants noted their appreciation of this work, and wanted to strengthen the links between National and Regional Networks and the AWG to ensure that this global-level work is informed by local-level realities. Across the different consultations, participants also expressed their interest in getting more involved in advocacy and campaigns at national and regional levels. There are already successful

*Anti-gender organising and patriarchal backlash are entangled with the efforts of authoritarian leaders and right-wing forces to undermine democratic life and human rights more broadly.*

examples of this on which MenEngage can build, such as: Alliance members supporting efforts to repeal colonial-era legislation on consensual homosexual activities between adults in India; allying with opposition to Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act; and inserting references to "men and masculinities" issues into Sri Lanka's national action plan for sexual and gender-based violence.

Given limited resources and the Alliance's allyship role, participants across the different consultations emphasized the following ways forward to strengthen MenEngage contributions to movement organising in the face of patriarchal backlash:

**Ensuring accountability in practice:** While the progress made in terms of Accountability Standards and Guidelines was widely recognized, several participants urged the need for continued attention to and investment in enforcement of these standards to ensure that relationships of trust with women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights movements can continue to be strengthened.

**Focusing on elite men as targets of change:** MenEngage members have developed considerable expertise in working with men to change their attitudes and behaviors, but rarely is this work targeted at elite men in political life and the corporate sector. One specific contribution that MenEngage members

can make to advocacy and campaigns for policy progress on women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights is to bring their masculinities expertise to bear on work with male power-holders and decision-makers.

**Monitoring anti-gender actors' efforts to enlist male support:** Several participants noted that another specific contribution that MenEngage can make to movement work on patriarchal backlash is to use their existing community networks to monitor the opposition and specifically the ways in which anti-gender actors are seeking to enlist men's support. Not only can this monitoring information be fed back into MenEngage members' direct work with men and boys but it can also be used to inform women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights advocacy campaigns.

**Countering de-democratisation by contributing to and organising with other progressive social movements:** As discussed in the Background section, anti-gender organising and patriarchal backlash are entangled with the efforts of authoritarian leaders and right-wing forces to undermine democratic life and human rights more broadly. Several participants highlighted the need for MenEngage to strengthen its own intersectional analyses of the gender dynamics of these de-democratisation efforts in order to be able to better ally with broader mobilizations in defense of human rights, economic justice, racial justice and climate justice.

# 5 Findings: Needs

*“We need to be proactive in shaping the debate”*

*- MenEngage Europe Consultation*

The third and final focus of the consultative process was to discuss with participants what was needed at national, regional and global levels of MenEngage in order that the Alliance and its members could implement the desired responses to backlash outlined above. The following needs were identified:

## **Shared clarity on values and strategy**

Participants acknowledged that one of the strengths of MenEngage, as a global network, is its presence in regions across the world and its heterogeneous membership, in terms of its members' different kinds of expertise and experience with differing communities and constituencies. Such diversity enriches the work of the Alliance as a whole, strengthening the legitimacy of its collective voice and enhancing its role as a community of practice and structure for mutual learning and support. However, a number of participants also noted the challenges that can come with this heterogeneity, not least in terms of being able to align around and be accountable to a

common set of core values. In all of the regional consultations, participants welcomed the progress made in recent years in terms of the Code of Conduct and Accountability Framework, with some emphasizing that the enforcement of such standards remains an ongoing challenge.

In the current context of intensified backlash and the growing visibility of organisations focused on a “men’s rights” agenda, this clarity of shared values and capacity to enforce standards around accountability is all the more needed. As the Men’s Rights Movement (MRM) grows in many countries, MRM activists are showing up in MenEngage spaces and meetings with increasing frequency. Several participants felt that greater clarity on shared values, including ‘redlines’, would enable MEA members to engage with men who are drawn to or involved in MRM activities confidently and respectfully, seeking where possible to “call in” men to our vision of gender justice, human rights and social progress, at the same time as being clear about political non-negotiables. Some participants also noted that this clarity on shared values will also help when it comes to trying to

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further diversify the membership of the Alliance and reaching out to those who are currently not involved in our work. In the Africa consultation, the example was given of the need to reach out to more LGBTQI+ activists and organisations to involve them in the work of the Alliance and that a greater clarity about what MenEngage stands for and for whom it works would aid in that effort. Developing this greater clarity will involve learning from past failures of the Alliance both to consistently stand in solidarity with LGBTQI+ rights agendas and to ensure that Alliance spaces and strategies explicitly uphold the rights of LGBTQI+ communities. Only this way can efforts to ally with LGBTQI+ activists and organisations be truly accountable.

an opportunity for members to get and feel aligned around the core values and vision underpinning the programme.

This emphasis on alignment needs to be complemented by greater attention to communicating MenEngage's shared values and vision to others. Many participants emphasized the need to better communicate the rationale and purpose of MenEngage and its animating values to external audiences; as one participant in the South Asia regional consultation put it, "we need to be better at publicizing our work with the common citizens." Across several regional consultations, there was an expressed concern that MenEngage external communications is sometimes too "NGO-ish" in its language, and that a

*A more accessible and emotionally compelling language is needed that speaks to and inspires people who are not already involved in the work of the Alliance.*

Given the size of MenEngage as a global network, with 1100+ members, developing and maintaining a shared clarity on values is clearly not a one-off event but a continuing conversation across the Alliance. Processes and opportunities to continue this conversation explicitly need to be expanded. Several participants in the consultations highlighted the urgency of this, noting that MRM and anti-gender activists appear to be purposefully infiltrating MenEngage spaces and meetings with the goal of disruption. The Global Secretariat and Board is currently finalizing MenEngage's new four-year programme, and countering patriarchal backlash and anti-gender forces will figure prominently in this programme, as it has done in the current strategic plan now ending. During the backlash consultations, it was noted that as this new four-year programme is discussed across the Alliance and within regional and national networks, with a view to operationalizing its priorities, such discussions are also

more accessible and emotionally compelling language is needed that speaks to and inspires people who are not already involved in the work of the Alliance. Given the wide diversity of communities and contexts within which MenEngage works, such language needs to be developed by and with regional and country networks and members in order to be contextually relevant, with the common commitment to not only informing people about MenEngage goals and activities but inspiring them to get involved.

## **Shared understanding and analyses of backlash**

Across all the regional consultations, participants urged the need to develop a shared understanding of the complex set of drivers and dynamics of backlash in order to guide more effective responses to it. As a participant in the Latin American consultation said: "It seems to me that part of the challenge, in any case, is to be able to analyze with

**“There is nothing stopping us but us”**

- MenEngage Europe Consultation

greater complexity.” Some expressed the need for more access to national/ regional-specific data and research on different aspects of patriarchal backlash and anti-gender organising, for example on the histories and current dynamics of MRM organising in different contexts.

There was a common recognition that MenEngage needs a more intersectional understanding of the forces driving and the narratives and strategies shaping the manifestations of backlash in different places. Different examples were given, such as the significance of patriarchal narratives of protection and reproductive threat in Islamophobic and racist anti-immigration politics in many parts of Europe or the complex links in India between Hindutva’s Islamophobic politics, it’s Brahmanical supremacism and resurgent patriarchy. In relation to this, it was noted that such analyses will also help to inform MenEngage’s efforts to contribute to broader progressive movements for intersectional feminist systems change. Developing a shared understanding of backlash, and its intersectional complexities, will require Alliance-wide processes of mutual political education that are designed and led by MenEngage members and facilitated by national and regional networks together with the Global Secretariat.

Several participants in the regional consultations urged that MenEngage be more explicit about the anti-LGBTQI+ politics of patriarchal backlash and anti-gender organising in many parts of the world. Clearly, homophobic and transphobic laws, policies and narratives are central to such organising in many places, not least in relation to their focus on the ‘natural’ family and the naturalized differences between the binary of male and female sexes. Intersectional feminism includes a commitment to gender and sexual self-determination, including in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity

and expression. Several participants noted that MenEngage could do more to foreground SOGIESC issues in its analyses of, and public communications about, patriarchal backlash and anti-gender organising. How this is to be done will of necessity vary, given the very different legal and social environments affecting LGBTQI+ rights within which MenEngage members are working.

Processes within MenEngage for developing a shared understanding of the complexities of backlash in different contexts and settings are clearly needed; participants in both the Africa and South Asia consultations explicitly requested Global Secretariat support to the Regional Network to develop this shared understanding among their members. In all consultations, the CoLab initiative was praised for its support to members on a range of technical issues, and many participants felt that a dedicated CoLab series on patriarchal backlash would be very beneficial - this is discussed more in the next section. One participant in the South Asia consultation recommended that the Global Secretariat “should support a Think Tank on backlash” to improve members across the Alliance in their analyses of patriarchal backlash and anti-gender organising.

## **Enhanced processes for sharing good practice and lessons learned**

As a global and expanding Community of Practice, the sharing of good practice and discussion and application of lessons learned across different contexts is at the heart of what MenEngage does. In all the regional consultations, there was a request that both the Regional Networks and the Global Secretariat enhance processes for sharing good practice and lessons learned between members to improve and support their work on patriarchal backlash and resistance. There were two broad themes in terms of the focus of such learning exchanges:

**Skills building, storytelling and lessons sharing about working directly with**

(differing) men and boys to call them in to our vision of and work for gender justice, human rights and social progress. Many participants wanted to learn from other regions about their work in this area, noting that the transnational nature of anti-gender organising makes it all the more important that MenEngage works and learns transnationally in order to be most effective in countering such anti-gender movements. Many participants were also keen that MenEngage members share their experience and expertise with each other in how to take account of intersecting forms of power and privilege in working with diverse groups of men and boys to challenge patriarchal masculinities.

*The transnational nature of anti-gender organising makes it all the more important that MenEngage works and learns transnationally in order to be most effective in countering such anti-gender movements.*

**Skills building, storytelling and lessons sharing about contributing more effectively to intersectional feminist and gender justice movement building.**

Participants noted the many ways in which MenEngage members are already active, albeit to different degrees, in intersectional feminist and gender justice movement work to counter anti-gender forces. There was general agreement, however, that not only do MenEngage members want and need to do more in this area of work, but also that specific skills and capacities need to be strengthened in relation to key movement building issues. These included building skills and sharing stories and lessons on: allyship and accountability for men in intersectional feminist organising; emotional support and practical safety protocols in countering backlash; as well as on specific contributions that MenEngage

members could make to intersectional feminist organising (from monitoring anti-gender organising with men in their contexts, to engaging with male-led institutional entities that have become a target for anti-gender campaigning, such as “men’s units” within Ministries of Gender).

In terms of processes that could support such skills building, storytelling and lessons sharing, there was general agreement across all the regional consultations that, as noted above, the CoLab initiative has worked well and should be used to enhance MenEngage’s response to backlash through inter- and intra-regional learning. More details on what this could look like moving forwards are discussed in the Directions section. Other suggestions to enhance MenEngage as a Community of Practice included:

- Using the CoLab site online as a space to collate and annotate existing resources on understanding and countering patriarchal backlash, including research, toolkits, training curricula etc and, where feasible, making resources accessible in multiple languages;
- Facilitating access to global training programmes and mentorship; and
- Developing monitoring and evaluation tools and encouraging regular reporting to track progress and refine approaches.

## **Greater internal capacity to shape narratives and shift policy**

In addition to the needs expressed above, there was a widely expressed need to strengthen the capacity of MenEngage members to shape the narratives that affect public opinion and policy debate about issues of gender, sexuality and justice. As already noted, there was widespread concern across the regional consultations at the success of anti-gender forces, albeit varying in different contexts, in influencing the very terms in which we conduct and express

*MenEngage urgently needs to strengthen its internal capacities to shape public narratives, and in particular to influence the media environment that is so influential in this narrative shaping.*

our work. This includes making it difficult to even use the term “gender” in some places, to the cooptation of a language of rights to emphasize “men’s rights” and/or the “rights of the unborn child”, to the use of emotionally compelling narratives of men’s victimhood to undermine MenEngage’s focus on enlisting men in the project of feminist systems change.

As many participants noted, MenEngage urgently needs to strengthen its internal capacities to shape public narratives, and in particular to influence the media environment that is so influential in this narrative shaping. Once again, the CoLab initiative was highlighted as a modality through which such capacity could be strengthened, but some participants also emphasized the need to not only facilitate intra-Alliance sharing and learning, but also to bring in specific external expertise on different aspects of media work that could strengthen the work of MenEngage members. A range of suggestions were made, including using external expertise to run training sessions and courses on:

- Developing emotionally compelling social media content for use in online campaigns on gender and sexual rights and justice;
- Developing skills in rapid response and rebuttal to enable MenEngage members to counter misinformation online that contributes to patriarchal backlash;
- Working with young men as both media consumers and media producers to mobilize them for gender and sexual rights and justice;
- Working with journalists and other media producers in mainstream, broadcast media to enlist their support in challenging patriarchal backlash

and resistance; and

- Contributing to advocacy campaigns on media regulation, in particular in response to the spread of technology facilitated gender-based violence.

Less commonly articulated, but still noteworthy, was the feeling among some participants that MenEngage should do more to partner with other organisations and campaigns who may be more credible with the differing constituencies of men whom we are trying to reach. This was sometimes framed as the challenge of reaching the “movable middle”, in other words, the great number of men who are not persuaded yet by our vision of gender justice and social progress but also not (yet) attracted by the messaging from anti-gender, conservative groups. One participant went so far as to say that, for this movable middle, “we are not credible messengers.” The extent to which this is true or not will most certainly vary from one context to another, but the need remains for MenEngage to continue to look for ways, and associated resources, to partner with “credible messengers” for the movable middle.

Strengthening internal capacities to shape public narratives was linked by many participants to the need to enhance MenEngage capacity to contribute to policy change advocacy and campaigns. The work of the global Advocacy Working Group (AWG) was praised by many participants, but at the same time, many noted that MenEngage National and Regional Networks needed capacity strengthening and ongoing technical and financial support in order for them to be more active in:

- Contributing data, evidence and case examples to support the work of the AWG on international agreements and conventions;

- Contributing to feminist and LGBTQI+ movement advocacy in intergovernmental fora at the regional level (e.g. African Union, European Union etc); and
- Allying with a range of feminist, LGBTQI+, social justice and human

challenges; as one said in the Latin American consultation, “MenEngage is a social laboratory of collective care and mutual support.” At the same time, many participants expressed the need for MenEngage to prioritize attention to and investment in processes and

*Hostile environments created by right-wing governments, the rise of the manosphere and intensified online and offline attacks on feminist and LGBTQI+ activists and allies were noted by many participants as posing an emotional as well as a technical challenge. Fear, exhaustion, overwhelm and a loss of hope were all mentioned as emotional responses.*

rights campaigns and strategic litigation at sub-national, national and regional levels to counter the de-democratizing politics of backlash forces and anti-gender organising.

## **Stronger processes for emotional support and personal safety**

The emotional challenges of taking on this work of challenging patriarchal backlash were highlighted often during the regional consultations. Hostile environments created by right-wing governments, the rise of the manosphere and intensified online and offline attacks on feminist and LGBTQI+ activists and allies were noted by many participants as posing an emotional as well as a technical challenge. Fear, exhaustion, overwhelm and a loss of hope were all mentioned as emotional responses. For some, there have been very severe impacts; one participant mentioned that they had had to relocate to another country because of the threats they had faced in their own country.

Participants valued the space that MenEngage already creates for members to support each other in dealing with these emotional

procedures for collective emotional support, making various suggestions including:

- More opportunities to meet regularly and to meet in-person as National and Regional Networks in order, as one participant said, to “reinforce that you are not alone”;
- Integrating practices of care and support into regular meetings and events, for example through the use of emotional check-ins;
- Drawing on culturally-specific practices that energize and inspire hope-full and joy-full action for personal and social change; and
- Access to personalized guidance on self-care and mutual support - one participant suggested having an “agony aunt session”.

Complementary to this discussion of emotional support needs was a discussion of the need for MenEngage to support members in managing their personal safety, especially in relation to digital security issues. It was noted by some that the rise of authoritarian leaders and right-wing governments has increased state surveillance of gender justice activists and intensified

censorship. Some participants urged that MenEngage provide more guidance and support for members operating in oppressive political conditions.

## Increased and sustained funding

Across all the regional consultations, it was agreed that a lack of funding for National and Regional Network activities is a significant constraint on their capacity to better support members to both understand and respond to patriarchal backlash and resistance. Without additional funding for the Networks, and for the Global Secretariat to expand its support for the National and Regional Networks, it is hard to see how many, perhaps most, of the above identified needs can be met. Participants also noted that the work of countering backlash and resistance must be sustained over time, as there are no quick fixes; this means that funding for this work must also extend beyond relatively short-term project funding timelines.

Given the woefully inadequate level of funding currently available for women's

rights and LGBTQI+ rights movements and organising, it is clear that any effort to raise additional funds for the work of MenEngage and its constituent Networks must not divert funding that would otherwise go to women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights organisations. Participants emphasized the need to pursue new sources of funding, and for the Global Secretariat to support National and Regional Networks in their own fundraising activities through technical support. Some specific suggestions were made including: educating donors about the impact of networked action for gender justice and the need to fund social change networks; pursuing new sources of funding in relation to the threats posed by patriarchal backlash (e.g. tech industry corporate social responsibility budgets to fund work on countering the Manosphere and technology facilitated GBV); supporting members to explore creative self-financing opportunities (e.g. using a social enterprise approach, as was suggested in the South Asia consultation); and strengthening Network capacity to respond quickly to fundraising opportunities as they arise.

*The work of countering backlash and resistance must be sustained over time, as there are no quick fixes; this means that funding for this work must also extend beyond relatively short-term project funding timelines.*

# 6 Recommendations

*“We need a big voice”*

*- MenEngage Africa Consultation*

In its closing section, the summary report on discussions at the Ubuntu Symposium during 2020-2021 on Backlash and Fundamentalism emphasized that “efforts to realize gender equality and justice require an awareness of patriarchal backlash and its adaptability” and made a number of broad recommendations for future action by MenEngage in response to this awareness. Based on the consultations that this report summarizes, and the concerns, responses and needs highlighted, it is clear that these recommendations still very much apply. Given the time that has elapsed between the Ubuntu symposium and now, it is also clear that refining and operationalizing these recommendations is now a matter of urgency.

The following recommendations, taken from the Ubuntu Symposium summary report, provide future priorities and directions for the work of MenEngage, and accompanying each recommendation are suggestions for operationalizing it, based on the findings from this consultative process.

**Recommendation 1:** “Synthesize and share feminist critical analysis of anti-gender, men’s rights, and anti-feminist offensives globally.”

There is an evident need to strengthen a shared analysis and understanding across the Alliance of the complexities of patriarchal backlash and resistance and anti-gender organising. Some specific suggestions for meeting this need include:

- Use the CoLab online site as a place to both collate and annotate the growing body of research, analysis and commentary on patriarchal backlash and resistance and anti-gender organising. XY Online provides

a useful starting point for identifying and then selecting relevant research, analysis and commentary. Given its anglophone orientation, specific efforts should also be made to source relevant research, analysis and commentary in other major languages and make these available on the CoLab site. A system of keywording of documentation should be developed to allow easy search by region, theme and documentation type.

- Produce a monthly digest for circulation on the MenEngage listserv to support members to keep track of the growing body of research, analysis and commentary on patriarchal backlash and resistance and anti-gender organising. The digest would provide short summaries of new publications on backlash-related issues, and where possible provide links to publicly available sources for these publications. Once again, this digest should attempt to cover publications in major languages.

**Recommendation 2:** “Organize a learning initiative on how to better understand and respond to backlash from a feminist-informed and men and masculinities perspective.”

Participants in all the regional consultations made clear their interest in more structured learning opportunities to deepen their understanding of patriarchal backlash and of strategies in response. There was also widespread appreciation of the CoLab initiative as a process of peer learning and sharing. Given this, it is suggested that specific actions to organise such a learning initiative could be to:

Develop a two-track CoLab series on patriarchal backlash resistance, comprising 8-10 sessions each. Reflecting the different areas of work in which MenEngage members are involved, the two tracks would focus respectively on:

*Track 1:* Mobilizing men and boys for personal and social change

*Track 2:* Movement work for feminist systems change

Both tracks would include sessions on foundational topics and issues, e.g. Understanding Backlash - Key Concepts; Responding to Backlash - Principles and Emerging Lessons; Operating in Hostile Environments; and Documenting, Sharing and Learning from Change.

*Track 1* on “Mobilizing men and boys for personal and social change” could include specific sessions on: Prioritizing and Connecting with Men; Intersectional Work on Power, Privilege and Oppression; Skills Building for Personal and Social Change; and Changing the Narrative - Using Media for Personal and Social Change.

*Track 2* on “Movement work for feminist systems change” could include specific sessions on: Understanding Feminist Systems Change; Showing up as an Accountable Ally; MenEngage Roles in Movement Advocacy and Opposition Monitoring; and Changing the Narrative - Strategies to Change Male-Dominated Media Institutions.

Each CoLab track would be designed and led by MenEngage member organisations, with support from the Global Secretariat and, if formed, the Resisting Backlash Working Group (see below). Where needed, external expertise should also be brought in, e.g. in relation to narrative change work with media.

**Recommendation 3:** “Identify and share lessons from how members and partners are confronting men’s rights and conservative anti-feminist messaging and mobilization.”

Linked to the above, this CoLab learning initiative should draw on emerging lessons from members’ own ongoing work. Although it was beyond the scope of this consultative process, there is a clear need for a thorough mapping and documenting of current work, which should include:

- Documenting current strategies, challenges, impacts and lessons from members’ work on patriarchal backlash and resistance across all MenEngage regions;
- Gathering and shaping of stories of change to share not only internally but for use in different media formats to reach multiple external audiences; and
- Addressing language access issues by making the above available in major languages.

**Recommendation 4:** “Develop regional and global messages to counter anti-feminist narratives, including by elevating messages from members and partners doing such work.”

Across all of the regional consultations, participants expressed their interest in doing more to contribute to the work of the Advocacy Working Group, especially given the role that Regional and National Networks can play as conduits between local-level realities and global policy discourse and advocacy. Participants also identified a need for Regional and National Networks to be more active themselves in advocacy campaigns within regional fora and national policy processes. Given limited resources and MenEngage’s commitment to allyship within broader movements for gender justice (GJ) as well as social justice (SJ) movements more generally, it makes sense for Regional and National Networks to strengthen their own capacities to be stronger allies for movements in their respective contexts. This could include:

- Building skills and expertise in pro-feminist and pro-LGBTQI+ rights message development for different audiences of men that gender justice/ social justice movements can use in

their advocacy and campaigns work;

- Building skills and expertise in social media strategies to ‘change the narrative’ regarding masculinities, power and justice;
- Developing the technical and organisational capacities required for rapid online response to and rebuttal of misogynistic, homophobic and transphobic content, including misinformation and disinformation; and
- Linked to the above, strengthening the technical and organisational capacities required for the ongoing monitoring of anti-gender actors.

**Recommendation 5:** “Strengthen processes and structures within MenEngage to deliver these four recommendations.”

This fifth recommendation, not specified by the Ubuntu symposium report, relates to the internal processes and structures that need to be strengthened in order for the four recommendations above to be effectively implemented. Such internal processes and structures must operate across all levels of MenEngage operations from the national to the global, in order to ensure that there is collective leadership and Alliance-wide implementation of strategies to counter

backlash. Actions to advance this recommendation could include:

- Establishing a Resisting Backlash Working Group to oversee and coordinate MenEngage action on these four recommendations;
- Attracting new sources of funding to support this work that adds to rather than detracts from funding currently available for women’s rights and LGBTQI+ rights work - e.g. tech industry corporate social responsibility funding;
- Educating donors on the longterm nature of this work to resist backlash as well as on the need for collective, networked action at all levels;
- Continuing to strengthen young people’s leadership at all levels of the Alliance to ensure that MenEngage remains responsive, creative and effective; and
- Supporting Regional and National Networks to continue to grow their membership through strategic outreach and ensure that this expanded membership is fully aligned with MenEngage’s standards, principles and strategies through an enhanced induction process for new members.