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White Paper prepared for the Feminist Research Seminar,
"Opposition to the Political Participation of Women and Gender Justice Advocates:
Building a Feminist Research Agenda"
University of Michigan
October 19-22, 2017

Defining Backlash, Resistance, Opposition, and Violence

For those concerned with confronting injustice, resistance typically has positive connotations. The election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency, which arguably represents the rise of white nationalism, has fueled a progressive movement that defines itself as the resistance. Resistance activates and empowers new actors, as evidenced in headlines such as "How a New Generation of Progressive Activists is Leading the Trump Resistance" (Rolling Stone, August 24, 2017) and "The Trump Resistance Can Best Be Described in One Word: Female" (The Guardian, July 23, 2017). These few examples suggest that, on the whole, resistance is *desirable*: resistance allows those faced with exploitation, oppression, silencing, and other entrenched systems of inequality to find individual agency and advance social change. The academic literature seems to share this view, with scholars in the social sciences and humanities writing about resistance to unjust systems, from global capitalism to autocracy.

If actors who resist have morality on their side, then actors who oppose do not. In other words, unjust policies or systems are *resisted* by good actors, but just policies or systems are *opposed* by bad actors. On the one hand, this distinction makes sense: we speak of opposition to abortion and to gay marriage. On the other hand, this split seems too simple. *Opposition* too gets used for confronting injustice: the media also has written about "Six Degrees of Trump Opposition" (Fivethirtyeight, April 3, 2017) and "Nine Ways to Oppose Donald Trump" (The New Yorker, Dec 16, 2016). On the academic side, Kimberlé Crenshaw writes of the moral importance of opposition: "collective opposition to racist practice has been and continues to be crucially important in protecting Black interests" (1991, 1295). Ultimately, resistance and opposition appear not as antonyms, but as synonyms: both resistance and opposition aim to undermine or obstruct, irrespective of the moral aims.

Narrowing the focus to resistance and opposition to women in politics and the broader gender justice agenda, I argue that the real distinction lies between resistance/opposition, on the one side and backlash, on the other. Political scientists writing about women's political participation and representation (like myself) have been writing about resistance and opposition for decades. The concepts appear, either implicitly or explicitly, when we write about the structural and cultural barriers that prevent women from becoming political actors and the obstacles to passing policies that advance the rights of women and girls. These barriers are both severe and obvious (i.e., the absence of constitutional amendments or laws that recognize women and men as equal) as well as slight and subtle (i.e., the mansplaining that creates hostile work environments for women politicians). A core insight of gender and politics scholarships has been the persistence of institutions and practices that preserve the gendered distribution of power, even as this distribution gets challenged by the appearance of new actors, new ideas, and new

policies. For instance, women enter cabinets, legislatures, and c-suites—at the very moment that real power shifts out of these institutions and becomes concentrated in informal advisory groups or the figure of president, prime minister, or CEO. Resistance and opposition thus constitute the regular, expected push back against change—suggesting that *backlash* must mean something even more severe.

I distinguish between resistance/opposition and backlash because reactions to progressive change can constitute business as usual or extreme responses. Mechanisms that oppose and resist change are design features of systems of power and privilege: they are "baked in" to these systems, because systems' main objective is their own maintenance and reproduction. Consider, for example, the everyday sexism and routinized gender discrimination found in political parties worldwide. Women seeking to enter politics face countless hurdles: they do the support work (knocking on doors) while men do the technical work (writing policy), and they receive less recognition, fewer opportunities for advancement, and less prestigious posts and fewer resources when they *do* advance. All these inequalities function to keep politics the exclusive preserve of hegemonic men; they are the regular, relentless forms of resistance and opposition to women's political empowerment. The same resistance/opposition appears when considering appeals for gender justice more broadly. For instance, the Twitter hashtag #notallmen responds to feminists' claims about the normalization of sexual assault—and expressly rejects the notion that all men benefit from systems of sexual privilege. As women and gender justice advocates gain platforms and power in the public sphere, we should therefore expect to see such forms of resistance and opposition increase. Systems, and the actors benefiting from them, will resist alterations to the status quo.

If resistance and opposition constitute design features operating as usual, then backlash constitutes a reactionary response. Said another way, I conceive of resistance/opposition as *linear*, proportionate reactions to political and social change, and I conceive of backlash as *exponential*, a disproportionate response. Backlash movements do not seem content with just reverting to the status quo—they often want to over-correct, to revert even farther back. Think of the idealization of homemaking in the 1950s and, as French feminist Elisabeth Badinter (2012) would say, in the 1990s and 2000s. Women were gaining economic autonomy before they entered traditionally male fields during World War II and before they made greater inroads into white collar professions and upper management in the 1980s and 1990s. But those championing homemakers in the 1950s and stay-at-home-moms in the 1990s and 2000s did not argue that (mainly upper-class) women should return to their feminized or part-time occupations: they argued that women found fulfillment through a complete dedication to hearth and home. Likewise, moral panic over gender-neutral restrooms means not that social conservatives reject the TQIA+ that comes after LGB, but that they reject sexual equality entirely. In both these examples, backlash movements seek returning to a romanticized (and often imaginary) past, one where men and women had fixed traits and heterosexual roles. Resistance and opposition are status quo-preserving, but backlash is backward-looking.

Where does violence enter this conceptual schema? Resistance/opposition and backlash are similar in that they maintain, reproduce, and even recreate systems of injustice and oppression. But do all acts that reinforce injustice and oppression entail violence? Here, I draw on conceptual work by myself, Gabrielle Bardall, and Elin Bjarnegård (2017) to distinguish between existential violence and criminal violence. Patriarchy, heteronormativity, white supremacy—these are all systems of injustice and oppression. These systems are existentially violent, in that they preserve power and privilege for some while marginalizing and repressing

others. Marginalized groups living beneath these systems certainly experience the macro and microaggressions perpetrated within them as forms of violence. Yet not all acts that uphold existentially violent systems are themselves *criminally* violent.

When Twitter users post comments under #notallmen, they seek to silence women as a group. Some women may experience such resistance and opposition as distressing and even as symbolically violent, but these acts are not criminal. They are not aimed at discrete victims; as such, no clear path appears for either quantifying harm or pressing charges against the Tweeters. When female politicians endure or even crumble under the relentless indignities of everyday sexism, they experience the existential violence of misogyny—but quantifying the harm of any single microaggression appears an impossible task, as does calling any one perpetrator to account. In some circumstances, insults or harms do have identifiable perpetrators and victims, such as when a male party leader asks a particular female politician to fetch the coffee and take notes. But even here, these covert or subtle forms of resistance and opposition do not enact criminal violence. These practices demean individual women politicians and signal to all women politicians their second-class status, but their harms are no equivalent to sexual harassment, sexual assault, and femicide.

Bardall, Bjarnegård and I argue that polities must recognize and address the relentless harm caused by the more covert practices of resistance, opposition, and backlash. Nonetheless, we contend that doing so does *not* mean conflating acts that differ in degree simply because they resemble each other in kind. We do not deny that resistance, opposition, and backlash may entail criminally violence acts, as in the stalking and harassment of Gamergate journalists, the kidnapping and beatings of women council members in Bolivia, or the murder of gay or trans activists in Russia, Turkey, and parts of South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Rather, we argue that criminal violence is a form of manifesting resistance, opposition or backlash, rather than a constitutive feature of resistance, opposition, or backlash themselves.

Capturing, Measuring, and Responding to Resistance, Opposition, Backlash, and Violence

My definitions are crucially concerned with two analytic distinctions: separating regular phenomenon from extreme phenomenon, and empowering activists and state agents to effectively bring about change. The first concern relates to capturing and measuring, and the second to responding. However, I do see measuring and responding as intertwined: effective responses are conditioned upon separating the everyday forms of resistance/opposition from backlash movements and their tactics.

Indeed, backlash movements seem particularly prone to criminal violence. The stalking, harassment, assault, and killing of politically-active women and of gender justice advocates are not uncommon in terms of their frequency, but they are extreme in terms of their nature. Those who perpetrate these acts are not perpetrating the institutional forms of resistance/opposition that the literature on systematic discrimination would lead us to expect: they are not quietly moving power elsewhere, shutting down channels of influence, withholding resources, subtly reinforcing women's second-class status, or speaking over certain voices. Rather, perpetrators are using criminal violence to silence and ultimately erase those whose presence and/or demands challenge the status quo. States ought to recognize this distinction, and respond in kind.

States usually address systematic discrimination for reasons of sex, gender, race, and other identity markers through civil law, which holds institutions accountable for systematic resistance and opposition. In these contexts, the focus shifts away from perpetrators as "bad apples" and towards institutional cultures, practices, norms and rules. The severity of backlash,

by contrast, suggests that states might rely on criminal law, including hate crime statutes (where they are in place), in order to sanction individual perpetrators.

Hence the importance of not stretching "violence" so far that the distinction between civil offences and criminal offences becomes meaningless. When French MPs catcalled minister Cécile Duflot on the floor of parliament in July 2012, they certainly created a hostile work environment—but was this heckling resistance/opposition (everyday sexism) or backlash? And was it violent? Women politicians and commentators alike quickly took to social and traditional media to condemn the hecklers, illuminating how catcalling hinders women's political inclusion. In other words, gender justice advocates showed that a regularized practice—loudly "appreciating" women's appearance and dress—in fact constituted a form of resisting/opposing women's voices. Meaningful redress occurred without the state having to detain, charge, and sanction the individual heckler. While the state could have (and perhaps should have) required that the institution (in this case, parliament) offer further restorative or preemptive solutions, such remedies would be civil rather than criminal.

Measured responses to resistance/opposition appear especially urgent given research suggesting that gender justice advocates' very success with addressing systematic discrimination itself provokes backlash. In the United States, companies must give employees and managers anti-bias training, which includes admonitions against sexual discrimination and sexual harassment. Researchers have concluded that rather than just being ineffective, such trainings might actually cause harassment to *increase* (Bingham and Scherer 2001). (Again, the distinction appears between reverting to the status quo and moving even farther backward.) Attempts to overly-condemn, over-regulate, or over-litigate what those with power and privilege view as culturally-appropriate interactions between men and women can make sexist attitudes even more entrenched. The bridge from feeling oversaturated by feminist ire and tweeting "not all men" to rejecting and ultimately resenting any claims gender equality is not that far. Indeed, other research shows that such backlash can occur even among progressive or liberal audiences. Psychologists find that individuals supporting the right causes later use their "moral credentials" as license or permission to support the wrong cause: for instance, whites were more likely to favor the advancement of whites over blacks after they expressed support for Barack Obama (Effron, Cameron, and Monin 2009). Thus, the risk of inciting backlash becomes magnified if feminists argue that heckling Duflot is not simply uncivil, boorish and outdated, but *violent.*

In underscoring how easily resistance/opposition can become backlash, I do not mean that either feminists or the state should let the regularized practices of resistance/opposition proceed unchecked. Those fighting injustice should not cease their struggle simply because it makes the powerful resentful and prone to lashing out. Nor should the state not press criminal charges when they are clearly warranted, as in the countless examples wherein women politicians and gender justice activists are stalked, beaten, assaulted, and killed. Rather, feminists should frame the more mundane, not-criminally-violent practices of resistance/opposition carefully. Namely, feminists should avoid rhetoric that overly focuses on individual bad apples. They should avoid language and framing that suggests, whether intentionally or not, an over-reliance on state power to police, prevent, and sanction the myriad daily practices of discrimination. Labeling Trump a misogynist or a white supremacist has neither changed his behavior nor shaken the resolve of his loyal supporters. The focus on individual prejudice and bias as the main explanations for resistance/opposition has not cultivated many allies, who will respond with #notallmen and #notallwhitepeople. Further, doubling-down on this rhetoric with

demands for individual accountability before the state (as opposed to just before the institution) risks triggering backlash.

Shifting the conversation away from individual bad apples and towards institutional cultures of injustice and unfairness has more promise. For example, exercises cultivating empathy towards marginalized groups change behavior more than messages about how individuals enact or perpetrate prejudice, since the former imparts general knowledge while the latter shames people (Lindsey et al. 2015). Scholars writing on organizational change further stress that behavioral change comes before attitudinal change, because actors can alter how they treat marginalized groups before they update their beliefs about these groups' humanity or dignity (Kalinoski et al. 2013). Returning to the Cécile Duflot example, this research suggests that reformers who focus on the unfairness or inappropriateness of catcalling in a professionalized parliament will have more long-term success than those who argue that such behavior is inherently sexist and therefore morally wrong. Such an approach may feel tepid and unsatisfying to gender justice advocates, who remain committed to exposing and overturning the existential wrongness of oppression. But if changed behaviors provide the foundation on which changed attitudes eventually grow even firmer roots, then focusing on what works in practice seems more important than focusing on what resonates in theory. The stickiness of systems and institutions—and therefore of power and privilege—demand a more gradual and sustainable approach to change.

Differences that Mediate the Phenomena of Resistance, Opposition, Backlash, and Violence

As a comparative political scientist, I am deeply concerned with how context mediates these four phenomena. How can researchers or activists separate resistance/opposition, backlash, and violence against women politicians or gender justice advocates from unfair, oppressive, unjust, or violent practices in a polity more broadly? Said another way, the baseline norms that govern how politics unfold matter enormously.

My article contesting the term *violence against women in politics* makes this point in reference to the Mexican case (Piscopo 2016). Mexico suffers from shockingly high levels of organized crime. Drug cartels commonly extort, threaten, and assassinate local politicians; their intimidation and murder of police officers and journalists ensures that they operate with near-absolute impunity. In July 2016, the cartels killed Gisela Mota, a mayor in the violence-prone state of Morelos. Gender justice advocates calling attention to backlash against women's political participation promptly turned Mota's assassination into a *cause célèbre.* Yet Mota was killed in the same manner as male victims, just hours after delivering a speech wherein she vowed to eliminate corruption. Given the context, no evidence exists to suggest that Mota's killing was anything other than regularized cartel violence. Indeed, Mota's assassination offers a perverse indicator of gender equality: in places where politics is inherently violent, but where women's political participation is also increasing, more women will become targets and victims. Framing Mota's case as an instance of backlash against women politicians discounts and even trivializes how organized crime has fomented a governability crisis in Mexico.

Taking context seriously does not mean that resistance/opposition, backlash, and violence against women politicians and gender justice advocates cannot occur in authoritarian, ungovernable, or failed states. Rather, researches must distinguish practices or harms that aim to uphold systems and institutions of gender oppression, versus practices and harms that serve purely electoral, political, or regime-related ends (Bardall, Bjarnegård and Piscopo 2017). These

harms may occur separately (as in the Mexican example), but they could also occur together: for instance, all political dissidents in Russia face retaliation, but LGBTQ+ activists face more extreme persecution, precisely because their identity challenges the hegemonic masculinity and cultural populism upon which Vladimir Putin constructs his power. Further, harms with gendered dimensions are not equivalent to harms that oppress women or gender justice advocates *because* they are women or gender justice advocates. Cartel killings have gendered implications if Mexico's governability crisis dissuades men from entering politics and creates an opening for women (if men have more alternative paths to professional success than women, then they have greater opportunities to opt out of politics when politics becomes too dangerous). But cartels do not *set out* to kill women because they resent women in politics; cartels set out to kill politicians, some of whom happen to be women. Feminists harm their cause by stretching concepts such that context and precision are lost.

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