# COFEM

**Feminist Pocketbook**

# TIP SHEET #9:

## Backlash: What is it and how do we address it safely?

**The Coalition of Feminist for Social Change (COFEM), created in 2017 to reassert a feminist perspective in violence against women and girls (VAWG) work, is a collective of activists , academics, and practitioners working globally to end VAWG.**

This Tip Sheet is part of COFEM's Feminist Pocketbook. For access to the full Pocketbook go to: www.cofemsocialchange.org.

*Tip Sheet 9 provides guidance for understanding and addressing backlash and resistance to work on gender equality and the response to, and prevention of, gender-based violence.*

## Key points

- When we work to create gender equality and end gender-based violence (GBV), we often face backlash, or push back, from individuals and systems that benefit from the patriarchal status quo.

- Backlash includes the harassment or aggression feminist activists experience when they challenge unequal power structures and male violence against women.

- Backlash affects the mental and physical wellbeing of GBV practitioners and can discourage others from working on these issues.

- Strategies to foresee and respond to backlash, such as framing, organisational or teaching strategies, can help to reduce the likelihood and consequences of backlash.

## What is the issue?

The movement to create gender equality and end GBV challenges established patriarchal structures. Our work can result in backlash and other forms of resistance when those in power seek to maintain existing gender relations and male privilege. This resistance can come not only from individuals, but entire systems that aim, directly or indirectly, to sustain a structure that serves those in power. In the context of feminist movement building and the prevention of GBV, backlash includes implicit or explicit attempts to block activism, programming and other activities that reflect change to the status quo.

Backlash tends to occur most frequently when the force of our activism begins to change existing patriarchal systems and structures and cause those who benefit from patriarchy to resist. Sometimes backlash can be active or direct; other times, backlash can be inadvertent or comprise passive or implicit attempts to maintain the status quo. For example, women may also seek to maintain the status quo regardless of whether it benefits them, due to societal conditioning; familiarity of the status quo; internalised misogyny and sexism; or other reasons. In a way, backlash and resistance reflect that our work to achieve gender equality is having an impact and gaining credibility and acceptance in the broader community beyond the GBV field.

## Why does this matter?

Backlash against feminist-informed programming and activism has a long history. By anticipating backlash — and strategising how to manage it — we can mitigate the risks to our programmes and selves. Because backlash affects the mental and physical wellbeing of GBV practitioners and can discourage others from working on these issues, it is important that we address backlash to support the safety of others and ourselves.

## What are different types of backlash?

There are different forms of backlash and resistance. Backlash can include verbal or online harassment as well as physical or sexual abuse in an attempt to 'put feminists back in their place.' It also includes more subtle or hidden forms of resistance that serve to buttress patriarchal systems and institu-

### Dealing with online backlash
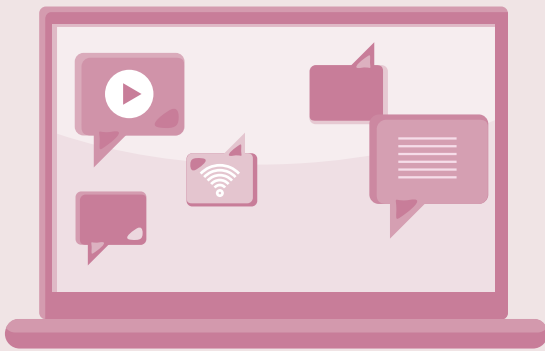
Online platforms can attract backlash such as 'trolling', where someone may comment or post something inflammatory or harmful to provoke a response. This can create additional trauma for survivors when their experiences are questioned or invalidated. It also can be harmful for organisational staff responsible for online communications who may feel attacked or worn down.

If content is being shared online, establish a survivor-centred policy for moderating comments and responses to posts about GBV, gender equality and feminism. Take a 'head, heart and hands' approach (facts, empathy, action) that aims to influence online and media discussions positively through evidence, emotional connections and practical actions. Determine guidelines and boundaries for the online space; who is responsible for moderating online discussions; what constitutes unacceptable behaviour or content; the process for removing or responding to harmful and negative comments or blocking users; and adequate support measures for staff dealing with the online backlash.

**Figure 1. Conceptualising the spectrum of backlash and resistance to gender equality and GBV prevention**

**1 Denial**
"*There is no problem here.*"
Denial of the problem or the credibility of the case for change. Blame the victims.

**2 Disavowal**
"*It's not my job to do something about it.*"
Refusal to recognise responsibility.

**3 Inaction**
"*It's not a priority right now.*"
Refusal to implement a change initiative.

**4 Appeasement**
"*Yes. Yes. We must do something (one day).*"
Efforts to placate or pacify those advocating for change in order to limit its impact.

**5 Appropriation**
"*Of course we'd appoint more women, if only they were more experienced.*"
Simulating change while covertly undermining it.

**6 Co-option**
"*What about men's rights? Men are victims too, you know.*"
Using the language of progressive frameworks and goals for reactionary ends.

**7 Repression**
"*We tried that once and women didn't want to take up the promotion/ training/opportunity.*"
Reversing or dismantling a change initiative.

**8 Backlash**
"*These feminists deserve all the abuse they get.*"
Aggressive, attacking response.

Adapted from VicHealth. (2018). (En)countering Resistance: Strategies to Respond to Resistance to Gender Equality Initiatives, Melbourne: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation.

tions, such as the exclusion of women's leadership and decision-making from male-dominated development and humanitarian agencies. Backlash may also reflect other types of oppression; for example, women of colour who engage in feminist activism may experience abuse and/or harassment that targets both their race and gender.

Gender mainstreaming that increasingly favours 'gender-sensitive' programming over explicit work towards gender equality — which was the original point of gender mainstreaming — is an example of backlash. The shift to expanded, depoliticised definitions of GBV also represents a type of resistance[1]; co-opting the language of GBV to re-assert men's priorities and perspectives has the effect of inserting the needs and concerns of men in women-specific spaces.

## What are key strategies for addressing backlash?

Experiences from other social movements, such as gun reform and environmental protection, show that facts and figures about the nature of a problem do not always change minds or prevent backlash among those opposed to the movement. Often those opposed to a message are motivated by personal reasons and/or are influenced by the social norms in their community and may reject fact-based arguments.

The strategies below provide effective ways to prepare for and manage backlash at different levels.

**Framing strategies:** Strategically articulate, communicate or 'frame' the issue and explain why it is important. For example, the issue of gender equality can be argued from a moral or ethical perspective ('gender equality is fair and right'), a human development perspective ('gender equality is good for everyone') or an economic perspective ('gender equality is good for business'). It is important to consider the risk of using frames that speak only to women and girls' utility; for example, economic perspectives should also be supported by rights-based language.

**Organisational strategies:** Be clear on how you involve leaders, individuals and groups, and advocate for organisational policies, practices and structures that support individuals and groups who speak out. When individuals feel supported by their organisations to take on diversity and equality issues, these initiatives will face less backlash and are more likely to succeed.

**Community strategies:** Build solidarity and alliances with other feminist organisations. Strong feminist networks can facilitate aligned strategies on how to deal with incidents of backlash and plan for anticipated backlash before it occurs.

**Teaching and learning strategies:** Teaching or training is a valuable tool to increase awareness about, and engagement with, issues of gender equality. Teaching is more effective in minimising backlash when it is reflective and experiential, framed in a positive way, supported by the broader organisation, and fosters a supportive space for discussion.

**Individual self-care strategies:** As individuals working in this field, it is important to identify allies, prioritise self-care and focus our efforts on those we can influence. The work we do can be exhausting and unforgiving. Dealing with backlash can have serious impact on health and wellbeing. Patriarchy and inequality flourish by breaking

### Case study: The International Rescue Committee

In 2016, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), a leading NGO for GBV programming in humanitarian settings, restructured its stand-alone Women's Protection and Empowerment (WPE) technical unit despite clear opposition from many WPE staff who demonstrated consistently the value and tangible impacts that a concentrated focus and prioritisation of women and girls' protection and empowerment had achieved within IRC programming and the wider humanitarian sector. WPE programming shifted from being the sole focus of a dedicated technical unit that included a senior director and over 30 VAWG specialists to being one of four areas of work in a new Violence Prevention and Response Unit (VPRU), with reduced resources for research, innovation and advocacy — and WPE's ability to represent itself within IRC at the same level as other technical units. In 2018, only 9 of over 50 VPRU staff have a WPE mandate. Despite the curtailing of the WPE technical unit, programme teams across the world continue to deliver protection and empowerment services to women and girls in humanitarian crises, and allies across the organisation maintain activism and advocacy with senior leadership to recreate space for an explicitly feminist and transformational agenda within IRC humanitarian action.

[1] See Tip Sheet 2, Why does GBV programming focus on women and girls?

03

down self-esteem and encouraging internal divisions within the feminist movement. Self-care, strong partnerships and supportive organisations and allies are vital to prevent burnout and maintain momentum.

## Practical tips

### Practitioners, researchers, donors and policy-makers

• Build solidarity with fellow activists to collectively mitigate and address backlash against work to promote gender equality and end GBV.

• Create environments that support respectful discussions among people with various backgrounds, including those who are — and are not — affiliated with feminist movements.

• Listen to and learn from local and national women's rights and other relevant organisations.

### Practitioners and researchers

• Anticipate and monitor for backlash and develop strategies to mitigate backlash throughout the programme cycle.

• Include community leaders from the start of GBV programmes, as they can be powerful voices to support or resist change.

• Engage entire communities — men, women, boys and girls — from the start of any programming.

• Meet people at their comfort level in conversations around gender equality, and work with communities to develop dialogue at their pace.

### Policy-makers and donors

• Advocate for women-centred and women-led framing of the issue, discourse, strategies and resources around GBV.

• Lead by example by developing gender mainstreaming systems to advance gender equality within organisations and institutions.

| Feminist Pocketbook | 01 | 02 | 03 | 04 | 05 | 06 | 07 | 08 | **09** | 10 |

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