



Anti-Gender Movements

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The aim of this policy brief is to compare anti-gender mobilisations in Colombia and Poland, and to reflect on what these tell us about the rapid rise of anti-gender movements worldwide.

Key takeaways

Despite varied regional contexts, anti-gender mobilisations in Poland and Colombia have startling similarities.

- In both instances, anti-gender rhetoric has been used to mobilise voters and gain support for conservative parties and policies.
- As in other national contexts, opposition to comprehensive sexuality education in schools, women's reproductive rights, and same-sex marriage and adoption have provided the starting point for anti-gender movements, which have then branched out to encompass a range of issues.
- While appealing to fears of globalisation and changing demographics, anti-gender actors portray the rights of women and those outside the hegemonic sex-gender order as threats to democracy. In doing so, they misconstrue feminism, which is based on the values of equality and non-oppression of all, framing it as a harmful ideology.
- The anti-gender movement's misconstrual of feminist ideas is not a defense of democracy, but represents a threat to it – endangering the rights of women and those whose gender identity and sexual orientation do not fit into hegemonic discourse.

INTRODUCTION

A transnational movement has emerged that is pushing back on women's and LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) rights. In Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere, conservative actors are increasingly vocal in opposition to issues such as women's reproductive rights, same-sex marriage and adoption, and comprehensive sexuality education. Such actors often define their target as "gender ideology" – a catchall phrase under whose banner conservative actors systematically misrepresent insights from feminist theory and gender studies in order to mobilise constituents.

Feminism seeks to promote gender equality and advance the rights of women and people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics. It fights not only against oppression based on gender and sexual orientation, but also on race, class and other status distinctions. Having emerged from the feminist movement, gender studies explore how difference and inequality based on gender and other status distinctions are reproduced in society and culture. Both feminism and gender studies are committed to establishing less oppressive, more equal and inclusive societies. They thus seek to advance basic democratic values. The attack on feminism and gender studies constitutes an attack on such values.

BACKGROUND

When anthropologists introduced the term "gender ideology" in the 1980s, they sought to describe the unequal gender orders they observed in societies around the world. But when used by anti-feminist movements, the term has come to mean something quite different. The Vatican appropriated the term in response to the focus on women's rights and gender at the Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 and the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Seeking to undermine insights of feminist scholars who defined gender as a social construction different from sex (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017), it re-framed their scholarship as a harmful "ideology" disconnected from science and nature (Corrêa 2017).

Since coming into common usage in Europe in 2012 and Latin America in 2016, the term "gender ideology" has been adopted by a range of actors, including right-wing politicians and catholic and evangelical preachers who deploy the figure to mobilise support for conservative and populist agendas. They frame feminism and the concept of gender as threats to society and traditional family values, presenting themselves as protectors of democracy against, among other things, "cultural colonisation" from international bodies, neoliberalism, and changing demographics from increased levels of migration. In nearly all contexts, anti-feminist movements frame themselves as the oppressed and silenced majority, and often adopt the language of rights – referring to the right to life when speaking of abortion and to parents' rights to educate their children about sex and sexuality based on faith-based values when countering comprehensive sexuality education.

This brief focuses on the cases of Poland and Colombia to illustrate how anti-feminist actors use the term "gender ideology" in two distinct contexts. With regard to sources, it relies on an increasingly large set of research

on anti-gender movements and on the usage of the term "gender ideology", as well as news reports and primary sources.

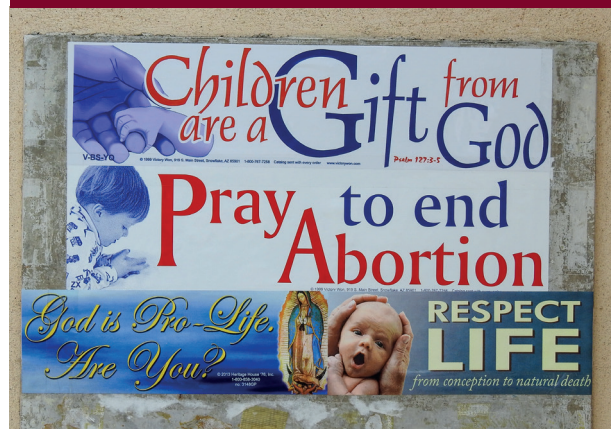
POLAND

In the run-up to the 2015 parliamentary elections, the Polish Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) utilised "gender ideology" messaging along with anti-European Union and anti-migrant sentiment to gain popular support and establish Poland's most conservative government since the move to democracy in 1989. In the recent October 2019 elections, the PiS government again demonised the LGBTI community to gain popular support, resulting in a win for the conservative party.

"Gender ideology" rhetoric began in Poland in 2012 around the ratification of the Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention). Opponents of the Convention claimed that the inclusion of gender was a form of cultural colonialism that posed a threat to the traditional family (Grzebalska 2015; Graff and Korolczuk 2018). Such rhetoric continued in 2013 when the World Health Organization issued recommendations related to sex education in Polish schools (Grzebalska 2015), leading opponents to claim that the proposed changes would result in the oversexualisation of children (Graff and Korolczuk 2018). Shortly thereafter, the Polish Catholic Church used anti-gender sentiment as a means to distract from reports of pedophilia and the subsequent public outcry, with the church issuing statements that linked "gender ideology" and feminism with "incest, pedophilia and homosexuality" and equated it with "communism and Nazism" (Graff and Korolczuk 2017).

Figure 1

Anti-abortion, pro-life stickers next to a Catholic church in Warsaw



Source: @ Dan Shachar / Shutterstock.com, 2019

Since coming into power in 2015, the PiS has repeatedly attacked sexual and reproductive rights in the country, including multiple attempts to ban abortion in almost all cases, ending state funding for in vitro fertilisation, restricting access to emergency contraception, limiting state funding to women's rights organisations, and arguing for the removal of gender studies programs. Even while harming women's rights, the government

claimed to support women, narrowly understood as mothers, highlighting their importance in Polish society via pro-natalist policies. In addition to attacks on gender-based rights, the PiS government also enacted a set of regressive reforms, which have, among other things, limited the freedom of media, interfered with judicial independence, and curtailed freedom of association (Human Rights Watch 2017).

Figure 2

March against the tightening of the abortion law in Warsaw, Poland



Source: @ Mallagossa / Shutterstock.com, 2018

In the leadup to the October 2019 elections, the PiS party narrowed previous “gender ideology” rhetoric to focus more specifically on the LGBTI community. Throughout the campaign, the party presented LGBTI individuals as a threat to children and an imposition of Western values, and even included countering “LGBTI ideology” as part of the party platform. Prominent catholic bishops echoed this harmful rhetoric, with the archbishop of Kraków referring to LGBTI persons as a “rainbow plague” (Chadwick 2019). Following the election victory, PiS parliamentarians proposed a law that would criminalise comprehensive sexuality education in the country, including jail time for educators, organisations and others who provide information about sexuality and reproductive health to minors (Margolis 2019). Members of the European Parliament condemned the proposed law, highlighting that a lack of age-appropriate information about sexuality and sex can make children and teens more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse (European Parliament News 2019).

COLOMBIA

In Colombia, misinformation about gender played a role in the rejection of the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC). In the weeks leading up to the October 2016 plebiscite, those in opposition to the peace accord encouraged voters to reject the agreement on the grounds that it contained “gender ideology” and that it

posed a threat to the Colombian family. In fact, the peace agreement was the first to include a gender-based approach as a guiding principle, intended to address the distinct ways in which the conflict impacted women and LGBTI persons, among other disadvantaged groups (Mazzoldi, Cuesta and Álvarez Vanegas 2016).

Months prior to the plebiscite, anti-gender rhetoric materialised in Colombia in the debate against a new anti-bullying curriculum. The curriculum, which was developed by the Ministry of Education and UNESCO and ordered by the Colombian Supreme Court, aimed to decrease discrimination based on sexual orientation in schools after a teenage boy committed suicide as a result of being bullied by the school administration because of his sexual orientation. Those opposed to the curriculum portrayed the reforms as an attempt to force “gender ideology” onto children and organised protests across the country, leading to the resignation of the Minister of Education. In the following months, opposition to the peace agreement co-opted popular anger from the education debate to mobilise against the peace accord, equating a “Yes” in the referendum to supporting “gender ideology” (Viveros 2017). The message spread quickly via social and traditional media and was amplified with the support of pastors and well-known figures from the catholic and evangelical churches.

Shortly after the referendum failed, President Santos met with Christian leaders to discuss changes to the accord. While the gender-based approach remains in the agreement, numerous changes were made at the behest of Christian churches, including focusing the agreement on the traditional family structure, replacing gender-based concepts with sex-based ones (such as changing “gender violence” to “violence against women”), and limiting references to LGBTI persons, instead referring to them as “vulnerable groups” (Mazzoldi and Cuesta 2017). Since taking office in August 2018, President Duque has made attempts to derail the implementation of the peace agreement, jeopardising peace and leaving the rights of women and LGBTI persons affected by the conflict anything but secure.

CONCLUSION

The portrayal of feminism and gender studies as an ideology is associated with fears about the disruption of traditional gender orders and constitutes a willful distortion of complex insights about the way gender, sex, and sexuality work in society. In spreading falsehoods about feminism, LGBTI rights, and comprehensive sexuality education, anti-gender movements pose a major threat to democracy and the human rights of women, sexual minorities, and gender non-conforming individuals.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle Gallo is currently finishing her master’s degree in Development Studies at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. Her research and work focus largely on gender and migration. Her thesis centers on strategies used by activists and non-profit organisations for advancing gender and reproductive health and rights in Latin America and Europe amidst attacks by conservative actors.

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HOW TO CITE

Gallo, Michelle. 2019. Anti-Gender Movements. Gender Centre Research Brief 2/2020. Geneva: Gender Centre, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.

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The Gender Centre

seeks to advance solutions to pervasive problems of gender injustice, discrimination and exclusion drawing on the tools of social science analysis. Its goals are to generate knowledge on the workings of gender in development and international relations that will help advance social and gender justice on a global scale.

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