

Unpacking “Gender Ideology” and the Global Right’s Antigender Countermovement

In 2011, eighty French MPs of the Union for a Popular Movement employed right-wing gender ideology rhetoric to oppose new biology textbooks that defined gender as socially constructed rather than biologically predetermined (Le Bars 2011; Fillod 2014; Brustier 2015).¹ Opponents called gender theory a “totalitarian ideology, more oppressive and pernicious than the Marxist ideology” and asserted that it “risks destabilizing young people and adolescents and altering their development” (Le Bars 2011). Analogous language later reappeared in France between 2013 and 2014 in debates concerning same-sex marriage and reproductive assistance for LGBTQ+ couples (Fillod 2014; Brustier 2015). While same-sex marriage was eventually approved, measures for alternative reproductive procedures and adoption for LGBTQ+ couples were denied. Additionally, a scholastic gender equality program called the “ABCD of Equality,” which was intended to support teachers in addressing gender stereotyping in schools, was canceled (Penketh 2014; Brustier 2015). The antigender mobilizations in France stimulated similar campaigns across Europe, all rooted in gender ideology rhetoric. In Italy, Croatia, Spain, Hungary, Poland, Ukraine, Germany, Austria, and Slovakia, programs and legislation that sought to enhance gender and sexual equality have faced significant resistance and, in many cases, have been abandoned.²

Latin America appears to be the latest battleground as gender ideology backlash has entered political debates in Mexico, Brazil, Peru, Guatemala,

I would like to thank Mona Lena Krook, Cynthia Daniels, Mary Hawkesworth, and Therese A. Dolan for their careful readings of preliminary drafts of this article. I am grateful for their generosity with their time and scholarly expertise, as their insights and encouragement for this project greatly inspired and informed my research. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

¹ Critiques of gender ideology have a long history in Western feminism. Theorists from Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stewart Mill to Shulamith Firestone and Sandra Bartky have decried the manipulation of ideas about gender to subordinate women. In this article, I am not concerned with those telling critiques. My focus is a new conceptualization of gender ideology as an explicit means to criticize feminist and LGBTQ+ ideas and policies.

² See Graff (2014), Paternotte (2014), Anić (2015), Blum (2015), Juhász (2015), Korolczuk (2015), Kuhar (2015), Mađarová (2015), Garbagnoli (2016), Kováts (2017), and Kuhar and Zobec (2017).

Chile, Argentina, and Colombia. As in Europe, the debates in Latin America focus primarily on policies concerning sex education, antibullying in schools, and LGBTQ+ rights. For example, in September 2016, tens of thousands of protestors mobilized in Mexico to oppose gender ideology in schools as well as same-sex marriage (Winters 2016). Colombian Evangelical and Catholic churches adopted a gender ideology platform to thwart an antibullying program that sought greater tolerance for gender-variant identities in schools. Capitalizing on their success, the mobilized masses in Colombia subsequently turned their attention to the nation's peace negotiations, which were set to end a fifty-two-year-long civil war. With the assistance of the global community, Colombia was poised to become the first country to include LGBTQ+ protections in its peace agreement. However, just weeks before the nation was set to vote on whether or not to accept the proposed peace agreement, right-wing politicians and Evangelical churches rapidly organized and made claims that the peace accord was "being used as an instrument to impose gender ideology" (Ordóñez 2016). On October 2, 2016, the Colombian people narrowly rejected the peace agreement, and in the days following, fourteen church leaders met with the Colombian president to discuss revisions pertaining to the peace accord's "gender focus" (Cosoy 2016a, 2016b).

The sudden explosion of this antigender backlash has led scholars from varying disciplines to examine the policy implications of gender ideology rhetoric within specific national contexts.³ Yet claims concerning gender ideology also circulate transnationally (Korolczuk 2015; Paternotte and Kuhar 2017). In this article, I examine antigender campaigns as palpable transnational countermovements and their use of gender ideology as salient counterstrategies to feminist and LGBTQ+ social movements. I contend that countermovement theory is a compelling framework for studying national and supranational antigender movements and strategies because it shows that recent antigender activity transcends isolated and uncoordinated instances of resistance and instead operates within distinct and coordinated countermovements to defeat feminist and LGBTQ+ policy. This framework furthermore unveils how antigenderism and its adoption of gender ideology rhetoric is first and foremost an epistemological response to emancipatory claims about sex, gender, and sexuality, and second, a political mechanism used to contain policy developments associated with feminist and queer agendas.

This essay is organized into four parts. The first section provides historical context for what the global Right has characterized as a threatening gender

³ See Graff (2014), Anić (2015), Kuhar (2015), Maďarová (2015), Robcis (2015), Fassin (2016), Garbagnoli (2016), Viveros Vigoya (2016a), Graff and Korolczuk (2017), and Kuhar and Zobeč (2017).

ideology and proposes a definition that captures the potency and elasticity of this concept. The second section offers a brief overview of movement-counter movement theory. The third section analyzes the rise of the global Right's antigender counter movement within a framework of four prevailing conditions for counter movement activity. The final section examines gender ideology as a leading counter strategy for thwarting feminist and LGBTQ+ policy and rallying public support by capitalizing on deep divisions within feminist and LGBTQ+ circles. As the following discussion makes clear, the global Right includes but is not limited to the Catholic Church, Evangelical Christians, conservative Muslims, right-wing politicians, as well as politically and socially conservative think tanks and organizations.

Origins and definition of gender ideology

Gender ideology rhetoric surfaced in response to feminist and LGBTQ+ movement gains made during the UN World Conferences in the early 1990s on issues concerning reproductive rights, gender mainstreaming of international policy, and sexuality. Early use of the term "gender ideology" can be traced to the Vatican. In 2001, Pope John Paul II declared that "misleading concepts concerning sexuality and the dignity and mission of the woman" are driven by "specific ideologies on 'gender.'" In 2002, the Vatican's Pontifical Council for the Family asserted that a "feminist ideology . . . known as 'gender'" has led to a misunderstanding of the complementary difference between man and woman and "a growing confusion about sexual identity" that "complicates the assumption of roles and the sharing of tasks in the home." In 2003, the Pontifical Council for the Family published its *Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions*, a compendium of articles that clarifies the Holy See's stance on issues concerning family and life. In the chapter "An Ideology of Gender: Dangers and Scope," Bishop Óscar Alzamora Revoredo (2003, 465) claims that gender ideology "affirm[s] that differences between men and women, beyond the obvious and not anatomical ones, do not correspond to a fixed nature, but are products of the culture of a certain country or epoch." In other words, this nefarious theory disrupts the moral fabric of society because it encourages everyone to "invent" him/herself" (Alzamora Revoredo 2003, 465) by erasing differences between men and women, promoting homosexuality, and inciting gender confusion.⁴

⁴ See Fassin (2011, 2016), Fillod (2014), Anić (2015), Kováts and Petó (2017), and Paternotte and Kuhar (2017).

Feminist and LGBTQ+ advocates and scholars have recognized the right-wing use of gender ideology as a rhetorical device created by the Vatican to counter gender and sexual equality policy.⁵ Catholic actors are not the only opponents who have leveraged this rhetoric for political purposes, however (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017). In Latin America, Evangelical Protestants and right-wing politicians have deployed gender ideology discourse pejoratively to advance political goals (Cosoy 2016b; *La Semana* 2016; *El Tiempo* 2016). Conservative organizations such as the American College of Pediatricians have also entered the debate, calling gender ideology harmful for children (Cretella, Van Meter, and McHugh 2017).⁶ In addition to serving as a political instrument, gender ideology functions as an epistemological counter to feminist and queer theorizations of gender (Buss 1998; Garbagnoli 2016; Paternotte and Kuhar 2017). Gender ideology can thus be conceptualized as a rhetorical counterstrategy that aims, first, to refute claims concerning the hierarchical construction of the raced, gendered, and heterosexual order; second, to essentialize and delegitimize feminist and queer theories of gender; third, to frustrate global and local gender mainstreaming efforts; fourth, to thwart gender and LGBTQ+ equality policies; and finally to reaffirm heteropatriarchal conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality.⁷

Movement-counter-movement theory

Examinations of antigender campaigns that deploy gender ideology propaganda often focus on specific national contexts, investigating domestic political dynamics and the campaign's effects on gender and sexual equality initiatives.⁸ This work provides important comparative insight into framing strategies,

⁵ See Robcis (2015), Bracke and Paternotte (2016), Garbagnoli (2016), and Viveros Vigoya (2016a).

⁶ The American College of Pediatricians (ACP) is a socially conservative organization founded in 2002 by health care professionals who opposed adoption by gay couples. The ACP consists of 200–500 members and has been categorized as an anti-LGBT hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center. The ACP is distinct from, yet often confused with, the American Academy of Pediatrics, a 64,000-member national organization of qualified pediatricians and health care professionals.

⁷ See Robcis (2015), Bracke and Paternotte (2016), Fassin (2016), Garbagnoli (2016), Viveros Vigoya (2016a), and Paternotte and Kuhar (2017).

⁸ See Graff (2014), Anić (2015), Kuhar (2015), Mađarová (2015), Robcis (2015), Fassin (2016), Garbagnoli (2016), Viveros Vigoya (2016a), Graff and Korolczuk (2017), and Kuhar and Zobeč (2017).

repertoires of contention, political opportunities, and mobilizing structures that are used on both sides of the gender debate (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996, Tarrow 2001). Scholars have also explored the role of the Catholic Church and its influence in mobilizing against feminist and LGBTQ+ policies, highlighting the Church's role as the primary movement entrepreneur and ongoing architect of antigenderism.⁹ As I note above, gender ideology rhetoric has since captured the imagination of a wide range of conservative actors well beyond the Church. Moreover, gender ideology serves as both a political and epistemological counterclaim to emancipatory conceptions of gender, sex, and sexuality. Countermovement theory offers valuable insights to account for the emergence and global circulation of this anti-gender phenomenon.

Social movement theory burgeoned in the latter half of the twentieth century following a boom of collective action in the 1960s. Scholarship on countermovements subsequently followed in the seventies and eighties, arguing that collective action organized in opposition to existing social movements constituted movements in their own right. Movement-countermovement theory insists that we cannot fully understand social movements without examining their countermovements since the interplay between the two influences strategy and resources on both sides. Simply put, social movements tell us a great deal about their opposition, and vice versa.¹⁰

Social movements are typically conceived in relation to two necessary conditions: collective action and a common purpose to promote social and/or political change. Social movements involve a constellation of social actors, networks, and organizations that mobilize to redress grievances, voluntarily coming together with some degree of common purpose to engage in continuing and dialectic interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities (McAdam 1982; Tarrow 2011).

Countermovements emerge when existing social movements demonstrate potential and/or actual success in their efforts to “influence policy, alter political alignments, and raise the public profile and salience of particular issues” (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996, 1634). Because the driving motivation of a social movement is to challenge the status quo and disrupt entrenched power structures (Mansbridge and Shames 2008), defenders of the existing order often mobilize to protect the systems that uphold their

⁹ See Kuhar (2015), Robcis (2015), Fassin (2016), and Kuhar and Paternotte (2017).

¹⁰ See Tilly (1977), Mottl (1980), McAdam (1983), Lind and Stepan-Norris (2011), and Fadaee (2014).

position of privilege. Coalitions devised to defend an existing or imagined social order combine resources to sustain a countermovement.

Countermovements, like social movements, involve collective action and united purpose. The most salient difference is that countermovements organize in opposition to and in an effort to defeat an existing social movement (Lo 1982; Turner and Killian 1987; Lind and Stepan-Norris 2011). As a collective that opposes social change (Mottl 1980; Zald and Useem 1983), countermovements may seek to eliminate social movement activists or reverse policy and cultural gains associated with a social movement's goals and objectives (Gale 1986; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Fadaee 2014). A countermovement, then, is a constellation of social actors, networks, and organizations of shared concern that make sustained contrary claims to an opposing social movement's objectives and involve continuing, dialectical interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities (McAdam 1982; Gale 1986; Busemeyer 2009). In this article, feminist and LGBTQ+ movements that promote gender and sexual equality policy serve as the protagonist social movements. Antigender movements that oppose gender and sexual equality policies serve as the antagonist countermovements.

Four fundamental conditions give rise to countermovement activity. The first condition is the presence of a social movement that seeks to challenge existing power arrangements in some capacity (Zald and Useem 1983; Turner and Killian 1987; Fadaee 2014). The second condition necessitates that a privileged collective perceive its interests as threatened by the values, actions, and objectives of the existing social movement. The third condition is that the existing social movement must either demonstrate signs of policy success or be perceived as achieving or likely to achieve its social change objectives. The fourth condition is that opponents of the social movement must have political allies and an ability to procure resources to support its countermobilization (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996).

Once countermovements emerge, they engage in counterstrategies to undermine the progress of social movements and exert epistemological control over the points of contention. Toward that end, they make "competing claims on the state on matters of policy and politics and vie for attention from the mass media and broader public" (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996, 1632; see also Lind and Stepan-Norris 2011). Here, antigender campaigns have adopted gender ideology rhetoric as a primary counterstrategy to mobilize support, neutralize feminist and LGBTQ+ social movements, and gain ontological control over the concept of gender. As discussed in later sections, the potency of this counterstrategy is in the global Right's frequent coupling of gender ideology with rhetoric that exploits deep divisions within feminist and LGBTQ+ social movements.

Historical rise of antigenderism within a countermovement framework

Threatening presence of an existing social movement

Antigender countermovements emerged in direct response to feminist and queer attempts to insert new understandings of gender, sex, and sexuality into international policy. Indeed, feminist and LGBTQ+ social movements have been mobilizing since the nineteenth century, challenging social norms and existing power structures in a multitude of ways. Additionally, conservative politicians and religious organizations have regularly organized to oppose their agendas and challenge their progress. Antigenderism and its gender ideology rhetoric, however, are an explicit counter to the epistemological turn within feminist and queer discourse and to attempts among feminists to reconceptualize and operationalize gender into international policy.

Although gender as a construct in medical and anthropological circles has been traced to the early twentieth century, feminist and queer theorists and activists radically transformed the concept from its normative, descriptive origins to an analytical tool and a cultural appropriation (Harding 1986; Scott 1986; Viveros Vigoya 2016b). Conceptualizing gender as something learned, acquired, and to some, performed, feminists challenged well-established modes of knowledge production and political processes that had been replete with “‘unquestionable’ axioms about gender,” which according to Mary Hawkesworth (1997, 649), include the beliefs that there are two and only two genders, that gender is invariant, that genitals are the essential signs of gender, that the male/female dichotomy is natural, that masculinity and femininity are natural traits, and that all individuals should be classified as masculine or feminine.¹¹

Throughout the seventies and eighties, feminists argued that scientific theory was fraught with conscious and unconscious cultural biases and that biological and psychological normality were constructed around an elite white European male subject. Androcentric norms were then used to “govern our concepts of human development and influence the language used to explain them” (Fausto-Sterling 1987, 67).¹² It was thus argued that fixed differentiation between the sexes, compulsory heterosexuality, and the political systems that depended upon them were inventions of eighteenth-century science (Laqueur 1986; Butler 1990). These ideas influenced developments

¹¹ See also Rubin (1975), Kessler and McKenna (1978), Chodorow (1985), Butler (1986, 1990, 1992), and Gilligan (1993).

¹² See also Miller (1976), Kessler and McKenna (1978), Chodorow (1985), Flax (1987), Gilligan (1993), and Fisher (2011).

in feminist theory and provided the impetus for the emergence of queer theory in the 1990s, which sought to destabilize false binaries of identity related to sex, gender, and sexuality (Sedgwick 1990). Rejecting the idea that gender is determined by biological sex and that heterosexuality necessarily follows from sexual dimorphism, feminist and queer theorists and activists challenged received philosophical and scientific views and lobbied for changes in a host of laws that regulated and constrained gender-variant bodies, identities, and aspirations.

With increasing globalization in the latter half of the twentieth century, transnational advocacy networks proliferated.¹³ Transnational advocacy networks offered vital space for both feminist and LGBTQ+ advocates to develop their support base, expand their political networks, and effect policy change. Capitalizing on shifting political opportunity structures (Kitschelt 1986; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996), these global networks organized with unprecedented force, most dramatically around the UN World Conferences on Women between 1975 and 1985, “the Decade for Women.” In the early 1990s, feminist and LGBTQ+ transnational advocacy networks continued their work at other (presumably gender-neutral) UN world conferences on the environment, human rights, and population prior to their huge turnout at the 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing. Through these transnational circuits, feminist and LGBTQ+ transnational advocacy networks succeeded in securing UN recognition of women’s rights as human rights (United Nations 1993) and building powerful consensus around the Beijing Platform for Action (1995).

The interests of a collective are threatened by the goals and actions of the social movement

The perceived threat posed by gender and sexual equality policy is structured by the patriarchal commitments of the antigender collective. Although the antigender collective includes diverse religious elements (Christian, Confucian, Hindu, Islamic, and Jewish), the documents published by the Vatican in the early twenty-first century provide particularly powerful explanations of the “dangers” posed by feminist conceptions of gender. The Vatican has clearly articulated a common language designed to prevent the denaturalization of the family and the degendering of social relations. As the authoritative leader and the most vocal Catholic actor at the international level, the Holy See is the creator and enforcer of canon law, the Catholic “Church’s principal legislative document,” which is “regarded as an indispensable instrument to

¹³ See Keck and Sikkink (1998), Friedman (2003), della Porta and Tarrow (2004), and Tarrow (2011).

ensure order both in individual and social life, and also in the Church's own activity" (Holy See 1998, xiv). Although the practice of Catholicism is diverse, and ideas pertaining to gender equality and women's rights vary across sectors of Church membership (Desmazières 2012), the Vatican alone can speak officially about Church doctrine, giving its words impressive authority.

Foundational to Catholicism is the notion that God created man, a carnal reflection of God's image and likeness. God also created woman to be man's eternal partner and helpmeet. The divine formation of man and woman established unambiguous expectations concerning two sexes: male and female, and "each of the two sexes is an image of the power and tenderness of God, with equal dignity though in a different way" (Holy See 1995, 620). The creation of two sexes is indispensable because they, man and woman, can join together in marriage to establish a family and procreate in God's name. In the Catholic tradition, "the *union of man and woman* in marriage is a way of imitating in the flesh the Creator's generosity and fecundity" (Holy See 1995, 620) and "the harmony of the couple and of society depends in part on the way in which the complementarity, needs, and mutual support between the sexes are lived out" (619–20). Additionally, "everyone, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his sexual *identity*. Physical, moral, and spiritual *difference* and *complementary* are oriented toward the goods of marriage and the flourishing of family life" (619). In short, sexual difference and the family unit are hallmarks that simultaneously inspire, drive, and protect society. Thus, the Holy See's perspective deeply depends on a stable and predictably correlated relationship between biological sex, gender identity, and heterosexual orientation, which is expressed in the Church's terms as the one and only natural unity of mind, body, and soul. Because this unity is believed to be rooted within natural and divine law—as a direct creation of God—it transcends political, historical, and social arrangements shaped by man (Hogan 2015, Garbagnoli 2016).

While mainstream feminism has historically challenged the Church concerning the role of women in society, the marked shift to more poststructuralist accounts of gender, sex, and sexuality directly challenges Catholic dogma. The Vatican is clear that gender ideology is a systemic threat to its worldview. Feminist ascendancy, then, holds the potential to dismantle the Church's core belief system and undermine its global position of power. Policies to promote reproductive rights and reproductive justice; ideas of gender, sex, and sexuality as social and cultural constructs; recognition that there are more than two sexes; rejection of compulsory heterosexuality; and equal citizenship for gender-variant and diverse sexual orientations not only undermine the Vatican's social agendas but deeply challenge religious doctrines, potentially affecting their political leverage.

The existing social movement must show signs of success

Countermovement activity will only arise when an existing social movement demonstrates potential for success, particularly with regard to policy advancement (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). The emphasis on policy is especially important because it validates a movement's ability to effect change, which in turn increases real and perceived threats to oppositional interests. Thus, it is no coincidence that the first coordinated antigender movement emerged on the heels of, and in direct response to, feminist and LGBTQ+ policy advancement at the UN World Conferences of the 1990s. The world conferences were formative for transnational feminist and LGBTQ+ advocacy networks because they established themselves, for the first time, as powerful negotiating forces and secured initial gains in formally engendering international policy by introducing progressive understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality.

The first victories came in 1992 at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (widely known as the Earth Summit). Here feminists effectively made women's issues central to environmental policy by "develop[ing] a message that emphasized women's role as stewards of the environment and expertise in sustainable development" (Friedman 2003, 320). As a result, the conference's final comprehensive plan of action, Agenda 21, contained 172 references to women, as well as a chapter titled "Global Action for Women towards Sustainable and Equitable Development" (Friedman 2003, 320). Additionally, the Women's Major Group was established to ensure that gender perspectives and women's human rights would be mainstreamed into all UN policy regarding sustainable development.

Transnational feminist networks again exerted pressure at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, where they sought to reframe human rights through a gendered lens. A major victory, for example, included the reconceptualization of gender-based violence from a private matter within the household to one in which governments were held accountable for failing to provide women with physical safety and security. This shift in framing provided an entry point for feminist advocates to make substantial changes to human rights law to include specific gendered protections (Bunch 1995; Friedman 1995, 2003).

At both the Rio and Vienna conferences, various members of the anti-gender movement were present, including Catholic and Muslim leadership and other conservative organizations. They were not yet working in consort, however, nor did they directly target feminist and LGBTQ+ activists in these venues (Buss 1998). It was not until the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo that the antigender movement began to show its muscle. As feminists were successful in incorporating progressive

ideas regarding sexuality and bodily integrity in proposed policy documents, religious and other conservative actors were determined to thwart these advances. They were particularly concerned about language included in the official program of action, such as “ensuring women’s ability to control their own fertility” as a “cornerstone of population and development-related programmes” and recognition that “in different cultural, political and social systems, various forms of the family exist” (UN Population Fund 2014, 14).

Opponents to the social movement build and engage political allies and procure resources for mobilization

Feminist and LGBTQ+ activists mobilized within UN world conferences, building coalitions, enhancing the size of their support base, and advancing their political agendas. So too did their opponents. At Cairo, the first signs of palpable antigender resistance emerged. Acknowledging that “this conference [was] very different from previous population conferences,” the Holy See declared that “neither the Cairo conference nor any other forum should lend itself to cultural imperialism or to ideologies that isolate the human person in a self-enclosed universe wherein abortion on demand, sexual promiscuity and distorted notions of the family are proclaimed as human rights or proposed as ideals for the young” (Cowell 1994). Together with other conservative NGOs and coalitions formed with Muslim leadership, the Vatican organized a vocal opposition to “issues challenging the structure of gender relations, particularly as they are manifest in family arrangements and control over women’s sexuality and role in reproduction” (Friedman 2003, 314; see also Bayes and Tohidi 2001). In a joint statement with Muslim leadership, the Holy See reaffirmed its belief that “family is the basic unit . . . for a just and holy society,” which “proceeds from the marriage between man and a woman,” adding that they were “distressed at current efforts to redefine family and other developments that devalue marriage” (Aslam Cheema and Keeler 1994, 4).

Tensions escalated in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the largest UN conference on women to date. More than seventeen thousand people attended in the official meeting in Beijing and another thirty thousand participated at the NGO forum in Huairou (United Nations 1995). The focus in Beijing differed from the preceding three conferences on women (in 1975, 1980, and 1985) in that its aim was to concretely influence inter-governmental treaties and agreements. Feminist activists sought to move beyond a strategy designed to raise awareness and heighten visibility toward one of accountability and action (Bunch et al. 2001). Lesbian activists had far greater visibility at this conference as they attempted to advance global recognition of sexuality rights as human rights (Page and Radford 1996;

Wilson 1996; IGLHRC and CWGL n.d.). The change in both substantive and representational strategies reflected greater confidence among feminist and LGBTQ+ advocates, suggesting that their agenda had increasing momentum. As these social movements demonstrated new confidence in their ability to achieve policy success, they established themselves as greater threats to their opponents. Increased tensions inevitably surfaced, which became readily apparent in the debates preceding the conference.

In the spring of 1995, just months before the summit, the Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, the principal preparatory body for the conference, presented a draft platform for action that would serve as the future road map for global women's empowerment. However, several key issues relating to gender and sexuality had to be bracketed due to objections among conservative delegates. Brackets indicated that certain terms would be debated at the conference in order to reach a consensus. The four references to sexual orientation in the draft were bracketed, two of which addressed issues of discrimination and sought to provide protection to sexual minorities as a protected class (Page and Radford 1996, Wilson 1996, IGLHRC and CWGL n.d.). The term "gender" was also bracketed. According to the draft document, "gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of women and men that are socially determined. Gender is related to the way in which we are perceived, in the way we are expected to think and act as women and men, according to the way society is organized and not by our biological differences" (Alzamora Revoredo 2003, 472). Although the term "gender" had appeared in earlier UN world conference documents, it was generally understood to refer to dichotomous biological sex or to women.¹⁴ The proposed definition signified a distinctive shift in conceptualization, which could have profound influence on subsequent policy. Its inclusion in the platform draft demonstrated that more feminist conceptions of gender were making their way into the global vernacular. It also signaled a fundamental concern with gender mainstreaming, that attention to disproportionate male power and privilege had to be addressed. When gender was conflated with women or with "natural" sex differences, gendered power structures in social life, political institutions, and economic development policies escaped scrutiny. The revised feminist conception of gender in the draft platform,

¹⁴ For example, the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development's Agenda 21 mentions gender eighteen times. In "Chapter 3: Combatting Poverty," statement 3.9 affirms that "evaluation of such programmes should be gender-specific, since women are a particularly disadvantaged group." In "Chapter 5: Demographic Dynamics and Sustainability," statement 5.28 sets forth that "population data should be disaggregated by, inter alia, sex and age in order to take into account the implications of the gender division of labour for the use and management of natural resources" (United Nations 1992).

then, opened the door for gender to be used as an analytic tool in global policy making and implementation (Pietilä 2007).

The Vatican led the charge against the proposed language.¹⁵ Rallying a growing opposition of Catholic and Muslim countries including Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, the Philippines, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Egypt, and Kuwait, the Holy See and Muslim leadership introduced several reservations that railed against feminist cultural domination, the exaggerated individualism of human rights, and the need for protection of “the real well-being of women” (Glendon 1995b, translation mine; see also Bayes and Tohidi 2001). The Vatican openly opposed same-sex sexuality and issued a “Statement of Interpretation of the Term ‘Gender,’” written by former US Ambassador to the Holy See Mary Anne Glendon (1995a) that specified its unwavering position that “the Holy See understands ‘gender’ as grounded in biological-sexual identity, male or female” (par. 2) and “thus excludes dubious interpretations based on widespread conceptions, which affirm that sexual identity can adapt indefinitely, to accommodate new and different purposes” (translation mine).

Due to the mobilization of this antigender countermovement, the final Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action did not incorporate any new definitions of gender. Indeed, the final document stated that “‘gender’ had been commonly used and understood in its ordinary, generally accepted usage in numerous other United Nations forums and conferences”; that “there was no indication that any new meaning or connotation of the term, different from accepted prior usage, was intended in the Platform for Action”; and that “the word ‘gender’ . . . was intended to be interpreted and understood as it was in ordinary, generally accepted usage” (United Nations 1995, 218). Additionally, all references to sexual orientation were removed from the platform in the final hours (Wilson 1996). Thus, the antigender countermovement that first raised concerns in Cairo solidified its force with important policy consequences in Beijing.

Gender ideology as a leading counterstrategy

In the aftermath of the Beijing Conference, the Holy See accelerated its attack on feminist and LGBTQ+ efforts by developing more robust counterstrategies. Its leading tactic was to manufacture gender ideology terminology and couple it with provocative rhetoric that exploits deep divisions within feminist and LGBTQ+ movements. Around the globe, “gender ideology” (and

¹⁵ See Poole (1995), Tempest and Farley (1995), Page and Radford (1996), Wilson (1996), and IGLHRC and CWGL (n.d.).

its sister terms “genderism” and “gender theory”) have been used to vilify feminist and LGBTQ+ movements while simultaneously generating counterclaims to thwart their policy initiatives and to rally antifeminist forces. In an effort to neutralize these social movements, this meta-frame capitalizes on complex and problematic cleavages within feminism and within global politics, which may account for how and why this counterstrategy has been so effective.

Equality/sameness/difference

In 1997, in response to the events of the UN conferences, the Vatican asserted that there are multiple “kinds of feminism,” some of which are “legitimate” and others that are not (Holy See 1997, 1.8). According to the Holy See, virtuous feminism “seek[s] to defend women’s dignity in the family but without severing women’s family bonds” (1997, 1.8). Other feminisms, however, are “based on discredited scientific theories” and “totalitarian tendencies” that promote constructivist views of gender and ideas that women are enslaved by family and motherhood (1.8). This account of multiple feminisms is further elaborated in the Pontifical Council for the Family’s *Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions* (2003). In the chapter “An Ideology of Gender: Dangers and Scope,” the Holy See conflates radical feminism with poststructuralism and brands it as “gender feminism,” a term cleverly borrowed from Christina Hoff Sommers’s book *Who Stole Feminism?* (1995; see also Alzamora Revoredo 2003). The Holy See claims that gender feminism is a neo-Marxist ideology that interprets the status of women as worsening over time and strives to liberate women from a “massive patriarchal conspiracy” (Alzamora Revoredo 2003, 481). Gender feminists are the creators of gender ideology, a virulent theory designed to disaggregate sex from gender and destroy the family unit through “procured abortion . . . homosexuality, lesbianism, and all other forms of sexuality outside marriage” (465). “Equity feminism,” on the other hand, refers to a strand of feminism that seeks moral and legal equality and conceives the status of women in the world as improving. This use of the word “equity” is important to note. As witnessed in Beijing, the Vatican perceives “equality” as a term that diminishes essential biological differences between sexes and one that implies sameness between men and women. The word “equity,” which in a legal sense implies fairness, is generally preferred (Buss 1998; Bayes and Tohidi 2001). Bifurcating feminism serves to position the Church within the benevolence of equity feminism while distancing itself from pernicious forms of gender feminism and radical gender ideology. It also capitalizes on the debates within feminism regarding sameness, difference, and equality among the sexes.

Since their inception, feminist movements have been diverse, grappling with multiple and competing epistemological and political strategies. Coalitions that bring together activists from the global North and South, capitalist and socialist commitments, liberal and authoritarian contexts, heteronormative and gender-variant communities, are necessarily fragile. Strains within global feminism have often involved intense contestations pertaining to equality, sameness, and difference—tensions that gender ideology counterstrategies intentionally exploit. Nancy Cott (1987, 5) aptly summarized these tensions: feminism paradoxically “asks for sexual equality that includes sexual difference. It aims for individual freedoms by mobilizing sex solidarity. It posits that women recognize their unity while it stands for diversity among women. It requires gender consciousness for its basis yet calls for the elimination of prescribed gender roles.” To rupture fragile transnational coalitions, the Holy See strives to drive a wedge between feminists, insisting that the equality and difference approaches are irreconcilable. This shrewd counterstrategy preys upon long-standing antagonisms that have at times threatened the survival of feminist coalitions (Cott 1987; Echols 1989). By dividing feminism into opposing camps, the Vatican also carves out space that enables it to selectively support certain feminist agendas (e.g., antipoverty and antiviolence) while rejecting feminist views that challenge its official stance on gender, sexuality, and the family. With this divisive tactic, the Holy See holds true to its commitments to women on global issues such as peace, human rights, and development, while simultaneously disavowing the aspects of the movement that challenge its essential power (Buss 1998). This is exemplified by the Vatican’s rhetoric on women’s economic empowerment, access to education, the burden of discrimination, and women’s contributions to peace and development.¹⁶ Such rhetoric coexists with its fear-mongering language about constructed genders and alternative family compositions and its allegations that feminists describe motherhood as a disease (Tauran 2002).

Colonization, imperialism, sovereignty

Antigender counterstrategies have emerged on regional and national stages as well. In 2014, Hungary’s minister of state for family and youth affairs, Katalin Novák, stated “certain Western European liberal states and governments are trying to hide their values in various tricky ways in documents. This means that documents of the EU and of international bodies, for example the UN Development Goals, contain passages that are extending the meaning of what constitutes a family. . . . Hungary supports the generally accepted human rights norms—but let us have the liberty to define family and the rela-

¹⁶ See Buss (1998), Holy See (2000), McGrath-Triulzi (2001), and Kasper (2002).

tionships between women and men in the way we want” (in Juhász 2015, 29). In August 2017, during a national debate over sex education, a state assemblywoman from the Colombian state of Santander, Ángela Hernández, blasted a proposed antibullying program for transgender youth as being a “colonization of customs and ideas . . . based in gender ideology” (*El Tiempo* 2016; translation mine). In February 2018, Nigerian author and prominent pro-life activist Obianuju “Uju” Ekeocha released her latest book *Target Africa: Ideological Neo-colonialism of the Twenty-First Century*, which argues that international donors are the “ideological neocolonial masters of the twenty-first century who aggressively push their agenda of radical feminism, population control, sexualisation of children, and homosexuality” (2018, cover copy). Language equating gender ideology with colonization, imperialism, and unwarranted cultural imposition has been another prevalent counterstrategy for the global Right (Kováts 2017). These counterframes capitalize on political tensions and deep-seated resentments pertaining to Western liberalism, neoliberal hegemony, and colonialism, both in global politics and within feminism itself. Accusations of cultural imperialism and colonialism resonated with postcolonial and third-world feminist critiques of liberal feminism in the 1970s, at a time when transnational feminist networks were building global solidarity among women (Hawkesworth 2006; Herr 2014). Feminists across the global South as well as feminists of color within the North criticized feminist discourses that privilege white, middle-class Western European and US issues and theorizations and have called for greater attention to and priority for diverse women’s experiences, histories, and agendas.¹⁷ These tensions persist as feminist and LGBTQ+ movements struggle to recognize entrenched racial biases and transform hierarchical relations. The antigender counterframe attempts to position religious and conservative leaders as the true champions of the disenfranchised and as genuine advocates for women’s rights, casting feminism as a form of cultural imperialism and colonization (Buss 1998; Case 2011). Thus, conservative attacks on gender ideology mask the cultural hegemony and ideological imperialism of right-wing forces, exploit global political tensions within feminist and LGBTQ+ movements, and allow the global Right to present itself as a gatekeeper against foreign influence and as the real voice for women (Graff and Korolczuk 2017).

Communism, totalitarianism, and terrorism

Linking gender ideology with politically charged notions like communism, totalitarianism, and terrorism has been another salient feature of the anti-

¹⁷ See Abu Odeh (1993), Lâm (1994), Spivak (1994), Alexander and Mohanty (1997), Mohanty (2002, 2008), Hawkesworth (2006), Tripp (2006), and Million (2009).

gender counterframe. In 2013, Polish Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek stated that “gender ideology is worse than Communism and Nazism put together” (in Graff 2014, 432; Graff and Korolczuk 2017, 176). In 2015, Guinean Cardinal Robert Sarah argued that the world is navigating “two radicalizations” in which “we find ourselves between gender ideology and ISIS. . . . What Nazi-Fascism and Communism were in the 20th century, Western homosexual and abortion ideologies and Islamic Fanaticism are today” (in Pentin 2015). Similar language can be found in “An Ideology of Gender: Dangers and Scope,” where the Holy See states that “‘gender feminism’ is based on a neo-Marxist interpretation of history” (Alzamora Revoredo 2003, 469). Where rhetoric about feminist imperialism and cultural colonization seeks to incite anger within communities outside of the hegemonic West, this hyperbolic coupling of communism and terrorism resurrects Cold War animosities to instill fear within transitional nations. Countries that have grappled with violent and repressive pasts may be particularly prone to these geopolitical anxieties. Gender ideology rhetoric attempts to conflate feminist and LGBTQ+ values and policy objectives with the historical trauma associated with totalitarian regimes. In Croatia, for example, denunciations of gender ideology equate feminism with antinational and anti-Catholic sentiments, resurrecting historical antagonisms that pitted the Church against the former Communist state (Anić 2015). In addition to anticommunist propaganda, rhetorical ties to totalitarianism and terrorism render gender ideology synonymous with moral decay, social control, and systemic threats to democratic stability. Thus, gender ideology has become a placeholder for social, economic, and political struggles that conservatives can leverage for political gain while thwarting feminist and LGBTQ+ policies that threaten their power and privilege.

Conclusion

In 2017, CitizenGo, an international right-wing advocacy organization, launched an antigender crusade, placing a bright orange bus carrying an unambiguous message at the center of its campaign: “It’s Biology: Boys are boys . . . and always will be. Girls are girls . . . and always will be. You can’t change sex” (CitizenGo 2017). The bus embarked on national tours across Spain, the United States, Colombia, Mexico, and Chile, generating support and igniting protests. As the examples in this article demonstrate, antigender campaigns are flourishing across geopolitical regions, and the deployment of gender ideology propaganda is an effective counterstrategy for mobilizing mass support against feminist and LGBTQ+ policies. As countermovement theory tells us, to understand the processes of feminist and LGBTQ+ agendas, we must also understand its resistance.

By locating antigenderism within countermovement theory, I have demonstrated that antigender campaigns are global phenomena that exceed generalized resistance and instead involve coordinated, well-organized, and well-resourced actors whose interests are to preserve traditional values of gender, sex, and sexuality. This framework has also highlighted the ubiquity and the heterogeneity of antigender campaigns and their counterstrategies. Surfacing in multiple discursive contexts—well beyond the examples discussed here—conservative critiques of gender ideology are unquestionably potent and elastic in their attempts to disarm and destabilize feminist and LGBTQ+ social movements, most notably through the exploitation of historical divisions within these camps.

I have sought to provide a conceptual and theoretical foundation that can be used as a springboard for future research on local and regional countermovements leveraging gender-ideology rhetoric. A countermovement framework is a viable approach for studying supranational trends while also promising to illuminate essential knowledge of national and local antigender efforts. Comparative work can therefore greatly benefit from this approach. Additionally, conceptualizing antigender campaigns as countermovements, and gender ideology as a counterstrategy, offers opportunities to examine how feminist and LGBTQ+ social movements are affected by and respond to antigender campaigns. Antigender countermovements produce their own outcomes, have important effects on feminist and LGBTQ+ processes and agendas, and impact the social systems that all of these movements are seeking to change (Tarrow 1986). Sensitizing ourselves to ways in which feminist and LGBTQ+ social movements and antigender countermovements inform each other will enhance feminist and LGBTQ+ knowledge repositories, augmenting these social movements' capacity to transform gender and sexual relations around the globe.

*Department of Political Science
Rutgers University*

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