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Understanding Backlash to Women's Rights Campaigns in Malawian Society with Lindsay Benstead

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Social backlash refers to changes in public opinion in the opposite direction to what we expect. So for instance, we know that human rights and women's rights campaigners may use messaging with the intention of changing public opinion and convincing social actors that gender equality is important. And yet, it's possible that in using these messaging campaigns on issues such as women's electoral participation, stopping female genital mutilation, in improving women's rights in land use, it's possible that when actors use messaging to convince the population of the need for gender equality in these areas, that in fact, due to resistance to how these reforms might impact interests it's possible that, groups that could be negatively affected by these reforms may actually come to be more convinced that gender inequality is the way that society should operate. That women shouldn't not be given more rights.

 So, social backlash can be attitudes in society, but it can also be actions that social actors use, in order to undermine the campaign. So for example, it could be maybe giving lip service to a campaign, but really not stopping the practice of, you know, maybe, undermining women in electoral campaigns, let's say. While at the same time, you know, accepting publicly that you would agree with the need for women's rights. But in private, you're not really promoting that.

This research seeks to understand how and why campaigns to promote women's rights might actually undermine those goals by causing social backlash in society. Well, the theoretical framework that we are using in this article, and when I say we, this article is a collaborative research project that I've conducted with Professor Ragnhild Muriaas and Vibeke Wang, who are both faculty researchers in Norway based in Norway. And in this project we use social position theory in order to theorize about the ways in which individuals' opportunities in society are structured by their their various identities, which can be their gender identity, can also be their cultural identity. In much of Africa and Asia, we observe two different cultural identities that are based on lineage, one is patrilineality and one is matrilineality.

So in the West, we often are familiar with patrilineality. This is where rights and property are passed down through the male lineage. This is something that western societies are usually familiar with. Most of the largest cultural cultural groups in the world are patrilineal, but there actually are many, many cultural groups in Africa, especially in Asia that are matrilineal. So in a matrilineal society, land and names are inherited through the matrilineal line, so from mother to daughter. And one of the key distinctions between patrilineal and matrilineal cultures has to do with the place that the new newly married couple lives.

So in a patrilocal society, a bride or a wife would go and live with the family of the husband and take his name. The children would belong to the family of the husband. In a matrilocal society, the new husband would go and live with the family of the wife and, and farm her land with her family. So you can imagine how these social customs around matrilocal and patrilocal customs structure, the power and privileges that males and females have in society. So in a patrilineal society, males have many more privileges than females do, and we often observe more patriarchal attitudes around women's political participation, for instance, in patrilineal social groups. And in matrilineal social groups, it's not that we observe that women have all the power and men don't have power, but we observe greater gender equality in these settings.

So Malawi is a really neat case to look at because it's one in which there's a mixture of patrilineal, matrilineal families. And so we can, we can observe differences in, for instance, the extent to which women can participate politically, they can do so to a greater extent in matrilineal contexts. And in, we also have sort of a bifurcation in Malawi, whereby we have, you know, we have state structures, so we have parliamentarians, but we also have tribal or, or traditional leaders of, of villages. And in patrilineal society, in patrilineal groups, only men can be traditional leaders, chiefs; but in matrilineal societies, men and women can be chiefs.

So when we're thinking about social position theory, we would observe that while generally speaking, women are subordinate to men, actually in many ways, in both of these types of social groups, this is especially the case in matrilineal context, whereas in a, or excuse me, in a patrilineal context, it's especially the case that women are disadvantaged relative to men. But in matrilineal context, you know, that power differential between men and women is, it's much less pronounced.

The primary research question is to understand how and why messaging campaigns to improve women's rights cause backlash in society. So we really wanted to explain the conditions under which development programs and practices might have, they might do

harm, in fact, they might not have their intended goal, but they might even cause backlash to the point that the practices would undermine the ultimate goal and undermine the process of trying to achieve gender equality.

So we looked at three different factors in trying to explain social backlash. And these factors are embedded within our theory of social position theory, which we are extending in this project. The first factor is the identity of the messenger. So we observed that in Malawi, we have two different kinds of messengers, often working in concert. But they… these two messengers vary in terms of their power. So on the one hand, we have groups that we consider to be marginalized. Relative to the other groups. So the marginalized messenger would be local Malawian women's rights organizations. And I say that local women's rights organizations are marginalized in comparison to another messenger that also promotes women's rights in Malawi, and that is Western donors like USAID, like Norway's development agency, like the World Bank, like UNDP.

So we wanted to test which actor, whether the marginalized actor or the empowered actor, so intrusive actor, the the Western owners, which one would cause greater backlash. And the reason why we wanted to unpack that is we would want to think strategically about, you know, if women's rights organizations, local organizations are working with Western donors, which one of these actors should, you know, make these statements, give these messages in order to reduce backlash? So the marginalization or intrusiveness of the messenger was the first factor that we wanted to try to explore. And this is where the marginalization hypothesis and the intrusiveness hypothesis come from in that the marginalization hypothesis is, you know, the hypothesis that women's rights organizations would cause the greatest backlash among groups that are threatened by women's rights. And the intrusiveness hypothesis would be that it's the powerful, the western donors, the, the actor that's really able to make things happen on the ground through the leverage of international aid, that it would be these actors that would be causing backlash to happen. So that was, that's the first of the three factors that we explore.

So the second factor that we explore has to do with the type of reform. So we notice that women's rights reforms are often thought of in sort of an essentialist way where we don't really distinguish between different rights types of gender reforms, but in fact, gender reforms are not equally threatening. So we use the theoretical concept of public and private rights, which a number of authors have explored in their research. But it's the notion that private rights that deal with rights and privileges in the family, such as divorce and inheritance, that these are often more sensitive and more threatening to establish interests than public rights, which could be things like going to school, going

running in elections, entering the labor force. And so we also want to test which types of rights cause the greatest backlash. And we think that private rights around inheritance, around land reform, which is our, our one key area that we're going to explore in this survey experiment, that land reform will cause greater backlash than, maybe, a less threatening reform like women's political participation. And finally, we also look at, you know, these differences across social groups, and we look at the intersection of whether the recipient is male or female, and matrilineal, and patrilineal.

This research seeks to understand how and why campaigns to promote women's rights might actually undermine those goals by causing social backlash in society. Well this research project really highlights something that international development specialists are increasingly very worried about, and that is that international development programs and practices are crafted in a way that, you know, intuitively makes sense. It intuitively makes sense that if people don't think that women should retain their rights to land, or people don't think that electoral gender quotas are appropriate, that we should tell them that gender equality is important and then they'll believe us and they'll agree with us. So intuitively we could craft this campaign and we could have women's rights organizations, we could have the World Bank or the UNDP, you know, talk about these things. But the problem is that what we intuitively think might work, might not work. And, and, and more importantly, it could actually do harm.

So international development specialists are increasingly guided by the doctrine of doing no harm. And in order to do no harm, we have to do more research. We have to understand, how do the development programs that we implement, how do they actually impact outcomes on the ground? Do they actually empower women, do they actually promote gender equality, or might they cause backlash? And if they do, how can we minimize, or eliminate that backlash?

So one key takeaway from this study is that we didn't see any impact of the campaigns on women's attitudes. So the takeaway from that is the notion that women already know that they face discrimination and that they need help to strengthen their rights. So women, whether they support gender quotas or land reform, they're, they're already clued into issues around gender equality. So, it maybe isn't so necessary to focus on campaigns that are directed towards women, at least in the Malawi Malawi context. But that doesn't mean that all women everywhere, you know, feel this way. And so we need to do more research in different contexts to understand that.

The second takeaway is that we should expect backlash. And with respect to the male survey respondents there, there was backlash among all groups. So it wasn't only males

from patrilineal groups, it was also males from matrilineal groups, and in some cases it was when the campaigns were from Western donors, in other cases it was the local women's organizations, it was quotas, it was land rights. So there were, there were a lot of examples of backlash effects in the survey experiment when men were the recipient of these messages. And so this really suggests to us that the problem of backlash is very much possible and that it needs to be understood and that it's a potential harm that might arise from a development program.

I'm Lindsay Benstead. I'm interested in understanding how to promote equality for women and marginalized groups in the Middle East and North Africa.

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