

# **The global consequences of the anti-DEI movement**

## **Abstract**

### **Purpose**

Critiques of the anti-DEI movement have focused predominantly on the consequences it poses to the US. This article examines how backlash against DEI manifests in other parts of the world, analysing it as locally mediated configurations of practices that undermine women's and LGBTQIA+ rights through distinct political, legal, cultural and material arrangements.

### **Design/Methodology/Approach**

Drawing on social practice theory, we conceptualise backlash as emerging through context-specific nexuses of practices rather than as a uniform global phenomenon, and examine illustrative cases from Europe, Africa and Asia.

### **Findings**

This article finds that backlash emerges from and through distinct configurations of practices; economic precarity and status anxiety in Europe, colonial legacies and transnational conservative networks in Africa, and coercive state practices amid war and institutional collapse in Afghanistan. These examples demonstrate that exclusion is enacted differently depending on how practices are organised locally.

### **Originality/Value**

This article reconceptualises context as a historically sedimented nexus of practices rather than a static background, and offers guiding questions for designing contextually embedded and practice-sensitive DEI interventions.

## **Introduction: Rethinking DEI through Localised Lenses**

The current backlash against Diversity, Equality/Equity and Inclusion (DEI) represents a pressing challenge to social justice and equality efforts worldwide (Brechenmacher, 2025). As much attention among DEI scholars and practitioners focuses on the consequences of the rollback of American federal and corporate DEI initiatives (Aguinis et al., 2025; Ng et al., 2025), examination of the phenomenon beyond the US is scant (Lewin et al., 2025). This is unsurprising as a significant number of contemporary DEI efforts, both scholarly and practical, originates from a US-centric framework, and academic considerations are predominantly limited to Global North countries.

Yet, we are witnessing palpable resistance to DEI initiatives on a global scale (e.g., Colmán, 2025; Karlberg et al., 2025; Lewin et al., 2025; Mustafa, 2025; Zaremborg et al., 2021). Indeed, legislative bans, public protests, cultural narratives, and political and scholarly rhetoric are causing the regression of, for instance, gender equity and inclusion frameworks across the world. This global backlash threatens to undermine decades of progress and may exacerbate inequalities while perpetuating gender-based violence, along with other forms of violence against members of minoritised groups, thus warranting urgent attention of DEI scholars and practitioners (McGowan et al., 2025; Prasad and Śliwa, 2024). We argue that the anti-DEI movement cannot be understood as a singular phenomenon but must be analysed as a set of locally organised practice formations that normalise exclusion. Drawing on social practice theory (Nicolini, 2013; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2012; 2016), we move away from treating context as a static backdrop and instead conceptualise it as an emergent configuration of practices consisting of meanings and material arrangements. From this perspective, DEI does not operate “within” context; rather, context is continuously enacted through practice, including DEI itself.

In this article, we use the case of women's and LGBTQIA+ rights to call for critical engagement with the backlash against DEI and to demonstrate why attention to locally organised practices is essential for designing effective DEI responses. We call on scholars to account for how the backlash manifests in diverse and idiosyncratic ways in different contexts. While it remains paramount to examine the overt paths through which women's and LGBTQIA+ rights are being eroded in overtly hostile contexts, it is also critical that we do not ignore the subtler cultural shift taking place elsewhere (Karlberg, 2025; Mampaey and Huisman, 2025; Wescott et al., 2024) with regard to the equality and inclusion agenda.

Against this background, we map out the contours of the backlash and explore its different scales, configurations and severity of implications for gender equality and inclusion. It is only by identifying the different trajectories through which the anti-DEI movement establishes a less inclusive and equitable world that critical scholars and practitioners may develop responses that are both contextually relevant and adequate to the demands of the current situation. In doing this, we draw attention to the need to tailor DEI efforts to the issues, priorities and limitations specific to each context rather than adopting an acontextual approach (Post et al., 2021).

This argument forms a central premise of our paper; by foregrounding the recursive relationship between DEI practices and context, we move beyond standard *contextualisation* to demonstrate why attention to local contexts is indispensable for practitioners seeking to design responsive, context-specific DEI practices. Our essay draws on illustrative vignettes (rather than a traditional empirical study), and its main contribution lies in arguing for context-sensitive approaches to DEI and in proposing a set of practice-oriented considerations for understanding how DEI practices are organised in particular settings.

We also respond to growing calls for a more candid discussion on the limitations of dominant DEI practices, which we contend is essential for a better understanding of the

coordinated efforts challenging progressive institutional and organisational social policies. Through our approach, while noting that the decades' worth of progress towards inclusive and equitable world is no longer assured, we attempt to propose a more affirmative stance: to consider this troubling moment of backlash as an opportunity to reimagine and re-energise DEI efforts by embedding them more meaningfully within local contexts. Rather than retracting DEI initiatives, we argue that the current situation demands of us to deepen and recalibrate DEI efforts by acknowledging that understandings, interpretations and actions related to equity and inclusion must be contextualised and locally embedded by accounting for social, legal and cultural considerations (Ciuk et al., 2023; Janssens and Zanoni, 2021; Post et al., 2021; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012).

The remainder of this article unfolds in three sections. First, we identify and engage with scholarly critiques of uncritical and universalising approaches to DEI. We use these concerns to foreground our central argument on the importance of recognising and responding to what is happening in local contexts. Second, we draw on specific examples to illustrate the scale and implications of recent rollbacks in women's and sexual minorities' rights. These include the curtailment of women's reproductive rights in some European countries, the criminalisation of LGBTQIA+ identities in parts of Africa, and the near-total erasure of women from public life under Taliban rule in Afghanistan. The three contexts are chosen for their geographical diversity, differences in political governance type, and variation in the intensity and form of backlash. They also illustrate distinct configurations of backlash: state-legislated anti-LGBTQIA+ repression embedded in colonial and transnational dynamics; authoritarian gender apartheid entangled with war and institutional collapse and anti-gender movements operating within formally democratic settings. Third, drawing from these examples, we conclude by outlining a set of guiding questions for informing future DEI approaches that are both context-sensitive and adaptable.

We use these examples to unpack the legitimisation discourse that underpins anti-progressive policies and attitudes. In doing so, we consider the extent to which these developments are linked to the resurgence of right-wing nationalist and populist narratives that strategically evoke traditional, religious and conservative values (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; McEwen, 2023). At the same time, we highlight how economic uncertainty, demographic anxieties and perceptions of social displacement may be fuelling growing scepticism toward gender equality and inclusion efforts, even in contexts that are typically considered supportive of gender inclusion.

Before proceeding, a caveat merits note. We contend that backlash against DEI is symptomatic of broader socio-political currents in which gender equality is increasingly weaponised to undermine decades of hard-won rights (Brechenmacher, 2025; Prasad and Śliwa, 2024). As such, we suggest that the response from DEI scholars and practitioners must extend beyond workplace-focused interventions to engage more deeply with wider cultural, political, and structural dynamics shaping contemporary resistance to inclusion. In doing so, we align our position with existing calls for adaptive and contextually grounded DEI (e.g. Janssens and Zanoni, 2021), while framing our contribution as a practice-oriented exploration. We limit theoretical discussion to what is necessary for grounding our argument, using it selectively to support practical insights. Our intention, here, is to employ illustrative examples from three varied contexts to demonstrate the operational need for context-specific DEI strategies in the face of global pressures. We propose a set of considerations to inform future, actionable approaches for enhancing DEI ideas in different settings, while explicitly cautioning against any claims to generalisability. Implementing DEI in any specific locality demands nuance, cultural humility and an in-depth awareness of historical and structural particularities.

### **The Need for a Flexible, Adaptive, and Contextually Sensitive Approach to DEI**

A significant portion of contemporary DEI efforts, both scholarly and practical, originates in a US-centric framework that traces its roots to the country's civil rights movement of the 1960s. Concepts such as racial equity, affirmative action and privilege have deep historical and cultural significance in the US and, to a degree, in the UK and other western liberal democracies. This does not, however, necessarily mean that the language, categories, agenda and specific priorities of DEI uniformly matter across the world. Given the current anti-DEI backlash, we see the need to rethink DEI efforts with the aim to more meaningfully embed inclusion in different contexts.

Such an objective not only acknowledges the limitations of current DEI practices, but also underscores the importance of contextual embeddedness in shaping understandings, interpretations and actions of DEI (Ciuk et al., 2023; Graff and Korolczuk, 2025). This, we argue, requires an awareness that understandings, interpretations and actions related to DEI are shaped through historically sedimentated configurations of social and material elements. Despite growing recognition that approaches to DEI often fail to account for cultural, political and legislative specificities of local contexts (Bader et al., 2022; Hennekam et al., 2017), scholars have yet to account for either the cultural milieu in which DEI efforts operate or the structural limitations inherent in different local settings (Ciuk et al., 2023; Janssens and Zanoni, 2021; Umeh et al., 2022). We suggest that addressing this issue becomes possible through moving away from the dominant view that treats context as a variable that influences DEI outcomes, towards a view of DEI as locally situated practices that cannot be understood apart from the context in which they are enacted. Addressing this oversight also requires a candid discussion on the validity and transferability of western DEI approaches and principles (e.g., Graff and Korolczuk, 2025; Post et al., 2021; Umeh et al., 2022) by challenging its assumptions of 'rightness' and universality that make standardised benchmarking of DEI tools tenable (Romani et al., 2019). In particular, by ignoring local understandings of equity, historical

justice, or lived experiences of people in different contexts across the world, including the Global South, we may inadvertently delegitimise the DEI ethos. These challenges are difficult to address, not only because scholarly DEI discussions tend to almost exclusively originate from the US, Canada, UK, Australia and other Global North countries (Alhejji et al., 2016), but also because global diversity management still remains an under-researched area of study (Ciuk et al., 2023; Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2022).

While some scholars have highlighted the problems with the ‘one-size-fits-all’ DEI approach (e.g., Janssens and Zanoni, 2021), we contribute to this discussion by emphasising specific considerations important for challenging the (tacit) presumption that organisational equity strategies can be designed effectively while having them decoupled from the specific local, political, legal, cultural and historical arrangements in which they are implemented (Ciuk et al., 2023).

From a social practice theory perspective (Nicolini, 2013; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2012; 2016), context is not simply an external set of conditions or fixed geographical setting, nor can it be reduced to macro-, meso- or micro-levels. Rather, it is continuously enacted through the ongoing organisation of sayings and doings, embedded within teleoaffective structures and materially mediated relations (Schatzki, 2012; 2016). This contrasts with more traditional views, where context is often conceptualised as a relatively stable environment, comprising structures, institutions, or cultural variables, that influence actions. Such views tend to reproduce a separation between activity and background conditions. In a flat ontological approach (Nicolini, 2013; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2012; 2016), however, this distinction collapses: action and context are co-constitutive. This understanding allows us to attend to context as produced through interactions of local institutions, transnational ideological flows, colonial legacies and material conditions, in order to ask not only *where* DEI work progresses

or is stalled, but *what* historically sedimented practices, current material conditions and normative understandings produce the conditions in which DEI practices unfold.

We argue that without contextual sensitivity, the very ethos of DEI may be not only resisted but outright dismissed as foreign, ideological, and misaligned with local priorities. The universalising DEI initiatives risk being perceived as oppressive, reproducing colonising dynamics and reinforcing peripheral position of localities outside western Europe and North Atlantic contexts (Villamil et al., 2023). What becomes increasingly problematic is that because local contexts vary, and since specific conditions experienced by marginalised groups are shaped by historical patterns of disadvantage, they impact different groups unequally (Kaufmann and Derry, 2024; Post et al., 2021).

Contextual sensitivity necessitates attention not only to contemporary lived experiences, but to socio-historical processes, which include the enduring impact of colonial and imperial legacies. These legacies continue to shape societal approaches toward gender, race and sexuality, either through the reshaping of pre-colonial attitudes (Ciszek and Tuli, 2026; Ruwhiu et al., 2024) or the amplification of existing social hierarchies (Zulfiqar et al., 2025). Unless we address assumptions of cultural superiority and the colonial legacies that sustain inequalities, DEI risks becoming tokenistic and may even reinforce domination and inequitable distribution of privilege (Zembylas, 2023), while becoming detached from any social justice agenda (Ahmed, 2007). We argue that, rather than viewing colonialism as an external historical factor, context understood as historically sedimented nexus of practices (Schatzki, 2012; 2016), allows us to pay attention to how colonial legacies continue to live on in current practices shaping institutional routines and forms of recognition.

The consequences of approaching DEI prescriptively, without care and without tailoring towards local values and priorities, are too important to be ignored: they risk undermining the broader DEI agenda while alienating the very populations DEI efforts seek to include (Vijay et

al., 2021). At the same time, an unreflexive and universalist approach to DEI practice may produce what we might term ‘moralisation’: a perception from local communities that DEI norms developed in the Global North are imposed as morally superior (Zakaria, 2021) without accounting for cultural fit (Graff and Korolczuk, 2025) and the socio-economic and historical forces that shape local experiences (Zembylas, 2023). To counter this perception, future DEI efforts need to both reflect and respond to the current specific threats from societal-level forces that are actively working towards undoing progress in equity and inclusion (Janssens and Zanoni, 2021; Prasad and Śliwa, 2024), and engage with the historical and cultural milieux (Ahmed, 2024; Zulfiqar et al., 2025) that influence present inequalities. This awareness becomes crucial in times of ideological polarisation, when the viability of DEI depends on whether it can become a grounded and locally meaningful practice.

In the next section, we provide illustrative examples of different challenges and priorities in relation to DEI. By focusing on authoritarian populism, religious nationalism and foreign ideological interference, we call for engagement with local constraints, histories and legal frameworks to ensure that DEI can serve as an adaptive and transformative practice across different settings.

### **The Anti-Gender Backlash in Europe and Its Implications for DEI**

Across the European Union, the coordinated rise of an increasingly transnational and financially robust ‘anti-gender’ movement has resulted in backlash against reproductive rights and LGBTQIA+ protections specifically, and resistance to DEI efforts more broadly. Once limited to fringe activism, this movement cannot be dismissed as marginal expression of cultural conservatism. It now constitutes a highly organised political project, bringing together religious conservatives and far-right populists seeking to reshape European governance and public norms (Cabezas, 2022; Datta, 2020). These practices operate not only at the level of ideology, but through enactment of coalition building, lobbying, media influence and policy

interventions that gradually reconfigure what counts as legitimate public action. A 2025 report by the European Parliamentary Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Rights revealed that over \$1.18 billion was raised between 2019 and 2023 by hundreds of organisations dedicated to combatting ‘gender ideology’, a term employed by anti-rights actors to signal an overarching, existential threat to traditional gender values. The political mobilisation against ‘gender ideology’ has eroded decades of progress on women’s rights, sex education, gender recognition, and LGBTQIA+ inclusion.

Those resources have been used to support legal challenges, political campaigns and disinformation efforts aimed at rolling back decades of feminist and queer activism (Korolczuk and Graff, 2018; Lovenduski, 2022). The Next Wave report (European Parliamentary Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Rights, 2025) describes how by relying on the language of parental rights, children’s protection, and demographic sustainability, while avoiding overt theological references, the movement builds wider legitimacy in public and political arenas. Viewed through a social practice theory lens, these are not just discursive strategies, but practices that reshape relations of authority, and the very meaning of public trust and normality.

The consequences are already visible across EU institutions. In EU policy discussions, for instance, there is growing presence of conservative far-right parliamentary groups such as the European Conservatives and Reformists. While its scale differs across the continent, in some countries the intensification of anti-DEI backlash has been particularly significant. For example, Hungary’s Fidesz party under Viktor Orbán has positioned itself as the ideological nucleus of ‘anti-gender’ movement, supporting pro-natalist policies, anti-LGBTQIA+ laws, and cultural nationalism under the guise of ‘family values’ and ‘Christian civilisation’ (Sarkadi Nagy, 2021). Hungary’s 2021 ‘child protection’ law, which effectively bans LGBTQIA+ content in schools and media, was modelled after Russia’s 2013 ‘gay propaganda’ law (Kassam, 2025). The Orbán government complemented this legislation with a parallel civil

society strategy, funding ostensibly independent NGOs like the Family-Friendly Hungary Association while systematically defunding feminist and LGBTQIA+ organisations. Framing gender diversity and liberal feminism as products of western liberal imperialism (Renkin, 2023), the Hungarian government has successfully built support within the region, establishing a coalition that connects likeminded ideological actors in Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria. This, we note shows how anti-DEI politics is embedded in practices configurations that connect state law, civils society infrastructure and transnational ideological alliances to produce material effects. At the time of writing this essay, the impact of the political regime change in Hungary, following the parliamentary elections in April 2026, on gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights remains to be seen. However, it has been noted that during the electoral campaign, Péter Magyar, the leader of the centre-right Tisza party that won the elections, stayed away from discussing gender and LGBTQI+ issues (Browne and Kay, 2026).

This backlash is part of a broader project aimed at building entire alternative infrastructures: media outlets, NGOs, informal networks and think tanks, designed to normalise exclusionary ideologies under the rhetoric of tradition, nationhood and care (Datta, 2020, 2021; European Parliamentary Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Rights, 2025; Graff and Korolczuk, 2025). These infostructures matter not only because they (re)shape the dominant discourse but also because they contribute to normalising anti-DEI practices, making them more durable and naturalised.

Transnational networks play an equally crucial role in sustaining this backlash (Graff and Karolczuk, 2025; Lovenduski, 2022). Extensive financial and organisational ties between European ‘anti-gender’ activists and US conservative groups (e.g., the Alliance Defending Freedom and Heritage Foundation), have funded legal challenges against same-sex marriage and gender recognition laws across multiple EU countries (Sario, 2024). The Political Network for Values with strong links to far-right organisations in Spain, Hungary, Mexico and the US

actively opposes reproductive and LGBTQIA+ rights, serving as a key coordination hub that facilitates knowledge exchange between European far-right parties and their ideological allies across the Atlantic (Brechenmacher, 2025). These connections facilitate the diffusions of legislative templates and rhetorical strategies, showing how practices travel, are reworked and become locally embedded.

The movement's impact on EU policymaking has already been significant. Anti-gender groups successfully stalled the Equal Treatment Directive since 2008, and despite having been revived after pressures from civil society groups and Members of European Parliament (Iraola Iribarren and Soler, 2025), the legislation is yet to be agreed. Analysis by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Brechenmacher, 2025) situates Eastern Europe's backlash against gender rights and LGBTQIA+ recognition as increasingly important due to the strengthening of the alliance between nationalist governments, religious institutions and international conservative networks (Graff and Korolczuk, 2025; Sario, 2025), with funding from conservative donors proving significant for the durability of this coalition. The importance of this is both in the growing influence of anti-DEI actors and in the material outcomes of how effective the practices in which policy is debated and legitimised become reconfigured.

Yet, while the above explanation focuses on the cultural shifts driven by various forces, the 'anti-gender' backlash cannot be understood solely as moral or ideological resistance. It is also shaped by economic changes and widening precarity, particularly among working-class men. Cultural explanations that emphasise religious or nationalist sentiments, risk obscuring the socio-economic conditions of declining industrial employment, wage stagnation, rising housing costs, and limited social mobility that have produced status contraction (Milosav et al., 2026) among European men. Carbonell (2025) argues that deepening economic precarity has intensified feelings of dispossession, resentment, and perceived displacement

within traditionally male-dominated occupational sectors. These structural changes have eroded the foundations of masculine identity historically tied to stable work and social status; resulting in a decline of men's mental health, growing levels of frustration and susceptibility to cultural grievances, with feminism increasingly framed as a source of personal and collective loss. Recognising the connection between the 'anti-gender' movement and a class-coded reaction to economic decline combined with welfare retrenchment is crucial for DEI scholars and practitioners, as overemphasising ideological drivers while neglecting the material underpinnings of backlash risks producing interventions that only target cultural narratives rather than their structural causes. Countering anti-DEI sentiments requires not only educational and cultural intervention strategies, but, as importantly, wider economic policies capable of addressing the economic decline among disaffected groups.

### **Anti-LGBTQIA+ Backlash in Africa and Its Implications for DEI**

Across much of Africa, LGBTQIA+ individuals face growing legal repression, social hostility, and shrinking civic space, forming a harsh environment that has only worsened in recent years (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025). As of 2025, same-sex sexual relations were criminalised in 31 out of 54 African countries, with Uganda, Nigeria and Mauritania prescribing the death penalty, even if rarely enforced in court (Brechenmacher, 2025). Uganda's 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act remains among the harshest. It mandates life imprisonment for consensual same-sex acts and capital punishment for 'aggravated homosexuality', including repeated offences or relations with vulnerable individuals. The law also punishes advocacy and support for LGBTQIA+ individuals with up to 20 years in prison. While Uganda's Constitutional Court struck down some provisions in 2024, core clauses remain, sparking international condemnation from the UN, EU and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (Human Rights Watch, 2024; Wepukhulu, 2023).

Other nations followed suit. Ghana passed the Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill in 2024, criminalising LGBTQIA+ identity and expression. It encourages family- and community-level denunciation and revives colonial-era surveillance tactics. Mali, under a transitional military government, criminalised homosexuality in 2024, while Liberia introduced a bill proposing life sentences for repeat ‘offenders’. We argue that these laws do not only regulate conduct, but they also organise everyday sayings and doings, define who may speak and who remains excluded and silenced. As such, they can be seen as part of wider practices through which LGBTQIA+ lives are rendered precarious and punishable.

The social environment in some local contexts is equally hostile. According to an Afrobarometer (2024) report, 74% of Africans say they would not want homosexual neighbours. In countries like Burundi, Nigeria, and Kenya, anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric is fused with nationalist and religious discourse. These attitudes are often fuelled by foreign influences, including American evangelical groups and the Russian Orthodox Church (Brechenmacher, 2025), which, reportedly, have funded anti-gay campaigns on the continent (Namubiru and Wepukhulu, 2020; Okareke, 2024). This rhetoric gains force because it is locally embedded in configurations where religion, kinship, morality and law are mutually reinforcing.

Despite historical evidence of gender and sexual diversity in precolonial African societies, modern laws criminalising homosexuality cannot be decoupled from the colonial legacy; from, for example, the British sodomy bans imposed in African countries during colonial rule (McEwen, 2021). Globally, over eighty countries continue to criminalise homosexuality, and more half of these trace such laws to British colonial governance (Gupta, 2008). Despite this colonial origin, African leaders now label LGBTQIA+ rights as a foreign imposition, framing repressive measures as resistance to neocolonialism and a battle to defend African values. This decolonial narrative conflates western advocacy for equality with imperial influence and ignores both precolonial fluidities and the ongoing impact of western religious

conservatism (Beeson, 2023; McEwen, 2023). This, we suggest, points to the importance of understanding context beyond a national setting, but as a historically mediated configuration of practices, colonial legacies and competing moral claims.

In this hostile context, LGBTQIA+ advocacy remains limited. ‘Promotion of homosexuality’ laws have criminalised media, education, and health outreach. Some rights groups operate covertly or rely on European donors, which exposes them to accusations of pushing ‘foreign agendas’ and raises risks of further backlash (The Guardian, 2024). Even in countries that decriminalised same-sex relations (e.g., Angola, Botswana, and Mozambique), discrimination persists due to weak enforcement and limited legal protections. These examples show that legal change alone is insufficient when surrounding practices’ arrangements continue to support stigma, surveillance and exclusion. Ultimately, the anti-LGBTQIA+ backlash across Africa reflects not only a convergence of authoritarian populism, religious nationalism, and foreign ideological interference, but also the entanglement between the colonial legacy of homophobia and (essentialised) cultural authenticity (Gupta, 2008). Efforts to advance inclusion must therefore be locally grounded, intersectional, and historically aware, centring African voices rather than reproducing western frameworks to avoid risks of re-inscribing the same colonial hierarchies DEI seeks to dismantle. This, we argue, requires seeing DEI beyond policy-centred work but understanding it as a social practice that must be organised within local relations, meanings and material configurations.

### **Anti-women Rights Backlash in Afghanistan**

Since the Taliban’s return to power in August 2021, Afghanistan has become the global epicentre of state-enforced gender apartheid. More than 50 decrees have been issued to exclude women and girls from public life. According to Genocide Watch (2025), Afghan women now endure ‘near-total social, economic and political exclusion’, a reality recognised by the UN and global human rights bodies as institutionalised persecution on the basis of gender (Genocide

Watch, 2025). Rather than just a policy regime, it is a sustained reorganisation of everyday life, in which movement, work, education and care are all restricted through interconnected practices.

Recent UNAMA reports reveal that enforcement of Taliban edicts has become even more intrusive and punitive. Women are banned from attending secondary schools and universities (UNAMA, 2025a, 2025b, 2026). Without a male guardian (*mahram*), women are now routinely denied access to health clinics, shops, markets and government services. In several provinces, inspectors from the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice instructed shopkeepers to block unaccompanied women from entering and ordered hospitals to deny medical care to female patients not accompanied by a male relative. Reports also confirm house-to-house raids to surveillance women's activities. In February 2025, home-based beauty salons were raided and shuttered; effectively closing one of the few remaining economic outlets for women. Similarly, radio stations owned by women have been forcibly closed unless their licences were transferred to a male guardian (UNAMA, 2025a). These coordinated mechanisms of exclusions constrict the space in which women can act, speak and organise.

While the Taliban claim to protect women's rights under Islamic law, their actions contradict such declarations. Public floggings of women continue weekly, with at least 150 women subjected to corporal punishment in 2025 (Azizi, 2025). In Khost and Jawzjan provinces, women convicted of adultery or 'running away from home' received up to 39 lashes before crowds, in a return to medieval punishments under religious pretexts (Kabul Now, 2025). Taliban's claims of addressing forced marriage and inheritance violations, remain unfulfilled as UNAMA documents cases where officials pressured abused women to remain in violent marriages. Such contradictions reflect the Taliban's commitment to extreme patriarchal control.

Western criticism of Taliban's action does not change women's material conditions on the ground. Even the warrant applications issued by the International Criminal Court against Taliban leader and Chief Justice for crimes against humanity, and specifically, persecution on gender grounds (ICC, 2025), did not serve as a deterrent of their violent policies. On the contrary, Taliban rejected the ICC's jurisdiction, calling its standards 'western' and incompatible with Afghan values. The current backlash against Afghan women is not only rooted in religious justification and socially enforced punishments, but also institutionally supported and legally codified by the Taliban. With education, health, expression, movement, work, and bodily autonomy all denied, Afghan women are not just marginalised, they are being 'systematically erased' from society. The current context is thus constituted through the coordinated configuration of law, coercion, moral discourse and material deprivation that makes it durable.

Yet, to conceptualise anti-women attitudes and actions in Afghanistan solely as manifestations of ideological extremism would obscure the historical conditions enabling this repression. The Taliban's consolidation of patriarchal rule cannot be decoupled from the cumulative outcome of four decades of foreign intervention and civil war that have led to poverty, economic collapse, ethnic fragmentation, and institutional disintegration. Thus, it is important to avoid the oversimplifications frequently present in western narratives, which are often underpinned by the image of Afghan women as powerless victims. Instead, we ought to engage in in-depth examination of the influence of structural deprivation and aid dependency as factors contributing to the current system of institutionalised persecution of women. At the same time, such analysis should not erase the resilience of Afghan women's networks, which continue to exercise their agency through collective action under extremely constrained conditions. Moving beyond the objectifying gaze requires grounding DEI efforts in Afghan women's intrinsic needs rather than universalist western scripts that marginalise local

experiences and survival strategies and rights (Haqpana and Tsouroufli, 2023). This requires treating context as historically sedimented, materially constrained and actively produced through practices, rather than neutral background to interventions.

### **Confronting the Global Backlash: Towards a Contextualised and Politically Conscious DEI Agenda**

We have discussed above the diverse forms of backlash against gender and LGBTQI+ inclusion agenda across vastly different contexts. Taken together, these examples show that backlash is not a single global phenomenon unfolding in the same way everywhere, but a set of locally mediated practice formations that are made durable through specific combinations of political, legal, cultural, economic and material arrangements. This, we argue, matters in shifting scholarly attention from context as a static background in which backlash happens, towards an understanding that links historical legacies, normative meanings and material arrangements into configurations of practices that make exclusion possible.

In parts of Europe, economic precarity, status anxiety and demographic concerns become especially relevant because they are enacted through everyday practices of labour insecurity, political mobilisation, media circulation and gendered resentment. In Africa, backlash is more directly organised through practice formations linking colonial legacies, religious nationalism, transnational conservative influence and anti-colonial political framing. In Afghanistan, exclusion is sustained by coercive state practices, legal codification, religious authoritarianism and the cumulative effects of war, institutional collapse and aid dependency. These contrasts are analytically important because they show that context does not merely shape the expression of backlash; it shapes the practice arrangements through which backlash becomes legitimate, actionable and resilient.

We thus suggest that the response from DEI scholars and practitioners must be recalibrated. Firstly, this includes abandoning the assumption that existing DEI frameworks,

predominantly developed within western liberal democracies, are universally applicable. Such frameworks cannot simply be transferred, since their meanings, assumptions and effects are always reconstituted within the local nexus of practices into which they enter. To avoid the unintended reinforcement of anti-western sentiments and, ultimately, the rejection of an inclusionary agenda, DEI practices must be embedded within the local cultural, legal, and historical realities (Ferri et al., 2025). Contextual sensitivity is essential in all DEI scholarly and practice efforts; otherwise, promotion of morally prescriptive or ideologically foreign view of DEI ethos will undermine future advancements.

Second, we suggest that DEI-related debates should not be confined to the workplace or institutional settings alone (Janssens and Zanoni, 2021). Instead, we call for including discussions on the relevant phenomena in the social, cultural and political spheres since, as we have demonstrated, emerging resistance against inclusion is connected to broader structural factors. The workplace is only one site withing wider practice arrangements and anti-DEI backlash are organised across multiple interrelated sites, that may include media, family life, religion, law and state institutions. Without attending to issues of economic disenfranchisement, demographic anxieties, political polarisation, and digital misinformation, the DEI agenda risks instrumentation, tokenism (Watkins et al., 2019), and intensification of ‘genderwashing’ narratives that instrumentalize, rather than meaningfully advancing, inclusion (Özbilgin and Erbil, 2024; Walters, 2024). What the examples in Europe, Africa and Afghanistan collectively show is that backlash is enacted through everyday sayings and doings that normalise exclusion, legitimate repression and rework the boundaries of belonging.

We thus call for careful consideration of how DEI may engage not only with the current ideological forces shaping public discourse and young men’s attitudes, but also for recognition of additional dimensions of structural influence:

1. **Economic precarity** – in contexts that are openly supportive of gender inclusion, DEI strategies need to be grounded in an in-depth understanding of the interplay between job insecurity, stagnation and intergenerational inequality and cultural manifestation of reshaping masculinities. In other contexts, the entanglement between material conditions of women and their vulnerability needs to be examined prior to the design of DEI interventions.
2. **Colonial legacies** – in postcolonial contexts, DEI efforts need to account for the interplay between inherited legal and cultural frameworks through the imperialist project and the reproduction of inequalities. These legacies persist as sedimented arrangements that continue to shape what kinds of gender- and LGBTQI+ rights can be made legitimate.
3. **Transnational and geopolitical dynamics** – in post-war contexts, DEI approaches need to recognise instances where paternalistic and saviourist western framings obscure marginalised groups' activism. Such framings are practices themselves and may produce asymmetries of voice, authority and visibility that can negatively impact locally grounded struggles for justice.

These three dimensions are not separate variables but interdependent aspects of the same contextual configuration. Such an approach highlights the limitations of current DEI strategies, which focus on contemporary cultural and ideological polarisation whilst ignoring the deep socio-economic, historical and geopolitical conditions that underpin the current backlash. It also clarifies why context must be understood as historically sedimented and relational rather than a neutral background to DEI interventions. It also points towards the importance of an intersectional approach to DEI since intersectionality research highlights that social categories such as gender, class, race, sexuality, religion or migration status cannot be treated in isolation. Integrating this perspective is essential for capturing how global backlash is experienced

unevenly both within and across local contexts. Finally, we suggest that the current moment calls for renewed, critical and generative engagement of DEI of scholarship and practice with the deep structural problems that the anti-DEI backlash exposes.

In Table 1 below, we outline key dimensions and guiding questions for developing context-specific DEI approaches. These are by no means prescriptive tools, but heuristic prompts for more nuanced, case-by-case reflection to help scholars and practitioners map how global structural forces intersect with local practice context before designing DEI interventions. rather than as a causal model of anti-DEI dynamics.

| Category                                    | Key guiding questions for a contextualised DEI approach                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Political and legal structures              | <p>Current context:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What existing laws, regulations and policy structures hinder or enable DEI implementation (e.g., criminalisation of homosexuality, restrictions on women's mobility, weak labour protection)?</li> <li>- To what extent do state capacity and regime type shape the feasibility, risks and potential for co-optation of DEI work (e.g. deployment of 'family values' narratives, NGO-phobia, limited civic space)?</li> </ul> <p>Historical legacies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How have colonial codes and imported governance models structured present-day exclusion and hierarchies?</li> <li>- Which aspects of the current political-legal order reproduce colonial legacies?</li> </ul> |
| Cultural norms and practices                | <p>Current context:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How do prevailing cultural norms support or constrain inclusion (e.g., masculinity, gender roles)?</li> <li>- Which groups or institutions police the dominant narratives around these norms (e.g., media, religious authorities, educational system)?</li> </ul> <p>Historical legacies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In what ways are current norms linked to colonial legacies?</li> <li>- What pre-colonial or indigenous gender and sexual orders existed and how might these offer alternative foundations for inclusion?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                        |
| Economic structures and material conditions | <p>Current context:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How do unemployment, housing inaccessibility, wage stagnation and declining economic status of young men shape openness to anti-feminist narratives?</li> <li>- What are the material conditions of women and marginalised groups in authoritarian or post-war contexts?</li> </ul> <p>Historical legacies:</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

| Category                                | Key guiding questions for a contextualised DEI approach                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How are current economic structures linked to exploitative colonial legacies?</li> <li>- How do wartime legacies produce long-term institutional collapse and gendered poverty?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Transnational and geopolitical dynamics | <p>Current context:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Which foreign actors are funding or ideologically supporting ‘anti-gender’ and anti-DEI projects, and through what infrastructures (NGOs, think tanks, online platforms)?</li> </ul> <p>Historical legacies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How have civil unrest, war and economic sanctions reconfigured gender roles, created new forms of vulnerability, or entrenched militarised masculinities and authoritarian power?</li> <li>- To what extent are DEI discourses perceived locally as neo-colonial control?</li> <li>- In what way do “saving” narratives about women/LGBTQIA+ obscure local agency and reproduce colonial hierarchies?</li> </ul> |

Table 1: Key dimensions and guiding questions for developing context-specific DEI approaches

### Concluding remarks

Confronting the scale and severity of backlash against DEI, scholars and practitioners must reconsider what it means for DEI to remain transformative. Our analysis suggests that this requires moving beyond a view of DEI as a transferable set of organisational instruments and instead treating it as a situated, relational and practice-based endeavour, constituted within historically sedimented and materially organised contexts. This involves paying attention to local struggles and priorities, to ensure that future DEI approaches are responsive to the local social, cultural and legal and political configurations through which inclusion is enacted, contested and resisted. It also means centring the voices, knowledge and practices of marginalised groups within each context. Further, it means that discussions on DEI need to challenge the primacy of the workplace focus and rethink diversity, equality/equity and inclusion from viewing it as a set of organisational tools towards approaching it politically grounded practices embedded in wider social worlds. The analysis presented in this paper is by no means free from limitations, not least because, seeking to offer a breadth of illustrations of

practices in different contexts, we did not engage in the kind of in-depth examination that would have brought to light the complex entanglements of both the anti-DEI movement and collective resistance practices. Nevertheless, we hope to have inspired future scholarship regarding context-sensitive approaches to DEI.

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