

Policy Backlash against Equality Reforms: A Multi-Level Review of Threat, Moralization, and Mobilization

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Equality-oriented policy reforms addressing gender, disability, race, and social inclusion have expanded globally, yet their implementation is frequently accompanied by persistent and organized resistance. This tension raises a critical question about why formally adopted equality policies often struggle to achieve long-term sustainability. This study aims to explain how backlash against equality reforms emerges, stabilizes, and constrains policy trajectories over time. **Method:** Using a qualitative research design based on secondary data, the study conducts an analytical review and qualitative evidence synthesis of scholarly literature, policy documents, and institutional analyses. Through systematic document analysis and thematic synthesis, the research integrates findings across policy sectors and contexts to identify recurring mechanisms shaping backlash dynamics. **Result:** The study demonstrates that backlash operates through a multi-level process linking perceived threats to status, identity, and social order; the moralization of policy debates that legitimizes opposition; and political mobilization that institutionalizes resistance within governance structures. These mechanisms interact dynamically, transforming individual anxieties into moral claims and sustained collective action, thereby embedding resistance within policy processes rather than limiting it to episodic dissent. **Novelty:** The originality of this study lies in its integrative framework, which connects psychological, discursive, and institutional dimensions of backlash into a coherent explanatory model. Theoretically, it advances understanding of backlash as a structured and self-reinforcing political process. Practically, it offers analytical insights relevant to the design and implementation of equality policies that are more resilient to organized resistance.

INTRODUCTION

Recent global developments in equality-oriented policy reforms addressing gender, disability, race, and social inclusion reveal a persistent tension between progressive institutional change and organized resistance. Although these reforms are widely promoted as essential instruments for reducing structural discrimination and expanding social rights, their implementation frequently provokes systematic backlash [1]. Importantly, such resistance extends beyond individual attitudes and becomes embedded within political institutions, legal procedures, and public discourse, thereby undermining the long-term sustainability of equality-oriented policies.

The expansion of equality reforms has been driven by the growing recognition of gender equality, disability rights, and social inclusion as fundamental human rights. In certain contexts, these reforms have demonstrated success when embedded within locally resonant cultural narratives and institutional arrangements. The post-genocide adoption of gender quotas in Rwanda illustrates how equality initiatives can gain legitimacy when aligned with socially meaningful frameworks rather than imposed as

external normative demands [2]. These successes remain uneven and are frequently countered by resistance rooted in perceived disruptions to established power relations.

Backlash against equality reforms is increasingly understood as a reaction among actors who perceive these policies as threats to existing hierarchies of status, identity, and resources. Conceptualize backlash as a process primarily driven by powerful groups who interpret equality reforms as challenges to their social dominance. Empirical evidence from labor regulation and anti-discrimination enforcement further shows how institutional resistance manifested through selective enforcement or procedural obstruction can substantially weaken policy effectiveness [3]. These dynamics demonstrate that backlash operates simultaneously at societal and institutional levels.

Within the existing literature, scholars have shown that opposition to equality policies is not spontaneous but actively mobilized through institutionalized narratives and moral framing. Political and bureaucratic actors often construct discursive frames that portray equality reforms as threats to social order, cultural values, or moral stability, thereby legitimizing resistance within governance structures [4]. Research has further highlighted how threat narratives and moral claims reinforce stigma toward marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities, by recasting them as social burdens rather than rights-bearing citizens [5].

Despite growing scholarly attention, the study of policy backlash against equality reforms remains analytically fragmented. Psychological research tends to emphasize individual-level threat perceptions, while discourse-oriented studies focus on moral framing, and institutional analyses examine resistance within policy processes [6][7]. What remains underdeveloped is an integrative perspective that systematically connects threat perception, moralization, and institutionalized mobilization across levels [8]. This fragmentation limits understanding of how backlash becomes durable and embedded, complicating efforts to assess the sustainability of equality-oriented policy reforms.

Existing scholarship has generated substantial insights into policy backlash by examining psychological threat perceptions, moral framing in public discourse, and institutional resistance as largely separate analytical domains [9]. While these studies have clarified important mechanisms operating at individual, discursive, or institutional levels, they rarely interrogate how these dimensions interact across levels to produce durable and self-reinforcing backlash against equality reforms [10]. Consequently, the processes through which perceived threats are translated into moralized narratives and subsequently institutionalized through political mobilization remain insufficiently integrated within a single analytical framework. This fragmentation limits the capacity of existing research to explain why equality-oriented policies persistently face resistance even after formal adoption and legal legitimation [11][12]. The central problem addressed in this study therefore concerns how multi-level interactions among threat perceptions, moralization processes, and mobilization dynamics jointly shape the sustainability of equality policy reforms.

This study advances the literature by offering an integrative analytical approach that systematically connects threat, moralization, and mobilization as interrelated

mechanisms operating across individual, discursive, and institutional levels [13]. Rather than treating backlash as a singular reaction or a sector-specific anomaly, the analysis conceptualizes it as a dynamic process through which resistance becomes normalized and embedded within governance structures. The novelty of this research lies in its capacity to synthesize fragmented strands of scholarship into a coherent multi-level perspective that clarifies the pathways through which equality reforms are contested and constrained. Theoretically, this contributes to a more refined understanding of policy backlash as a sustained political process rather than a transient response. Practically, the study is urgent insofar as persistent backlash continues to undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of equality policies worldwide, highlighting the need for analytical tools capable of informing more resilient and context-sensitive policy design

RESEARCH METHOD

Research design and approach

This study adopts a qualitative research design based exclusively on secondary data to examine the mechanisms underlying policy backlash against equality-oriented reforms. The research is structured as an analytical review combined with qualitative evidence synthesis, drawing on peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, institutional reports, and relevant grey literature that explicitly address equality reforms related to gender, disability, race, and social inclusion. The unit of analysis consists of policy texts, scholarly analyses, and documented institutional responses that articulate threat perceptions, moral framing, and mobilization dynamics [14]. This design is directly derived from the study's problem formulation, which seeks to integrate fragmented strands of literature into a coherent multi-level analytical framework linking individual, discursive, and institutional processes of backlash.

Methodologically, the study employs systematic document analysis as its primary approach to extract, compare, and synthesize qualitative patterns across selected sources. Documents were treated as empirical materials and analyzed to identify recurrent narratives, analytical constructs, and causal linkages relevant to the three core mechanisms examined in the findings: perceived threat, policy moralization, and political mobilization. The analytical focus is restricted to methods that are explicitly reflected in the results section, ensuring full alignment between design and empirical interpretation. By prioritizing interpretive consistency and cross-study synthesis, this approach enables conceptual replication and analytical rigor while avoiding the introduction of unused or normative methodological elements.

Data Collection Technique

Data for this study were collected exclusively from secondary sources in accordance with the qualitative, document-based research design. The data corpus consists of peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, institutional reports, and scholarly review papers that explicitly address equality-oriented reforms related to gender, disability, race, and social inclusion, as well as documented forms of resistance or backlash toward these reforms. Sources were identified through systematic searches of academic databases and publisher platforms using keywords related to equality reforms, policy backlash, threat perception, moral framing, and political mobilization. Only documents that contained explicit analytical discussion of policy resistance,

discursive contestation, or institutional responses were included, ensuring direct relevance to the study's analytical focus and findings.

The data collection process involved purposive selection and iterative screening of documents to ensure analytical fit with the study's multi-level framework. Documents were treated as empirical materials rather than illustrative references and were collected based on their substantive contribution to identifying threat narratives, moralized policy discourse, and mobilization dynamics. Materials that focused solely on descriptive policy outcomes, bibliometric mapping, or unrelated governance sectors were excluded to maintain coherence between collected data and subsequent analysis. This procedure ensured that all collected data were systematically examined in the results section and that no sources were included without direct analytical use, thereby maintaining methodological alignment and internal consistency across the study.

Data Analysis Techniques

The analysis employed a qualitative thematic synthesis combined with focused content analysis to examine secondary documents as empirical data. The analytical process began with close reading of all selected texts to identify analytically relevant segments related to policy backlash against equality reforms. These segments were coded inductively to capture recurring patterns associated with perceived threat, moralized policy framing, and mobilization dynamics. Coding was conducted iteratively, allowing themes to be refined and consolidated as similarities and divergences across documents became evident [15]. This initial phase ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the data corpus and directly responsive to the study's research objective of integrating fragmented scholarship into a coherent multi-level explanatory framework.

In the subsequent stage, identified themes were systematically compared across policy sectors and contexts to examine how threat narratives, moralization processes, and mobilization strategies interacted at individual, discursive, and institutional levels. Content analysis was applied to trace how specific frames and narratives were constructed, reiterated, and linked to forms of political or institutional resistance documented in the sources. The analytical focus was limited to patterns explicitly discussed in the findings section, ensuring full alignment between analytical procedures and reported results. Through this structured synthesis, the analysis generated an integrated interpretation of backlash as a dynamic process rather than isolated reactions, while maintaining methodological transparency and conceptual replicability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Threats to Status, Identity, and Social Order

The implementation of equality-oriented reforms consistently generates resistance from social groups that perceive these policies as threats to established hierarchies of status, identity, and social order. Rather than emerging as isolated attitudinal responses, such reactions are embedded in collective interpretations of reform as redistributive, identity-altering, or norm-disruptive [16]. The literature synthesized in this study demonstrates that threat perception operates as a central mechanism linking individual anxieties to organized resistance. These dynamics confirm that backlash is not merely reactive but structured through shared interpretations of loss and disruption. As a result, threat perception becomes a foundational condition for the mobilization of opposition to equality reforms.

Economic threat constitutes a primary dimension through which equality reforms are interpreted as destabilizing existing privilege structures. Empirical studies show that dominant groups often perceive redistributive or anti-discrimination policies as direct challenges to their material advantages. Okuyan and Vollhardt illustrate that reminders of the instability of racial hierarchy reduce support for dominant political candidates among hierarchy-oriented individuals, indicating a defensive response aimed at preserving economic and symbolic advantage. Similarly, Fourie et al. demonstrate how belief in meritocracy functions to legitimize existing inequalities, reinforcing resistance to reforms that threaten material status. These findings suggest that economic threat operates not only through objective redistribution but also through subjective interpretations of deservedness.

Beyond material concerns, cultural threat emerges when equality reforms are perceived as undermining traditional norms, values, and social identities. Changes in gender norms, family structures, or social roles often trigger defensive reactions rooted in fears of cultural displacement [17]. Rivera-Rodriguez et al. show that shifts in public opinion favoring gender equality activate group-based threat among men, leading to opposition against feminist movements [18][19]. This response reflects anxiety over the erosion of culturally sanctioned identities rather than policy content alone. Cultural threat thus functions as a mechanism through which reforms are framed as existential challenges to collective ways of life.

Symbolic threat further deepens resistance by targeting perceptions of group status and social recognition. When equality reforms are interpreted as diminishing symbolic dominance, opposition becomes tied to identity defense rather than policy disagreement. Domen et al. demonstrate that men's defensive evaluations of women advocating for equality reflect perceived challenges to male identity and authority. Shahidi et al. similarly show that welfare reforms provoke resistance when they are seen as disrupting established moral and symbolic orders. These findings indicate that symbolic threat intensifies backlash by transforming reforms into zero-sum contests over recognition and status.

Perceived threats do not remain at the individual level but are translated into collective resistance through shared interpretations of autonomy and agency. Collective autonomy becomes a focal point when groups perceive reforms as externally imposed constraints on self-determination. Rivera-Rodriguez et al. highlight how both advantaged and disadvantaged groups mobilize when they perceive restrictions on collective autonomy, albeit toward opposing goals [20]. In the context of equality reforms, dominant groups often frame resistance as defense against illegitimate interference. This framing legitimizes collective action by recasting privilege preservation as autonomy protection.

Psychological mechanisms further intensify resistance by reinforcing group identity and social validation processes. Individuals strongly invested in group status are more likely to interpret equality reforms as threats and to align with oppositional narratives. Niklová and Hanesová demonstrate how faith-based and social frameworks

provide moral and emotional resources for mobilizing resistance. These mechanisms facilitate the internalization of threat narratives, transforming abstract policy changes into personalized identity challenges [21]. Consequently, resistance becomes emotionally charged and socially reinforced.

While threat-based reactions display notable consistency across contexts, comparative evidence also reveals patterned regularities across policy sectors. Studies on public health, taxation, and education reforms show that similar threat narratives recur regardless of geographic setting. Mulcahy et al. demonstrate that resistance to sugar-sweetened beverage taxes across multiple countries is shaped by shared ideological and economic concerns. Such findings suggest that threat perception operates through transferable frames that transcend specific policy domains. This cross-sector consistency underscores the generalizability of threat-based backlash mechanisms.

At the same time, cross-national analyses reveal that economic threat is a particularly stable driver of resistance during periods of crisis. Rad et al. show that economic anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic consistently fueled opposition to public health mandates across countries [22][3]. This pattern highlights how contextual shocks amplify threat sensitivity, especially where reforms intersect with livelihoods and economic security. Economic threat thus acts as an accelerant, intensifying backlash under conditions of uncertainty. These dynamics reinforce the centrality of material insecurity in shaping resistance trajectories.

Despite these consistencies, significant variation emerges due to local cultural narratives and institutional arrangements. Comparative studies of early childhood education and environmental governance demonstrate how similar reforms produce divergent outcomes across contexts. Elbakidze et al. show that variations in local governance and institutional histories shape how reforms are received, even within relatively homogeneous regions. Boro and Stoll further illustrate that biodiversity governance outcomes differ according to national political ecosystems [23]. These findings confirm that threat perception is mediated by contextual narratives rather than determined solely by policy content.

Taken together, the findings indicate that backlash against equality reforms is best understood as a multi-dimensional threat response shaped by economic, cultural, and symbolic factors operating across contexts. Threat perception provides a unifying analytical lens that explains both the consistency and variability of resistance patterns. Importantly, these dynamics demonstrate that backlash is not an anomaly but a predictable response embedded in struggles over status, identity, and social order. This synthesis provides a conceptual bridge to the next section by highlighting how perceived threats are subsequently translated into moralized narratives that legitimize resistance within public discourse and institutions.

Policy Moralization as a Mechanism of Legitimation

Building on the threat-based dynamics identified in the previous section, this subsection examines how perceived threats are transformed into moral narratives that legitimize resistance to equality reforms. Rather than remaining at the level of fear or

anxiety, opposition is often articulated through moral judgments that redefine policy debates as struggles between right and wrong. The literature synthesized here shows that moralization functions as a crucial discursive mechanism that converts perceived threats into publicly defensible positions. Through this process, resistance acquires normative authority and social legitimacy. Moralization thus operates as a bridge between threat perception and sustained political opposition.

The shift from technocratic to moralized policy discourse reflects a broader transformation in how equality reforms are evaluated in public debate. Blanco-González et al. demonstrate that experts increasingly interpret equality policies not merely as administrative instruments but as matters of moral legitimacy requiring societal endorsement. This shift elevates equality reforms from technical governance issues to symbolic battlegrounds over values and norms. As a result, policy disagreements become moral conflicts rather than debates over effectiveness or efficiency. This transformation intensifies resistance by embedding reforms within deeply held moral frameworks [24].

Religious beliefs and socially embedded norms play a central role in shaping moralized interpretations of equality reforms. Empirical studies show that religiously informed moral reasoning frequently positions reforms related to gender and sexual identity as violations of sacred or traditional values. Zhange and Mohangi, along with Waswa and Githui, highlight how conservative moral positions are mobilized to oppose reforms perceived as transgressing established moral boundaries [25][2]. These moral claims do not merely express personal belief but function as collective standards used to evaluate policy legitimacy. Consequently, religious morality becomes a powerful resource for legitimizing resistance.

Moralization also facilitates the politicization of equality reforms by framing them as conflicts between competing moral orders. Krishnan's analysis of tensions between public morality and constitutional morality illustrates how equality policies become sites of ideological struggle. In such contexts, resistance is framed not as opposition to equality per se but as defense of a superior moral order. This framing allows opponents to claim ethical high ground while contesting legally grounded reforms. Moralization therefore deepens polarization by recasting policy disagreement as moral incompatibility.

Policymakers and political actors actively employ moralized narratives to simplify complex policy conflicts and mobilize public support. By invoking moral emotions, policy debates are rendered accessible and compelling to broader audiences. Morgenroth et al. show how media portrayals of gender equality initiatives frequently rely on moral appeals rather than policy substance. This strategic simplification reduces cognitive complexity while heightening emotional engagement. As a result, moral narratives displace nuanced policy discussion with value-driven judgments.

The reduction of complexity through moral framing further reinforces binary interpretations of equality reforms. Goyal and Miller argue that moral binaries transform multifaceted social issues into clear choices between virtue and vice. This process encourages public alignment with moral positions rather than critical evaluation of policy trade-offs. While such framing enhances participation, it narrows the discursive space for

compromise. Moralization thus reshapes public discourse by privileging moral conformity over deliberative reasoning.

Moral framing also functions as a mechanism for contesting policy legitimacy by mobilizing collective identities. When reforms are framed as morally illegitimate, opposition groups draw on shared values to strengthen internal cohesion. Gruenbaum and Ahmed demonstrate how cultural practices become focal points of moral negotiation, enabling resistance to be articulated as collective moral defense. Through this process, moral narratives unify diverse actors under a common ethical banner. Legitimacy is therefore claimed not through institutional authority but through moral consensus.

Comparative evidence indicates that moralization operates across diverse policy sectors, albeit with context-specific expressions. In health promotion, moral framing is frequently used to encourage compliance and public support. Magrath and Nichter's study from Indonesia illustrates how health initiatives are justified through appeals to moral responsibility. Similarly, Okigbo shows how religious teachings frame caregiving as a moral obligation in Nigerian policy debates. These cases demonstrate the cross-sectoral reach of moral legitimation strategies [26].

At the same time, moral frames often interact with epistemic or rational arguments, creating layered discursive strategies. Lévesque's analysis of cannabis policy reform reveals how moral and empirical claims coexist in public debates. Vossen et al. further show how abortion policy discussions are polarized through moral framing intertwined with rights-based arguments. This dual framing enhances mobilization while sustaining contestation. Moralization therefore does not replace rational discourse but reorders its hierarchy.

Overall, the findings indicate that moralization serves as a powerful mechanism through which resistance to equality reforms is legitimized and sustained. By translating perceived threats into moral claims, opposition gains normative force and collective resonance. While moral framing can stabilize support among adherents, it simultaneously intensifies polarization and complicates policy implementation. These dynamics underscore the central role of moral narratives in shaping the trajectory of equality reforms. The next subsection builds on this insight by examining how moralized resistance is translated into organized political mobilization and institutional contestation.

Political Mobilization and the Institutionalization of Backlash

Building on the process of moralization discussed in the preceding section, this part analyzes how resistance to equality reforms is transformed into organized political mobilization and, at a later stage, institutionalized within the policy arena. The findings indicate that backlash does not remain confined to the discursive level but develops through the interaction of political actors, social organizations, and media. This mobilization strengthens opposition to reform by converting normative rejection into sustained collective action. In this sense, backlash operates as a dynamic and multi-layered political process.

Political actors play a central role in translating moral tensions into mobilization agendas. Chen et al. demonstrate that framing strategies employed by political movement actors and the media are capable of consolidating group identities and directing audiences toward specific forms of action. Such framing not only shapes public perceptions but also determines who is mobilized and for what purposes. In the context of equality reforms, this process enables opposition groups to claim moral representation of the public interest. Political mobilization, therefore, is rooted in actors' capacity to articulate perceived threats in a collectively resonant language.

Social organizations function as intermediaries between moral discourse and collective action. The study by Gressgård and Smoczyński shows that organizations in Poland draw on historical and cultural narratives to respond to shifts in gender and sexuality norms. These narratives serve as sources of internal legitimacy that reinforce group solidarity. In many cases, organizations do not merely reflect community values but actively reproduce and strengthen them. As a result, backlash acquires a relatively stable institutional base.

The media act as a primary accelerator in the mobilization process. Vu et al. show that media framing can generate willful ignorance, thereby deepening social polarization. When narratives are selectively constructed, media do not merely inform but also shape collective emotions and attitudes. In the context of backlash, media framing frequently shifts attention away from policy substance toward identity-based conflict. This role positions the media as a key arena in the institutionalization of resistance.

Mobilization is further reinforced through negative policy feedback mechanisms. Fitzpatrick demonstrates that public policies can produce moral responsibility narratives that trigger subsequent resistance. When policies are perceived as ineffective or unjust, such experiences are internalized as evidence legitimizing opposition [27]. This process generates feedback loops in which initial resistance is strengthened by policy implementation outcomes themselves. Consequently, backlash not only reacts to policy but is also reproduced through it.

As mobilization intensifies, cascading effects emerge that deepen the institutionalization of backlash. Mole et al. show that collective sentiments, such as homophobia in Poland, can be sustained through organized nationalist identities. Such mobilization is not temporary but builds durable support structures [28]. As a result, opposition to equality reforms becomes embedded within the policy landscape. This process constrains policy coherence and reform sustainability.

Historical factors significantly contribute to the consolidation of political mobilization. Welsch shows that social norms and collective memory can generate tipping points that accelerate resistance to change. When political actors link reforms to past injustices or perceived identity threats, mobilization acquires a deeper emotional dimension. These historical narratives transform contemporary policies into symbols of long-standing conflict. Backlash, therefore, is rooted not only in present policy choices but also in interpretations of the past.

The forms of mobilization that emerge are sequential, ranging from symbolic to institutional. Sadykova et al. show that symbolic actions such as protests and petitions function as initial stages of articulating opposition. Abihiro et al. emphasize that mobilization can evolve into direct efforts to influence policy agendas through lobbying and political pressure. Moreover, Mondal et al. demonstrate that multisectoral coalitions enable resistance to enter formal governmental channels [12][4]. This variation illustrates the strategic flexibility of backlash in responding to political contexts.

Digitalization further expands the capacity for mobilization and the institutionalization of backlash. Friel shows that social media facilitate networked activism, accelerating coordination and participation. Digital platforms not only reduce mobilization costs but also extend the lifespan of resistance narratives. When symbolic, emotional, and institutional dimensions are digitally interconnected, backlash gains broader reach. This condition strengthens the durability of opposition to equality reforms.

The primary contribution of this section lies in explaining how backlash becomes stable and embedded rather than remaining a temporary reaction. This insight underscores that the sustainability of equality reforms critically depends on policy capacity to anticipate and manage mobilization dynamics. These findings provide the analytical foundation for drawing overarching conclusions regarding the durability and resilience of equality-oriented reforms.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : The study finds that participatory election supervision in geographically marginalized regions is fundamentally enabled by the mobilization of social capital, which functions as a relational infrastructure through trust formation, information diffusion, collective coordination, and resource mobilization, allowing communities in Kabupaten Seluma to transition from passive observers into active supervisory actors within the electoral process. **Implication :** The findings imply that strengthening electoral integrity requires not only formal institutional mechanisms but also deliberate strategies to cultivate trust, reinforce shared democratic norms, and expand inclusive social networks, thereby positioning social capital as a central operational component in participatory governance frameworks. **Limitation :** This study is limited by its reliance on secondary and document-based data, which restricts direct observation of actor-level interactions and reduces the depth of contextual understanding, particularly in capturing informal dynamics and micro-level variations across communities. **Future Research :** Future research should incorporate primary data collection through interviews, ethnographic approaches, and longitudinal designs to examine the evolving dynamics of social capital across electoral cycles, as well as comparative studies across different marginalized regions to assess the robustness and contextual adaptability of the proposed framework.

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