

**Björkdahl, Annika, Jenny Lorentzen, and
Inger Skjelsbæk, eds. 2026. *Backlash Against the
Women, Peace and Security Agenda:
Contesting Gender Norms*. Springer, 183 pp.
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The edited volume *Backlash Against the Women, Peace and Security Agenda: Contesting Gender Norms* offers timely and theoretically grounded intervention into debates on the trajectory of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. More than two decades after the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325), WPS agenda has become widely institutionalised across international organisations, national policy frameworks, and security practices. Yet, as this volume demonstrates, these developments have been accompanied by growing resistance directed at gender equality norms and women's rights, contestation and, increasingly, backlash in the international security realm.

A central contribution of the volume lies in its reconceptualisation of backlash as an integral part of norm dynamics rather than as an external reaction to normative progress. Positioned at the intersection of feminist security studies and norm theory (Cochran 1999), the book interrogates how the backlash against gender equality and women's rights reshapes the aims, implementation and future of the WPS agenda. Rather than treating the backlash as episodic or external to normative progress, contributions collectively argue that it is embedded within the very processes of norm institutionalisation and diffusion.

Rather than presenting a single unified analysis, the volume brings together both empirical case studies and theoretical contributions. Furthermore, contributions of the volume are situated within a changing geopolitical context marked by intensifying political polarisation and challenges to the liberal international order. As the editors note, "support for women's rights cannot be taken for granted as conservative and patriarchal norms gain ground within existing international and domestic normative structures" (Björkdahl, Lorentzen, and Skjelsbæk 2026, 2). In this environment, the WPS agenda appears simultaneously more urgent and more fragile.

The assumption of linear normative progress, central to earlier constructivist accounts (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) is thus called into question. The introductory chapter provides the conceptual framing of the volume, while subsequent chapters examine how backlash unfolds across different sites and actors. Some chapters focus on global

governance arenas, such as the UN system and international legal frameworks, where norm contestation takes the form of reinterpretation and “norm spoiling” (Sanders 2018). Others explore how backlash is experienced and negotiated in practice by activists, peacebuilders, and military personnel, in contexts such as the Colombian peace process and Norwegian armed forces. Chapters eight to ten take a critical and theoretical turn, interrogating core assumptions of WPS, how “women” are constructed, how institutions absorb or resist feminist agendas, and the limits of norm theory in explaining stagnation or regression. Overall, the volume positions backlash as a dynamic process that shapes both the practice and the future resilience of the WPS agenda.

Drawing on feminist scholarship, particularly Faludi’s (1991) notion of the backlash as a “counterassault” on women’s rights, editors move beyond an outcome-based understanding. Instead, they define the backlash as a process producing “outcomes on the spectrum towards a patriarchal gender order” (Björkdahl, Lorentzen, and Skjelsbæk 2026, 3). This shift is analytically significant, as it foregrounds the temporal, relational, and multi-level character of resistance, while challenging linear models of norm evolution.

To operationalise this approach, the volume introduces a framework centred on two mechanisms of “norm spoiling” actors: counter-discourses and counter-practices. Counter-discourses include strategies such as depoliticization, reframing, and discursive attacks on gender equality, while counter-practices encompass forms of resistance, rejection, and attempts to reverse normative gains. These processes unfold across institutional and spatial scales, from local contexts to global governance arenas, underscoring the embeddedness of the backlash in broader political and institutional dynamics.

The volume engages explicitly with norm theory, particularly through the concept of norm clusters (Winston 2018), conceptualising WPS as a set of interrelated norms rather than a singular framework. Rather than conceptualising WPS as a set of stable norms, the volume adopts the notion of a norm cluster (Chapter 4), consisting of interrelated elements such as gender equality, participation and protection. From this perspective, the backlash can be understood as a form of norm contestation. Rather than a simple non-compliance, actors engage in processes that challenge the meaning, scope and legitimacy of norms (Chapter 4). Importantly, the volume shows that contestation does not necessarily take the form of outright rejection; it more often operates through reinterpretation or selective incorporation.

This is particularly evident in security contexts, where gender equality is frequently reframed in instrumental terms, for example, as a means to enhance operational effectiveness, rather than as a normative commitment (True and Wiener 2019) (see also: Chapter 7). At the national and local levels, case studies such as the Colombian peace process show how the backlash operates through counter-discourses and counter-

practices, even in contexts of apparent normative progress. Taken together, these cases demonstrate that backlash is not confined to specific actors or sites, but operates across multiple levels and through diverse mechanisms. They also reveal the uneven and context-dependent nature of norm contestation, challenging assumptions of uniform diffusion or implementation.

Despite these strengths, such as the application of norm theory on the WPS agenda and empirical contributions, the distinction among backlash, resistance, and broader forms of norm contestation is not always clearly delineated. This conceptual overlap may limit the precision of comparative analysis. Second, while the volume convincingly demonstrates how the backlash operates within institutional and governance frameworks, it pays less attention to how these frameworks themselves, particularly those embedded in mainstream security governance, may reproduce the hierarchies that enable backlash. This raises an important analytical question: is the backlash primarily a reaction to feminist progress, or is it also facilitated by the institutional forms through which that progress is pursued (Lorde 2018)?

In conclusion, *Backlash Against the Women, Peace and Security Agenda: Contesting Gender Norms* offers a significant and timely contribution to both feminist security studies and the study of norms in international relations. By reconceptualising backlash as an inherent component to norm dynamics, the volume provides a nuanced framework for analysing how gender equality norms are contested, reshaped and, at times, undermined. Its central insight, that normative progress is neither linear nor secure, has important implications for both scholarship and practice. It suggests that the future of the WPS agenda will depend not only on the expansion of norms, but on the capacity to critically engage with the conditions under which these norms are translated, contested and sustained.

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