

## Anti-gender Politics in Latin America in Pandemic Times<sup>1</sup>

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Thank you, Sonia, and hello everyone. Thanks for being here with us at the launch of the English version of these case study reports. I'm happy to be here, in the company of people whose work I have the deepest respect for and have been following for a long time. My research interests and political commitments towards the study of and resistance to anti-gender attacks, are indebted to the affective and intellectual labour of so many people, most of whom are here with us today. Thanks also to the wonderful people who make up Sexuality Policy Watch and to the authors of the regional study, who have made available these timely and much-needed analyses, first in [Spanish](#) and now in [English](#).

I am speaking here from London, where I've been based since 2015. I'm also speaking as a Chilean queer feminist researcher, whose interests in what we now call 'anti-gender ideology', or 'anti-genderism' stem from my early involvement as a member of an LGBT Pastoral Catholic Group in Santiago in 2010, and activism against so-called conversion therapies, in an effort to counter both religious and psychological discourses that equate our lives with predatory behaviours, and as a threatening presence to the binary sex/gender system. At that time, most of our efforts consisted in convincing our allies, including, among them, progressive academics and LGBTIQ+ activists, about the seriousness of 'anti-gender ideology' campaigns and their real impact on our lives and on politics; that we needed to talk about it and call them out for their actions; to study them, map out their influence and hold them accountable for their heteropatriarchal, restorative agenda. It was difficult, it took us some time, but here we are, in solidarity with other fellow travellers, sharing resources and possible strategies to resist this new wave of attacks in pandemic times.

My comment departs from this early assertion: that the level of consensus we have today about the seriousness of these attacks, as well as the fact that we can share a common language and vocabulary to name them and act accordingly, is not an obvious outcome but rather part of a history of progress and setbacks we have built and experienced collectively and that we need to remember and honour, especially now that new actors and strategies of attacks have entered into the anti-gender landscape. And I'm not only thinking here about the

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<sup>1</sup> This piece is a slightly updated version of the intervention I made at the [online launch event](#) of the "Anti-gender Politics in Latin America in the Pandemic Context" e-book on November 29, 2022.

role of the pandemic and its disastrous politics, or the efforts involved in making our “regional” struggles a *case study* of anti-gender mobilisations outside a Eurocentric framework (see [Çağatay, 2019](#)). I’m also thinking about how opposition to gender and LGBTIQ+ rights is enacted by those who will otherwise be part of the struggle against racist heteropatriarchal forms of violence and dispossession. Identifying some ‘gender critical’ feminists and left-wing activists and thinkers as also doing ‘anti-gender ideology’ work or joining forces and sharing agendas with the far right and fascist ideologies, is concerning and, to me, personally, a concern that I also experience with a sense of loss, in a way similar to the sense of hopelessness I experienced after the Chilean constitutional plebiscite, in September this year. So, my engagement with the regional reports is also an affective one: my reading of the state of anti-gender attacks goes along feelings of loss and hopelessness, but also of fatigue and exhaustion. As Sonia Corrêa and Clara Vale Faulhaber ([2022](#)) conclude in their analysis of anti-gender crusades in Brazil, and I quote, “the political feeling of the last four years is of participating in an endless obstacle course that produces more exhaustion than horizons” (p. 90). And this is important as exhaustion is one of the affects that circulates and seems to traverse the cases, which speaks about the political work that anti-gender ideology discourses do, as they produce exhaustion as an affective mechanism aimed at tiring us out and precluding horizons of possibilities to think anti-gender politics otherwise. We can talk about this later.

From here, I would like to share with you some reflections that build on the case studies, and that reflect three common threads and possible analytic paths on the state of anti-gender forces in the region, which I will put in dialogue with varieties of ‘anti-transgender ideology’ crusades as they manifest in the UK context. Firstly, the role that the pandemic has had in both enabling and intensifying the attacks on gender, as well as in staging a new scenario for the strengthening of “anti-elitist” and anti-intellectual sentiments. Secondly, and in connection with the latter, the use of social media and digital media activist practices as radicalising *echo chambers* and as means of producing moral panics, bringing new actors and discursive strategies into action, that facilitate the articulation of ‘opportunistic synergies’, to borrow from Agnieszka Graff and Elzbieta Korolczuk ([2021](#)), between right-wing populist ideas, neo-fascist sentiments as well as left-wing and conservative feminist currents. And finally, the emergence of what Tessa Lewin ([2021](#)) describes as “incidents of language appropriation and resignification” (p. 254) on the concepts of ‘freedom’, ‘rights’, and ‘gender’, to name but a few. Let’s unpack these threads.

## 1. **Opposition to gender during the COVID-19 pandemic, or the confluence between anti-gender offensives and anti-covid measures.**

From the outset, as readers, we are told that attacks on gender have not ceased during the pandemic but, on the contrary, have intensified in their virulence and recrudescence. Not only this; anti-gender campaigns have operated in tandem with significant changes in the global *geopolitical chessboard*, which interpellate us in our capacity to read this political moment in its multiscale and intersectional complexity. The latter reminds us that our efforts to map and follow the events that have shaped the modalities of expression of anti-gender politics in the region, although contained within a particular time scale, are traversed by multiple temporalities. In that sense, anti-gender politics have a temporal life that is also that of the social uprisings and political transitions, as well as that of the pandemic, which is still very much alive.

No wonder why most of the reports, if not all of them, warned us about the apparent novelty of political phenomena that have been building for some time. In most cases, the pandemic has thus set the conditions for a *perfect storm*, a staging of uncertainty, chaos and polarisation that anti-gender actors have amplified and used to their advantage, making their way into the state apparatus, with Brazil and Uruguay, with all their differences and nuances, being two examples of intentional efforts to position anti-gender discourses, and more specifically, anti-abortion ideologies, as official state policy. In its temporal dimension, the advancements of anti-gender forces have also troubled the generational divide between young and old segments of the population, and the hopes placed on the youth as necessarily progressive and sympathetic towards the fight against heteropatriarchy. As Maximiliano Campana ([2022](#)) showed in the case of Argentina, the accession of so-called ‘anti-progressive youths’ into the anti-gender landscape, with ties in Libertarian and Nationalist political groups, or the emergence of conservative *influencers* such as the case of *Empoderadas Colombia* ([Gil Hernández, Pérez Arjona & Rojas Olarte, 2022](#)), are signs of worrying transformations that need to be taken seriously: not only in their generational difference but also as bringing into the scene new languages and means of dissemination that challenge our conceptual apparatuses and tactics of resistance.

Another salient aspect is related to what Ann-Kathrin Rothermel (2022) has described as how “blatantly similar discursive constructions of gender and the pandemic (or rather the means to counter it, like masks, vaccines, quarantines and social distancing) are in right-wing narratives”. Moreover, the extent to which these discursive formations rely on anti-academic sentiments and right-wing bio-politics is also noteworthy. The reports present plenty of examples of these confluences. In Argentina, for instance, religious anti-gender and anti-abortion groups have vehemently opposed the government’s pandemic response measures in online forums and offline demonstrations, claiming that both the anti-quarantine and pro-freedom marches were part of the “sky blue wave – anti-abortion movement” (Campana, 2022, p. 44). These expressions are also attacks on scientific and evidence-based research perceived as coming from elite academics and policy-makers who work in isolation and are detached from the ‘real’ struggles of ‘common people’.



*Excerpts from a leaflet produced by an ‘anti-gender ideology and anti-abortion’ campaign co-led by the Latin America-based organisation ‘Somos Millones’ (We are Millions) and the Chilean ‘Defiendo Chile’. The image above describes how ‘gender ideology’ is making its way to Chilean schools and how gender works as an ‘ideological vaccine’ aimed at indoctrinating children and ‘usurping the place’ of parents as their guardian and educators. This leaflet was distributed in Catholic and Christian Churches in the city of Santiago in 2017. Photo credit: the author.*

In this context, as Rothermel (2022) suggests, anti-elitist expressions are also connected to anti-academic sentiments that construct anti-covid measures as merely ‘cultural Marxist’ propaganda (para. 2). Given the uneven impact of the pandemic among the population, of

which each case study provides a complete and devastating picture, these anti-elitist and anti-academic sentiments impact the population differently, with those already marginalised, and whose struggles and precarious life conditions were made dispensable, suffering the worst consequences. By denying and opposing the need for vaccines, as well as by interrupting the delivery of antiretrovirals for people living with HIV, and making access to contraception, gender affirmative care and abortion an almost impossible task, as reported in the Chilean case, these actors denied the very existence of those whose lives depend on such measures ([Barrientos Delgado, Ramírez Pino & González Avilés, 2022](#)). And as Rothermel ([2022](#)) argues, and I quote, “anti-Covid discourse exposes even more blatantly the absolute and unimaginable violence of right-wing bio-politics, which assigns whose lives are worthy of protection and whose can be ignored” (para. 7).

## **2. Anti-gender ideology as echo chambers in times of digital activism**

All the case studies warn us about the uses of social media and digital activism by anti-gender actors, as effective means of radicalising segments of the population that haven't been involved in anti-gender campaigns before, as well as a means of positioning new leaderships, and politicising new audiences. As described by Franklin Gil, Laura Pérez and Daniela Rojas ([2022](#)) for the case of Colombia, the pandemic has not halted the cisnormative, heteropatriarchal agenda of anti-gender actors; quite the contrary. “Because of restrictions on direct contacts – they suggest – these actors have moved most of their activities to the virtual world, which has allowed them to strengthen international ties and create spaces that were not so common before, such as seminars, talks, and workshops, as well as other spaces for debate and training” (p. 144). What is interesting here, in relation to my previous comment, is that the use of the digital sphere by anti-gender activists, as clearly shown by David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar ([2018](#)), is also a call to populate a space they perceive as dominated by corrupt elites and, as such, “unworthy and fake” (p. 13). Analysis that explores the workings of ‘coordinated link sharing behaviour’, for example, has revealed the existence of centralised and coordinated efforts to spread specific anti-gender content and amplify their reach, which, in turn, act as broadcasters for problematic news sources that produce moral panics ([see Righetti, 2021](#)). In the UK, for instance, these efforts are also led by so-called ‘gender critical’ academics and journalists. As Julian Honkasalo ([2021](#)) observes, the scene of the argument and the debate has changed as discussions around the political meaning of gender is not “predominantly taking place in peer reviewed academic journals, or at academic

conferences, but instead in rapidly distributed tweets and popular opinion blogposts” (p. 140S), op-eds, and newspaper columns.

Given this changing scenario of attacks and the challenges brought about social media in ongoing debates around gender, I agree with Nicola Righetti (2021) on the need for bringing to the analysis of anti-gender politics an explicit social media approach. As he suggests, and I quote, “the literature on the anti-gender movement is not totally clear on whether social media is just, or mostly, used to amplify offline initiatives, or is a relatively autonomous communication field where the religious-conservative culture war is fought through digital activism strategies” (p. 228). This is important not only as a mapping exercise, as, in doing this, and centring the Internet and social media in our analyses, we are also addressing another dimension of the generational that is key, which is the gap in media and technology literacy that exist even among those of us doing research on anti-gender ideology. As Righetti (2021) suggests, while there are aspects of anti-gender digital activism that do not imply a sophisticated understanding of social media to research and analyse, aspects such as ‘coordinated link sharing behaviour’ for example, may require more skills and knowledge. Researching into these areas could be particularly challenging to those who do not have an active online presence. However this is also tricky as we know that while the digital space can be a rich source of knowledge into the workings of anti-gender movements, we also know that there is where most anti-gender attacks take place and not all of us can risk having our life under attack in spaces that are increasingly adverse to women and marginalised communities, and that do not serve the purposes of only sharing ideas and engaging in productive debates.

Each of the cases show light into new online leaderships, platforms and networks that have emerged during the pandemic, and that make up the anti-gender digital space. Moreover, as Gabriela Arguedas and Gustavo Chaves (2022) suggest in their account of anti-gender politics in Costa Rica, the Covid-19 crisis has also revealed, and I quote, how many countries have been forced “to adopt and even naturalise policies that have traditionally been part of the agendas of the extreme right” (p. 173), in issues such as migration, education, free speech, trans and sexual and reproductive rights. Much of these forced connections have also exposed the articulation of opportunistic synergies (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021) between neo-fascists, as well as right wing and conservative feminist positions that have found a space to thrive and

join forces in the digital world, with serious consequences for building transnational anti-fascist solidarities and coalition building across progressive forces.

### 3. Anti-gender politics as staging a ‘silent coup’

The reports share valuable insights into the workings of anti-gender attacks as forms of ‘discourse capture’ within gender backlash politics, following Tessa Lewin’s (2021) conceptualisation. By means of appropriating and re-signifying so called progressive languages, anti-gender actors have sought to erode the structures of discursive and material support crucial for women and LGBTIQ+ people’s rights. The mechanics of this operation is clearly described in the reports of Brazil and the Organisation of American States (OAS), where anti-gender attacks operate by way of sanitising, erasing and, I would argue, even foreclosing references to specific terms and struggles: from textbooks, policy documents, laws and constitutional decrees, the meanings of gender, family, freedom, feminism, intersectionality and human rights, to name but a few, are fiercely policed and are under siege (Corrêa & Faulhaber, 2022; Moragas, 2022). In these ways, these strategies of co-optation operate as a ‘silent coup’ in Tessa Lewin’s (2021, p. 257) understanding, enabling both a “masking of intent” and a “full-frontal assault” on the systems established to protect people’s existence. The fact that we are now analysing anti-gender attacks as ‘fascist trends’ (Butler, 2021) and using the terms and vocabularies that comes from the study of fascism and authoritarianism, is telling about the restorative political project at stake in current anti-gender attacks.

The mechanisms of appropriation, co-optation and resignification are crucial strategies of assault. For example, Lieta Vivaldi (2019) has extensively analysed the appropriation of feminist strategies by anti-abortion activists and ‘pro-life’ groups in Chile, who have been questioning the notion of the ‘human’, ‘life’ and ‘neoliberalism’ in legislative debates around sexual and reproductive rights. By ‘humanising the foetus’ and equating abortion with an ‘assassination’ and as a ‘*machista*’ act, anti-gender ideologues have portrayed women as ‘vulnerable victims’ in need of protection, whilst appearing in the public scene as the real “defenders of women’s rights” (para. 11). This is not it. They also claim to be “the genuine feminists” (para. 11) who are freeing women from the alleged neoliberal trap of believing that their bodies belong to them as *individual properties*, whilst eroding the principle of the right

to bodily autonomy, which has been historically fought for by feminists, travesti, trans and non-binary people.

Resistance towards the inclusion of the term ‘intersectionality’ in the OAS’s meetings is another interesting example of discourse capture via resignification. As Mirta Moragas ([2022](#)) describes in her analysis, it “has become one of the targets of conservative forces” (p. 238) in their efforts to define intersectionality “as a maneuver to refer to LGBTI rights without saying so: a deception like ‘gender ideology’” (p. 238). For the OAS delegate community, intersectionality “evokes ‘disordered sexuality’” (p. 238), which completely removes the centrality of race and racism from the concept’s history, in a move that Magaly Pazello ([2022](#)) identifies as a perverse manoeuvre: it not only empties the concept from its radical roots, but also erases the voices and struggles of Black and Indigenous communities, reinforcing whiteness as the racial politics of both the OAS and the anti-gender project.

The purposeful resignification and dismantling of particular frames and infrastructures is also a strategy of attack used by ‘gender critical’ feminists in the UK as a means of hijacking and distorting the language of ‘affirmation’ and ‘equality’ in discussions around legal reforms to the Gender Recognition Act, access to gender affirmative care, and the banning of so-called conversion therapy. In these cases, as trans and non-binary people have pointed out repeatedly, ‘gender critical’ activists “have sought to rely on the Equality Act 2010 to obtain discrimination protection for clearly anti-trans conduct” ([O’Thomson, 2022, para. 13](#)) as well as resignifying ‘gender affirmation’ care as akin to ‘conversion therapy’, discrediting scientific consensus and the available evidence on the subject ([American Psychological Association, 2021](#); Ashley, [2019, 2022](#); see also the [Memorandum of Understanding on Conversion Therapy in the UK](#)). By this mechanism of reversal, they present themselves as the ‘real victims’ of ‘cancel culture’ as well as the ‘concerned’ activists and ‘defenders’ of children and young people, in a way similar to the strategies of reversal deployed by anti-abortion activists. This manoeuvre not only works by distorting the power imbalances in which this dynamic is grounded but also by equalising the positionality of each actor involved. As Jess O’Thomson ([2022](#)) warns us in their analysis of the (abusive) uses of the equality law by anti-abortionists and ‘gender critical’ activists, it is precisely “the danger of accepting that all beliefs, short of the most extreme, should be protected equally regardless of structural power and marginalisation” (para. 14) what results in these dynamics of discourse capture.

Although framed in a different way, the provision of gender affirmative care was also the target of anti-gender ideology attacks in Chile by two extreme-right politicians, who issued an official letter to the Ministry of Health to report on the state funding allocation to gender identity and sexual diversity health programmes. The petition came in parallel with another one aimed at the Ministry of Finance to provide “information on resources allocated annually to finance the courses, centers, and study programs that refer to gender studies, gender ideology, sexual diversity, and feminism, detailing their main characteristics and identifying the officials or teachers who are in charge of them” ([Barrientos Delgado, Ramírez Pino & González Avilés, 2022, p. 112](#)). Here as well, the attacks are neutralised and depoliticised, and those who are denied their status as victims of the attacks are, again, those who depend on the provisions of these services for their existence. The petitions are part, we were told, of their role as overseers of government spending. However, one of them, made his position clear by denying accusations of transphobia, censorship and persecution: “*victimizarse* (playing the role of the victim) is what this totalitarian and sectarian ideology is about, an ideology that seeks to *secuestrar* (kidnap) language and destroy everything in its path through their *militancia callejera* (street militancy)” ([Urruticoechea, 2021, para. 11, as cited in Tapia Leiva, 2021](#)).

A silent coup operates thus by dismantling the institutions and discursive systems established to protect both LGBTIQ+ and women’s rights. And it is by framing their “agendas in the language of discrimination and marginalisation” ([O’Thomson, 2022, para. 23](#)) that both the ‘gender critical’ and anti-gender ideology political projects are masked as non-ideological, and their proponents as *just* concerned and non-violent citizens. On the contrary, and by way of a discursive operation, ‘trans rights activists’ are the ones constructed as intolerant and even aggressive actors, as carriers of a dangerous ideology that threatens to spread over everyone and everything, like a virus.

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