

CENTRE FOR RESEARCH ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN

CENTRE DE RECHERCHE SUR LA VIOLENCE FAITE AUX FEMMES ET AUX ENFANTS

A collaborative venture of Fanshawe College, The London Coordinating Committee to End Woman Abuse and The University of Western Ontario

Resistance to Change: Exploring the Dynamics of Backlash

by

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1996

The Backlash project includes two videos and training manuals and this report.

The project was guided by the following organizations and individuals:

The Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children; Western Caucus on Women's Issues, The University of Western Ontario; Fanshawe College, Office of the President; Fanshawe College, General Studies Division, Women's Studies Development Fund; First Nations Services, The University of Western Ontario; The President's Standing Committee for Employment Equity, The University of Western Ontario; The Department of Equity Services, The University of Western Ontario, Nancy Bjerring; Bev Simon-Coulston; Anne Cummings; Joseph Dunlop-Addley; Lorraine Greaves; Olena Hankivsky; Bonnie MacLachlan, Kem Murch; Leela MadhavaRau; Shirley Murray; Vivian Cywink-Peters; Aniko Varpalotai; Linda Wayne, Bill Wilkinson

The Project was funded by:

Provincial Anti-Harassment and Discrimination Projects Coordinating Committee, a jointly sponsored initiative of the Ontario Council of Regents of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology and the Ontario Council on University Affairs, Ontario Ministry of Education and Training; The President's Standing Committee for Employment Equity, UWO; Violence Prevention Secretariat, Ontario Ministry of Education and Training; The President's Committee on the Safety of Women on Campus, UWO; The Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children; Human Resources Development Canada, Government of Canada, Western's Caucus on Women's Issues, UWO

Funded by Scotiabank







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BACKGROUND

In late 1993, an advisory committee made up of representatives of The University of Western Ontario's Caucus on Women's Issues, Department of Equity Services, and the President's Standing Committee for Employment Equity (Western), along with representatives from Fanshawe College and The Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children put forward a proposal to produce a video investigating the backlash to equity and human rights programs in higher education. This project is a sequel to a 1991 video entitled *The Chilly Climate for Women in Colleges and Universities*, produced by Kem Murch Productions in London, Ontario for Western's Caucus on Women's Issues and Standing Committee for Employment Equity.

The purpose of the *Chilly Climate* video had been to increase awareness of unrecognized and unacknowledged mechanisms that specifically make up a chilly climate for women employed in post-secondary education. Since its production, many educators had observed that specific forms of harassment characterized in the video had intensified, targeting especially those who spoke out against inequality. In addition, equity programs seemed to be generating increasingly defensive reactions.

The purpose of the backlash video project was to better understand the dynamics of backlash in post-secondary education, and to develop strategic methods of addressing and transforming it. The original intent of the project was to produce an English language video production with a French language translation, and one First Nations language version. In January of 1995, Kem Murch Productions was commissioned to produce the two Backlash videos, working collaboratively with the Video Steering Committee and the First Nations Services Coordinator at the University of Western Ontario.

It was eventually decided, however, that the committee did not have the expertise to produce a credible Francophone version of a video on backlash in higher education that would be appropriate for a Francophone audience. In addition, the committee decided to produce a completely separate First Nations video in English under the direction of Vivian Cywink-Peters, Western's First Nations Services Coordinator. Given the widespread resistance and opposition to social justice, change and equality, the committee also agreed that the examination of backlash in the videos should not be limited to institutions of higher education but should include the wider community, particularly reactions to anti-violence initiatives.

During the research process, more than 70 individuals representing communities, colleges and universities across Canada were interviewed. They shared personal accounts of backlash and the difficult and painful process of making change and striving for equality. The final result of the interviews was the production of two videos and training manuals on the subject of backlash. They are *Backlash to Change: Moving Beyond Resistance* and *Backlash to Equity: First Nations People Speak Out*.

This document, which provides both a synopsis and an elaboration of the themes discussed in the

videos, focuses on the causes and dynamics of backlash.

The information in the document is important to help maintain gains made in the last few decades and to continue to create real change. Although most of the quotes used throughout the document come from educators in universities and colleges, the experience of backlash, its origins and consequences, are such that the issues, painful impact and strategies for dealing with this experience are the same in the wider community. We must collectively recognize backlash and understand the opposition to that change. As a First Nations Justice of the Peace explains:

***I've learned, that if you're hunting bear, you have to think bear.
And I've had to understand people's fears. I've had to understand
their anger in order to make it my friend.***

Lastly, to help people deal with the problems constructively and effectively, this report identifies important strategies for dealing with and managing backlash.

THE CHILLY CLIMATE AND BACKLASH

The phrase "chilly climate" was coined by Bernice Sandler in her work The Campus Climate Revisited: Chilly for Women Faculty, Administrators, and Graduate Students,¹ about the inequalities facing university women. The chilly climate can be characterized by:

- inequitable working conditions (lower wages, fewer promotions, etc.),
- discriminatory behaviours (marginalizing remarks, harassment, etc.),
- social and/or professional exclusion and criticism.

Discriminatory incidents and behaviours are often not blatant. Their accumulation, however, can cause women and other historically disadvantaged people to feel like they are being buried under what has been called a "ton of feathers". This phenomenon often leads to an environment in which learning, teaching and working are difficult and women, racial minorities, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, persons with disabilities and members of the First Nations are prevented from achieving their true potential.

What is the relationship between chilly climate conditions and backlash? Backlash builds on the discriminatory practices of the chilly climate. Therefore, chilly climate conditions can be understood as part of backlash.

A useful way of thinking about the relationship between the chilly climate and backlash is to picture a continuum. At one end is the systemic discrimination of the chilly climate and at the other end, overt, hostile and well-organized opposition to equity, referred to as backlash.

(_____ → _____ → _____ → _____ → _____ → _____ → _____)
chilly climate equity initiatives organized opposition backlash/ overt hostility

A spiral could also illustrate the process in which chilly climate initiates changes that spark backlash.

Backlash differs, however, from chilly climate practices because it is far more deliberate, well-thought-out and emotionally charged. It makes an already chilly environment toxic.

¹ Sandler, Bernice and Hall, Roberta, The Campus Climate Revisited: Chilly for Women Faculty, Administrators, and Graduate Students, Washington: Project on the Status and Education of Women, Assoc. of American Colleges, 1986.

One university professor explains the relationship between the chilly climate and backlash:

Backlash is the intensification of the very same kinds of practices that originally create a chilly climate and typically the climate is made more chilly and more exclusive and more devaluing and more stereotyping for those who are targeted when they call attention to the ways in which they are excluded or marginalized.

While women's experiences in universities and colleges have been the main focus of chilly climate practices, backlash is far more encompassing. It affects all traditionally disadvantaged persons including women, visible/racial minorities, gays, lesbians, First Nations persons and people with disabilities not only in institutions of higher education but in all sectors of the community.

BACKLASH DEFINED

In the Funk and Wagnalls Dictionary backlash is defined as follows:

a jarring recoil, as of the parts of a machine when poorly fitted; the amount of loose play in such parts; in angling, a snarl or tangle of line on a reel, caused by a faulty cast.

In the Merriam-Webster Pocket Dictionary, backlash means:

a sudden violent backward movement of reaction; a strong adverse reaction.

Backlash is a term which describes **active resistance** to the changes proposed or brought about by equity and diversity programs at colleges, universities and in the community at large. These programs can include initiatives such as:

- human rights and anti-discrimination policies,
- affirmative action hiring,
- accommodation of the differently-abled,
- inclusive curriculum and classroom practices,
- advocacy for social justice,
- anti-violence or anti-racist policies,
- demands for equitable living, working and learning conditions.

Backlash can also take the form of **deliberate attacks** on individuals and groups and their struggles for social diversity, inclusiveness and equity. Often those who are directly involved in equity work experience the most backlash. The forms and degrees of backlash vary but always include emotionally charged reactions of defensiveness, hostility or rage. Sometimes backlash can be violent in nature and include physical threats.

Problems with the term backlash

Not everyone who confronts resistance and opposition to equity and change uses the term backlash. Instead, people express feelings of **marginalization, isolation, intimidation** and **fear**. Some prefer, instead, to use the terms **racism, homophobia** and **sexism**. For example, a First Nations law professor argues:

Backlash to me is a real perversion. It's all twisted inside out. Backlash is nothing more than racism, or sexism, or homophobia, or whatever the motivator has dressed up as something else to make the person who is actually being victimized or oppressed, objectified, turned into the actor as if they had some kind of power

and control over the circumstance. So for me backlash is just a great big lie. And it's actually a fairly neat tool to keep those of us who are "victims" spinning around and powerless.

Her argument is similar to that of others who see the term backlash as belonging to the language of equity resisters. They argue that using such language results in being co-opted into the backlashers' agenda. A video producer and lesbian explains:

I actually don't like the term backlash at all because it really focuses us on responding to and thinking about our efforts and activities in terms of what other people, and in particular, what the resisters to our efforts believe.

For many, responding to the agenda of the resisters also deflects from the complexity of issues causing and perpetuating the backlash. A college professor articulates his opinion of the term:

For me...backlash is just a problematic term where if we fall into using it ourselves, then we're really getting hooked on something that deflects from the complexity of what we're trying to deal with.

For a number of equity practitioners, calling anti-equity reactions backlash helps to sensationalize them and often feeds into the perception that backlash is everywhere and inevitable. Therefore, for several equity advocates, using the term is self-defeating and disempowering. In addition, they argue that the term backlash tends to disproportionately focus on resistance instead of the positive effects of change. A provincial government ombudsperson and First Nations representative comments:

I don't like talking about it in terms of backlash. That's negative. It's a different shape of the challenge and it's a promising shape.

A university professor explains the need to resist the language of backlash:

I'm actually not all that comfortable with the concept of backlash. In resisting the language of backlash I see myself and others retaining a certain kind of control over our agenda and keeping our focus on the positive changes we'd like to make.

Finally, there are those who completely avoid using the term because they think that it is misleading to refer to resistance to change where no change or only superficial change has happened. For them, discriminatory practices and attitudes run deep. They prefer to describe resistance to equity as a "status-quo"-lash or an attempt to maintain the current social system. In the opinion of a university dean:

The word backlash is one that I'm not sure I'm comfortable

using...If I'd want to call it backlash, I would want the gains to be real, such that there is resistance to them, and in my case, I think what the reaction is to, is the perception of gain, because if you look at it statistically, there's not been much.

Nevertheless, the term backlash remains a useful concept for two reasons. First, by naming resistance to equity as backlash, it makes this type of opposition difficult to ignore. And ignoring backlash can be dangerous because it can gain strength when it goes unchallenged. As a former university race relations officer notes:

When it is ignored there's simply the opportunity for the backlashes to gather momentum and to keep talking and to keep writing.

Secondly, the term provides a common basis for individuals and groups to situate their personal experiences and strategize positive responses to the backlash. Most importantly, by classifying experiences of bigotry and intolerance to equity and change as backlash, it becomes impossible to deny the magnitude of the problem or the importance of establishing social justice and equity. As one academic reminds us:

One thing that is really striking to me is that if you take together women, all kinds of women, people who are subject to exclusion and stereotyping, people who comprise what are described as ethnic and religious minorities, lesbian women and gay men, people with disabilities of various kinds, we are talking about a vast majority, not only of the world's population but of the Canadian population. And it seems to me that backlash represents, sort of a last ditch effort at denial of this reality.

What Backlash is Not

When assessing people's reactions to equity and social change it is very important to determine **what** is and **what is not** backlash.

Backlash does not occur when there is an openness to being convinced or to understand the other person's point of view. Backlash is not about honest inquiry, constructive criticism and debate based on good faith and a willingness to engage seriously in an intellectual way with an argument that is being made. A college professor explains:

I think there is a difference between backlash and honest inquiry. I think if a person is willing to listen to what you have to say...there is a willingness to change an opinion.

Some people who react negatively in the face of change have a lack of understanding of what equity

and social justice really mean. They often do not recognize their own biases, bigotry and prejudices. They don't understand the dynamics and consequences of societal discrimination and inequality because they have never been exposed to the historic background of these issues. As a result, they may have serious questions and reservations about equity initiatives. Putting all these criticisms under the label of backlash, however, is not desirable. As a feminist activist and college professor argues:

It is really important to differentiate between what is actual backlash and what isn't. And sometimes I think the word is used in a general sense to refer to all criticisms. To me there's some good criticisms that need not be regarded as backlash. To me also there are some reactions that stem not from an ideological resistance to progress as we see it but from ignorance of the facts, or ignorance of prior research, or lack of investigation into the realities.

Such reactions, even when they are emotionally charged, should not automatically be labelled backlash. Categorizing all negative reactions as backlash reduces the possibility of reaching people who are resisting but may have important things to say and are open to being convinced of another person's point of view. A social activist and author reminds us that:

If someone is just confused about feminism, and doesn't understand what it means and how it will affect his life, we just assume that he is just a right wing reactionary, who is just opposed to change and we are going to address him as a reactionary and not be able to reach him as a man who happens to be confused.

THE HISTORY OF BACKLASH

When analyzing current backlash in society, it is important to understand that backlash has existed throughout history and often occurs when there are attempts to make fundamental changes to society. An educator explains:

In any kind of evolution, there comes a time when those people who have benefited from oppression understand that they cannot benefit in those ways anymore and they lash out.

In addition, a university law professor notes:

I don't think it's new. I think that it just takes different forms at different times.

During the early part of the 20th century, women suffragists experienced overt resistance in their struggle for the vote and participation in public life. They were accused of threatening the very social fabric of society — the traditional family.

Similarly, civil rights activists in the United States experienced various forms of backlash in their demands to dismantle segregation. Speaking about the violent reaction against civil rights for Black men and women in the United States, Martin Luther King Jr. observed:

The white backlash had always existed underneath and sometimes on the surface of American life.

Another noteworthy example is the backlash that has existed throughout the history of Native/non-Native relations in Canada. Native rights leaders and treaty rights activists experience backlash to their demands for human rights, treaty rights, equality and the end to Native apartheid vis-a-vis the federal government's Indian Act.

More recently, however, resistance to change has taken on a much more overt form in an attempt to stifle, marginalize and oppress those working for equality, diversity and social change. Generally, backlash to social change is becoming much more organized and analytically sophisticated. As a result it is becoming increasingly difficult to combat.

At the same time, it is also becoming easier for the proponents of the backlash to make their arguments and to gain certain public support for their position. In order to discredit the benefits of equity and silence those struggling for social justice, backlashers tap into people's basic concerns about social stability. They often argue persuasively that equity initiatives combined with existing financial cutbacks will increase job displacement and decrease access to education and other resources.

As a university professor explains:

What we are seeing now is a climate in which it's easier for those who oppose equality to push those emotional buttons among those who are fearing change. They're getting more vocal and more able to attack directly.

WHY BACKLASH OCCURS

I think what is being called backlash is the sound of power. It's power speaking. And when power doesn't feel threatened, why would it waste its time on us?

—a feminist activist and law professor

Backlash is a reaction of people who already have power to the equity demands of people who have less power. At the root of such opposition is a fear of change. Most people are not comfortable with change because change brings with it uncertainty and fear of the unknown. They often equate change with social instability. As a result, any challenges to the status quo are often perceived as controversial. According to an astronaut and scientist:

Things that are set up against the norm, against the establishment, are things...that probably lend themselves to more criticism...

For those in power, change can be particularly intimidating. As one of the interviewers points out, equity and social justice require *"more than just power sharing, they're about a major, significant paradigm shift"*. Fearing that such a fundamental degree of social change will result in the loss of privilege and power, traditionally advantaged groups aggressively resist the adoption of equity initiatives.

Usually, the more change is demanded or the more progress made, the greater the backlash, often in direct reaction to social, political and economic gains of traditionally disadvantaged persons. The backlash comprises defensive reactions against those who identify chilly making practices as a problem for them. For example, a history professor describes backlash as:

Resistance to equity — it's as if the old guard of white male academic power is fighting one of its last battles. They're up in their castle tower, slinging their last few arrows down on us — the equity groups, 'the barbarian hordes' who are walking up the hill towards them.

Backlashers are not a homogeneous group. Many people are caught up in the attitudes which perpetuate backlash, even some who come from traditionally marginalized groups, sometimes even those who are involved in the struggle for social justice. As a university ombudsperson cautions:

I think we need to avoid assuming that the problem is with only one group. I think we all have these attitudes. We're all struggling within ourselves.

Perhaps the most painful and isolating aspect of backlash is when it occurs **within** an already marginalized group. As a provincial ombudsperson and First Nations representative puts it, when *"it comes from your own people"*. Referring to the First Nations people of Canada, she argues that

having learned the techniques of the colonizers, *"we tend to keep one another down"*. This stems from a need to *"keep everybody safe"* and to avoid *"threatening what little we do have left"*. Internal backlash is particularly devastating because it adds another serious obstacle to securing equality and social justice in society.

BACKLASH TACTICS

There are numerous backlash tactics, often difficult to recognize. Four tactics used frequently are discussed below.

1. Denying the Need for Change

Many people do not think that change is necessary, or they see equity work as passé. The denial of any need for change was identified by many of those interviewed for the videos. For instance, according to a university professor:

There's the refusal that there really is a need for change. And sometimes that denial takes the form of a refusal to consider experience as a valid source of information. Women and minorities, aboriginal people, people with disabilities, experience doesn't seem to count, doesn't seem to be convincing to decision-makers.

Moreover, a university ombudsperson notes:

There's the argument that well, there isn't any prejudice or bias, or systemic bias. It has not been demonstrated or proven or shown. Nobody is being disadvantaged here so why are you spending all this money on equity initiatives, on equity officers, race relations officers and so forth?

Similarly, an equity practitioner observes:

I think a lot of the time you have a lot of people in positions of control, in positions of power who themselves are reasonable people and well-meaning people who often say, that this could not be happening here. And some of it is to work through to the reality and make it clear to people that there are things happening here.

Many people feel that change will cause the lowering of standards at institutions of higher learning or in the workplace. Some say that equity and diversity give unfair advantages to undeserving people. This is explained by a university director and equity practitioner, quoting a statement often made by people resisting equity initiatives and change:

I've managed to make it on my own. Why can't you do it by the same standards that I have?

2. Attacking the Messengers of Change

This tactic includes isolating, marginalizing, silencing and personally discrediting and threatening

those working on equity initiatives. Equity advocates are commonly called totalitarians, fascists, Stalinists and propagandists while equity activities are labelled witch hunts, policing, and inquisitions. For instance, a university professor argues:

Messengers are stigmatized, put in a position where what they say doesn't count. It's not believable. Well they're too radical, they're too idealistic. Perhaps they're too feminist. Or they're too interested in critiquing the status quo.

Backlash often occurs when people become **symbols** of the racial, ethnic, class, gender, sexual or ability group that they belong to, yet are attacked on a **personal** level. This can be observed in the following quotations. A student council representative for gay, lesbian and bisexual issues explains:

Now there's catcalls, being called a fag, a queer, get AIDS and die you queer. I've had to deal with that. Also I've had to deal with being gay bashed. I've had to deal with that twice. Where I've been beaten and had my nose broken. So I've had to deal with that and get through it.

A law professor and feminist activist observes:

Individual women would be mocked or pornographed or gossiped about behind closed doors. Stories were told about her which were untrue or her views were taken and twisted or even belittled some other way to her students, to her colleagues.

A college counsellor for disabled students notes:

People who talk to me about equity tend to be more frightened and defensive and see me as the problem. That somehow because I am part of the designated groups within the equity legislation, I have become the enemy. And I was that same person six months ago as I am now but all of a sudden, I'm a threat, and I feel really uncomfortable with being put in that role.

A coordinator for students with disabilities shares parallel experiences. She argues:

Responses tend to be very personal and that's always been a concern to me. That rather than perceiving that an office on campus is trying to implement a policy that's been passed by the broader university it's seen as this person, sitting in an office telling us what to do.

A feminist activist working in the area of violence against women, describes the personal attacks by stating that:

Just telling the truth brings about incredibly hateful and very often threatening kinds of rebuttal to our work, direct threats against our livelihood, disparaging comments about who we are as people in the world, and that's just about speaking the truth.

Telling the truth, especially for individuals reporting childhood incest and abuse, is often met with powerful backlash. Their stories are disbelieved and dismissed and these individuals are accused of "suffering" from "false memory syndrome". They are attacked on the basis that with their "accusations" they are destroying families and the lives of those who are accused of abuse or incest. And according to Keith Russell Ablow, a medical director in the United States:

The danger in a label like "false memory syndrome" is that it can be politicized and used to silence the real victims. It can neatly close the circle of abuse by defining accusers as unreliable.²

3. Resisting Change through Inaction or Sabotage

This tactic includes not following through on policy changes or not properly evaluating changes which have been implemented. Other methods include creating rumours, lying and trying to give the impression that with equity changes, something bad is happening. As a university professor explains:

It may happen that organizational decision-makers will say yes there's a problem, and we should really do something about it, so we'll put in place a new policy. Or we'll start to try to make change. But then they don't follow through. So the result is inaction. It's refusal to really implement the new policy or new approach that they've agreed to. It may take the form of appointing people to look after the problem but then not empowering them to do the job, so that it's a kind of co-optation.

² Quoted in Lyn Cockburn, "How Do You Spell Backlash? False Memory Syndrome," *Herizons*, Winter 1996, p. 27.

Not following through on change can include not providing adequate services. A First Nations law student explains:

And some of the problems are that...the equity programs allow you to get your foot in the door, but once you're in the door, there are no resources for you, or there are very limited resources.

Sometimes, as a college professor notes, the resistance to change can take on a very personal form:

People who have the control, who have the ability to incorporate change, I see them as being very resistant personally...

Another deterrent is simply not supporting equity initiatives. As a First Nations chief puts it:

Whenever we do make noise, whenever we try to do something for ourselves, there is that aspect of being silent, of being deterred, being told that it doesn't work. You can't make it work.

4. Dismantling Change Initiatives

This tactic includes the withdrawal of support for equity positions and programs and is usually justified on the basis of economic cutbacks and freezes. A former college president explains, in the face of challenging financial times, people need to recommit to equity issues:

I think as the financial pressures mount on us and the temptation to reduce the very minimal existing structures that are in place to help bring about some equity, we need to make these issues everyone's business.

HOW IS BACKLASH MANIFESTED?

There are many issues and controversial debates that elicit strong negative responses by the proponents of the backlash. The following are some of the more contentious problems which cause backlash and resonate throughout all sectors of society.

1. Political Correctness

Negative responses to political correctness are found in all sectors of society. The media began sensationalizing political correctness in the early 1990s and as a result it is often seen by the public as responsible for institutionalizing formal speech and behaviour codes in order to eliminate racism, sexism and homophobia. Political correctness has been criticized for threatening individual freedoms, especially freedom of speech, and for destroying the very foundation of a democratic society.

The issue of political correctness is seen as causing a crisis in institutions of higher learning. For example, reforming curricula to make colleges and universities more inclusive is perceived as attacking traditional standards of academic excellence. Courses such as Women's Studies, Black Studies, Gay/Lesbian Studies are constantly attacked and marginalized.

Political correctness is a tool used by opponents of equality in an attempt to stifle social change and deflect productive debate and discussion about equality. The elimination of racism, sexism and homophobia threatens neither individual rights and freedoms nor democratic values. These changes are essential for establishing a more inclusive and democratic society for all citizens.

2. Academic Freedom

Universities and colleges are in the business of acquiring and spreading knowledge. In many ways, institutions of higher education have also taken a leading role in eliminating discrimination and establishing equality. In the process, they have striven to develop a more inclusive and less discriminatory learning environment.

Measures which have been taken to ensure that historically disadvantaged groups are drawn into institutions of higher learning have caused a deeply divided debate. A backlash has developed against those who see equity policies as encroaching on their abilities to teach and research without constraints. At the heart of the matter has been the issue of academic freedom.

In the academy, academic freedom has traditionally been protected through the tenure system which secures academics from dismissal because of their research and opinions. For example, according to the handbook of the Canadian Association of University Teachers:

Academic members of the community are entitled, regardless of prescribed doctrine, to freedom in carrying out research and in publishing the results thereof, freedom of teaching and of

discussion, freedom to criticize the university and the faculty association, and freedom from its institutional censorship... Academic freedom and tenure exist...in order that society will have the benefit of honest judgement and independent criticism which might [otherwise] be withheld because of fear of offending a dominant social group or a transient social attitude.

Responding to the perception that equity initiatives violate academic freedom and freedom of speech, The Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship was established in 1992 to protect "absolute freedom in universities to teach and do research, including that on controversial subjects, regardless of prescribed or popular doctrine."³ Its objectives are:

- to resist the ideological misuse of teaching and scholarship,
- to support rigorous standards in both academic research and teaching in university hiring policies,
- to preserve academic freedom and the free exchange of ideas, regardless of popular doctrine.

Equity measures, however, do not violate academic freedom. Instead, they are intended to secure a safe and comfortable learning and working environment for all. They seek to find a balance between the rights of educators and their obligations to the public and student body.⁴

RIGHTS

- to speak
- to stimulate
- to present opinions
- to expose hateful views
- to express biases
- to provoke

OBLIGATIONS

- not to offend
- not to wilfully promote hatred
- not to defame
- not to harass
- to be perceived as representing the university
- to protect the fiduciary relationship to students as mentor to protégé

Equity is not about banning, censoring or suppressing the expression of controversial issues. At the same time, academic freedom should not be an excuse for dangerous or hurtful discourse that creates an environment that is inequitable and in which not everyone is free to participate. According to a university professor:

³ Western News, March 19, 1992, p. 5.

⁴ Taken from N. Levine, "Academic Freedoms - Sword or Shield", 1995, p.2.

You cannot truly have academic freedom functioning in universities without equity.

Many academics, however, rely upon academic freedom as immunity from criticism. Such individuals and groups use freedom of speech to reaffirm systemic discrimination and structures of advantage and disadvantage. This becomes especially problematic when individuals attempt to further marginalize disadvantaged groups, for example, by "proving" that women and blacks are inferior beings.

So while some supporters of academic freedom claim that their ideas are offensive only because they are new, equity advocates would call them offensive because they support gender inequality, racial injustice and class privilege. According to a university ombudsperson:

Academic freedom is a phrase that's been taken over by right-wing thinkers, and is being used as a kind of wall if you like. It's almost a wall to keep some people safe and not others. And to permit people who already have power, to permit them to keep all that power.

University or college faculty are as vulnerable as anyone to charges of harassment, whether it be discrimination (prohibited by human rights legislation), non-human rights specific (emotional abuse in the workplace), the wilful promotion of hatred (which is contrary to the Canadian Criminal Code (s. 319(2))), or defamation. Academic freedom cannot be a code for legitimizing emotional abuse in the classroom or denying equity in education. As a social activist and author puts it:

Academic freedom is important...but academic freedom shouldn't be used as an excuse for bigotry, racism and sexism.

By balancing rights with freedoms one doesn't have to give up the commitment to academic freedom or freedom of speech when defending anti-racist, anti-sexist polities or initiatives.

3. Reverse Discrimination

A common societal perception is that equity initiatives and programs result in reverse discrimination, that is, discrimination against groups and individuals already privileged and powerful in society. Goals for hiring women, aboriginal peoples, visible/ethnic minorities, gays/lesbians or persons with disabilities (employment equity, affirmative action, quotas) are described as unfair and blamed for lower standards of excellence in the workplace or in educational settings.

People who have not been exposed to discrimination may not fully understand why changes are necessary. They often assume that everyone is on an equal playing field and so anyone has the power to discriminate. A First Nations representative and provincial ombudsperson explains how this is a false representation of reality:

The reality is we are not in the same condition to run. We are not at the starting gate. Many of us are nowhere near the starting gate.

In the words of a college professor, people who assume that everyone is already equal in society and therefore no change is required:

They deny history. They refuse to look at the historical reality that they have always been privileged. And that for a period of time we need some adjustment strategies that will undo that history.

Taking action against discrimination is **not** discriminatory. For people in designated groups who have suffered discrimination and inequality for many, many years, the need for certain measures to improve their status in society is essential.

And yet, many people believe that adjustment strategies, especially in the workplace or educational settings, undermine merit and quality of education. They argue that by being inclusive such strategies hurt students, employers, and give unfair advantages to those who do not need them. Explaining how these kinds of attitudes are played out, a First Nations law professor notes the backlash against the aboriginal pre-law program:

They say that through affirmative action Indian people are getting second class law degrees, like this was some new phenomenon. The program's been there for twenty years.

In addition, another First Nations person explains:

People say right out well this is what I feel about you as a First Nations person. I think that you are getting more than your fair share of chances.

Proponents of the backlash do not recognize the benefits of being more inclusive. They fail to realize that standards of excellence are raised and not lowered by equity initiatives and diversity. According to a university director and equity practitioner:

We ought to be glad we are improving the pool and therefore the competition because that means whoever is selected as the best candidate will have made an even more significant accomplishment. We really can be assured that we're getting better qualified candidates occupying positions within the academy.

In the community, individuals and groups working for social change are often attacked on similar grounds. For example, those working in the area of lesbian/gay rights issues, often confront backlash. A student council representative for gay, lesbian and bisexual issues explains:

We're being told now that we want special privileges, you want to be better than everyone else. That's not what we want. All we want is to be treated the same as everyone else, given the equal rights and equal chances in society that everyone else has.

Feminists working in the area of violence against women are also accused of abandoning objectivity by focusing on violence against one gender. Resisters argue that this skews reality and causes discrimination against men in society. Such arguments, however, are difficult to defend especially in light of a number of research findings. The Canadian Urban Victimization Survey (1989) found that 89% of those charged for sexual assault, wife assault and child abuse were men. More recently, findings of the 1993 Violence Against Women Survey undertaken by Statistics Canada revealed that 51% of women 16 years of age or older have experienced physical or sexual violence at least once in their adult lives. Other findings of the survey underscore that male violence is widespread, persistent and has serious physical and emotional consequences for the victims.

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

Even while detailing numerous and various painful episodes of backlash, all of those interviewed offered important strategies for how to deal with backlash.

1. Anticipate Backlash

This was perhaps the most significant strategy offered. Backlash can be an indicator of how much of an impact change is making. In the words of a feminist activist and college professor:

We are bound to get a reaction. If we didn't get a reaction, perhaps we wouldn't even be getting through. That's probably our best measure of effectiveness of our work.

Anticipating the occurrence of backlash also allows one to prepare a response to it. An activist in the area of violence against women comments:

I need to, in my work, think strategically all the time, to anticipate the backlash, to anticipate the resistance and to plan for that. I need to have answers. As a non-academic person, I have to become much more aware of the good research that is available that can back up the work that we do.

Being prepared also helps to put the backlash in perspective. This might mean realizing that even if backlash takes on the form of a personal attack, it should not be internalized. As a feminist activist and college professor explains:

If we're working in progressive movements trying to make equity happen we are bound to be resisted as long as we live. I think we have to accept that role in life, collectively and individually. And as long as we accept that then I think a lot of the things that happen to us that can be acutely painful and very damaging and very undermining and sometimes completely defeating can be put into perspective.

Similarly, a First Nations activist and law professor states:

I don't take resistance personally. And I guess when I run into racist incidents, sexist incidents, whatever that's painful, that hurts, I say to myself...I don't have the problem, he has the problem.

2. Build Personal Support Systems

Everyone who was interviewed for the videos talked about the need to share experiences of backlash

with others and offer support to those groups and individuals who become the most visible targets of backlash. This was seen as a highly effective way in which to acquire strength to continue with one's work and activities without feeling isolation, despair or exhaustion. Without such supports, one can feel very isolated.

As an astronaut and scientist explains:

Do you know what I think the most important strategy is? That is your support system...you can't go anywhere without it. It's something that you have to choose very carefully, choose very widely, and have it still flexible so that you can bring new people in...and you try to acquire from these individuals your strength, and then you're their support system as well, so it's not just you that sort of sucks energy from all these people but you actually put back something for people.

Further, in the opinion of a university student:

I would have to say that the support group is one of the most important things because you need to regroup and regain your strength before you can go out. It's very important to know that you're not the only person in the world who has these views and who feels like this and who's passionate about these things.

While close-knit support groups are important, it is also just as important to reach out to those who experience backlash. A law professor and feminist activist explains:

We have an obligation to protect women who are in calamitous situations. To write to them, to support them, to speak on their behalf, to write letters to their administrators, their employers...to do what we can to make their struggle a little less isolated.

3. Link with Large Collectives of Like-Minded People

Another popular strategy involves moving beyond a smaller personal network to forge links with a wide range of groups and individuals who experience similar resistance and opposition to their work for social change.

Organizing with like-minded individuals also prevents any one individual from taking on the forces of backlash alone. This point is made by a First Nations educator:

There is power in numbers, there is safety in numbers, and there's motivation, there's more motivation I think to create changes... than there is on your own.

A collective response to backlash is often very powerful. As a video producer and lesbian argues:

I think that what we have to do is get political. I think we have to organize, start defining things. Basically start being very organized and forthright with what we need and start asking for it and start demanding it.

For First Nations people, using the "Sharing Circle", involving the Native method of group dynamics and ensuring respect for speech and action, can be very important for sharing ideas of how to combat backlash. Equally as important is the use of Native medicines and teaching — involving learning and practising the "Native way" of looking after yourself, your group, and your community. Within organized institutions, having a safe place to meet to share and continue with one's work and activities has also proved to be an effective strategy for First Nations persons. One student explains the strategic importance of an Aboriginal Students Centre in a college setting:

One of the needs that had come up through the Aboriginal students was that they needed a place to call their own. They needed a place that felt safe, that was accepting, that was welcoming.

4. Choose Carefully What Battles to Engage In

Most of the interviewees cautioned that it is important to choose what discussions or debates to take part in. No one person can take on the entire backlash movement. Not all backlashes are open to rational and fair discussion.

Engaging in every battle can become self-defeating, according to a student focus group member:

It seems people waste a lot of time defending themselves. And the actual issues often get lost, and there are often problems when the situation just becomes emotionally charged and very disruptive.

Similarly, an equity practitioner encourages taking part in those battles where there is a good chance of success:

One has to be careful to pick one's battles carefully, pick one's issues, not spend an enormous amount of energy when you know you're very unlikely to win. And you know, the best battles to pick are the very, very serious ones, where you've got a good chance of winning. Those are the ones that I look for.

At times it is also important to maintain a critical distance from the attacks of the backlash, especially when they become personalized. As a law professor and feminist activist argues:

I think that often the better part of wisdom is not to read your bad press. Have somebody else read it, hopefully a good friend. And have her tell you what you need to know about it. But don't torture yourself going over it with a fine-toothed comb. I think it has a tendency to hijack our work.

5. Engage in Open Debate and Discussion

Respondents suggest that once the battles have been chosen, diplomatic reasoning is a good first strategy. Acknowledge what someone else is saying regardless of his/her motives. Take part in difficult conversations. Listen to others without becoming defensive. Acknowledging fears and misinformation about equity, and providing a safe space for people to say what they really feel, can be important.

There are a number of very helpful strategies for engaging in open debate and discussion.

a) Use "sweet reason"

An equity practitioner explains:

[We] need to explain, trying as much as possible to make it clear, that the goals and objectives make sense. We need to explain what we're all striving for is a world that is going to be better for everybody in the end. We need to talk to people at a time when they are not feeling angry and defensive and try to break through the anger and defensiveness, and get down to what are the real issues, and how can we come to some common understanding.

b) Personalize the issues

As another equity practitioner puts it:

Ask people who don't feel for example, personal safety [to be an issue] keenly themselves to think about it in terms of people they care about, or people they respect, in terms of friends, sisters, spouses, etc.

c) Demonstrate that equity is good for everyone

According to a college professor:

It has to be seen that equity issues are not women's issues. They are issues about equality for everyone, and that there is so much to be gained by all of us.

There is as much in equity for the people seeking it as there is for the people who are allowing others in.

6. Use the Media

Since the media often disproportionately report the position of backlashes, it is important to use the media as a forum for publicly presenting alternative points of view. This can be done through newspaper/magazine articles, letters to the editor, television and radio broadcasting. For example, the producer of a First Nations radio program argues that the media can be an effective forum for dispelling common myths about First Nations people:

We try to help tell the story of the people in our community, so that results in many stories being shared. And I think it's very important that finally, our story gets to be heard, because it's our turn, it's our turn to speak, it's our turn to be heard, to be listened to, because for over 500 years now we've been listening to their story, and it's time for that change to take place....the change that our show is trying to implement to change the stereotypical myths that all First Nations people are alcoholics and on welfare.

7. Secure Administrative Support

Securing administrative support whether in the workplace or in colleges and universities is essential for any equity measure to be successful. This requires definite commitments from those in power as a First Nations representative and provincial ombudsperson explains:

At the highest level, make explicit the commitment to do it. Don't assume, don't imply, don't hope. Pick the load up, declare the agenda, put money into it, and do it. Demonstrate that you're serious about it.

This idea is echoed by a former college president:

I think it's really important for people in positions like mine, presidents and vice-presidents, to let people know where they stand...to send out clear messages...provide leadership.

Similarly, a university department head explains the significance of administrative support to the success of her work:

I think one of the things that has helped me most as an administrator at the departmental level is to have support from the senior administration. And I've certainly found that without the support of the senior administration, when you're facing backlash, then it makes all the difference in the world and then in the final analysis there is a limit to what they can do to undermine you.

8. Be Self-Critical

Perhaps the most difficult strategy to adopt is to constantly evaluate and be self-critical of one's work and one's arguments.

It is important to learn to be open to the criticism of others — especially the arguments of the backlashers. According to a university director and equity practitioner:

When I talk to practitioners across many universities and colleges there's consensus that one can't ignore the arguments or criticisms of those whom we would call the backlashers. That in fact there's a need to receive them, to consider, and assess them for their integrity and accuracy.

Being self-critical may involve changing or improving upon current arguments, positions and research methodologies. A feminist activist and college professor states:

I think we have to question our strategy. We have to become more self-critical. We have to reflect upon our own methods. I think the backlash inspires us to accelerate our own thinking, to think more deeply, to think more strategically, to move the agenda ahead. I would never suggest that we simply react, and be defensive or react in such a way as to answer the criticisms to the detriment of ...continuing to create a much more progressive agenda.

Similarly, a university professor argues that constantly improving upon our arguments is essential to effectively responding to the claims of backlashers:

I think as part of our strategy as change advocates, it's very important that we continue to make the case for change, and to make it as effectively as we possibly can. And that means being self-critical. It means not being so wrapped up in protecting ourselves from the criticism of others that we forget to be self-critical. We need to make the argument as strong as we possibly can and we need to have our evidence as good as we possibly can to convince people of the need for change.

9. Recognize the Positive Aspects of Backlash

Backlash can feel overwhelming. The power of backlash may make many people feel that it is difficult or impossible to combat.

For those who have experienced backlash first-hand, the incidents are often painful and difficult to deal with. Sometimes backlash can affect the health and well-being of people. It is therefore not

surprising that many people find it difficult to think of backlash as a positive social phenomenon.

Yet, many of those interviewed argued that backlash is a sure sign that progress is being made. For example, a feminist artist argues that we know our work is going right if we experience backlash:

You know we don't have to see it as a bad thing. To be able to touch nerves, is not a bad thing. It's only in recognizing that if we've touched a nerve, then we're on the right track.

Similarly, a First Nations representative and provincial ombudsperson explains:

The acting out that we are seeing, I think that it's a natural part of change. I think it's a sign that real change is coming. I like to think about something that an elder by the name of Lyle Longclaws said from Manitoba. He said you have to expose the wound in order to have healing take place. And that's going to hurt a little bit. That's going to make people who feel powerful feel quite threatened, and afraid, and not able to see yet what's in it for them. All they see at the moment is what they are going to lose.

Others argue that backlash is positive because it forces the mobilization of traditionally disadvantaged groups in society. As a gay activist puts it:

There is a positive side to backlash. I think what we have seen historically are oppressed people who form bonds together and they end up tramping over oppression. For gays and lesbians in our society...we've been oppressed, we've been discriminated against, we've been fired from jobs, kicked out of housing. But we've formed a group — a powerful group.

Finally, the most effective summary of how backlash is part of a process of change — painful, necessary and in the end rewarding — is made by a college counsellor for disabled students:

All of us are going through change. Our society is going through a diversity of changes. For me, even though it's a frightening experience, it's an uncertain experience, at the same time it's very exciting. I really feel that there are some really positive things coming out of equity. And I don't think that anything really exciting, and really positive doesn't come out of a painful process.

***ALL TRUTH PASSES THROUGH THREE STAGES.
FIRST IT IS RIDICULED.
SECOND IT IS VIOLENTLY OPPOSED.
THIRD IT IS ACCEPTED
AS BEING SELF-EVIDENT.***

ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER

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BACKLASH VIDEOS ORDER FORM

Two videos are available as part of the Backlash Project.

These videos and accompanying manuals were developed to explore the current opposition and resistance to equity initiatives being experienced in post-secondary institutions and the community at large. They are intended to inspire change by documenting the resistance against people who have historically suffered disadvantage in society and by offering strategies for change.

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