



Research Article

Reactionary Feminism in The Global South: Conservative Women's Movements Redefining Gender Politics

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Abstract

This doctoral research paper examines the emergence and political significance of reactionary feminism, a conceptual category denoting organised women's movements that deploy feminist language, solidarity frameworks, and identity politics in service of socially conservative agendas across three Global South contexts: India, Brazil, and Nigeria. While mainstream feminist scholarship has primarily mapped women's activism on a progressive-to-radical spectrum, this study interrogates the growing phenomenon of conservative women who actively mobilise against gender-progressive policies while simultaneously claiming feminist or proto-feminist identities.

Drawing on a qualitative design integrating comparative case analysis, critical discourse analysis (CDA) of movement texts and social media communication, the paper advances three principal arguments. First, reactionary feminism is not a monolithic or externally imported phenomenon but emerges from specific postcolonial configurations of religious nationalism, neoliberal governance, and gendered citizenship. Second, these movements exhibit sophisticated strategic agency, appropriating the epistemic authority of feminist discourse to delegitimise progressive feminist demands. Third, existing theoretical frameworks, including liberal feminism, postcolonial feminism, and right-wing populism literature, are individually insufficient to account for this phenomenon, necessitating a new analytical framework termed 'sovereign feminism.' The paper contributes to debates on gender and democratisation, right-wing populism in the Global South, and the contested boundaries of feminist politics.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In November 2018, hundreds of saffron-clad women marched through the streets of Ayodhya, India, demanding the construction of a Ram temple and denouncing what they termed Western feminist imperialism, all while organising through WhatsApp groups that coordinated logistics in real time. In Brazil, during the same period, evangelical women's networks mobilised millions of votes for Jair Bolsonaro, a candidate whose public statements were openly misogynistic, framing their support not as submission but as the exercise of sovereign moral judgment against what they called gender ideology. In Nigeria, women's groups affiliated with the Pentecostal Christian and conservative Islamic blocs campaigned vigorously against domestic violence legislation, arguing that such laws undermined indigenous family structures and represented neo-colonial interference in African social life.

These three vignettes share a striking feature: women acting collectively, with political sophistication and genuine popular support, in ways that challenge and undermine gender-progressive policy agendas while simultaneously claiming to speak on behalf of women's authentic interests and identities. This phenomenon, which this paper terms reactionary feminism, presents a profound challenge to feminist political theory, to comparative politics scholarship on gender, and to practitioners working on gender justice in the Global South.

The scale of this phenomenon is substantial. According to the V-Dem Institute's Women's Political Empowerment Index, all three countries have witnessed plateaus or declines in gender political empowerment since the mid-2010s, coinciding with surges in conservative women's political organization¹. Pew Research Center surveys conducted across sub-Saharan Africa document that women consistently express more socially conservative positions on gender roles than their male counterparts in several regions, a counterintuitive finding that underscores the inadequacy of treating women as a monolithic progressive constituency². Afrobarometer Round 8 data (2019–2021) reveal that in Nigeria, roughly 58 percent of women surveyed agreed that a wife must always obey her husband, compared with 54 percent of men, complicating any simple narrative of patriarchal imposition³.

The existing literature provides only partial purchase on this phenomenon. Mainstream feminist scholarship has historically treated women's conservative activism as false consciousness, as internalised misogyny, or as the product of external manipulation by patriarchal institutions^{4,5}. More recent scholarship has acknowledged the genuine agency of conservative women^{6,7} but largely within North Atlantic contexts. The right-wing populism literature, while increasingly attentive to gender dimensions^{8,9}, tends to treat women as either victims or passive supporters of male-led populist projects, rather than as strategic actors shaping those projects from within. Postcolonial feminist theory^{10,11,12} offers the most nuanced tools for understanding gender politics outside Western frameworks, but has been less attentive to how conservative women appropriate its anti-imperialist critiques for ends antithetical to progressive feminist goals.

This paper advances the argument that reactionary feminism is a distinct and growing political phenomenon that requires its

own analytical framework. It is neither false consciousness nor simple patriarchal co-optation. It represents a strategic political form in which women mobilise feminist idioms, solidarity, voice, representation, rights, in defense of gender orders that mainstream feminism seeks to dismantle. In Global South contexts, this mobilisation is articulated through postcolonial and nationalist discourses that give it popular legitimacy and make it deeply resistant to dismissal as mere backwardness.

Defining Reactionary Feminism

The term reactionary feminism as used in this paper requires careful conceptual specification. It does not refer simply to any form of conservative women's activism, nor to women who vote for right-wing parties. Rather, the concept designates organized women's movements that exhibit three simultaneous features: (a) explicit political mobilization based on gender solidarity or women's shared identity; (b) deployment of feminist or proto-feminist rhetorical frameworks, including claims about women's agency, voice, and authentic representation; and (c) political objectives that systematically oppose gender-progressive policy agendas, including reproductive rights, domestic violence legislation, LGBTQ+ equality, and women's economic autonomy.

This tripartite definition distinguishes reactionary feminism from several adjacent phenomena. It differs from ordinary conservative women's voting behaviour, which need not involve gendered solidarity or feminist rhetoric. It differs from anti-feminist women's movements, which explicitly reject feminist frameworks rather than appropriating them. It differs from maternal feminism or social feminism, historical movements that expanded women's political participation through maternalist ideologies, in that reactionary feminist movements actively restrict, rather than expand, women's formal and substantive rights.

The concept has partial antecedents in the literature. Schlafly's STOP ERA movement in the United States (1972–1982) is perhaps the most studied case of organised women's mobilisation against feminist policy gains¹³. Paxton and Hughes¹⁴ document conservative women's organisations within international governance structures that deploy women's rights language to advance socially conservative agendas. More recently, Norocel¹⁵ has analysed femionationalism in Scandinavian contexts, where anti-immigration movements mobilise feminist discourse against Muslim communities. However, these North Atlantic cases are analytically limited: they operate in different institutional environments, are disconnected from postcolonial nationalism, and involve very different configurations of religion, state, and civil society than those that obtain in the Global South.

The Global South specificity of this paper's cases is not merely geographic. It reflects a theoretical commitment to understanding how colonial history, religious revivalism, and subaltern nationalism shape the gendered politics of women's conservatism in ways that cannot be read off from North Atlantic cases. As Mohanty¹⁶ argues, feminist solidarity requires understanding the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes. This paper takes

that injunction seriously by attending to the particular postcolonial configurations that give reactionary feminism its distinctive forms and popular force in India, Brazil, and Nigeria.

Gender and Right-Wing Populism in the Global South

The scholarly literature on right-wing populism has undergone rapid expansion since 2016, yet gender dimensions remain undertheorized, particularly in Global South contexts. Mudde and Kaltwasser's¹⁷ influential comparative framework identifies exclusionary nativism, anti-elitism, and Manichaean Weltanschauung as core features of right-wing populism, but offers limited analysis of how gender relations are constituted within or against populist projects. Norris and Inglehart's¹⁸ cultural backlash thesis argue that right-wing populism represents a reaction to progressive cultural change, with gender equality norms among the primary triggers. However, this framework risks homogenizing the diverse forms of gender backlash across vastly different cultural and institutional contexts.

More recent scholarship has begun to address this gap. Mayer and Sauer (2017)¹⁹ document how European right-wing populist parties construct gender-traditional family models as the authentic national unit threatened by cosmopolitan elites. De la Torre (2017)²⁰ analyses how Latin American populisms, both left and right, instrumentalise gender politics for electoral mobilisation. Rao²¹ examines Hindu nationalist gender ideology in India, arguing that it offers women a particular form of dignity and belonging within a gendered nationalist imaginary. Ekine and Abbas²² document the complex articulations of feminism and religious nationalism in African political contexts.

What is largely missing from this literature is an analysis of how women themselves, not as objects of populist gender ideology but as strategic political actors, shape and negotiate the gender politics of conservative movements. This paper corrects this asymmetry by centring women's movement actors as the primary unit of analysis. The theoretical stakes of this asymmetry are considerable. If conservative women are understood only as instruments of male-led populist projects, whether as voters mobilised by elite manipulation or as symbolic markers of a threatened gender order, then the analytical task is to explain why women support movements that work against their interests. This framing reproduces, at the level of theory, the very assumption of false consciousness that the empirical evidence challenges. By contrast, treating women as strategic actors requires asking a different set of questions: What political interests do reactionary feminist movements articulate and represent? What does participation in these movements offer women that progressive feminist alternatives do not? What are the structural conditions that make reactionary feminist appeals resonant? These questions do not presuppose answers that are comfortable for progressive feminism, but they are more analytically adequate to the phenomenon under examination.

Postcolonial Feminist Theory and Its Limits

Postcolonial feminist theory offers the richest conceptual resources for understanding gender politics outside Western frameworks. Mohanty's²³ foundational critique of Western feminism's construction of the Third World woman as a unified, oppressed subject established the principle that feminist analysis must be attentive to the specific historical, cultural, and institutional contexts that shape gender relations in particular locations. Spivak's²⁴ analysis of the subaltern woman's structural inability to speak within dominant discourses opened theoretical space for attending to the ways in which colonial and postcolonial power shapes the conditions of women's political expression. Oyewumi's²⁵ challenge to the universality of gender as an analytical category, based on Yoruba social organisation, has been particularly influential in African feminist scholarship.

However, postcolonial feminist theory faces significant limitations when applied to the reactionary feminist phenomenon. First, the framework tends to privilege critique of Western hegemony over critique of indigenous patriarchal power, making it difficult to analyse how reactionary feminist movements may reproduce and intensify gendered oppression under nationalist cover. Second, postcolonial feminism has been more attentive to the silencing of subaltern women's voices than to the political agency of women who make audible conservative claims. Third, the framework can inadvertently romanticise local gender arrangements as authentic alternatives to Western modernity, obscuring how reactionary feminist movements actively construct and reconstruct tradition as a political resource. This last point deserves particular emphasis, since it reveals a structural irony in the relationship between postcolonial feminism and reactionary feminism. Postcolonial feminist scholars developed the critique of Western feminist universalism precisely to create space for diverse, locally grounded forms of feminist politics. That critique, however, created a discursive opening that reactionary feminist movements have systematically exploited. If Western feminism has no authority to speak for women in the Global South, then who does? Reactionary feminist movements answer this question by positioning themselves as the authentic voice of local women's traditions, simultaneously claiming postcolonial legitimacy and conservative gender content. The result is a form of what might be called strategic traditionalism, the selective invocation of tradition, not as a description of actually existing social arrangements but as a political resource for delegitimising gender-progressive reforms. Understanding this dynamic requires postcolonial feminist theory to move beyond the critique of Western hegemony to develop an equally robust critique of the internal gender politics of nationalist and religious conservatism.

Toward a Framework of Sovereign Feminism

Drawing on and departing from these existing frameworks, this paper introduces the concept of sovereign feminism as an analytical tool for understanding reactionary feminist movements in Global South contexts. Sovereign feminism designates a political form in which women assert collective agency and demand recognition as political subjects while

simultaneously insisting that their authentic sovereignty, understood as the right to define their own gender arrangements, requires protection from both external (Western, cosmopolitan) and internal (liberal, secular) feminist agendas. The concept of sovereignty here is deployed in a double sense. First, it denotes national/civilizational sovereignty, the claim that communities in the Global South have the right to self-determination in matters of gender and family organisation, free from imperialist feminist imposition. Second, it denotes feminist sovereignty, the claim that conservative women are the true representatives of women's authentic interests, against progressive feminists who, in this framing, speak only for an urban, secular, Westernised minority. This double articulation of sovereignty is not accidental. It reflects the specific postcolonial condition in which these movements operate, where anti-imperialism retains deep popular resonance and where the claim to speak authentically from within one's own tradition carries significant moral and political weight. By positioning progressive feminism as a form of neo-colonial imposition, reactionary feminist movements transform the terrain of gender politics. The question is no longer whether women's rights should be advanced, but which women, and which traditions, have the authority to define what those rights

mean. This discursive move is theoretically significant because it demonstrates how postcolonial critique, which was developed as a tool for challenging Western hegemony, can be appropriated for purposes that are antithetical to its emancipatory intent. The framework of sovereign feminism thus occupies an uncomfortable analytical position. It must account for the genuine anti-imperialist resonance of these movements' postcolonial claims while also attending to the ways in which those claims function to entrench, rather than dismantle, gender hierarchies.

This framework builds on Hawkesworth's²⁶ analysis of feminist activism as always situated within particular political contexts. It incorporates Htun and Weldon's²⁷ distinction between doctrinal and non-doctrinal gender issues, which helps explain why reactionary feminist movements are more mobilised around some issues (abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, domestic violence legislation) than others. It also draws on Connell's²⁸ theory of gender regimes to understand how reactionary feminist movements participate in the active construction of particular gender arrangements, rather than simply defending pre-existing traditional orders.

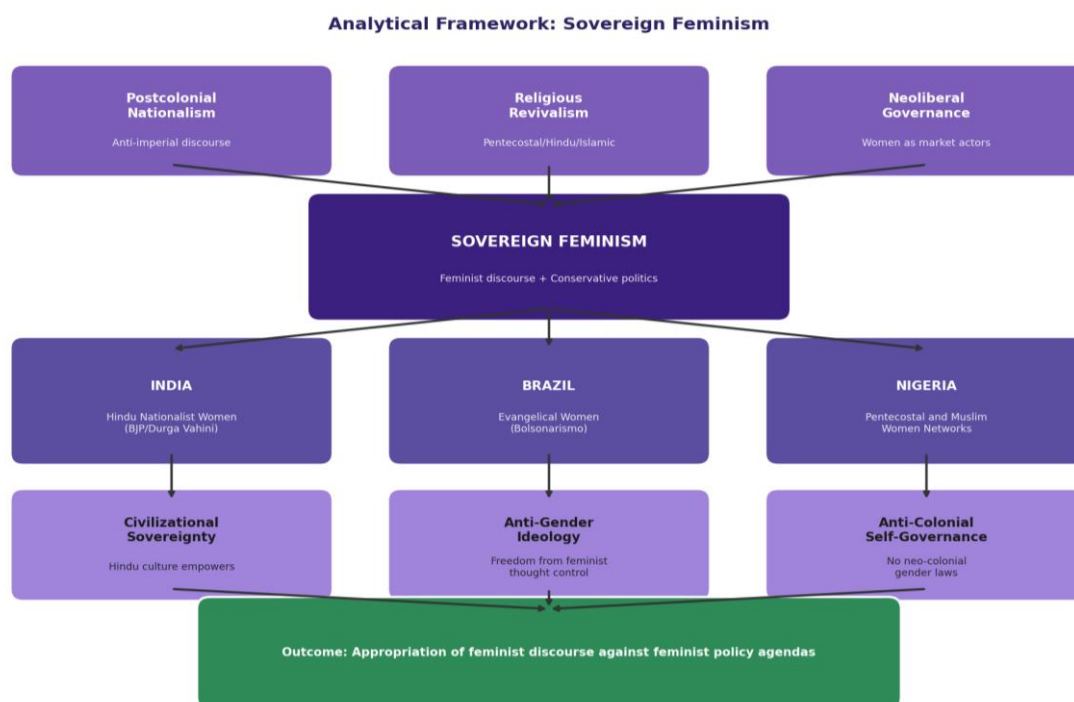


Figure 1: Analytical Framework of Sovereign Feminism — Structural Conditions, Case-Level Configurations, and Discursive Outcomes.

Research Design and Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodology combining comparative historical analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA). Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate here because the research object, the meaning-making practices, rhetorical strategies, and identity constructions of reactionary feminist movements, is irreducibly interpretive. Understanding how women mobilise feminist language in the service of

conservative agendas require close attention to the texture of political discourse, to how concepts are stretched, inverted, and appropriated, and to the contextual conditions that make particular discursive moves politically available and effective. This kind of interpretive depth cannot be captured by quantitative measures alone. Rather than seeking numerical generalizability, this study aims at theoretical generalisation, the development of concepts and mechanisms that illuminate

recurring patterns across the three cases and can guide future comparative research.

Comparative Case Study Logic

The three cases, India, Brazil, and Nigeria, were selected through a most-different systems design modified by theoretical consideration. They are most different in terms of colonial history (British, Portuguese, British), religious composition (Hindu majority/Muslim minority, Catholic/Evangelical, Christian/Muslim split), and regime trajectory (stable electoral democracy, recent democratic backsliding; semi-consolidated democracy). They are similar in terms of the theoretical variables of interest, all three are large, diverse Global South democracies that have experienced significant right-wing populist mobilisation in the 2010s–2020s, all three have active conservative women's movements that deploy feminist-inflected rhetoric, and all three exhibit tensions between postcolonial nationalist discourse and gender-progressive policy agendas.

This design allows the study to identify whether and how reactionary feminism takes different forms in different cultural-institutional contexts (divergence), while also identifying structural features that recur across cases (convergence). The goal is not statistical generalisation but theoretical generalisation, the development of concepts and mechanisms that can guide future comparative research.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis is employed to analyse the textual and visual outputs of reactionary feminist movements in each case. The corpus includes founding documents and manifestos

of key movement organisations, speeches and public statements by movement leaders, social media content (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter/X, Instagram) from movement-affiliated accounts, and newspaper coverage of movement activities. The corpus was assembled through systematic collection over eighteen months and comprises approximately 2,400 documents across the three cases.

CDA analysis focuses on four discursive dimensions: (a) the construction of collective identity and authentic womanhood; (b) the framing of political opponents, progressive feminists, international gender-justice organizations, secular states, as threats to women's sovereignty; (c) the deployment of rights language and feminist tropes; and (d) the articulation of gender politics with nationalist, religious, and postcolonial discourses. Analysis proceeds iteratively, moving between individual texts and the broader discursive context, with findings triangulated against secondary literature.

Positionality and Ethical Considerations

This research raises significant ethical and positionality considerations. The researcher approaches this topic as a political scientist committed to gender justice, studying movements whose political goals she does not share. This positionality requires ongoing reflexive attention to the risk of misrepresentation, both the risk of dismissing movement actors' agency through condescending analysis and the risk of inadvertently legitimising reactionary politics through analytical empathy. Following Harding²⁹ and Collins³⁰, the study aims to analyse movement actors' public self-representations rigorously while subjecting them to critical analytical scrutiny.

Table 1: Cross-Case Comparison of CDA Data Sources

Dimension	India	Brazil	Nigeria
CDA corpus documents	~900	~800	~700
Time period	Jan 2024 – Jun 2025	Jan 2024 – Jun 2025	Jan 2024 – Jun 2025
Primary platforms analyzed	WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter/X	Facebook, YouTube, Telegram	WhatsApp, Facebook, Radio

Case Studies

India: Hindu Nationalist Women and the Gendered Nation

The Hindu nationalist movement in India has a long history of organising women as political actors within its ideological framework. The Rashtra Sevika Samiti (RSS Women's Wing), founded in 1936, one year after the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh itself, established early the principle that Hindu nationalist politics required women's active participation, not merely their passive support. However, this participation was framed through a specific gender ideology, of women as mothers of the Hindu nation, custodians of cultural purity, and symbols of civilizational vitality. This early model of Hindu nationalist women's activism corresponds more to maternalist feminism than to reactionary feminism as defined in this paper, it mobilized women without deploying feminist discourse.

The transformation toward reactionary feminism, the appropriation of feminist language alongside conservative gender politics, accelerated in the post-liberalisation period (post-1991) and intensified with the Bharatiya Janata Party's

(BJP) national electoral dominance from 2014 onward. Key drivers of this transformation include the rise of social media platforms as spaces for women's political expression, the emergence of a new generation of Hindu nationalist women leaders with educational credentials and professional identities that locate them within feminist-adjacent discourses, and the strategic need to counter progressive feminist movements that had gained significant legal and policy victories in the 1990s and 2000s.

Post-2014, the BJP's Lok Sabha vote share among women reached 38 percent in the 2019 general elections, according to the Lokniti-CSDS National Election Study³¹, a figure that challenges easy assumptions about a uniform women's anti-BJP bloc and invites analysis of the political appeals that draw women toward the Hindu nationalist project.

Contemporary Hindu nationalist reactionary feminism operates through several overlapping organisational forms. The Durga Vahini (Army of Goddess Durga) is the most explicitly militant formation, organising young women in physical training and cultural activities while articulating a vision of Hindu women as

warrior-mothers protecting the nation against Muslim love jihad and land jihad. The organisation explicitly frames itself as feminist, claiming to empower women to resist victimisation, while simultaneously demanding women's adherence to Hindu cultural norms and opposing inter-religious marriage.

The BJP Mahila Morcha (Women's Front) operates as a more mainstream political organization, mobilizing women voters and candidates while articulating a specifically Hindu nationalist vision of women's empowerment. Key figures such as Smriti Irani and Nirmala Sitharaman have simultaneously served as ministers overseeing significant women's policy portfolios and as advocates for positions that mainstream feminist organizations oppose.

A third, more diffuse formation is the network of women bloggers, YouTubers, and social media influencers who articulate Hindu-nationalist, reactionary-feminist politics to mass audiences. CDA of this network reveals high rates of content sharing and network density, suggesting strong internal solidarity alongside effective outward diffusion of reactionary feminist framing.

Discourse analysis of the Indian corpus reveals four dominant frames. The civilizational sovereignty frame positions Hindu cultural gender arrangements as the product of a superior ancient civilization under threat from both Western feminist imperialism and Islamist patriarchy. The authentic voice frame claims that Hindu nationalist women, unlike progressive feminists, represent ordinary Indian women's genuine

preferences, delegitimizing progressive feminist organizations as elite, urban, and Westernized. The protection narrative frames Hindu nationalist politics as necessary for women's physical safety against gendered violence by Muslim men, instrumentalizing feminist concerns about sexual violence for communal political mobilization. Finally, the development feminist frame endorses women's economic empowerment and education while opposing changes to family structure, reproductive rights, and sexual norms. What is analytically significant about these four frames is not simply their content but their combinatory logic. The civilizational sovereignty and authentic voice frames work together to position Hindu nationalist women as speaking from, and for, the authentic Indian tradition, delegitimising progressive feminist organisations as external impositions. The protection narrative instrumentalises feminist concern for women's safety while redirecting it toward communal rather than structural ends. And the development feminist frame creates a zone of apparent alignment with progressive feminist values, economic empowerment, education, which moves positions on reproductive rights and family structure appear as measured disagreements within a shared feminist space, rather than as categorical rejections of feminist principles. Together, these frames constitute a coherent discursive system that is far more sophisticated than simple anti-feminism, it appropriates feminism's most publicly legitimate claims while systematically contesting its substantive political agenda.

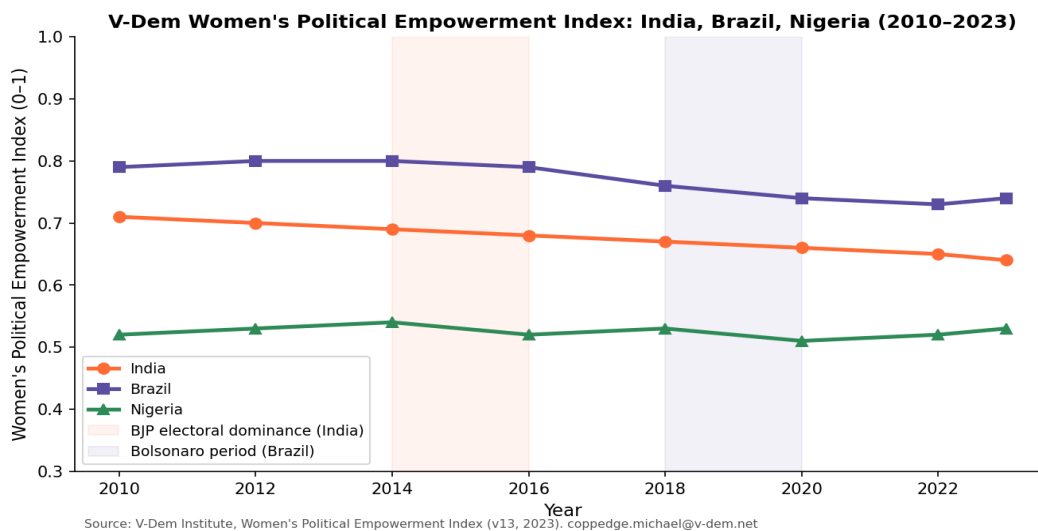


Figure 2: V-Dem Women's Political Empowerment Index — India, Brazil, Nigeria (2010–2023). India's index shows a declining trend coinciding with BJP dominance from 2014; Brazil's index dips sharply during the Bolsonaro period.

Brazil: Bolsonaroismo, Evangelical Women, and Anti-Gender Mobilisation

Brazil's contemporary reactionary feminist landscape cannot be understood without attention to the dramatic transformation of the country's religious landscape over the past four decades. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE)³², the share of Brazilians identifying as Evangelical

Protestant grew from approximately 6.6 percent in 1980 to 22.2 percent by the 2010 census. More recent Pew Research Center³³ and Datafolha³⁴ estimates suggest the Evangelical share reached approximately 31 percent by 2024, making Evangelicals the fastest-growing religious group in Brazil. This transformation has fundamentally reorganised the gender politics of conservative civil society.

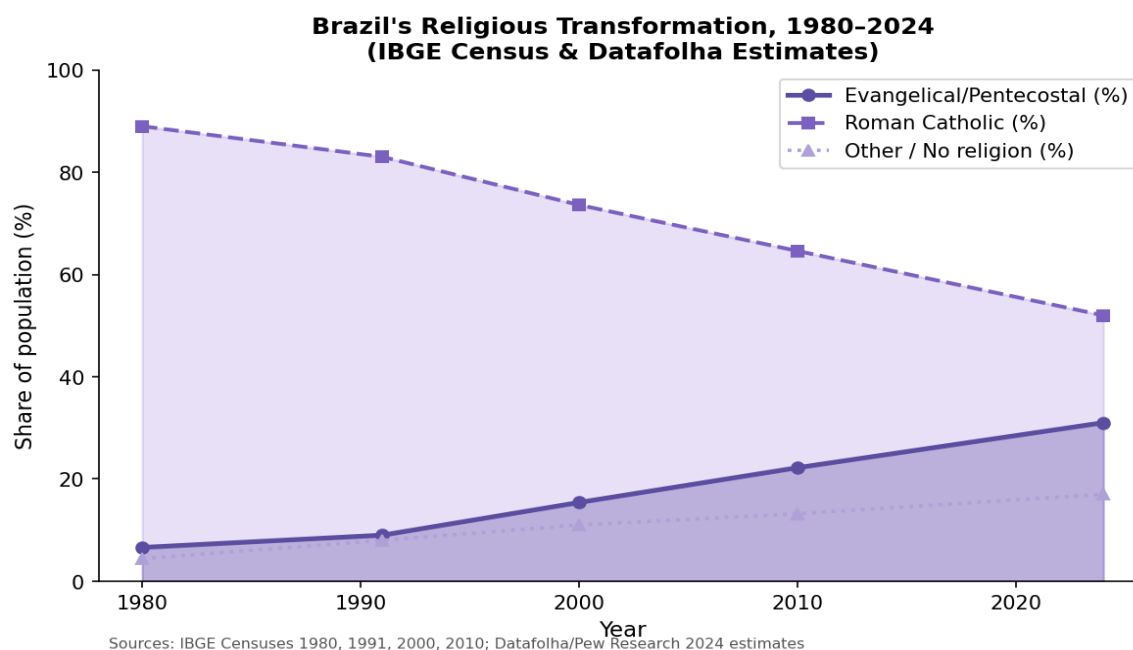


Figure 3: Brazil's Religious Transformation, 1980–2024. The dramatic growth of Evangelical/Pentecostal Christianity, from 6.6% to approximately 31%, has reshaped the organisational landscape for conservative women's politics.

The election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 and his son's continued political prominence crystallised a particular form of reactionary feminist politics that combined evangelical gender theology, anti-gender-ideology discourse, and Brazilian nationalism. Datafolha³⁵ exit poll data from October 2018 show that approximately 44 percent of women voters supported Bolsonaro in the first round, a figure that rose among Evangelical women, among whom support exceeded 55 percent. What distinguished this formation from earlier conservative women's activism was its explicit feminist mimicry, the deployment of women's empowerment, choice, and autonomy language in service of anti-feminist political objectives.

The *Mulheres com Bolsonaro* (Women with Bolsonaro) movement, which emerged during the 2018 electoral campaign and was subsequently institutionalised as a network of women's groups, provides the clearest example of reactionary feminist organization in the Brazilian context. Its communications consistently emphasised women's rational choice, political agency, and rejection of progressive feminist paternalism, arguing that progressive feminism denied women the right to freely choose traditional family values. The movement organised significant public events, including a counter-march to the annual 8 March International Women's Day demonstrations, under the banner 'Women for Life, Family, and Freedom.'

The Frente Parlamentar Evangélica's women members represent a second, institutionalised form of reactionary feminism operating within the Brazilian legislature. Analysis of their legislative records and public communications reveals a consistent pattern, support for policies that increase women's formal political representation alongside opposition to abortion

rights, domestic violence legislation that challenges parental authority, and LGBTQ+ anti-discrimination measures.

A distinguishing feature of Brazilian reactionary feminism relative to the Indian case is the prominence of anti-gender-ideology discourse, a globally circulating Catholic and evangelical political discourse that frames progressive gender equality norms as a totalitarian ideological project threatening family, children, and civilisation. This discourse, originating in Vatican documents of the 1990s and subsequently disseminated through transnational Catholic and evangelical networks³⁶, has been particularly effective in Brazil because it frames opposition to gender equality as itself a form of resistance to ideological imposition.

The anti-gender-ideology frame thus functions as a sophisticated rhetorical resource that allows reactionary feminist actors to position themselves as pluralists defending freedom of thought against feminist thought-control, inverting the standard progressive feminist critique of conservative gender politics as authoritarian.

4.3 Nigeria: Religious Conservatism, Chieftaincy, and Women's Movements

Nigeria's gender politics are shaped by a unique configuration of factors, a near-equal division between Christian and Muslim populations (approximately 53 and 45 percent respectively, according to Pew Research Center (2010) estimates)³⁷, a complex federal structure with 36 states applying different legal regimes including Sharia in 12 northern states, deep traditions of women's economic autonomy and market organization in many Yoruba and Igbo communities, and a strong tradition of women's organized resistance to both colonial and postcolonial state power. The celebrated 1929 Women's War (Aba Women's Riots), in which Igbo women organised a massive uprising against colonial taxation policies, stands as a founding

reference point in Nigerian feminist historiography, one that reactionary feminist movements in Nigeria have notably sought to appropriate.

Contemporary Nigerian reactionary feminism operates across both Christian and Muslim communities, taking different forms in each while sharing the characteristic features identified in this paper's conceptual framework. The campaign against the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act in the early 2010s, in which women's groups affiliated with both religious communities argued that the legislation represented neo-colonial interference in Nigerian family life, provides a defining case study.

Nigerian Pentecostal women's organizations constitute a major form of Christian reactionary feminism. The women's ministries of large Pentecostal churches, including the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Living Faith Church (Winners Chapel), and Deeper Life Bible Church, organise millions of Nigerian women in formations that emphasise women's spiritual authority, prophetic gifting, and leadership capacity within the church, while simultaneously enforcing strict gender complementarianism in family roles and opposing progressive gender legislation.

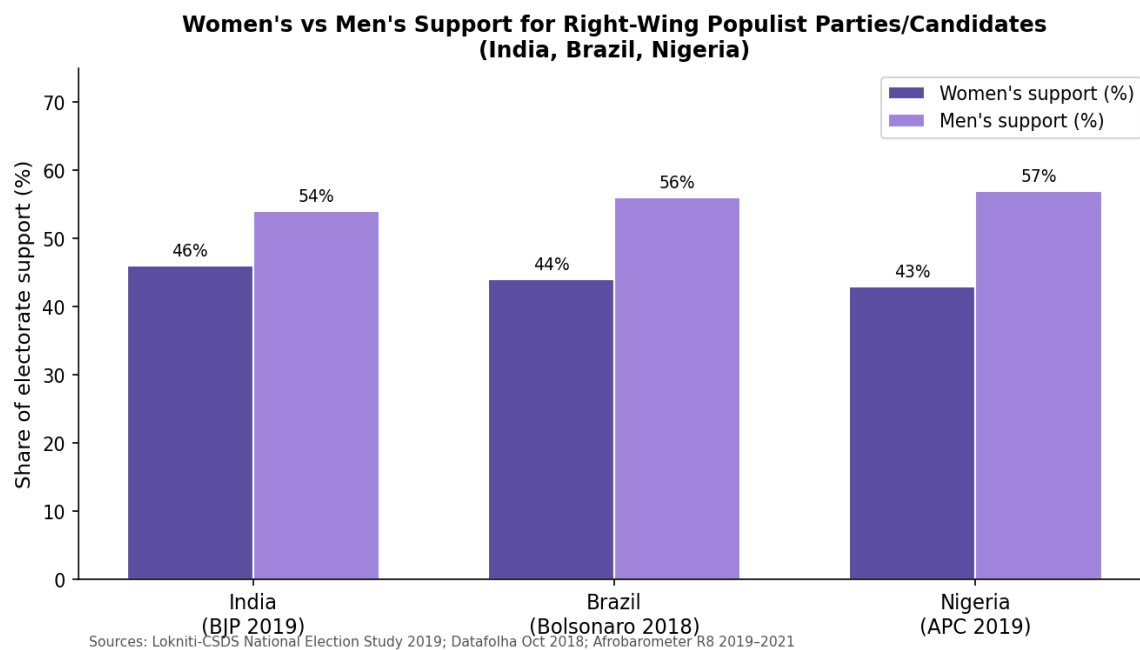
There is a notable pattern in Nigerian Pentecostal women's movements that CDA of their public texts makes visible, the extensive leadership roles women exercise within church structures, as pastors, prayer leaders, and ministry directors, coexist with public advocacy of domestic complementarianism and opposition to legislative frameworks designed to protect women from domestic violence. Discourse analysis of movement texts and social media communications reveals that this combination is constructed as internally coherent rather than contradictory. Within the discursive universe of Nigerian Pentecostal reactionary feminism, spiritual equality and leadership authority within the church is precisely what is seen to enable women to authentically choose domestic complementarianism. What progressive feminist frameworks read as patriarchal imposition is constructed, within movement discourse, as an expression of women's own spiritual discernment and sovereign agency. The language of 'choice' and 'empowerment', central to liberal feminist discourse, is thus appropriated and redirected. Women are empowered enough to choose submission.

This pattern has significant implications for feminist theory's understanding of agency under patriarchal constraint. The experience of authority in one domain (church leadership) appears to reinforce rather than subvert deference in another (domestic life), confounding liberal-feminist assumptions about the relationship between empowerment and gender-progressive politics.

In northern Nigeria, reactionary feminist politics takes a distinctive form shaped by the institution of *purdah* (female seclusion), the 12-state Sharia legal system, and complex dynamics of class and education among northern Muslim women. Women who operate within Sharia-compliant frameworks have developed sophisticated arguments, drawing on Islamic feminist scholarship from scholars such as Amina Wadud³⁸ and Fatima Mernissi³⁹, to claim that properly understood Islamic law empowers women and that progressive feminist demands are both culturally alien and theologically misguided.

The campaign by northern Nigerian Muslim women's organizations against the Child Rights Act, which sets 18 as the minimum marriage age, is particularly illustrative. Movement actors argued that the Act represented Christian southern imposition on Muslim northern culture, that Islamic law provided adequate protections for girls and women within its own framework, and that northern Muslim women were capable of self-governance in these matters without external feminist intervention. This argumentation simultaneously deploys rights discourse (women's right to self-governance, communities' right to cultural self-determination) against rights legislation (minimum marriage age), a characteristic reactionary feminist discursive manoeuvre.

Afrobarometer Round 8 data provide contextual grounding for these findings: in Nigeria, 62 percent of respondents, with only minor variation by gender, agreed that traditional leaders play an important role in governing local communities, and 58 percent of women agreed that gender roles in the family should follow religious guidance⁴⁰. These findings underscore that reactionary feminist movements operate within and can draw on broad popular legitimacy for traditionalist gender frameworks.



Sources: Lokniti-CSDS National Election Study 2019 (India); Datafolha Oct 2018 (Brazil); Afrobarometer R8 2019–2021 (Nigeria).

Figure 4: Women's vs Men's Electoral Support for Right-Wing Populist Parties/Candidates (India, Brazil, Nigeria). While women's support is somewhat lower than men's, it is substantial in all three cases, complicating narratives of a unified feminist electoral constituency.

5. Cross-Case Analysis: Patterns, Divergences, and Theoretical Implications

Comparison across the three cases reveals both significant convergences that support the theoretical coherence of the reactionary feminism concept and important divergences that illuminate the contextual specificity of its instantiation. This finding has important theoretical implications: it suggests that structural conditions, the institutional ecology of religious organizations, the dynamics of political party competition, and the specific configurations of postcolonial nationalism, shape the forms that reactionary feminism takes in each context, while a shared underlying logic of discursive appropriation operates across all three. The task of cross-case analysis is therefore not simply to catalogue similarities and differences, but to identify the structural mechanisms through which that shared logic is locally articulated and institutionalized, producing movements that are recognizably the same phenomenon while remaining deeply embedded in their particular historical and cultural contexts.

5.1 Convergent Patterns

Three convergent patterns are most significant. First, all three cases exhibit the characteristic discursive double movement of reactionary feminism: the simultaneous affirmation of women's agency, intelligence, and political capacity, and the opposition to gender-progressive policy agendas. This combination is not incidental but structural: the affirmation of women's agency is precisely what allows reactionary feminist actors to reframe their opposition to feminist policies as the exercise of women's authentic sovereign choice.

Second, all three cases deploy postcolonial and anti-imperialist discourse to delegitimize progressive feminism as a form of

cultural imperialism. In India, this takes the form of civilizational discourse positioning Western feminism as part of a broader assault on Hindu civilization. In Brazil, it takes the form of anti-gender-ideology discourse positioning progressive feminism as a totalitarian project imported by international organizations. In Nigeria, it takes the form of explicit anti-neo-colonial discourse positioning gender-progressive legislation as a continuation of colonial cultural imposition.

Third, all three cases show that reactionary feminist movements are internally heterogeneous and contain significant tensions around class, education, and generational position. Discourse analysis reveals that younger, more educated reactionary feminist actors are more likely to deploy explicit feminist language and frame their politics in terms of women's rights and autonomy, while older and less formally educated members are more likely to frame their politics in terms of religious duty, family integrity, and national culture.

5.2 Divergent Patterns

Three significant divergences are also apparent. First, the relationship between reactionary feminist movements and formal political parties differs markedly across cases. In India, the movement is tightly integrated with the BJP's organizational structure; in Brazil, it has a more complex and sometimes tense relationship with Bolsonarismo, in Nigeria, it operates more independently of formal party politics, allying opportunistically with various political formations.

Second, the role of international networks differs. Brazilian reactionary feminism is most deeply integrated into transnational Catholic and evangelical conservative networks, receiving organizational support, discursive resources, and financial backing from these networks. Indian reactionary

feminism draws primarily on domestic organizational resources and nationalist traditions with minimal transnational integration. Nigerian reactionary feminism occupies an intermediate position.

Third, the movements' relationships to violence and democratic norms differ significantly. Hindu nationalist reactionary

feminism has significantly closer organizational ties to movements that deploy extra-legal violence. Brazilian and Nigerian cases show less direct organizational proximity to political violence, though both involve movements that operate in contexts of significant gendered and political violence.

Table 2: Cross-Case Comparison — Convergences and Divergences

Feature	India	Brazil	Nigeria
Anti-imperialist framing	Civilizational sovereignty	Anti-gender ideology	Anti-neo-colonial
Religious basis	Hindu nationalism	Evangelical Christianity	Pentecostal & Islamic
Party integration	Tight (BJP)	Moderate (PT/Bolsonarismo)	Loose (opportunistic)
Transnational networks	Minimal	Strong (Catholic/Evangelical)	Moderate
Proximity to political violence	High	Low-Moderate	Low-Moderate
Feminist language deployment	High	High	Moderate

Source: Author's analysis, synthesising CDA and secondary literature.

6. The Framework of Sovereign Feminism

Constitutively, sovereign feminism is organized around the claim that women have the right to define their own gender arrangements, and that this right is threatened by progressive feminism, international gender-justice organizations, and secular states that seek to impose cosmopolitan gender norms on communities that have not chosen them. The sovereign feminist claim is simultaneously internal and external: it claims sovereignty against external (Western, cosmopolitan) feminist imposition, and claims that conservative women are the authentic internal representatives of women's real interests, delegitimizing progressive feminist organizations as speaking for a minority.

Strategically, sovereign feminist movements exhibit a common logic of appropriation and inversion. They appropriate the epistemic authority of feminism, its claim to speak from women's experience and in women's interests, while inverting its political content. By claiming feminist credentials, these movements complicate the standard progressive feminist move of positioning conservative women's activism as self-defeating or manipulated. When reactionary feminist actors say 'I am a feminist and I oppose abortion rights,' they create a discursive challenge that cannot be answered simply by asserting that real feminism supports abortion rights — since that assertion presupposes the very content that is in dispute.

Institutionally, sovereign feminist movements flourish in a specific ecological niche: they require access to feminist discourse (meaning they typically emerge in contexts where feminism has achieved some degree of public legitimacy), they require organizational infrastructure (typically provided by religious institutions, political parties, or both), and they require a mobilizing threat (typically a progressive gender policy agenda). The cases suggest that the most organizationally robust forms of reactionary feminism emerge where all three conditions are present simultaneously.

In relation to democratic politics, sovereign feminism presents a complex and ambivalent picture. On one hand, these movements undeniably expand women's political participation, voice, and organizational capacity, values that feminist democratic theory endorses. On the other hand, their policy objectives systematically restrict the substantive rights and

freedoms of women, girls, and LGBTQ+ persons. This tension cannot be resolved by a simple normative judgment that reactionary feminism is anti-democratic: the movements operate through democratic means and claim democratic legitimacy. Resolving this tension requires a more nuanced conception of democratic legitimacy, one that distinguishes between the procedural legitimacy of democratic participation and the substantive democratic deficit created when majorities restrict the rights of minorities.

7. DISCUSSION

Implications for Feminist Theory and Democratic Politics

The findings of this study have significant implications across several domains of feminist theory and democratic politics scholarship.

For feminist theory, the most important implication is the need to move beyond frameworks that locate women's conservative activism within a false consciousness/manipulation/internalized patriarchy paradigm. The movements analyzed in this study exhibit genuine political sophistication, strategic agency, and popular resonance that cannot be adequately theorized within these frameworks. Acknowledging this does not require abandoning feminist normative commitments; it requires distinguishing between taking seriously the agency of reactionary feminist actors as an analytical matter and endorsing their political objectives as a normative matter.

The study also implies that feminist theory needs a more robust account of the relationship between feminist discourse and feminist politics. The emergence of reactionary feminism demonstrates that feminist discourse, the language of women's empowerment, voice, and authentic representation, has become sufficiently institutionalized to be available for political projects that are antithetical to feminist political goals. This is, in one sense, a measure of feminism's success: its discursive victory has been significant enough that even its opponents must speak its language. But it also creates novel political challenges: feminist organizations can no longer simply deploy the language of women's empowerment as an unambiguous political resource, since that language has been appropriated by their opponents.

For democratic politics scholarship, the study raises important questions about the relationship between women's political

representation and substantive gender equality. The movements analyzed in this paper increase women's numerical representation in political organizations and mobilize women as political actors. If we measure political gender equality by representation, these movements are making a contribution. But if we measure it by substantive outcomes for women's rights, autonomy, and material welfare, these movements are making things worse. This tension suggests that representation-based measures of gender equality in politics are necessary but insufficient.

The study also speaks to broader debates about democratic backsliding and autocratization. All three cases are contexts in which democratic institutions have been under stress in the 2010s–2020s. According to Freedom House's Freedom in the World reports, India's freedom score declined from 77/100 in 2014 to 66/100 in 2023, Brazil's score declined from 80/100 to 73/100 between 2018 and 2022, Nigeria's score has remained at 'Partly Free' levels throughout, declining from 49/100 to 43/100 between 2018 and 2023⁴¹. The relationship between reactionary feminist movements and democratic backsliding is complex: these movements are not simply tools of autocratic consolidation, since they operate through democratic mobilization and represent genuinely popular constituencies. But their consistent support for leaders and parties that attack judicial independence, press freedom, and civil society autonomy creates conditions in which the democratic norms that enable women's political participation are progressively undermined.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has analyzed the emergence and political significance of reactionary feminism, organized women's movements that deploy feminist discourse in service of socially conservative gender politics — across three Global South contexts: India, Brazil, and Nigeria. Drawing on a qualitative design integrating comparative case analysis, critical discourse analysis, it has advanced three principal arguments.

First, reactionary feminism is a distinct political phenomenon with its own internal coherence and strategic logic. It is not false consciousness, not patriarchal manipulation, and not simply women's conservatism. It represents an innovative political form that appropriates feminist epistemic authority for anti-feminist political objectives, and it does so with sufficient sophistication to constitute a genuine challenge to progressive feminist movements.

Second, in Global South contexts, reactionary feminism is distinctively shaped by postcolonial and nationalist discourses that give it popular legitimacy and make it deeply resistant to dismissal as mere backwardness or imitation of Western conservative politics. The specific configurations of reactionary feminism in India, Brazil, and Nigeria reflect their different colonial histories, religious landscapes, and nationalist traditions, but all three share the structural feature of positioning reactionary feminism as nationally authentic against progressive feminism as foreign-imposed.

Third, understanding reactionary feminism requires a new analytical framework, sovereign feminism — that captures the specific combination of feminist discourse, anti-imperialist

politics, and conservative gender objectives that characterizes these movements. This framework builds on but goes beyond existing approaches in feminist theory, right-wing populism scholarship, and postcolonial feminist theory.

For future research, several directions are indicated. Comparative analysis of a wider range of Global South cases, including South Africa, Egypt, the Philippines, and Mexico — would test the generalizability of the sovereign feminism framework. Longitudinal research tracking the evolution of specific reactionary feminist movements over time would illuminate the dynamics of movement radicalization, institutionalization, and decline. And research on the policy impacts of reactionary feminist mobilization, specifically, its effects on women's substantive rights in health, education, and economic participation, would ground the normative stakes of this phenomenon in concrete material terms.

The politics of gender in the Global South are being actively contested and remade. Reactionary feminism is one of the most significant forces participating in that remaking. Understanding it clearly is the indispensable first step toward responding to it effectively.

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