

Research Article



Reclaiming the City. Feminist and Queer Resistance to “Anti-gender” Mobilisations

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Marianne Blidon

This article explores how “anti-gender” mobilisations across Europe are reshaping urban life, not only by intensifying gendered and racialised inequalities but also by generating new spaces and practices of intersectional feminist and queer resistance. Focusing on the French context and drawing from original fieldwork conducted within the European RESIST project (15 interviews and 4 focus groups), the analysis highlights how cities function as key terrains of ideological confrontation. Public infrastructures, cultural spaces, and the everyday use of urban environments have become politicised sites where “anti-gender” discourses, mobilisations, and politics seek to reassert normative control.

At the same time, feminist and LGBTIQ+ actors respond by reclaiming space, creating community initiatives, and forging coalitions grounded in intersectional solidarities. These efforts are often precarious, shaped by internal tensions and external threats, but they also open up new imaginaries of urban belonging and solidarity. Rather than presenting cities as being either spaces of repression or resistance, the article examines their contradictory role in the current political moment.

By situating feminist and queer struggles within the material and symbolic geographies of contemporary urban life, the article contributes to a plural, situated, and transnational feminist urbanism. It calls for renewed attention to the everyday practices through which justice is claimed, resistance is enacted, and solidarity is reimagined in times of political backlash.

We fight the same battles over and over again. They are never won for eternity, but in the process of struggling together, in community, we learn how to glimpse new possibilities that otherwise never would have become apparent to us, and in the process we expand and enlarge our very notion of freedom.

Angela Davis (2009)

Introduction

In an era marked by the resurgence of nationalist, conservative, and authoritarian ideologies across Europe, cities have become key battlegrounds in the struggle over gender, sexuality, and democracy. Urban spaces are being reshaped by “anti-gender” mobilisations that seek to undermine feminist, queer, and LGBTIQ+ rights and promote a return to rigid gender binaries and traditionalist values (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Giraud, 2021; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). These campaigns are not abstract: they materialise in institutional attacks, symbolic controls over public space, and policy interventions that restrict bodily autonomy and non-normative ways of living.

The term “anti-gender”, originally coined by reactionary religious actors, is used critically in this article as a politically charged and ambiguous label that often obscures the systemic and transhistorical nature of gender-based violence. While analytically useful, its strategic deployment risks reinforcing binary logics (gender/anti-gender and the binary logic of gender itself) and masking complicities across the political spectrum. This calls for a cautious and reflexive use of the term—one that foregrounds lived forms of resistance rather than reified categories.

This article argues that cities are not only sites where gendered power relations are reproduced and intensified, but also spaces where feminist and queer resistance emerges, adapts, and flourishes (Oswin, 2010; Blidon and Brunn, 2022). Urban environments concentrate infrastructures, media, and activism — making them fertile ground for both repression and contestation. Drawing on intersectional feminist theory and critical urban geography, this study examines how “anti-gender” mobilisations reshape urban inequalities and how feminist and queer movements challenge them through everyday acts of resistance, solidarity, and creative reimagining.

This article draws on empirical material from the European RESIST project and focuses on the French case, based on fifteen interviews and four focus groups, to analyse how “anti-gender” narratives are experienced and contested. The French case does not reflect a sudden cultural shift but rather a long-standing tension around gender and sexuality, reactivated and reconfigured by current political dynamics. While “anti-gender” narratives have gained visibility in recent years—particularly through the rise of far-right parties and conservative movements—they build on deeper ideological foundations: a secular republican tradition wary of identity politics, a persistent influence of Catholic norms around the family, and the unresolved legacies of colonialism. Political actors from different ideological backgrounds have mobilised these discourses, whether in the name of protecting “traditional values” (*La Manif pour Tous*) or defending a threatened universalism (*Le Printemps Républicain*). These converging logics have helped normalise suspicion towards feminist, queer, and intersectional claims. Rather than marking a rupture, the current situation reveals how longstanding moral panics about gender, race, and pluralism are being rearticulated within an increasingly polarised political landscape.

This paper addresses the following question: How do “anti-gender” mobilisations intensify urban inequalities, and what forms of feminist and queer resistance emerge in response? In doing so, it aims to contribute to contemporary feminist urban theorising by re-centring the city as a site of both struggle and possibility. Drawing on postcolonial and queer theory (Rao, 2020; El-Tayeb, 2020), the article situates urban feminist practices within broader frameworks of decolonial critique, intersectionality, and transformative politics. By foregrounding the situated, embodied, and often precarious nature of feminist and queer urban resistance, this article calls for renewed attention to the everyday practices through which justice, resistance, and solidarity are enacted and reimagined in times of political retrenchment and social fracture.

1. Urban spaces as theatres for “anti-gender” mobilisations

1.1 A repertoire of urban “anti-gender” actions: Targeting feminist and queer presence

In France, as in other case studies, participants described a consistent and multifaceted repertoire of actions targeting feminist and LGBTIQ+ presence in urban space. These actions, far from being isolated or spontaneous, reflect a broader strategy of symbolic and material erasure and are grounded in what several respondents perceived as an increasingly hostile atmosphere shaped by “anti-gender” discourse. One participant

powerfully captured the effects of this denial of existence and the underlying desire to erase it. He explained “You erase the concept; you erase the people”, pointing to the logic behind repeated attacks on trans-inclusive spaces (Resist 2024, 68).

Attacks against queer and feminist infrastructures were reported across multiple cities and towns, ranging from graffiti and property damage to threats and verbal assaults. Community centres, feminist bookstores, and associative spaces were frequently defaced or vandalised — material signs of presence turned into targets. These actions aim not only to intimidate but to delegitimise, discrediting feminist and queer spaces as aberrant or illegitimate parts of the urban fabric.

Public demonstrations and marches also emerged as key moments of confrontation. Pride events and feminist mobilisations — central to collective visibility — were described as flashpoints marked by threats, insults, or physical intimidation, often perpetrated by both opponents and law enforcement. For many, occupying the street was a form of embodied resistance that remained perilous and was constantly negotiated under the spectre of counter-mobilisations or spontaneous hostility.

The repertoire extends beyond street-level aggression to institutional targeting. In France, the mobilisation against so-called “gender ideology” often centres on the defense of parental authority, traditional family values, and the symbolic integrity of the nation. These discourses portray feminist and queer claims not merely as political disagreements, but as existential threats to the social order — particularly in areas such as education, healthcare, and children’s rights. This framing has allowed conservative actors to politicise institutions like public schools, family planning centres, or local associations as contested sites, recasting gender equality as a form of ideological intrusion. Such dynamics are instrumental in constructing “gender” as a cultural and political danger, thereby legitimising calls for control, restriction, or even erasure of feminist and queer presence in public life.

Participants highlighted how infrastructures of care — especially family planning centres, schools with inclusive educational programs, or health services — were subject to growing pressure from conservative campaigns. In France, several respondents described how such institutions were accused of promoting “gender ideology” and were increasingly politicised as threats to parental authority or national values (RESIST, 2024). These dynamics materialised in debates over school curricula, administrative access, and service provision, transforming those institutions into battlegrounds.

Beyond public and institutional spaces, the private sphere was also targeted. Several participants reported receiving threats at home, often linked to their public visibility or activist roles. In one particularly striking case, a participant received a miniature coffin and abusive letters at his residence. Such acts reflect a deliberate incursion into the domestic sphere — traditionally seen as private and protective — with the intent to undermine personal safety and psychological stability.

These accounts show how “anti-gender” mobilisation operates on multiple spatial registers. The street, the local institution, and the home all become targets in a campaign

to reassert normative gender orders. These actions reflect what Browne and Nash (2017) describe as “heteroactivist” mobilisations, which seek to reclaim urban space for patriarchal and heteronormative visions of society. Often embedded in broader networks of surveillance and social control, these actions are not simply reactive; they form part of an organised effort to reshape the urban landscape itself.

1.2 Urban inequalities intensified by “anti-gender” politics

The repertoire of “anti-gender” actions described by participants does not unfold in a vacuum; rather, it intersects with and exacerbates pre-existing urban inequalities. In doing so, it reshapes the everyday geographies of those who are already subject to marginalisation — particularly trans*, queer, racialised, and precariously housed people.

Participants consistently spoke about navigating the city through a lens of vigilance. Moving through urban space required constant calculation: choosing which streets to take, which areas to avoid, which times to travel. One respondent summarised this affective geography as a form of learned choreography: “You calculate your safety in every street, every moment”. What emerges is a map of the city not as an open field of movement, but as a fragmented and hazardous terrain, where presence must be negotiated moment by moment.

This heightened vigilance also extends to the ability to express affection with a partner. In such contexts, something as seemingly simple as a kiss becomes subject to constant negotiation — what I have elsewhere termed *la casuistique du baiser* (Blidon, 2008). Rather than being spontaneous, intimacy is filtered through situational judgement, where each gesture must be weighed against the perceived safety of time, place, and audience.

Public transport also crystallised these tensions. Several interviewees reported experiences of harassment or being misgendered on buses or in metro stations. The absence of effective institutional response often led to avoidance strategies — such as ceasing to use certain lines or entire transit systems. One trans* woman described how, after repeated assaults, she stopped using public transport altogether. This kind of self-limitation has far-reaching effects, shaping access to employment, education, and social life, and reinforcing a sense of disconnection from the city’s promises of mobility and inclusion.

Participants noted that campaigns targeting care infrastructures — such as family planning centres or inclusive education — disproportionately affected working-class, racialised, migrant, or queer populations. When services are delegitimised or withdrawn, those with limited alternatives bear the brunt of exclusion. For instance, *Planning Familial* — a cornerstone of sexual and reproductive health in France — has faced a significant reduction in public subsidies, directly undermining its ability to provide essential support and prevention services, particularly for marginalised groups. Some feminist and queer associations have also faced threats or actual withdrawal of funding, especially when their activism confronts dominant political forces. In June 2025, for example, the Île-de-France regional authority withdrew all financial support to Inter-LGBT following the release of a Pride poster that called for mobilisation against fascism, under pressure from the far-

right *Rassemblement National*. Additionally, trans* people report structural exclusion in healthcare systems, where access to inclusive services remains limited or conditional. These processes reflect what Rao (2020) describes as the exclusion of queer lives from dominant temporalities of development and futurity — they are rendered “out of time”, illegible within normative state agendas.

Even in large cities that promote symbolic inclusion — such as Paris — the gap between official discourse and everyday experience remains stark. Legal recourse is difficult to access; police responses are often dismissive or complicit. As one participant remarked, “The institutions that are supposed to protect us are the same ones that silence us”. Police indifference, legal opacity, and bureaucratic inertia were frequently mentioned, suggesting that “diversity” initiatives often remain superficial when not backed by effective protection or support mechanisms.

This dissonance between symbolic inclusion and material exclusion reveals the limits of liberal urbanism. While some cities adopt “diversity” as a branding tool, the lived experiences of feminist and queer subjects — especially those who are multiply marginalised — remain shaped by exclusion, insecurity, and precarity. “Anti-gender” politics, in this sense, do not invent new forms of inequality; they intensify and legitimise existing ones.

As Oswin (2010) argues, we must analyse urban sexual politics not merely in terms of presence or absence, but through the uneven distribution of vulnerability and support. In doing so, we see that “anti-gender” mobilisations do not only contest discourse or identity — they actively participate in the reconfiguration of urban justice, access, and life itself.

2. Urban Spaces as Sites of Feminist and Queer Resistance

2.1. Reclaiming space through everyday counter-practices

Faced with the intensification of “anti-gender” violence in cities, many feminist and queer people are not simply withdrawing — they are organising, both individually and collectively. Across France, participants described how the city, even when hostile, remains a space where solidarity can be enacted and presence reaffirmed. In this context, urban space becomes both a terrain of threat and a resource for resistance.

Several respondents mentioned places like cafés, community centers, or bookstores that have become informal sanctuaries — spaces where it is possible to exist without justification, to organise, to breathe. These places are not neutral: they are built, maintained, and defended through networks of solidarity and collective labour, often outside of institutional support. One participant described how navigating the city required a selective geography of trust: “I move around with people I know I’m safe with. [...] Queer spaces, leftist bars, Latino bars, leftist bookstores”. This form of urban navigation is not only practical — it is affective and political. It reveals a micropolitics of survival, shaped by past exposures and present alliances. These selective geographies reflect what might be called an affective urbanism of trust — a way of moving through space that centres collective safety over abstract ideals of openness or access.

In many cases, these spaces arise precisely where public services have withdrawn. Their fragility — underfunded, volunteer-run, subject to political pressure — is also what makes them agile. Embedded in neighbourhoods and attuned to local needs, they form what some participants described as intimate infrastructures of resistance. Their role is not only practical but affective: to counter the isolating effects of “anti-gender” politics by cultivating proximity, visibility, and trust.

Digital tools also play a supporting role. Messaging apps, encrypted chats, and hybrid formats allow for a continuity of presence even when physical gatherings become impossible. While not reducible to urban space, these technological supports extend the capacity to resist spatial exclusion, allowing people to remain connected across the gaps created by fear, repression, or displacement.

Several participants spoke of the feeling of imposed isolation, while stressing that this isolation was countered by the creation of spaces and networks enabling people to remain connected and visible. These counter-spaces, however modest, subvert the logics of isolation imposed by “anti-gender” mobilisations and discourses. They reinhabit the city differently — through co-presence, mutual care, and small-scale interventions that hold space for joy, struggle, and survival.

2.2 Performing resistance: cultural and artistic interventions in the city

In parallel to these everyday practices of care and refuge, many participants described how cultural and artistic acts become powerful tools of urban resistance. In an environment where normative order is enforced through visibility and control, reclaiming the city through performance, art, and protest becomes a way to disrupt what can be seen, said, and imagined.

Participants spoke of more ephemeral or subversive actions: pasting over municipal signage with rainbow stickers, sticking feminist messages on walls, circulating slogans that reappropriate the language of exclusion, producing zines, or painting murals in areas marked by hostility. These micro-interventions, while often short-lived or swiftly erased, constitute a form of “spatial graffiti”— inscriptions of dissent that challenge the moral order imposed on public space.

One participant recalled a recurring ritual: “On the first or last Friday of each month, we would gather in front of the town halls to sing”. These repeated gatherings, grounded in rhythm and ritual, re-signify public space through presence and collective voice. They offer moments of shared affirmation and resistance, embedding dissent in the everyday temporalities of urban life. Over time, these gatherings also became spaces of connection and political awakening: several women reported that these meetings allowed them to get to know each other and later go on to form new activist collectives.

Importantly, these artistic resistances often emerge from the margins: trans* collectives, undocumented queer migrants, youth groups, or racialised feminist circles. They do not always adopt the codes of institutional art or sanctioned protest. Instead, they blur the boundaries between activism and everyday life, between politics and affect. Their strength

lies in this ambiguity — in their refusal to separate the aesthetic from the political, or the intimate from the collective.

Several interviewees emphasised the emotional and political importance of joy and celebration in the face of repression. Activist festivals, queer events, feminist theatre performances, or interventions were described as moments of reconnection and pleasure. These expressions of “militant joy” — as coined by participants — allow collectives to inhabit the city differently, not only through protest but through presence.

By generating shared emotions — anger, joy, mourning, defiance — these acts contribute to what El-Tayeb (2020) describes as transgressive collectivity — formations that emerge from shared exclusion and minoritised experiences, rather than fixed identities. They reconfigure urban space not through dominance, but through creative disruption and affective presence.

As one participant put it, resistance is not always about shouting. Sometimes it’s about insisting on being seen — flamboyantly, creatively, unapologetically — in a space that tells you to disappear. These urban performances do more than protest; they propose. They open up new ways of being together in the city — ways not yet fully legible within the dominant urban order, but already alive in the gestures, voices, and movements of those who refuse to be erased.

3. Solidarities and Intersectional Challenges in Urban Struggles

3.1. Building solidarities in urban settings

In the face of growing “anti-gender” hostility, the city is not experienced solely as a space of violence and surveillance. For many participants, it also constitutes a site where solidarities take shape — sometimes by design, sometimes by necessity. Several respondents described how living in proximity with others exposed to racism, sexism, and queerphobia generated shared frameworks of action, despite experiential differences.

In multiple cities, antifascist and queer-feminist collectives played a central role in connecting struggles and creating coalitional infrastructures. These groups facilitated coordination between feminist associations, LGBTQ+ networks, anti-racist organisations, and migrant rights collectives — especially in times of heightened threat, such as attacks on community spaces or demonstrations. Rather than diluting political specificity, these alliances often emerged from tactical necessities, grounded in lived proximity and mutual support.

Solidarities also took shape in everyday urban life — through shared organising spaces, community events, and informal networks of care. Whether in activist bookshops, inclusive cafés, or occupied cultural centres, participants described these sites as enabling slow, situated alliances across lines of difference. These solidarities were built not just through political alignment, but through repeated presence, shared labour, and affective investment in collective survival.

These spaces are often precarious and rooted in local contexts, but they allow for slow

forms of coalition-building grounded in mutual trust and shared vulnerability. Urban proximity plays a key role in these solidarities. This spatial proximity allows for the emergence of what Oswin (2010) describes as “queer urban alliances” — coalitions that move beyond identity politics to foreground structural injustice.

Importantly, respondents did not idealise these alliances. They acknowledged the frictions, asymmetries, and exclusions that persist within urban movements. Yet many insisted on the importance of working through tension. Alliances were described as dynamic and contingent, reconfiguring themselves according to the stakes of the moment. This fluidity made it possible to act together on shared concerns without requiring complete agreement on all fronts — enabling pragmatic solidarities that prioritised common and strategic objectives over total ideological unity.

Ultimately, the city appeared in these accounts not as a neutral backdrop, but as a constitutive force in the making of solidarities: a space where political identities are made and remade through encounter, conflict, and collective action.

3.2 Tensions and contradictions in urban feminist and queer movements

While cities may provide the material and symbolic conditions for feminist and queer alliances, they also reveal the frictions within these coalitions. Several participants expressed how, even within spaces claiming to be intersectional, structural inequalities continued to shape participation, voice, and recognition. Rather than overt conflict, these dynamics often unfold through subtle exclusions — of who is heard, who leads, and whose experience is considered central.

A racialised respondent reflected on how their presence in feminist spaces was frequently instrumentalised: “They invite us for visibility but never for decision-making”. This form of tokenisation, while framed as inclusion, ultimately reinforces hierarchies by reducing trans and racialised participants to symbolic figures rather than full political actors. Such experiences are not isolated but rather reflect broader critiques across the dataset about the selective permeability of feminist and queer spaces.

Spatial inequalities — including race, class, and mobility — often shaped who could access activist networks in the first place. One non-binary participant noted the contrast between the relative ease of organising in Marseille, with its strong queer migrant presence, and the isolating, hierarchical culture of Paris: “It’s much easier to organise and engage in Marseille”, they said, attributing this difference to the horizontal culture and infrastructural openness of the southern city. Such accounts underscore how urban geographies themselves reproduce or mitigate exclusion.

Language, education, and institutional codes also functioned as barriers. Several participants pointed to the prevalence of academic or activist jargon — particularly in Paris-based spaces — which implicitly favoured white, middle-class norms. In contrast, some interviewees described how micro-local venues (like rural libraries or village bookshops) provided more accessible and contextually grounded forms of mobilisation. These environments allowed for coalition-building across difference without relying on

predefined ideological vocabularies.

Intergenerational tensions further complicated these landscapes. In interviews, younger activists often prioritised non-institutional strategies such as mutual aid, while older organisers tended to engage through formal networks and state-facing initiatives. These differences were not inherently antagonistic, but they often produced misalignment in pace, language, and expectations, especially in cities where political capital is unevenly distributed. This points to a politics of imperfection, where solidarity is not presumed but constructed through iterative, and often uncomfortable, processes.

In this sense, the city is both a magnifier of contradiction and a laboratory for negotiation. The proximity it generates — social, spatial, and political — makes conflict unavoidable. But it also creates the conditions to address it, through tools such as restorative practices, collective governance, and anti-oppression frameworks. The presence of conflict, far from undermining solidarity, reveals the depth of what is being contested: the right not only to belong, but to reshape the terms of belonging itself.

Conclusion

In the face of intensifying “anti-gender” politics across Europe, this article has demonstrated how urban space constitutes both a theatre of repression and a laboratory for feminist and queer resistance. Cities concentrate the material and symbolic power of “anti-gender” mobilisations: through attacks on public infrastructures, surveillance of bodies, and the legitimisation of spatial exclusion. Yet cities also host the everyday practices of survival, contestation, and transformation enacted by feminist, queer, trans*, and racialised communities.

Focusing on the French case within the broader RESIST project, the article has shown how urban inequalities are not only reinforced by “anti-gender” narratives but actively reshaped through their deployment — especially against the most marginalised. Yet the urban is also a space of invention. From collective rituals in front of town halls to ephemeral artistic acts and slow-building alliances in neighbourhood spaces, participants crafted what might be called infrastructures of presence — fragile yet vital. These are not merely reactions to violence but forms of situated resistance that reimagine what the city can hold.

Importantly, this article has highlighted how feminist and queer urban resistance does not rely on unity but on convergence. Participants described solidarities that are pragmatic, contingent, and often imperfect — rooted in shared stakes rather than complete ideological alignment. This fluidity enables action across difference, and reflects the adaptive, situated nature of contemporary urban movements. Solidarity here is not a stable identity but a political practice: one that must constantly negotiate frictions, recompose itself, and remain attentive to exclusions within its own ranks.

By centring urban experiences, the article contributes to a broader feminist urban scholarship that sees the city not only as a backdrop for resistance, but as a constitutive terrain — one in which encounters, frictions, and solidarities give shape to political

subjectivities. Intersectionality, in this context, is not simply a lens, but a methodology of struggle: a way to inhabit contradiction, to work across difference, and to build coalitions without flattening them.

In moments of political retrenchment, these forms of resistance — often small, fragile, and localised — remind us that the fight for gender and sexual justice is also a fight over urban futures. They demonstrate that the city, while a site of exclusion, remains full of potential: for encounter, for creation, and for collective becoming.

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Cover image:

Ligne de fuite, a street in Marseille, France, décembre 2024 (M. Blidon)

Authors



Marianne Blidon

Associate Professor of Geography and Demography » Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University

Marianne Blidon (she/her) is Associate Professor of Geography and Demography at Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University. A pioneer in the geography of sexualities in France, her work focuses on feminist and queer geographies, spatial inequalities, and the intersections of gender, sexuality, and space. She was co-founder of the journal *Genre, sexualité et société*. She has coedited with Stanley Brunn *Mapping LGBTQ Spaces and Places. A Changing World* (2022) and currently contributes to the EU-funded RESIST project on resistances to "anti-gender" discourses, mobilisations and politics in Europe.