



PUSH FORWARD DIALOGUES: SERIES 1 REFLECTIONS • August 2025

Pushing Forward for Rights, Equality and Justice in a Shifting Global Context

Photo: UN Women / Ryan Brown

Summary

This paper aims to provide an experience-based analysis of the strategies and practices that have proven effective in advancing gender equality and women's rights in the current global moment of pushback on women's rights and challenges to the achievement of gender equality. The document highlights the importance of legal advocacy, feminist research, movement-building, multi-stakeholder

partnerships, the protection of women human rights defenders (WHRDs), among other strategies and tactics. It also offers concrete recommendations to strengthen accountability, secure sustainable funding for feminist movements, and reinforce international solidarity in the fight for gender equality.

Introduction

As the world marks 30 years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA), gender equality is facing unprecedented challenges. Despite significant legal reforms and increased recognition of women's rights, the global context has shifted dramatically. According to UN Women's report, [Women's rights in review 30 years after Beijing](#), nearly a quarter of governments worldwide recorded backlash against women's rights in 2024. This includes higher levels of discrimination, weaker legal protections, and reduced funding for programmes supporting women and girls. Over 600 million women and girls are affected by war, a 50% increase compared to a decade ago. In 2023, the number of women killed in armed

conflicts doubled, and cases of conflict-related sexual violence increased by 50%. Across regions, democratic backsliding and rising authoritarianism have led to the erosion of judicial independence, restrictions on civic space, and increased repression of women's rights organizations. According to the 2024 CIVICUS Monitor Report, civic freedoms are under severe attack in 118 of 198 countries and territories, and almost one third of the world's population now lives in countries with closed civic space, the highest percentage since 2018. Nevertheless, feminist coalitions, alliances, and allied stakeholders continue to resist these forces, demonstrating resilience, adaptability, and strategic innovation.

The international landscape for gender equality is being reshaped by political, economic, and ideological shifts. Multilateral institutions, once perceived as pillars of justice, are increasingly undermined by nationalist and isolationist policies. Many states are prioritizing military security concerns over social development and human rights, often justifying repressive measures in the name of political stability. At the same time, the backlash against gender equality is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader, well-funded global movement that seeks to roll back hard-won gains, across a range of women's rights including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), leadership and political participation, economic rights, right to safety and security, the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons, migrant rights, climate justice, racial justice, and the rights of marginalized and excluded groups.

The rise of authoritarian governance structures and illiberal democracies has contributed to the deliberate dismantling of gender-responsive policies and legal protections. In many

cases, feminist and women's rights organizations have been forced to curtail their work due to financial restrictions, political repression, or threats to their safety. In some countries, restrictive laws on civil society operations have made it increasingly difficult for grassroots organizations to sustain their advocacy. Simultaneously, economic crises and austerity measures have weakened public investment in gender equality policies and programmes, leaving many essential services underfunded.

Despite these challenges, there remains strong momentum for gender equality, particularly within feminist movements, women's rights advocacy led by young women and girls, and transnational social justice solidarity efforts. These actors continue to challenge patriarchal forces, hold governments accountable, and reimagine more inclusive and equitable systems at the community and country level. Below are examples of strategic approaches employed by these stakeholders to push forward for rights, equality, and justice in diverse contexts.

Strategic Approaches to Pushing Forward

1. Strategic Litigation and Legal Reform

Legal advocacy remains one of the most effective tools for challenging gender-based discrimination, institutionalizing progressive gender norms, and challenging harmful social norms. Strategic litigation has been successfully employed to contest regressive laws, set legal precedents, and advance gender-responsive policies. In contexts where legal avenues remain open, feminist and women's rights organizations

have worked closely with human rights lawyers and other legal experts to overturn discriminatory legislation on issues such as reproductive rights, workplace protections, and gender-based violence. These efforts require sustained legal expertise, financial resources, and broad-based coalitions to withstand political pushback.

CASE STUDY 1

In response to rising anti-abortion policies and the continued epidemic of sexual violence across Latin America and the Caribbean, a regional reproductive rights organization has utilized strategic litigation as a key tool to challenge harmful laws, influence policy reform, and set human rights precedents. Faced with legal and political resistance, particularly around access to abortion for survivors of sexual violence, the organization presented emblematic cases before United Nations human rights mechanisms, including the Human Rights Committee and the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

These cases focused on the rights of girls under the age of 14 who had been subjected to rape and subsequently forced to carry pregnancies to term—highlighting this as a widespread, systemic violation rather than isolated incidents. Through this legal advocacy, the organization succeeded in securing groundbreaking decisions that recognized forced pregnancy as a violation of girls' rights to dignity, health, and freedom from cruel treatment. These rulings established international legal precedent, calling on states—including Nicaragua, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Peru—to align their laws and policies with human rights standards, irrespective of existing national abortion frameworks.

Strategic litigation was supported by strong documentation and public advocacy, including high-impact campaigns such as [“They Are Girls, Not Mothers”](#) (“Son niñas, no madres”). These campaigns evolved into a regional movement, engaging national and international partners—from grassroots groups to legal experts and influencers—to broaden reach and amplify pressure on policymakers.

Multi-stakeholder collaboration has been essential to the movement's success. By working closely with local organizations, youth activists, and media allies, the initiative has shifted prevailing narratives around reproductive justice and emphasized the lived realities of girls subjected to forced motherhood. The movement's holistic approach—combining litigation, communications, coalition-building, and survivor-led advocacy—continues to shape a powerful regional response to protect and advance reproductive rights. Most recently, the UN Human Rights Committee's 2025 ruling reaffirmed that states must ensure access to abortion, particularly in cases of rape or where pregnancy endangers life or health—strengthening international norms and catalysing national reforms across the region.

2. Research, Documentation, and Analysis

Evidence-based advocacy is critical for shaping public discourse, influencing policy, and countering misinformation. Feminist-led research initiatives have been instrumental in documenting the impact of regressive policies on women and marginalized communities. This includes analyses of how fiscal austerity measures disproportionately harm

women and girls, how digital disinformation campaigns are weaponized against gender justice advocates, and how legal rollbacks affect women's economic and political participation. The ability to systematically collect and disseminate this data enables movements to make stronger policy demands and hold governments accountable.

CASE STUDY 2

In a context marked by deeply rooted patriarchal norms and technology-facilitated gender-based violence, a Moldovan civil society organization has played a pivotal role in advancing gender equality through sustained research, documentation, and evidence-based advocacy.

Faced with institutional resistance, the organization developed a comprehensive approach to counteract gender-based discrimination. Central to its strategy was the production of detailed reports documenting manifestations of gender-based violence, online hate speech, and barriers to women's political participation. These reports, shared with both national and local authorities, served as critical tools for public advocacy and policy dialogue. Through consistent monitoring and documentation, the organization provided concrete evidence that supported the development of legal provisions—such as updates to the electoral code to sanction hate speech and discriminatory rhetoric during campaigns.

Complementing its research efforts, the organization led public awareness campaigns and community dialogues aimed at challenging harmful gender norms and mobilizing support for reform. Capacity-building sessions with law enforcement, educators, and civil society actors helped integrate gender-sensitive approaches across institutions. The use of online reporting tools enabled women to document incidents of digital hate and intimidation, feeding into ongoing analysis and advocacy.

As a result of these efforts, the legal and institutional landscape in Moldova has begun to shift. Protections against gender-based violence—including in the digital sphere—have been strengthened, cultural attitudes—especially among younger generations—are gradually changing, and women are increasingly participating in politics and public life. Stronger networks among civil society actors, along with strategic partnerships across government, academia, and international organizations, have amplified the organization's impact and broadened outreach to marginalized communities. By leveraging research and documentation as a foundation for advocacy, the organization continues to influence legal reforms and contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society.

3. Intersectional, Intergenerational Mobilizing and Organizing

The strength of feminist movements lies in their ability to mobilize across generations, identities, and geographies. Intersectional and intergenerational organizing has proven to be crucial in ensuring that gender justice advocacy remains inclusive and adaptive to emerging challenges. This has been particularly evident in youth-led movements that leverage digital activism to counter disinformation, build solidarity across regions, and advance policy advocacy across issue areas. The role of intersectional feminist organizing is also evident in coalition-building efforts that bring together diverse constituencies (e.g., Indigenous

women, LGBTIQ+ activists, labour movements, etc.) to demand systemic change. However, for this organizing to be effective and sustained—especially in the face of growing pushback—it must be backed by flexible, long-term funding. Women’s rights organizations and youth-led groups often operate with limited resources, yet they are at the forefront of movement-building and rights defence. Ensuring they have access to sustainable, flexible funding is critical not only for their survival, but for their ability to respond quickly to threats, nurture collective leadership, and maintain the momentum needed to achieve transformative change.

CASE STUDY 3

In Belo Horizonte, Brazil, young leaders have demonstrated the transformative power of intersectional and intergenerational organizing in a context marked by political regression, shrinking civic space, and backlash against gender equality. Despite legal frameworks recognizing youth participation, systemic barriers, underfunded youth councils, and the rise of far-right narratives have made meaningful youth engagement in governance increasingly difficult. Young women, LGBTIQ+ individuals, and other WHRDs often face dismissal, institutional obstacles, and social stigma.

To respond to these challenges, a youth-led movement in Belo Horizonte has developed a robust and inclusive model of organizing. Rather than waiting for recognition or space to be granted, these young activists have built a platform for collective action, positioning themselves as co-creators of solutions on issues ranging from gender justice to climate resilience and social inclusion. Their strategy includes empowering diverse youth voices, integrating gender perspectives into youth spaces, and formalizing commitments from public institutions to uphold gender- and youth-responsive policies. They are working to reform legal frameworks, institutionalize youth participation in governance, and hold authorities accountable beyond symbolic events. Crucially, they are forging multi-stakeholder partnerships that link youth movements with civil society, academia, public institutions, and the private sector, creating a replicable model for youth-led governance.

As a result, this movement has achieved notable progress in institutionalizing youth participation and breaking down barriers to policy influence, even amid political volatility. Their efforts have not only shifted municipal policy dynamics but also strengthened the resilience of feminist and youth movements. By ensuring youth leaders have access to tools, training, and financial resources, this initiative is paving the way for a more inclusive and democratic future—one that recognizes young people as essential architects of change, rather than passive beneficiaries of it.

4. Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships and Alliances

Strategic alliances between governments, UN entities, the private sector, and civil society organizations have proven effective in sustaining gender equality commitments, even in restrictive political environments. Local governments have played a particularly significant role in advancing gender-transformative policies despite national-level

resistance. Partnerships between feminist organizations and international financial institutions have also been instrumental in advocating for gender-equitable fiscal policies. Additionally, engaging male allies in gender equality advocacy has helped counter patriarchal resistance and broaden public support for women's rights.

CASE STUDY 4

In Kenya, a broad coalition of health sector actors, civil society organizations, and government allies has demonstrated the power of multi-stakeholder partnerships in advancing gender-transformative health policies despite political resistance. Health providers, civil society leaders, and technical experts strategically collaborated to draft and advocate for new maternal health and reproductive rights guidelines, culminating in the development of the [“Big Five” Guidelines](#). By working together through regular reproductive and maternal health committees and informal consultations with government officials, these actors forged alliances that strengthened their collective influence. Supportive leadership within the Ministry of Health, particularly following the appointment of an obstetrician as director, enabled a more receptive environment for policy change, showing how targeted engagement with key government allies can overcome national- or regional-level opposition.

In addition to civil society and government collaboration, partnerships with legal experts played a critical role, as seen in the successful court cases that mandated reinstating safe abortion guidelines and challenged restrictive practices. This integrated approach—combining health expertise, legal advocacy, and grassroots mobilization—ensured that the push for change was multifaceted and resilient. Localized research, storytelling, and solidarity across networks further expanded public support, while fostering trust and shared ownership of the reforms.

5. Protection and Support for Women Human Rights Defenders

Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) remain at the forefront of the struggle for rights, equality, and justice, often operating under severe threats. Ensuring their protection requires a combination of legal safeguards, emergency response mechanisms, and financial support. UN Women has played a role in strengthening global protections for

WHRDs by advocating for international accountability measures and supporting feminist protection networks. These efforts must be scaled up by all relevant stakeholders to ensure that WHRDs can continue their vital work without fear of retaliation.

CASE STUDY 5

In response to escalating risks faced by WHRDs—particularly in conflict, post-conflict, and humanitarian settings—the Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF), in partnership with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), launched a dedicated [Funding Window for WHRDs](#) in 2022. The window provides both rapid-response and long-term funding to WHRDs to ensure their protection and enable them to continue their vital work despite intensifying repression, threats, reprisals, and intimidation.

By centring WHRDs who work in fragile and often dangerous contexts—such as Afghanistan, Sudan, Myanmar, Colombia, and Ukraine—the WPHF funding window addresses critical gaps in traditional donor support, which often overlooks individual activists or smaller grassroots organizations. Through flexible, accessible, and trust-based funding modalities, the mechanism offers core support for physical and digital protection, relocation, psychosocial care, and legal aid. This has enabled WHRDs to respond to threats they face and continue their activism in the defence of human rights, including documenting human rights violations, supporting survivors of violence, and advocating for peace and accountability.

As of June 2025, 921 WHRDs and 2,704 of their dependants have received support through this window. The model’s agility, commitment to feminist movement priorities and principles, and emphasis on co-creation with defenders make it a powerful example of pushing forward protection strategies in the face of intensifying backlash and threats to peace. It demonstrates the importance of coupling political advocacy with resourcing tools that centre the needs, safety, and leadership of WHRDs on the frontlines of resistance.

Conclusion

This paper highlights just some of the strategies that have proven effective in advancing rights, equality, and justice in the face of growing resistance. From building cross-regional alliances to leveraging digital advocacy and expanding financial support for feminist coalitions, alliances, and WHRDs, these efforts demonstrate what is possible when diverse actors come together with purpose and persistence. Sustaining and replicating these successes at scale will

require renewed commitment, deeper collaboration, and strategic investment from governments, the UN system, and other partners. By advancing intersectional, intergenerational, and multi-stakeholder strategies, states can help sustain the transformative power of feminist organizing and uphold the commitments made in Beijing 30 years ago.