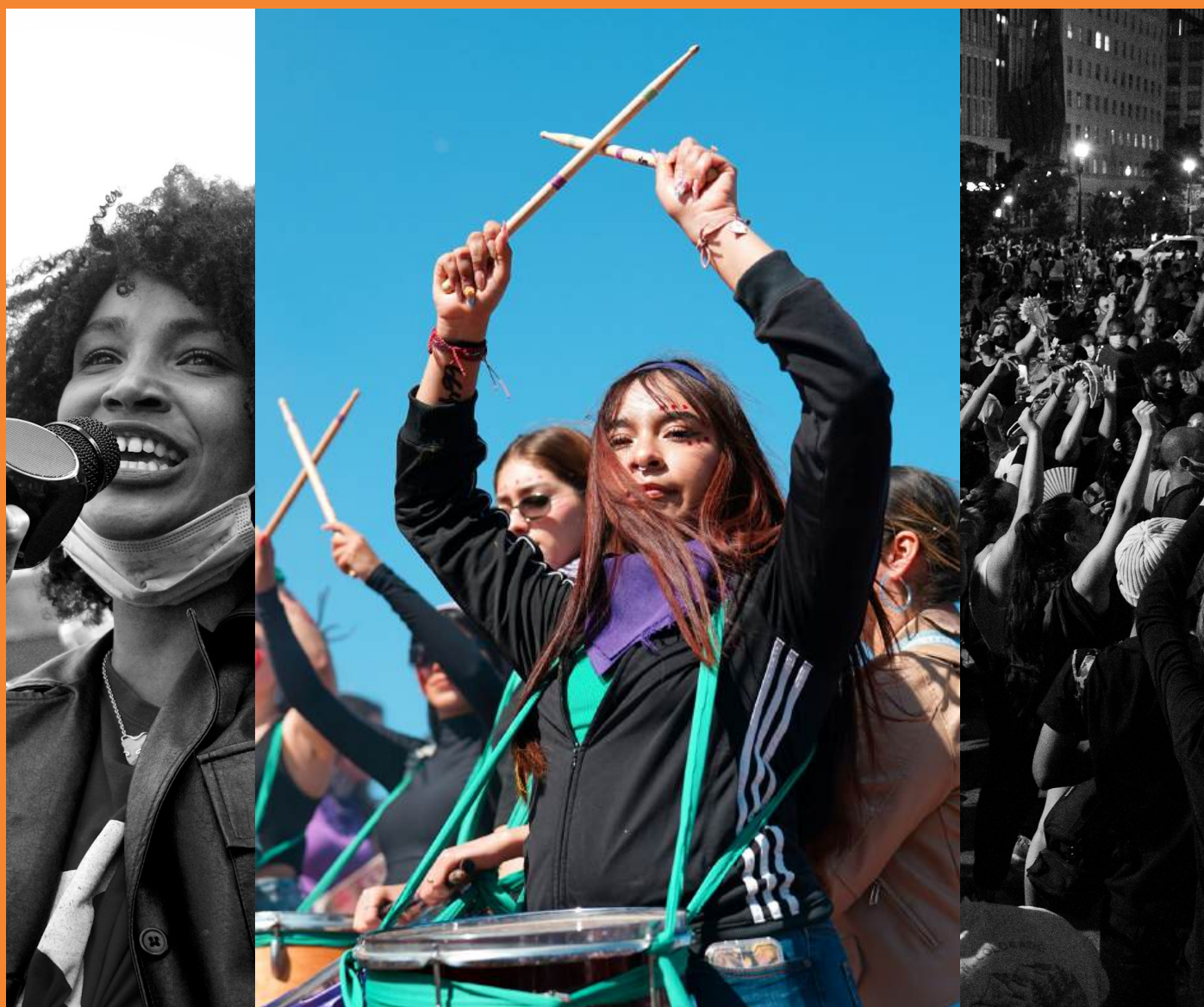


UNDERSTANDING BACKLASH AGAINST GENDER EQUALITY

Evidence, Trends and Policy Responses



UNRISD

UNITED NATIONS
RESEARCH INSTITUTE
FOR SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT

UN
WOMEN



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Acronyms and abbreviations

Istanbul Convention	Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women
LGBTIQ+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, plus
PLN	Polish zloty
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
UN-Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment



CONTRA LA VIOLENCIA DE GÉNERO

RECONOCER A LAS MUJERES

♀

LA VIOLENCIA DE GÉNERO ES UN PROBLEMA SOCIAL

CONTRA LA VIOLENCIA DE GÉNERO

LA MATERNIDAD NO DEBE SER UN CASTIGO O NO SE DEBE

SIN MEDIO
Educación y salud
NOS QUEREMOS

Y SI VEO A TÚ MAMÁ YO LE PREGUNTO POR TÍ CON MIEDO DE QUE RESPONDA QUE NO SABE DE TÍ

LAS VIDAS POR SALVAR ESTAN EN LAS GRANJAS MATERNAS EN NUESTROS ÚTEROS

Quiero vivir. Sobrevivir!

La tierra está temblando porque nosotras estamos marchando

QUIERO QUE LOS SECRETOS FAMILIARES DE ENCUBRIDORES

HOY ESTOY AQUÍ PARA QUE MAMÁ YA NO PUEDA HACERLO CADA VEZ

Una se V... FEMIN... Con su... Histo... #8m

A TIA ♀

NI UNA

♀

Summary

Opposition to gender equality is not new. Yet almost 30 years after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, anti-gender equality organizations and movements have found avenues to grow in strength and visibility. In 2025, the latest wave of “gender backlash” is threatening hard-won gains for women and girls. It poses renewed challenges to commitments to the rights of women and girls, and LGBTIQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, plus) persons, while also undermining human rights and democratic institutions more broadly.

Drawing from the latest research by academics and practitioners, this report brings together definitions and cross-regional evidence to provide a comprehensive review of the current dynamics of opposition to gender equality and women’s rights and empowerment. It provides insights on effective responses and recommendations for governments, United Nations organizations and civil society to safeguard and further advance historical gains on gender equality and women’s human rights.



Introduction

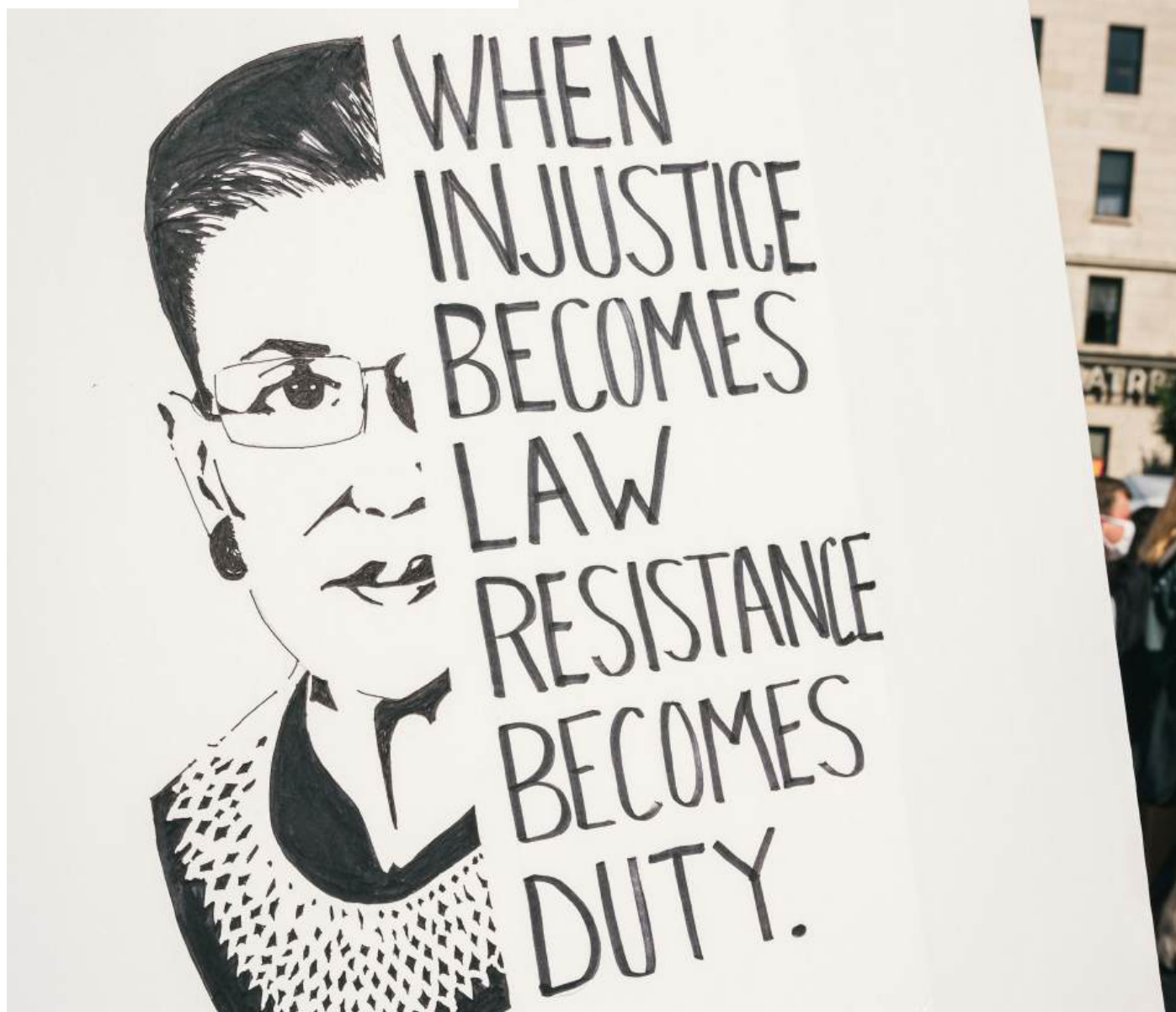


Photo: "When injustice becomes law, resistance becomes duty". Gayatri Malhotra. 2021. Public domain.

In an era marked by growing insecurity and compounding crises, the advancement of women's human rights faces two connected and troubling trends: the ascent of anti-democratic and exclusionary forces, including authoritarian, nationalist and xenophobic groups; and pervasive backlash against gender equality, women's rights and women's empowerment.

The current political landscape is characterized by alarming democratic decay, with the rise in illiberal

democracies and the shrinkage of civic space creating fertile ground for opposition to human rights and gender equality to flourish. As of 2024, 45 countries had taken an authoritarian turn, putting nearly three quarters (72 per cent) of the world's population under autocratic rule.¹ That year, numerous countries saw declines in key aspects of well-functioning democracies, including freedom of expression and the media (44), the conduct of free and fair elections (25) and freedom of association (22).²

The economic toll of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent cost-of-living crises worsened longer-term trends concentrating wealth, well-being and opportunities in the hands of a few.³ This has eroded trust in mainstream politicians and elites while fracturing solidarity among social groups.⁴ Far-right political outsiders have capitalized on inequalities to gain and consolidate power by restricting civic space, undermining institutional checks and balances and rallying electoral support by critiquing elites, even as, paradoxically, they strive to concentrate their own power.⁵ Overall, this has renewed the visibility and strength of broader exclusionary forces globally. They vocally seek to hollow out public provisions and reinstate gender, social and racial hierarchies.

Violence against women in public life, including politicians, activists and journalists, both online and offline, is deterring women from participating and speaking out.⁶ Alarming, where data exist, they indicate that acts of violence are rarely reported to authorities.⁷ Together, these trends are imperilling avenues of accountability that feminists have historically used to champion women's rights and gender equality.

Within this wider context of democratic erosion, anti-gender equality (or simply “anti-gender”)⁸ organizations and movements have become increasingly influential in recent years.⁹ Widespread campaigns against gender equality have contributed to the “normalization” of gender inequalities and anti-LGBTIQ+ sentiments to varying degrees across the world, with some common and distinctive features emerging across countries and regions.¹⁰ Crafting a compelling narrative that often includes backlash against gender equality and hostility towards outsiders and

international cooperation, these actors attempt to reduce the impetus for action to advance women's and girls' rights and to create pluralistic and egalitarian societies.¹¹

Misogyny and strongman politics have gained noticeable traction during the 2024 mega-election cycle, spanning presidential and legislative campaigns. Legislative election results across 33 countries reveal a decline in women's representation, with regression in two thirds of these countries compared to previous years, while only 11 countries recorded progress.¹² Against this backdrop, it is no surprise that nearly a quarter (24 per cent) of countries pointed to backlash on gender equality as a factor undermining implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.¹³ Three decades after the Beijing Conference, feminists increasingly find themselves in a defensive position, advocating to preserve gains already made rather than pushing forward to make new ones. As a result, commitments to women's human rights face ongoing challenges and the actors promoting them meet with hostility and violence.¹⁴

Nearly a quarter (24 per cent) of countries pointed to backlash on gender equality as a factor undermining implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

Photo: “Do you want a future of decency, equality and real social justice?”. Jon Tyson. 2018. Public domain.



Recent cross-country data suggest that backlash against gender equality goes much beyond technical policy circles and is influencing mainstream opinions and attitudes. Although young people have historically held politically liberal views compared to older age groups, recent evidence from countries as diverse as Germany, the Republic of Korea and the United Kingdom shows a gap of at least 25 percentage points between increasingly conservative young men and their more liberal and progressive female contemporaries.¹⁵ A 2024 poll in the United Kingdom found that 18 per cent of men aged 16 to 29 say efforts to support women's equality have gone too far, more than twice the proportion of young women (8 per cent).¹⁶

In line with the United Nations Secretary-General's call to "push back against the pushback",¹⁷ the Gender Equality Acceleration Plan (GEAP) was launched in March 2024 to accelerate progress on gender equality and take active steps to prevent rollbacks of existing gains. Measures include upholding gender equality principles through a system-wide political strategy on the pushback against gender equality and ensuring the protection and participation of women human rights defenders. UN-Women has formulated the Push Forward for Rights, Equality and Justice strategy in partnership with other United Nations entities and civil society. It aims to reaffirm the commitment of national and global stakeholders to gender equality and women's rights, increase awareness and replicate innovative practices to support gender equality, human rights and democratic institutions in the context of backlash.¹⁸ The strategy backs multistakeholder alliances to: uphold the international human rights architecture; create inclusive, open spaces for dialogue

to establish common ground and trust; promote intergenerational, intersectional solidarity; and bolster research and learn from and amplify effective responses.¹⁹ The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) has also been contributing to countering backlash by advancing research and policy dialogue on the drivers and impacts of backlash against gender equality and by amplifying transformative responses that strengthen social justice and inclusive democratic institutions in collaboration with partners from civil society, academia and the multilateral system.

To support the work of UNRISD and UN-Women, and building on growing academic and practitioner evidence on gender backlash, this report provides key insights to understand the current dynamics of this backlash and how best to respond. It defines backlash and identifies its main mechanisms to influence public policies and obstruct feminist organizing. It spotlights feminist responses and recommends strategies to counter opposition and push forward for gender equality, women's rights and empowerment.



From Historical Opposition to Current Backlash: What Has Changed?

Photo: "Women demand equality". Women's Liberation March, Washington, D.C. Warren K. Leffler. 1970. Believed to be in Public Domain, from Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Collections.

Efforts to achieve gender equality have always met opposition from groups and individuals intent on maintaining the status quo and their institutionalized privileges. Such opposition includes upholding discriminatory laws or patriarchal gender norms, supporting a culture of misogyny that undervalues women's roles and blocking gender equality policies. Yet not all forms of opposition are labelled gender backlash.

While there is debate among scholars and activists on how to define this backlash,²⁰ it is understood here as deliberate, organized attempts to

roll back established commitments, rights and achievements in gender equality, women's rights and women's empowerment as defined in a given local, national, regional or global context.²¹ It usually takes the form of orchestrated, often virulent political opposition to the rights of women, girls and people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and to the actors who champion them.²² Those behind the backlash not only rally to oppose feminist framings but also trumpet their own narrow definitions of human rights.²³

Backlash tends to operate in cycles. In many instances, it responds to prior waves of feminist activism and/or advances. It can lead to policy backsliding that removes formal commitments or dismantles policies to advance gender equality. It can also involve more gradual processes that undermine the implementation of commitments.²⁴ Such attacks on established rights are not always immediately successful, but they

narrow policy debates, making progress more difficult or impossible.²⁵

In this latest cycle of opposition, networks of old and new conservative actors and men's rights activists, mobilizing in countries and international fora, have advanced new transnational framings. These efforts include rallying around the fight against “gender ideology” (see Box 1).²⁶



Box 1. What is gender ideology?

The term “gender ideology” first gained prominence in the 1990s within the Catholic Church’s scholastic debates on the inclusion of “gender” in the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.²⁷

In recent years, “gender ideology” has gained resonance in wider public debates, political campaigns and protests. It has been used to oppose activism for the rights of women, girls and LGBTIQ+ people and to attack the academic fields of gender and sexuality studies.²⁸ Its proponents use the word “ideology” to convey their view that the concept of gender and its social construction are products of “ideological colonization” that threaten “traditional” family structures and values.²⁹

Contemporary mobilizations opposing “gender ideology” are broad and intersect with other political projects and a wider set of actors. The term has become an adaptable frame³⁰ that brings different actors together to oppose a range of demands, such as access to abortion and contraception, the human rights of individuals of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, the recognition of and support for diverse families, comprehensive sexuality education, efforts to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, and women’s political participation, among others. Opposition is sometimes couched in terms of an overweening state or transnational order that is interfering in individual freedoms, the integrity of private family life and/or the sovereignty of the nation state. The malleability of the concept of “gender ideology” provides a useful way to identify a single, simplistic root cause of perceived social problems, along with a menu of thematic options for opposition that can be adapted to each context.³¹

United Nations mechanisms, including the Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls, have acknowledged the detrimental effects of “gender ideology” narratives on the rights of women and LGBTIQ+ people and recommended that United Nations Member States actively counter narratives used to spread misinformation and undermine women’s rights.³²

Novel local and transnational alliances among civil society organizations, religious groups with various affiliations, populist leaders and political parties have staged mass mobilizations, shaped legislative debates, made legal demands and permeated mass media across regions.³³ Their growing visibility and strength have gone hand-in-hand with a proliferation of international non-

governmental organizations and think tanks that have promoted anti-gender equality proposals and orchestrated large increases in funding for anti-gender equality actors in the last decade (see Box 2). This has enabled bolder tactics, including public attacks against women politicians, feminists, LGBTIQ+ activists and human rights defenders.³⁴

Box 2. Who is funding anti-gender movements?

Comparative data on the scale and sources of funding to anti-gender actors remains limited, owing to differences in campaign finance disclosures, tax reporting and civil society transparency requirements across countries, as well as the strategic use of anonymous donor funds and other opaque financial vehicles that obscure the origins of capital and weaken accountability.³⁵ Nevertheless, the available evidence indicates that anti-gender actors are successfully consolidating a robust financial infrastructure, mobilizing both domestic and transnational resources to expand their capacity to shape policy agendas and erode national, regional and multilateral commitments to gender justice.³⁶

Their funding sources are diverse. They include membership-based contributions, particularly among grassroots faith-based organizations, as well as privileged access to national government funds—whether through grants, public contracts or eligibility for service delivery—alongside indirect support through tax exemptions. On top of this, significant transnational resources flow from conservative religious institutions, far-right political parties and actors, philanthropic foundations, civil society organizations and high-net-worth individuals, notably from the Russian Federation, the United States of America and Europe.³⁷ For instance, a recent study suggests that 54 organizations based primarily in these countries and regions provided over \$700 million to anti-gender movements between 2009 and 2018.³⁸

More concerning still is that this funding appears to be on the rise and coincides with a steep decline in international resources dedicated to gender equality and human rights, compounding the risks to hard-won gains. According to the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, annual anti-gender funding in Europe more than doubled between 2018 and 2022, reaching \$1.18 billion over this period.³⁹ These figures capture only documented flows; the true scale of financial backing is likely far greater, given the opacity of many funding channels. Such resources are being strategically deployed to finance litigation, lobbying, media campaigns and grassroots mobilization aimed at rolling back LGBTIQ+ rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender equality.



Photo: Pepi Stojanovski. 2018.
Public domain.

Threats to feminist proposals have become part of larger political projects opposing inclusive democracy, social justice and equality, in which gender issues are strategically mobilized to achieve broader political gains.

In terms of thematic focus, the most common forms of opposition relate to politicized (often called “doctrinal”⁴⁰) gender policies that touch on religious or customary issues. There is a strong focus on policies that regulate procreation and childrearing, sexuality and family relations (spanning sexual and reproductive health and rights, particularly abortion), the recognition of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and comprehensive sexuality education.⁴¹ More recently, violence against women and women’s political representation have emerged as areas for anti-gender action and policy dismantling. In Europe, for instance, the Istanbul Convention to address violence against women has been a focal point for backlash (see Box 3).⁴²

The thematic focus of anti-gender equality activism expands to other progressive policy areas. Threats to feminist proposals have become part of larger political projects opposing inclusive democracy, social justice and equality, in which gender issues are strategically mobilized to achieve broader political gains.⁴³ For instance, the “gender ideology” framing was effectively used to undermine popular support for the 2016 peace agreements in Colombia. By mobilizing evangelical and conservative catholic voters against the gender perspective in the agreement, the “Vote No” campaign secured a victory in the Colombian Peace Plebiscite held that year, gaining 50.2 per cent of votes.⁴⁴

In other contexts, an overlap between anti-gender equality groups and organizations that deny climate change and promote anti-vaccine conspiracies has also been observed.⁴⁵ In some European countries, far-right politicians, with support from the media, have blamed migrant (often Muslim) men for cases of violence

against women and fuelled anti-immigration sentiment by claiming that gender-based violence is a non-Western cultural problem.⁴⁶ These examples illustrate how the backlash agenda is expanding, with new spheres of progressive politics within reach.

The success of anti-gender equality campaigns partly stems from their ability to communicate emotionally laden slogans that resonate internationally but are anchored in local realities. While these campaigns are diverse, their narratives tend to follow similar patterns. They often start by feeding a sense of “moral panic” in societies around highly sensitive (and contextual) social and economic problems, such as migration in Europe, low fertility in Eastern Asia, gang violence in Central America, financial instability in South America, colonial legacies in Africa or the aftermath of partition in India. They exploit concerns instigated by wider ongoing crises, causing economic and social insecurity. After instilling a sense of urgency and stoking a moral outcry, anti-gender campaigns position the strengthening of the “traditional family” and/or “the nation” as the solution to social and economic ills.⁴⁷ Their vision proposes a return to a real or imagined past where gender hierarchies were accepted and “traditional family models” were based on what they consider to be “natural”, binary and complementary gender roles and identities. Candidates and authorities strategically use these slogans and campaigns to gain or perpetuate themselves in power and divert public attention from their failures in other areas.

Paradoxically, administrations that amplify regressive discourses around “traditional family values” also underinvest in public services on which families depend. While women’s

economic rights and anti-discrimination laws are not yet an explicit target for anti-gender actors,⁴⁸ the policies they advocate have negative economic consequences for women at the bottom of the income distribution, particularly those in poor households, single parents, informal workers and Black, Indigenous, ethnic minority and rural women. A retreat from public education and reduced public spending on health, social protection, care services or environmental protection all contribute to shifting responsibility back to the private sphere (and onto women's shoulders), undermining public responsibility and collective action.⁴⁹ In many contexts, women's civil society organizations pick up the additional work to hold together the social fabric by providing food banks, care services and responses to violence against women.

Regional variations in opposition dynamics

While there are commonalities, patterns of opposition vary significantly across countries and regions, depending on political opportunities and mobilization patterns.⁵⁰ For instance, in many contexts, civil society actors—generally those with some link to religious organizations—lead anti-gender equality actions. In others, politicians, state bureaucrats and the private sector are involved. Anti-gender equality campaigns often exploit democratic tools but, in some cases, use violent means.⁵¹ Campaigns may have a single-issue focus, be broadly anti-gender or explicitly intersect with other anti-egalitarian political projects.⁵²

The degree of democratic consolidation, the breadth of civic space and the relative strength of feminist activism and secular traditions

affect the extent to which anti-gender equality networks can thrive and gain traction in formal politics.⁵³ Another source of variation relates to prior advances in gender equality. Because anti-gender campaigns are often reactive, large-scale street rallies against gender equality policies have been more persistent and extensively documented in regions where previous feminist and LGBTIQ+ gains have been significant, such as in Europe and Latin America.

In Europe and Northern America, the rise of right and far-right populist parties and leaders has facilitated anti-gender equality campaigns and overseen the erosion of democratic institutions in many countries.⁵⁴ For instance, a key strategy of the presidential administration in the United States of America from 2017 to 2021 was the insertion of neoconservative actors in key institutional spaces. Among other impacts, this led to the decision of the Supreme Court to strike down *Roe vs. Wade*, effectively rolling back 50 years of women's constitutional right to abortion.⁵⁵

Across the Atlantic, early mobilizations in Croatia, Italy, Slovenia and Spain in the 2000s were followed by widespread campaigns against “gender ideology” throughout Europe in the 2010s.⁵⁶ For instance, the movement *Manif pour Tous* (Protests for All) in France in 2012–2013 staged mass protests in reaction to the Government's pledge to introduce same-sex marriage and school curricula aimed at countering gender stereotypes.⁵⁷ Opposition to the rights of women and LGBTIQ+ people has taken particularly virulent forms in Central and Eastern Europe, encompassing efforts to roll back policies on access to abortion, gender mainstreaming and violence against women, compounded by attacks on activists and gender studies. This



Photo: “Manif pour tous”. Nicolás de Cárdenas/Jaime Hernández. 2013. CC BY-SA 2.0.



Photo: “Don’t mess with my kids”.
Lima, Peru. Mayimbú. 2018. CC 4.0.

has led to gender policy backsliding in Hungary, Poland and the Russian Federation,⁵⁸ countries where the strength of democratic institutions is also declining.⁵⁹

In Latin America, campaigns against “gender ideology” took off in contexts with democratic shortfalls. While they did so mostly under right-wing executive leadership, they also flourished (in contrast to Europe) under left-wing leaders with anti-democratic tendencies. Examples include Brazil’s right-wing presidential administration from 2019 to 2022 and Nicaragua’s left-leaning administration from 2007 onwards.⁶⁰ Anti-gender street mobilizations first emerged in Peru around 2016, with a campaign against comprehensive sexuality education under the banner “don’t mess with my kids” (*«con mis hijos no te metas»*). This ignited actions throughout the region, from Mexico, where the National Front for the Family was launched that same year, to countries where the slogan has influenced mainstream politics, including Argentina, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay and Uruguay.⁶¹

Orchestrated opposition to gender equality policies in Latin America is undergirded by novel alliances between

longstanding Catholic conservative actors and new conservative evangelical churches and/or groups, especially those with Pentecostal roots. The latter have recently become an important political force as well as a service provider for the poor in many parts of the region.⁶² In the context of a rollback in public provisioning, religious groups have taken the place of the state, building support for opposition to gender equality among local communities.

In Africa, where democratic consolidation varies widely, public discourses continue to question equality between women and men in areas such as family law, gender-based violence or women’s equal political participation. In sub-Saharan Africa in particular, recent campaigns and propaganda oppose the recognition and push for the criminalization of people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and their advocates.⁶³ Uganda is among the most visible examples, having passed laws criminalizing LGBTIQ+ people in 2014 and 2023.⁶⁴ Opposition to comprehensive sexuality education has been vociferous, often accompanying pushback against reproductive health and rights, with documented cases across the continent, including in Ghana, Kenya and South Africa.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, collective

advocacy by diverse stakeholders in The Gambia successfully upheld the 2015 ban on female genital mutilation, thwarting coordinated attempts to overturn the law in 2024.⁶⁶

The transnational influence of Christian conservative networks in the global North has fuelled African anti-gender campaigns with resources, training and contacts.⁶⁷ Paradoxically, opposition to gender equality has adeptly tapped into local anti-imperialist narratives that frame pro-abortion and pro-LGBTIQ+ rights organizations as new forms of colonization and a threat to children.⁶⁸ In tandem, local politicians often exploit anti-LGBTIQ+ sentiments or invoke the dangers of “gender ideology” for their own political gains, including to secure votes, suppress opposition or divert attention from pressing economic or political issues. In settings where broader struggles over democratic consolidation are ongoing, many anti-gender equality campaigns are not reactive responses to previous feminist or LGBTIQ+ wins but rather preventive “prophylactic”⁶⁹ measures to thwart future rights claims. For instance, in Liberia, the New Citizens Movement, an anti-LGBTIQ+ group, has sought to prevent legislation and organizations from advancing the human rights of LGBTIQ+ individuals.⁷⁰

Generalizing about any region poses challenges, but backlash against gender equality in Asia is particularly complex to characterize due to regional diversity and a limited number of studies on regional patterns. The deteriorating situation in Afghanistan since 2021 exemplifies one of the most egregious and visible examples of backlash against women’s and girls’ rights in the world. The Taliban’s authoritarian reimposition of restrictions on women’s rights to speak, move, gather, show their face in public, work and access education is part of their

religious fundamentalist rule, resulting in women’s complete erasure from society, a form of institutionalized misogyny that experts describe as “gender apartheid”.⁷¹ The Afghan context highlights how fragile and conflict-affected states provide fertile ground for exclusionary politics to flourish.

Some common patterns emerge from highly diverse contexts. Opposition to gender equality has thrived in both India and Türkiye, longstanding secular states where religion has recently been used to roll back rights. In India, Hindu nationalist forces in office have stigmatized Muslim minorities and clamped down on dissenting movements and voices, including feminist ones, while continuing to use the language of gender equality strategically in official discourse.⁷² Türkiye’s recent reversals of legislation on violence against women and family law have coincided with the use of a constitutional referendum to further concentrate power in the executive.⁷³

In other parts of Southern and Eastern Asia and the Pacific, while actors opposing gender equality exist, there is little evidence of mass mobilization against the “gender ideology” frame. Instead, opposition to gender equality tends to coalesce around conservative religious networks and slogans that resonate locally. In high-income countries in Eastern Asia, online and grass-roots anti-feminist organizing is on the rise in reaction to some shifts in gender roles. In Japan, activism was sparked by the Government’s use of the term “gender free” (meaning freedom from gender stereotypes).⁷⁴ In the Republic of Korea, younger men have opposed feminism as antithetical to gender equality on the basis that it prioritizes women’s rights over those of men.⁷⁵

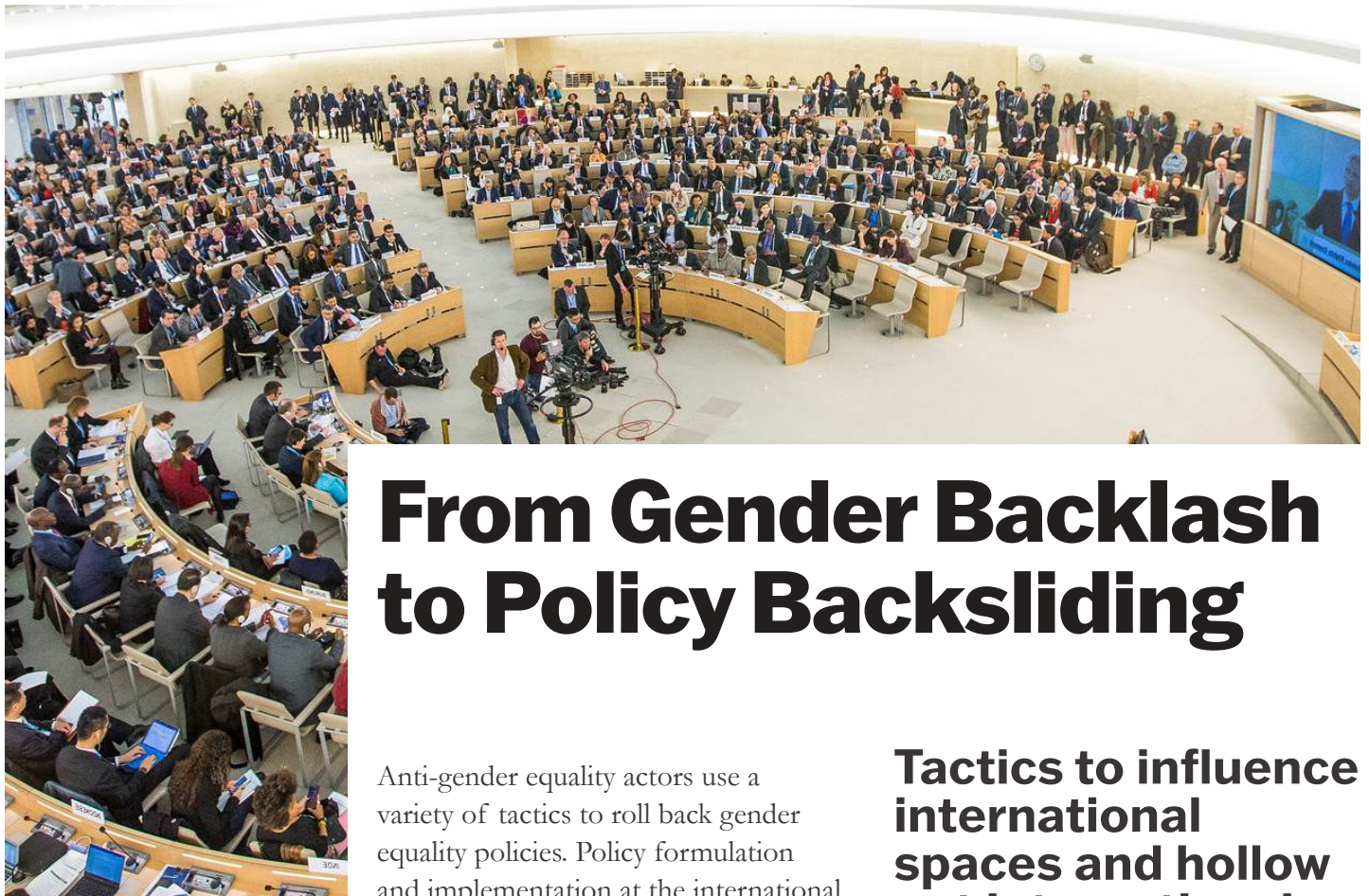


Photo: High-Level-Segment of the 34th Session of the Human Rights Council. UN Photo / Elma Okic. 2017. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

From Gender Backlash to Policy Backsliding

Anti-gender equality actors use a variety of tactics to roll back gender equality policies. Policy formulation and implementation at the international and national levels are dynamic processes. Both feminists and their allies and those opposing gender equality strive to shape their directions. Overall, “policy backsliding”⁷⁶ on gender equality policies can be *explicit*, as in the removal of existing normative commitments, or *implicit*, as in the more subtle erosion of current provisions without altering formal normative or policy architectures.⁷⁷ Whether explicit or implicit, such rollbacks violate human rights commitments and the principle of non-retrogression.⁷⁸

With some notable exceptions, the successful removal of formal commitments is unusual. The erosion or “hollowing out” of existing policies to limit their implementation is more common and an increasing concern internationally and nationally.

Tactics to influence international spaces and hollow out international norms

Transnational coalitions of state and non-state anti-gender equality actors cut across traditional geopolitical divides and are expanding their menu of strategies, including by exerting outside pressure through online petitions and direct action as well as by operating inside national delegations, official events and multilateral negotiations.⁷⁹ Within intergovernmental spaces, they are becoming more effective at influencing international norms by reframing moral or religious claims and appropriating rights-based, scientific discourses.⁸⁰ Often, efforts to water down existing women’s human rights standards entail a range of tactics that occur repeatedly, making it important for advocates to anticipate, plan and be versatile in their responses.

Those efforts focus on revising agreed language to challenge and weaken—in other words, “spoil”—international

norms. “Norm-spoiling”⁸¹ tactics have been increasingly visible in specialized decision-making spaces, such as the Commission on the Status of Women and the Human Rights Council.⁸² Three main tactics—to control, alter and delete language central to women’s rights—may be used in combination.⁸³

An important norm-spoiling tactic is to control what women’s rights advocates can say. An emblematic example is the “global gag rule” of the United States of America, implemented by Republican Presidents since the 1980s. This rule uses financial leverage to prevent foreign non-governmental organizations from providing necessary abortion care or promoting access to safe abortion.⁸⁴ Controlling voices in international spaces can also be achieved through harassment, intimidation or reprisals against human rights defenders for collaborating with United Nations representatives and human rights mechanisms. Between May 2022 and April 2023, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights documented 140 incidents of reprisals and intimidation for cooperating with the United Nations on human rights in 40 countries, affecting at least 108 women and girls.⁸⁵

One overt tactic to oppose women’s rights language in intergovernmental fora is to demand the deletion of foundational text from international agreements and global governance documents. For example, in the fifty-sixth session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2024, 22 resolutions were adopted. In the process, Member States tabled 30 amendments of which 12 (40 per cent) targeted resolutions with a gender focus and/or references related to gender, including proposals to delete references to “bodily autonomy”, “reproductive rights”, “gender” and “women and girl human rights defenders”. Eleven

amendments were eventually rejected, and one was withdrawn as a result of Member States defending existing agreed language.⁸⁶ Increasingly, terms such as “gender-responsive” and “multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination”, which have been agreed language for years or even decades, are contested. The Member States and their civil society allies attempting to purge rights-based language from international agreements often claim it is used as a Trojan horse to advance feminist or LGBTIQ+ rights agendas. Even if these tactics are unsuccessful, they may stall negotiations or focus all efforts on defending existing language, undermining work to advance new or additional rights in the process. At the same time, other Member States, in insisting on the inclusion of such gender references, may be prioritizing unrelated political agendas or geopolitical point scoring. Rather than fostering compromise and trying to bring “moveable middle” countries on board, this approach creates further division and gridlock.

Besides deleting gender terminology, more indirect strategies include altering the meaning of existing women’s rights and gender equality language. This is usually done by pitting women’s rights against other rights by, for example, claiming that women’s rights threaten religious freedom or national sovereignty. These subtler tactics create additional barriers for gender advocates who do not wish to oppose other human rights or be perceived as imposing global North agendas (see Box 3). More recently, under a hospitable global political opportunity structure, tactics have moved beyond spoiling existing norms, with efforts directed at replacing established rights with rival regressive international frameworks—exemplified by the Geneva Consensus Declaration on Promoting Women’s Health and Strengthening the Family, introduced in 2020 and endorsed by 40 countries.⁸⁷

Box 3. The European Union's ratification of the Istanbul Convention: Emerging lessons for gender advocates

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention) is a regional human rights treaty that came into force in 2014. In June 2023, it was ratified by the European Union, which makes the treaty legally binding in all European Union member States, including the five States that as of November 2024 had declined to ratify it.⁸⁸

This comprehensive Convention defines violence against women as gender-based violence and, in line with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women,⁸⁹ it recognizes that structural inequalities between women and men are among the key drivers of such violence. Despite its robust legal footing, the Istanbul Convention has become heavily contested across Europe as a result of a strong transnational anti-gender campaign. This poses a serious threat to policy enactment. For instance, in 2018, Bulgaria determined that the ratification of the Convention was unconstitutional.⁹⁰ Türkiye officially withdrew from the Convention in 2021.⁹¹

On top of resistance within European Union member States, treaty ratification by the European Union itself has remained contested. Initial efforts to adopt the Convention began as early as 2014, with broad support from the European Parliament, yet by 2017, parliamentary opposition had gained significant traction.⁹² In 2019, to avoid a further clash, advocates for the Convention sought the European Court of Justice's opinion on the legal basis for ratification. In 2021, the Court delivered an opinion in favour of the Convention, which the European Union ratified in 2023.⁹³

Research into European Union parliamentary debates indicates different levels of support among ratification promoters, and varying degrees of opposition among norm spoilers. This nuanced analysis offers four important insights on promoting gender equality in regressive contexts:

- Norm spoilers are strategically advantaged when political ideologies and agendas outweigh legal arguments that can bring together actors across the political spectrum. For instance, the rise of far-right populist representatives in recent elections and increasing political polarization in the European Parliament ignited a more adversarial style in chamber debates, leading to more overt forms of opposition to the Convention beginning in 2017.
- While those rejecting the Convention outright argued that it represented the imposition of “gender ideology” on society, their norm-spoiling tactics were rarely based on the content of the text. Instead, they often used alarmist terms, dismissing it as “too militant, too political”. Their objective was to distort and distract from the content of the Convention rather than engage in legal debate.
- More indirect forms of opposition to gender equality norms may be more difficult to contest. For instance, some parliamentarians acting as norm spoilers did not question the Convention's content or validity but instead invoked the subsidiary principle to argue that ratification was unnecessary because national legislation sufficed. National sovereignty arguments are difficult to counter because sovereignty is at the foundation of any intergovernmental system. Arguing against it may undermine the international system that allows equality standards to spread in the first place.
- When faced with strong opposition, procedural (rather than substantive) arguments may be effective in rallying support from those who are reluctant or undecided. These tactics can circumvent disagreements on different understandings of gender but also carry risks. Some promoters of ratification chose to stress the limited scope of the Convention. Emphasizing two areas in which European Union competencies applied—cooperation in criminal matters and asylum and non-refoulment—allowed right-wing parliamentarians to support ratification while shying away from broader gender claims that might not have been acceptable within their political groupings. Not focusing on substantive gender equality issues poses risks, however, including the closure of future opportunities to expand rights.

Avenues to roll back policies at the national level

While anti-gender equality activity in international fora is growing, efforts at “policy backsliding”⁹⁴ usually target national and subnational policies. These, in turn, may shape foreign policy positions.

The regulation of gender and sexuality has moved from the margins to the heart of mainstream national policy debates. The influence of anti-gender narratives and actors extends across the entire policy process through four main approaches: discrediting gender equality as a legitimate state goal; undermining implementation mechanisms; reframing existing policies in ways that restrict women’s and girls’ rights; and limiting accountability and civic space for women’s rights organizations.

Discrediting gender equality as a policy objective

At the national level, rollbacks typically start with efforts to undermine gender equality as a state policy objective. This is often achieved through public statements by high-level officials or heads of state or through public campaigns. The latter may promote the idea that by denying “natural” differences between women and men, the concept of gender could lead to the destruction of the “traditional family”.⁹⁵ Additional actions may directly target gender equality advocates by, for example, attacking feminist public figures or discrediting gender studies as an academic discipline.⁹⁶ “There is no such thing as gender!” claimed a high-level Hungarian politician in support of the Government’s ban on master’s degrees in gender studies in 2018.⁹⁷

Electoral campaigns are a flashpoint for anti-gender equality mobilization.⁹⁸ This was seen in presidential elections in Costa Rica in 2018, the Republic of Korea in 2022 and the United States of America in 2016, 2020 and 2024. The presidential administration in the Republic of Korea, under the People Power Party, has been characterized by anti-feminist positions, particularly on abortion and LGBTIQ+ issues. It has targeted support from young male voters who perceive gender affirmative policies in employment and compulsory military service for men as evidence of reverse discrimination.⁹⁹ Plans were announced to abolish the national Gender Equality Ministry created in 2001, with claims that it was obsolete.¹⁰⁰ Over 800 organizations united to protest the closure, warning that cuts to services, including childcare, would disproportionately impact women’s lives. This led to a temporary reprieve.¹⁰¹

Undermining implementation mechanisms

While in some countries backlash has remained at the level of discourse, anti-gender rhetoric in many other settings has translated into concrete efforts to undermine existing policies. Dismantling implementation arrangements, particularly by targeting national women’s machineries (or national machineries for gender equality) has emerged as a relatively low-cost strategy to expedite policy decay across sectors, rendering existing laws and policies a “dead letter”.¹⁰²

The crucial role of national women’s machineries in setting the overall direction of gender equality policies and coordinating across sectors

As part of the 30-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, only half (52 per cent) of States reported that their national women's machineries are provided with adequate financial resources and staff capacity to fulfil their mandates.

makes them a prime target for efforts to defund, undermine, rename and redirect them. As part of the 30-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, only half (52 per cent) of States reported that their national women's machineries are provided with adequate financial resources and staff capacity to fulfil their mandates.¹⁰³ Countries with weaker national machineries for gender equality, lacking sufficient specialization, authority and/or resources, are in a more constrained position to withstand attacks.¹⁰⁴

As well as threatening the closure of women's machineries, such attacks include downgrading gender equality ministries and limiting their responsibilities to specific areas, such as violence against women, as decided by the recently elected libertarian administration in Argentina in 2023.¹⁰⁵ Changing mandates from gender mainstreaming to "family mainstreaming" is another tactic. Hungary, for example, has adopted a family mainstreaming approach that, with the nationalist goal of population growth,¹⁰⁶ regulates women's paid and unpaid work to "preserve" tradition and the nation.¹⁰⁷ Family policies have been redirected to support large middle-class families at the expense of poorer families and those from the Roma community.¹⁰⁸

Even robust gender machineries can face setbacks. In Brazil, for example, the women's ministry was once a strong champion of gender equality. Under successive presidencies from 2016 to 2022, it was downgraded first to the National Secretariat for Women's Policies and then moved to the newly created Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights, led at that time by an evangelical conservative activist. Strengthening "the family" became the main objective of the new

ministry.¹⁰⁹ The minister at the time openly opposed abortion, advocated that women obey their husbands and oversaw funding cuts for women's shelters.¹¹⁰ Under new executive leadership, the Ministry of Women was reinstated in 2023, prioritizing rights-based policies, with an increased budget.¹¹¹

Reframing and redirecting policies to restrict women's rights

Besides attacks on coordination mechanisms, significant shifts can occur when the objectives of existing policies undergo radical alterations. Gender policies are grounded in ideas or "frames" concerning the nature of a given social problem and its causes, consequences and potential solutions.¹¹² Anti-gender equality actors oppose feminist frames and introduce their own. This can drastically change the definition of a policy problem, its origin and required actions, resulting in reversals in key areas.¹¹³

In an increasing number of countries, policies to eradicate violence against women are reframed from the intention to address unequal gender relations to the goal of protecting family or "traditional values".¹¹⁴ Since 2010, discourse emphasizing the need to protect "traditional values" and children from outside interference has taken hold in federal legislation in the Russian Federation. In addition to the 2013 ban on minors being exposed to "propaganda for non-traditional sexual relations",¹¹⁵ the "traditional values" framing was used to roll back domestic violence provisions. In 2017, an amendment to the Administrative Code stipulated that a first instance of domestic battery not resulting in "lasting harm" should be considered an administrative offence rather than a criminal one and punished only with a fine.¹¹⁶

Other policy frames opposing action on violence against women include asserting children's right to grow up in an "unbroken" home, identifying domestic violence as an exclusive problem of deviant or marginalized groups (such as migrants or the poor) and claiming that men are frequently victims of domestic violence or that women accuse men of violence to curtail their rights to custody (typically promoted by men's rights groups).¹¹⁷

Successful policy reframing by anti-gender equality actors can lead to policy stalling or abandonment. In countries including Ghana and Peru, government-led reforms on comprehensive sexuality education were stalled and ultimately abandoned due to opponents arguing that they promoted "homosexuality" or "inappropriate sexual behaviour" in children and/or represented a "Western imposition" or "an unlawful intrusion by the national government into private family matters".¹¹⁸

Sexual and reproductive health and rights policies have been reversed in ways that limit women's choices and future life chances. This is where some of the most successful (and fiercely contested) policy reversals have taken place. In contexts where abortion policies have already been curtailed, new laws may attempt to further strengthen

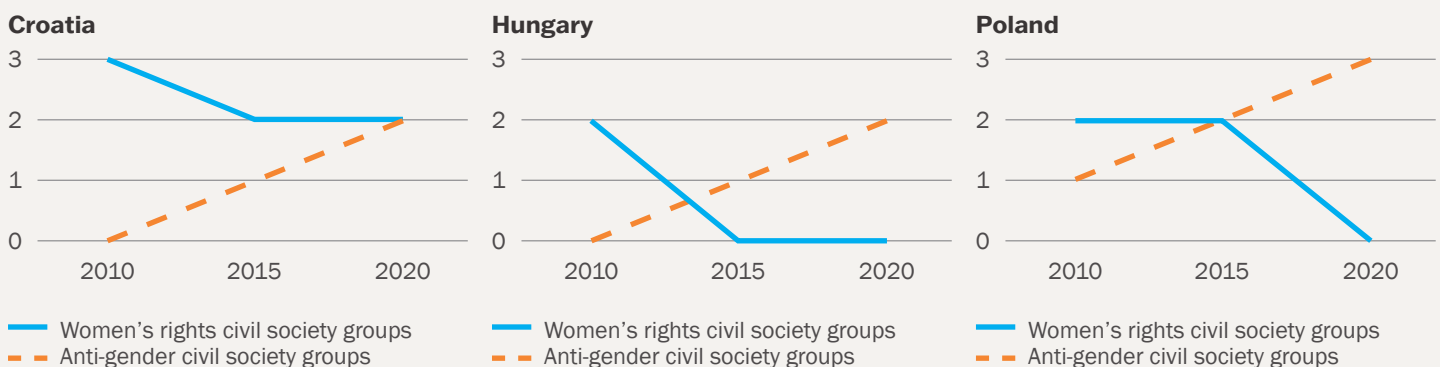
"pro-life" discourses. For example, the For Life programme in Poland in 2017–2021 introduced a one-off stipend (4,000 PLN) for women deciding to give birth to a child prenatally diagnosed with a serious malformation or life-threatening condition.¹¹⁹

Eroding policy accountability and civic space for women's rights organizations

The dismantling of policy can also manifest through the curtailment of policy accountability processes, including consultations and civic engagement to monitor outcomes and keep policymakers in check.

Figure 1 illustrates how the space for women's organizations in policy consultations has been restricted while new spaces have opened for regressive actors. It shows the evolution in access to state-led participation processes over a decade for both women's rights organizations and groups opposing them in Croatia, Hungary and Poland. In a relatively brief time frame, a selective closure of civic space resulted in women's rights organizations largely being supplanted by anti-gender equality actors in Hungary and Poland. In Croatia, by 2017, anti-gender equality groups had achieved access equal to that of women's rights groups.

Figure 1. Changes in access to participation in policy spaces in Eastern Europe



Source: Roggeband and Krizsán 2021, p. 29.

Note: The source employs a qualitative methodology, using process tracing and analysis of movement documents and newspaper accounts, to compare civic space configurations. The variable "changes in access to participation" measures the level of civil society actors' contribution to policy processes on an ordinal four-point scale: 0 (no consultation), 1 (tokenistic inclusion), 2 (consultation/deliberation) and 3 (partnership/co-governance). Women's rights organizations are defined as those that advocate for women's rights and empowerment and gender equality. Anti-gender organizations are defined as those that directly oppose these groups and seek to preserve "traditional" family structures, including men's rights groups and conservative think tanks.

Curtailing autonomous civic spaces for rights-based organizations is another effective means of ensuring women's demands go unheard. An array of strategies is employed, such as unnecessary administrative hurdles for civil society and barriers to registration, reporting or receiving funds.¹²⁰ More aggressive forms of harassment may involve unwarranted raids, event cancellations by security forces¹²¹ or designating civil society groups as “foreign agents” posing a threat to national security.¹²² Other tactics include launching smear campaigns to discredit women's rights activists; criminalizing civil society organizations, often targeting LGBTIQ+ groups in particular; deploying judicial harassment and sanctions, including criminal prosecution; and resorting to threats, intimidation and even physical violence.¹²³

When there is orchestrated opposition, women human rights defenders and their families frequently face threats or actual incidents of gendered or sexual violence, violations that are typically exacerbated in conflict or post-conflict settings.¹²⁴ Gendered violence is used as a weapon to undermine women human rights defenders, control their bodies and stifle their voices.

Efforts to dismantle national policies not only undermine commitments to gender equality and women's rights but also contribute to the erosion of democracy. By further curtailing women's participation and representation, democratic deliberation and institutions become increasingly exclusionary and violent. Women in public life, including journalists, activists and politicians, are a primary target of such violence, which usually intensifies during election periods, limiting their freedom of expression. For instance, a 2021 report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) found that 73 per cent of the 901 women journalists interviewed reported experiencing online violence.¹²⁵ Across 15 countries in the Latin America and Caribbean region, a qualitative study reveals that 80 per cent of journalists and activists interviewed limited their participation in online networks as a result of technology-facilitated gender-based violence, while the same share (80 per cent) feared for their physical safety or their life.¹²⁶ Anti-gender equality and far-right campaigns are particularly violent and exclusionary towards marginalized groups of women, including migrants, women belonging to ethnic or religious minorities and trans, lesbian or queer women.

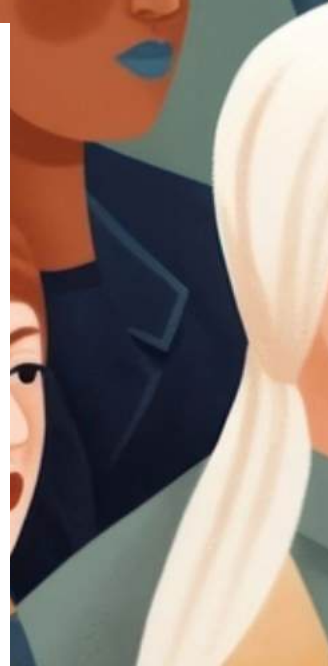


Key Strategies to Push Forward for Gender Equality

The global feminist movement has been at the forefront of resisting backlash on gender equality. It increasingly recognizes that strategic alliances are needed to counter backlash and advance women's rights and gender equality. As the example of the Istanbul Convention illustrates (see Box 3), allies in a particular moment and context may come from unexpected places. It may not be helpful or accurate to think of two unified political camps—an “us” versus “them”—when in fact, empirically, both camps are quite diverse in their composition and alliances. Feminists may hold divergent views on certain issues while conservative actors may endorse some gender equality policies but not others. Rather than identifying actors as “good” or “bad”, a more productive approach is to focus on a

specific policy issue under contestation and understand the framings, dynamics and context-specific networks of actors at play.¹²⁷ This can then inform effective strategies to resist backlash and advance gender equality and women's rights and women's empowerment.

While systematic evidence remains scarce, emerging insights provide valuable lessons on strategies to neutralize opposition and advance gender equality.¹²⁸ They will guide UN-Women's Push Forward for Rights, Equality and Justice strategy to support and amplify innovative good practices and UNRISD's work on pushing forward equality by advancing research and convening dialogue on the drivers and impacts of backlash on social development.



Visual from Rawpixel library.
Free of use.



Photo: “When one woman takes a step forward, we all move forward”. Buenos Aires, Argentina. Titi Nicola. 2017. CC AS 4.0.

Feminist movement strategies: What works?

A hallmark of feminist activism is that it is propositional—it proposes alternatives. In this current moment, however, strategies are also needed to defend against rollbacks (see Boxes 4, 5 and 6).¹²⁹

Feminist movements are perhaps most visible when they mobilize women and their allies on the streets. But their work goes much deeper than this. In many settings, grass-roots, intersectional feminist movements are vital forces in resisting rollbacks. They establish bottom-up advocacy and alternative care infrastructures that provide the essentials of daily life, from access to food and basic services to child and elder care. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, grass-roots women’s organizations played a pivotal role in sustaining communities, advocating for their needs and providing essential care in crises.¹³⁰ These networks, which require nurturing over time, are sadly usually at the sharp end of policy reversals promoted by far-right leaders. An example is when budgets are slashed for communal soup kitchens primarily operated by women in low-income communities and informal settlements.¹³¹

When faced with escalating political constraints, feminists rely on the relative strength and reach of longstanding networks to respond and adapt to backlash. Hostility from other civil society actors or newly unresponsive and antagonistic public officials may render traditional parliamentary lobbying ineffective, requiring new approaches to mobilizing resources and garnering support. This compels feminists to develop new skills and coalitions. In turn, they are required to develop new strategies for autonomous and/or decentralized action and grass-roots mobilization and for selective engagement with some state actors to prevent rollbacks (see Boxes 5 and 6). New approaches to securing financing, such as crowdfunding, may be required to address sudden cuts in state support.

The Black Protests in Poland, described in Box 4, underscore that working in restrictive environments requires adjusting tried and tested tactics for engaging with the state and asserting claims. This may mean mastering the art of combining influence, achieved through consultations and advocacy, with more disruptive autonomous actions. The latter encompass street protests and rallies, petitions to policymakers and strategic litigation.

Box 4. Polish feminists' autonomous organizing sparks women's strikes across the globe

The Polish women's movement has demonstrated impressive adaptability in developing skills and strategies for autonomous organizing in the face of State-led opposition. The most significant responses to policy reversals in reproductive rights were the massive Black Protests staged in 2016–2017, triggered by the introduction of further legal restrictions on access to abortion. The scale of participation was unprecedented, with over 150,000 individuals taking to the streets in 142 cities and towns across Poland and protestors demonstrating solidarity in other countries.¹³²

The protests, following many years of feminist lobbying against an abortion ban, united supporters from diverse groups, including queer feminists, long-time feminist activists and young women. They also instigated a shift towards bolder proposals. Rather than just rejecting restrictive provisions, the civic initiative Ratuemy Kobiet (Save the Women) put forward an alternative draft bill liberalizing access to abortion. It advocated for access to legal abortion until the twelfth week of pregnancy as well as to sex education and contraception. Grass-roots organizations successfully collected more than 700,000 signatures in support, and in September 2016, the All-Poland Women's Strike brought thousands to the streets.¹³³ Elections in 2023 ushered in a new, more moderate coalition government, which is negotiating on how and how far to liberalize the country's abortion laws.¹³⁴

The struggle to strengthen women's rights continues in Poland. In the meantime, the Women's Strike inspired similar action across the world, such as rallies by the Not One Woman Less (Non Una di Meno) movement in Italy to address gender-based violence.¹³⁵ These events forged transnational ties with larger Not One Woman Less (Ni Una Menos) demonstrations against femicide in Argentina, which were also linked to broader mobilizations for safe and legal abortion in Latin America¹³⁶ known as the Green Tide (Marea Verde) after the signature green scarves worn by activists.¹³⁷

Other activists from various countries strengthened their connections via online collective strategizing, leading to the formation of a transnational grass-roots movement, the International Women's Strike. These coordinated plans for synchronized actions took place in over 54 countries on 8 March 2017.¹³⁸ Since then, several annual protests have been held in many countries.¹³⁹ The strike emphasizes transnational and intersectional solidarity, highlighting the interconnections among key feminist issues. These include gender-based violence, reproductive rights, the undervaluation of women's work, the impact of austerity measures on livelihoods and climate justice.¹⁴⁰



Photo: Demonstration in Warsaw Poland. Grzegorz Żukowski. 2016. CC BY-NC 2.0.

In other contexts, honing new tactics to counter backlash may require working with customary and community leaders to overcome local opposition, as seen in Nicaragua, to ensure the implementation of national gender-based violence legislation.¹⁴¹

Alternatively, it may involve creating new and alternative spaces for voice—including online campaigns as well as the use of closed groups and invite-only spaces to avoid targeting by conservative or extremist groups—as observed in Bangladesh.¹⁴²

One of the most promising approaches to challenging rights-restrictive proposals involves adopting transversal tactics and forming coalitions capable of addressing both issue-specific rollbacks of women's rights and broader exclusionary, xenophobic and illiberal political agendas.¹⁴³ Looser coalitions, bringing together women's organizations that may not have collaborated otherwise, along with pro-democracy groups, have emerged in diverse contexts. For example, in Türkiye, at a time when anti-gender equality actors were gaining influence in the mainstream mass media, activists

defending the Istanbul Convention managed to overcome longstanding secular-Islamic-ethnic divisions among women and LGBTIQ+ groups to create alternative spaces for debate that amplified non-hegemonic voices.¹⁴⁴

Promoting diverse feminist networks that cut across identities based on class, race and gender and that are well-connected with formal institutional spaces (judicial, legislative and executive) and/or levels of government (local and national) is crucial for resilience against backlash.¹⁴⁵ The example of feminists in Brazil illustrates this point: broad-based, diverse and intersectional feminist movements have been particularly effective there (see Box 5). This is because when feminists take to the streets, deeply rooted community work and intersectional organizing can help expand the scope of their advocacy. Such networks link feminist concerns to broader issues of neoliberal exploitation, plural democracy and climate action—generating a force referred to as the transformative power of feminism (*potencia feminista*).¹⁴⁶

Photo: Brazil: Public hearing on gender ideology. Clareana Cunha. 2017. CC BY 2.0.



Box 5. Intersectional and diverse feminist networks as a strategy to block backlash in Brazil

In Brazil, from 2015 to 2021, at least 76 bills aiming to restrict sexual and reproductive rights were introduced in the legislature. Due in part to the organized resistance of feminists, none was successfully codified into legislation.¹⁴⁷

Previously, feminists had built a broad and diverse network of advocates, linked with the executive branch and allied with national legislative actors, that powered their response. This resulted from years of prior engagement in formal participatory mechanisms put in place by previous administrations, such as women's national conferences and women's rights councils. These provided a space to negotiate common platforms, organize and foster bottom-up capacity-building among feminists as well as movements of people of African descent on racial and economic justice and LGBTIQ+ rights.

The resulting feminist network withstood rollbacks by developing legislative strategies, seeking accountability through the courts and taking to the streets to oppose restrictive bill proposals and further promote women's and girls' rights. In Congress, the network actively disputed anti-choice bills, foreclosing or delaying anti-choice voting sessions, pressuring congressional party leaders to block conservative proposals and inviting advocates for abortion rights into plenary sessions.¹⁴⁸ In tandem, the network pursued strategic litigation. It identified international fora to highlight the reproductive rights agenda as a key human rights issue in Brazil, to challenge bills and policies contrary to international commitments and to denounce attempts to restrict or criminalize the activities of women human rights defenders.¹⁴⁹

In 2015, large-scale demonstrations took off, including the annual Daisy March (Marcha das Margaridas) by rural women workers and the first Black Women's National March. These events, together with a series of protests known as the Feminist Spring, brought millions of women into the streets in many cities to defend women's rights, including social and economic rights, and to demand greater accountability and transparency in politics.¹⁵⁰

A key strength of this network and a factor in its success was its diversity and intersectional composition. While the organizing work to bring together diverse, intersectional movements is undoubtedly more time-intensive and complex, the experience in Brazil demonstrates that, especially in the context of backlash, it is an investment worth making.



Photo: Brazil: Intervention at the public hearing on gender ideology. Clareana Cunha. 2017. CC BY 2.0.

Institutions, notably parliaments, women's machineries and courts, matter. They serve as protective shields against the most aggressive forms of anti-gender equality politics.

Strengthening institutions to prevent or reduce backlash

Countering gender backlash goes beyond addressing specific issues; it involves safeguarding and strengthening democratic principles, practices and institutions. These institutions, notably parliaments, women's machineries and courts, matter. They serve as protective shields against the most aggressive forms of anti-gender equality politics.

For instance, in parliament, the strategies of legislators supporting gender equality play a vital role in resisting gender restrictive proposals tabled for debate, as the cases of Brazil and the European Parliament attest (Box 5 and 3, respectively). Feminist legislators leverage gender data, evidence and knowledge and make it accessible to citizens to counter misinformation and populist attacks on gender experts. They also forge multi-party alliances to gain strength in numbers, ranging from informal practices, such as setting a "*cordon sanitaire*" to prevent far-right parties from occupying key parliamentary positions, to the use of formal parliamentary committees on women or gender equality to collectively respond to anti-gender equality challenges.¹⁵¹ The adoption and proper monitoring and enforcement of gender-inclusive and democratic parliamentary rules are also instrumental in preventing abusive practices, such as hate speech and sexual harassment, which stifle women's voices in parliament.

This is important because where political processes and institutions become violent and exclude women and marginalized groups, their ability

to call for equal representation and inclusive deliberation is compromised, diminishing the quality and strength of democratic institutions. Institutional reforms to end impunity for violence against women in politics, to promote effective monitoring and reporting mechanisms and to enable enforcement through state capacity-building are needed.¹⁵² Tackling violence against women in public life promotes both robust democracies and progress on gender equality.

Besides tabling gender-restrictive proposals, anti-gender actors who secure seats in parliaments often propose broader reforms to secure the economic resources, communications reach and political influence of their allies in civil society.¹⁵³ Actively opposing tax reforms that grant exemptions to a broad range of formal and informal religious organizations, reforms that increase the control of anti-gender equality actors over mainstream media outlets and electoral reforms that widen the space for conservative religious figures to run for office, are strategic ways to prevent the growth and/or consolidation of anti-gender equality actors.

Strengthening national machineries for gender equality in the executive branch is an important strategy for resisting backlash and preventing democratic backsliding more broadly. Comparative studies show that in stable democracies, national women's machineries can enhance democratic performance by serving as a state conduit for the descriptive and substantive representation of women's diverse interests. Where democratic institutions are more fragile, these institutions have historically played an important role in supporting transitions to democracy.¹⁵⁴ Data for 70 countries from 1975 to 2005 indicate a statistically significant positive correlation between the

presence of a national women's machinery and higher levels of democracy.¹⁵⁵

Independent supreme courts have also played a key role in withstanding attempts to roll back rights in many countries, including in Colombia and Mexico (see Box 6).¹⁵⁶ Because courts can serve as an important protective factor against backlash, feminists and LGBTIQ+ activists have vigorously

opposed efforts to curtail judicial independence or the politicization of the judiciary. The recent decision in the United States of America to overturn women's right to access abortion, against the longstanding consensus of public opinion, offers a sobering example of the consequences of Supreme Court politicization, particularly with regard to the appointment process.¹⁵⁷

Box 6. Using courts to withstand backlash at the subnational level in Mexico

In 2007 in Mexico City, a small, cohesive and professionalized pro-abortion rights network, with influential local contacts and strong links with the federal Government, successfully advocated for a bill that legalized access to abortion in the capital city. Swift and organized opposition erupted at the subnational level, where feminists operating federally had less influence. This opposition sought to prevent the spread of the Mexico City measure into other districts and to enact subnational restrictions on sexual and reproductive rights. Local backlash unfolded with striking speed: 20 of 32 states had passed local anti-choice constitutional reforms by 2021.

The feminists behind the Mexico City ruling, acting alongside local feminist networks in strategic states, effectively countered this backlash by leveraging their connections with and influence on the Supreme Court. Their efforts culminated in three historic Supreme Court rulings in 2021, establishing the depenalization of abortion nationwide, invalidating provisions that protected the right to life from conception and deeming the conscientious objection of medical staff unconstitutional when it prevented access to abortion services.

While ongoing tensions between the judicial and executive branches were important enabling factors, emerging evidence suggests that institutional activists played a pivotal role. Young judicial clerks and legal advisers, trained within a feminist and human rights framework, were instrumental in assisting judges in drafting these landmark decisions, often preparing and providing supporting arguments.

This example underscores the importance of capacity-building on gender issues across institutions, including the judiciary, as it can provide institutional actors with the technical tools to resist backlash.

Source: Zaremborg and Rezende de Almeida 2022.

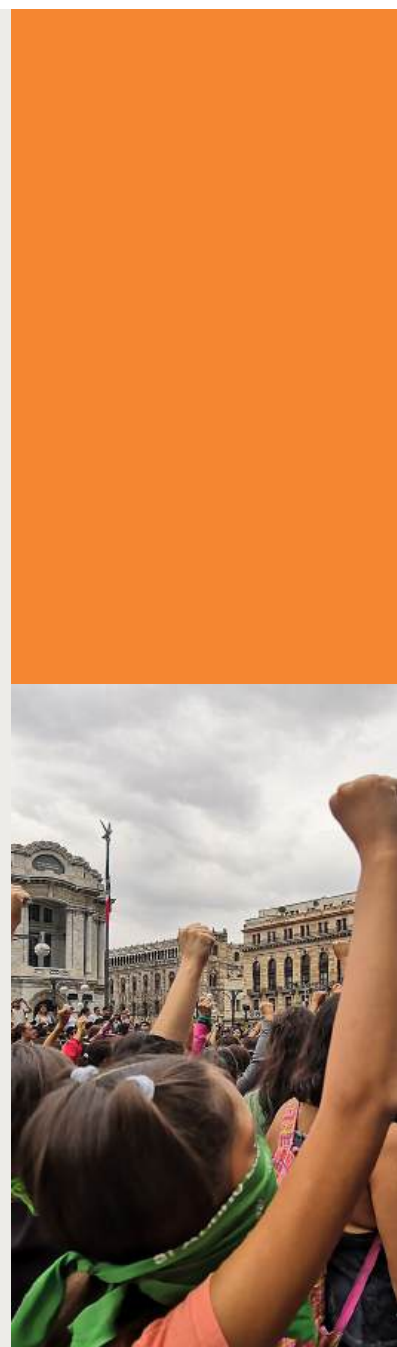


Photo: March for International Abortion Rights Day in Mexico City. Wotancito. 2019. CC AS 4.0.

Recommendations



Photo: Barbara Zandoval. 2023.
Public domain via Unsplash.

In the context of global economic fragility and compounding crises, political candidates competing for office are confronting decisions with major consequences for democracy and gender that will shape global politics for years. Many may seek easy wins and employ anti-gender equality and/or exclusionary nationalist rhetoric to secure votes and maintain authority.

As this year marks the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action—the most widely endorsed and visionary agenda for women’s rights—the need to resist is clear. Organized opposition to gender equality threatens the rights of women and people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and has significant implications for a broader set of issues, including the content and scope of human rights, the quality of democratic institutions and broader struggles to create inclusive and equal societies.

Many United Nations Member States, civil society organizations (particularly feminist and LGBTIQ+ groups), independent media and philanthropic foundations are working together to resist these rollbacks. The United Nations System-Wide Gender Equality Acceleration Plan will develop a strategy to address pushback on gender equality. Complementing these efforts, UN-Women’s Push Forward for Rights, Equality and Justice strategy focuses on key actions that include documenting and amplifying good practices and effective responses by advocates and activists to counter pushback.¹⁵⁸ In the same spirit, UNRISD advances research and convenes dialogue on the structural drivers and societal impacts of backlash against gender justice, generating evidence and policy insights to strengthen transformative responses and support inclusive, democratic institutions.

To support ongoing efforts, this paper provides key recommendations. Diverse stakeholders should collaborate strategically to implement them.

Uphold human rights and promote inclusive and accountable democracies

- Strengthen broad-based coalitions across countries and in intergovernmental spaces to win over leaders in the “moveable middle”; ensure human rights and gender equality language is preserved and advanced; and safeguard gender issues from undue polarization.
- Reinvigorate international human rights bodies, adequately equipping them to oversee and promote the realization of international commitments on human rights and gender equality.
- Promote plural and inclusive national democratic institutions and robust independent accountability mechanisms such as supreme courts or independent oversight bodies. These institutional actors can make it more challenging for organized opposition to gender equality to take root and consolidate.
- Ensure gender equality advocates can access avenues for effective participation and play a significant role in shaping policy formulation and oversight in international and national fora.
- Eliminate, prevent and respond to all forms of intimidation, persecution and violence directed at women in public life, including politicians, journalists and activists, in online and offline spaces.

Protect autonomous civic space and strengthen women’s rights organizations and broad-based solidarities

- Promote and support the development of “early warning” systems, encompassing civil society, the media, parliamentarians and others, to identify and prevent backlash through, for example, campaigns to block institutional reforms aimed at consolidating the economic and political power of anti-gender equality actors.
- Protect and provide consistent, vocal political support for human rights defenders, gender equality and LGBTIQ+ advocates, including to counter mis- and disinformation about their work. It is also critical to uphold their rights to freedom of expression and privacy and ensure their access to redress in cases of violence.
- Strengthen the capacity of autonomous women’s rights organizations to respond to rollbacks. This comprises, among other measures, supplying adequate, long-term, unrestricted and flexible funding for their work, including for the collective care needed to ensure movements can sustain themselves and flourish.
- Support spaces and networks that promote intersectional, intergenerational and cross-sectoral movement-building to foster dialogue and collaboration among diverse groups, communities and constituencies and to cut across divides.



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Amplify impactful feminist practices and drive change with evidence and data

- Promote and cultivate capacities to develop positive narratives on strategic issues that can expand the reach of feminist and human rights ideals and garner wider support for egalitarian and inclusive societies. Positive narratives can, for instance, highlight the benefits gender equality gains bring to wider communities or cast key terms such as “family”, “life” or “care”, used by conservative actors in narrow ways, in a new light.
- Reinforce and create new safe spaces to boost solidarity where feminists can share innovative practices of resistance and assess their effectiveness across settings; these spaces can become powerful platforms to draw lessons and promote ongoing joint actions.
- Support and amplify emerging research on feminist strategies and practices to resist and push forward for gender equality, to understand what works, in which contexts and why.



Endnotes

- ¹ Nord et al. 2025.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Oxfam 2024.
- ⁴ UNRISD 2022; UN-Women 2021a.
- ⁵ Engler and Weisstanner 2021; Norris and Inglehart 2019.
- ⁶ Restropo 2020.
- ⁷ For instance, survey data on the prevalence of violence against women in politics in local governments from Jordan and Tunisia show that in 2021, although more than half of women surveyed reported suffering from this, less than 15 per cent filed a complaint. UN-Women 2021b.
- ⁸ Anti-gender equality and anti-gender here refer to opposition to the equal rights and treatment of women and men, the advancement of women's rights and/or the rights of individuals with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity. The literature on gender backlash and the Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls both highlight that, under the banner of "gender ideology", conservative actors strategically target emotionally charged topics within one or more of these areas (see Box 1).
- ⁹ UN ECOSOC 2020; McEwen and Narayanaswamy 2023.
- ¹⁰ Awondo et al. 2022; Biroli 2019; Graff and Korolczuk 2022.
- ¹¹ Roggeband and Krizsán 2020; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Verloo and Paternotte 2018.
- ¹² UN-Women calculations based on Inter-Parliamentary Union data on women in parliaments for 33 countries as of 1 October 2024.
- ¹³ UN-Women calculations based on 145 countries that responded to the questionnaire as part of the 30-year review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.
- ¹⁴ UN HRC 2018; Juhász and Pap 2018.
- ¹⁵ Burn-Murdoch 2024.
- ¹⁶ King's Global Institute for Women's Leadership et al. 2024.
- ¹⁷ Guterres 2019.
- ¹⁸ UN-Women 2024a.
- ¹⁹ Ibid. Recent research on the positive outcomes of intergenerational feminist movements can be found in Friedman et al. 2023.
- ²⁰ Townsend-Bell 2020; Paternotte 2020.
- ²¹ Roggeband and Krizsán 2020.
- ²² Piscopo and Walsh 2020.
- ²³ Murray 2022.
- ²⁴ Roggeband and Krizsán 2018.
- ²⁵ EIGE 2019.
- ²⁶ Paternotte and Kuhar 2018; Halperin-Kaddari and Freeman 2016.
- ²⁷ Corrêa 2018; Paternotte and Kuhar 2017a, p. 9.
- ²⁸ Paternotte and Kuhar 2018; Pető 2016.
- ²⁹ UN OHCHR Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls 2020.
- ³⁰ Corredor 2019.
- ³¹ Corrêa et al. 2018; Paternotte and Kuhar 2017b.
- ³² UN HRC 2018; UN OHCHR Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls 2024.
- ³³ Corrêa et al. 2018.
- ³⁴ UN HRC 2019.
- ³⁵ GPP 2020.
- ³⁶ McEwen and Narayanaswamy 2023.
- ³⁷ Datta 2021; Khan et al. 2023.
- ³⁸ Datta 2021.
- ³⁹ Datta 2025.
- ⁴⁰ Htun and Weldon 2018.
- ⁴¹ Graff et al. 2019; UN-Women 2019.
- ⁴² Roggeband and Krizsán 2020.
- ⁴³ Verloo and Paternotte 2018.
- ⁴⁴ Caminotti and Tabbush 2021.
- ⁴⁵ Kanci et al. 2023.
- ⁴⁶ Colella 2021.
- ⁴⁷ Balieiro 2018; Miskolci 2018.
- ⁴⁸ Verloo 2018.
- ⁴⁹ Biroli 2019; UN-Women 2019.
- ⁵⁰ The classification of geographic regions is based on the standard country or area codes for statistical use of the United Nations Statistics Division. See: United Nations Statistics Division undated.
- ⁵¹ Krizsán and Roggeband 2021; Bishop 2017.
- ⁵² Verloo 2018.
- ⁵³ Verloo and Paternotte 2018.
- ⁵⁴ Verloo 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019.
- ⁵⁵ Childress and Einbinder 2017; Hurley 2022.
- ⁵⁶ Corrêa et al. 2018.
- ⁵⁷ Kuhar and Paternotte 2017.
- ⁵⁸ Krizsán and Roggeband 2021; Roggeband and Krizsán 2020.
- ⁵⁹ Nord et al. 2025.
- ⁶⁰ Caminotti and Tabbush 2021.
- ⁶¹ Biroli and Caminotti 2020; Zarembert et al. 2021; Rousseau 2020; Abracinskas et al. 2020.
- ⁶² Vaggione and Campos Machado 2020.
- ⁶³ Awondo et al. 2022.
- ⁶⁴ The first of such bills, introduced into Parliament in 2009, was initially passed in 2014 before being struck down by a court. A revised version of the bill was signed into law in 2023. Reuters 2023.
- ⁶⁵ Nabaneh et al. 2022.
- ⁶⁶ Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Welfare 2024.
- ⁶⁷ Kaoma 2009; Awondo et al. 2022; McEwen 2018.
- ⁶⁸ Kaoma 2016.
- ⁶⁹ Paternotte 2020.
- ⁷⁰ Currier and Cruz 2020.
- ⁷¹ UN-Women 2024b; UN HRC 2024a.
- ⁷² Graff et al. 2019; Chopra 2021.
- ⁷³ Kanci et al. 2023.
- ⁷⁴ Yamaguchi 2017.
- ⁷⁵ Kim and Lee 2022.
- ⁷⁶ This conceptual framing of policy backsliding was coined by Roggeband and Krizsán 2020 and argues that, in practice, backsliding of gender equality policies encompasses four dimensions: (1) discursive (de)legitimation of gender policy objectives; (2) dismantling and reframing of existing policies; (3) undermining implementation; and (4) eroding accountability and inclusion mechanisms.
- ⁷⁷ Roggeband and Krizsán 2020.
- ⁷⁸ The "prohibition of retrogression" means that the duty to progressively fulfil economic, social and cultural rights implies a prohibition of measures that would diminish the current enjoyment of rights. See UN OHCHR undated-a.
- ⁷⁹ McEwen and Narayanaswamy 2023; AWID 2021.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid.
- ⁸¹ "Norm-spoiling strategies" are defined as processes through which actors directly challenge existing norms with the aim of weakening their influence. Sanders 2018.
- ⁸² Halperin-Kaddari and Freeman 2016.
- ⁸³ This section relies on the framework developed by Sanders and Jenkins 2022.

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This report presents a comprehensive review of academic and grey literature from the past 10 years on the opposition to gender equality and the responses to this challenge across various regions. The review includes targeted keyword searches, snowball sampling from references and key informant interviews to validate empirical patterns and highlight illustrative examples. It also incorporates insights from two expert group meetings to commemorate the 25th and 30th anniversaries of the Beijing Platform for Action in 2019 and 2024, respectively. In line with the highest standard quality assurance processes, the paper underwent rigorous internal and external peer review by experienced professionals and academic experts.

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UNDERSTANDING BACKLASH AGAINST GENDER EQUALITY

Evidence, Trends and Policy Responses

Opposition to gender equality is not new. Yet almost 30 years after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, anti-gender equality organizations and movements have found avenues to grow in strength and visibility. In 2025, the latest wave of “gender backlash” is threatening hard-won gains for women and girls. It poses renewed challenges to commitments to the rights of women and girls, and LGBTIQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, plus) persons, while also undermining human rights and democratic institutions more broadly.



Drawing from the latest research by academics and practitioners, this background paper brings together definitions and cross-regional evidence to provide a comprehensive review of the current dynamics of opposition to gender equality and women’s rights and empowerment. It provides insights on effective responses and recommendations for governments, United Nations organizations and civil society to safeguard and further advance historical gains on gender equality and women’s human rights.



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