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The New Global Struggle Over Gender, Rights, and Family Values

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Introduction

On January 20, 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump issued an executive order directing all U.S. government agencies to remove statements, policies, regulations, and other messages that “promote or otherwise inculcate gender ideology.”¹ In Argentina, President Javier Milei has announced that his government aims to remove the crime of femicide from the country’s penal code, arguing that anti-femicide laws are the products of radical feminism and “woke” culture.² The Hungarian parliament has passed a law that bans the Budapest Pride event and allows state authorities to use facial recognition tools to track down attendees.³

These are not isolated incidents. Instead, they are part of a new wave of resistance against gender equality and women’s and LGBTQ rights that is sweeping many parts the globe, resurfacing even in countries where cultural battles over gender and sexuality previously appeared to be relics of the past. This oppositional movement is bolder, more organized, and more transnational than in previous decades. It is not merely reactive: In addition to contesting progressive gender equality laws and norms, it is advancing an alternative normative and cultural framework that centers the “natural family” as the foundation of social and national cohesion. Responding to these trends, UN Secretary-General António Guterres in March 2025 warned that “a surge in misogyny and a furious kickback against equality” threaten to “push [gender equality] progress into reverse.”⁴

The most acute manifestation of this backlash against progressive gender norms—“anti-gender backlash” in short—are efforts to roll back existing legislation and policies or introduce new restrictions on sexual and reproductive rights, LGBTQ rights, and education and research about gender and sexuality. In some countries, governments have successfully rescinded rights protections and defunded and sidelined gender-equality institutions and

organizations. In others, campaigns are underway but remain fiercely contested—restrictive bills have been stalled in parliaments and legal challenges mounted in the courts. Even in countries where proposed reversals have yet to gain traction, however, efforts to liberalize policies and laws on gender-related issues face more overt opposition, and cultural resistance to feminism and progressive gender norms has intensified. As a result, women’s and LGBTQ rights activists also face new restrictions and threats from both state and non-state actors.

Although this backlash has global implications, it is not impacting all parts of the world to the same degree or in the same manner. Mounting opposition to gender equality is most pronounced in regions where illiberal, right-wing populist leaders and parties have gained political power and are taking up the anti-gender discourse and policies advanced by ultra-conservative activists, including in the United States, Latin America, and Eastern and Southeastern Europe. It is also visible in nationalist autocracies like China and Russia, where governments in recent years have doubled down on traditionalist gender norms as a means of state legitimization and sociopolitical control.

Yet the tentacles of the trend extend further. In parts of Africa, politicians in socially conservative autocracies *and* democracies have advanced new restrictions on LGBTQ and sexual and reproductive rights in response to lobbying from domestic and international religious movements. In East Asia, anti-feminist groups in civil society have formed new coalitions with conservative parties and politicians, whereas in South Asia, recent waves of feminist mobilization have catalyzed stronger resistance by ultra-religious and ethno-nationalist movements. By contrast, escalating pushback is less evident in the Middle East and in the Gulf, where many of the progressive gender norms now being contested elsewhere were never institutionalized in the first place.

The primary forces behind and targets of backlash also vary. Across Europe, Latin America, and Africa, transnational religious networks (particularly ultra-conservative Christian organizations) have played an important role in driving campaigns against women’s and LGBTQ rights, often under the banner of fighting radical “gender ideology” or defending the “traditional family.” In Asia, by contrast, local cultural and religious conservatism—and in East Asia, pronounced demographic anxieties—have played a more decisive role than transnational networking, and resistance has centered primarily on feminist discourse, ideas, and mobilization.

Beneath these regional variations, however, lies a common thread: New oppositional movements treat gender equality, feminism, and LGBTQ rights as existential threats to cultural and national integrity linked to globalization, Western liberalism, and the erosion of traditional authority. This shared worldview allows diverse actors—from right-wing populists in Europe to nationalist autocrats in Russia and China to conservative religious groups in Latin America and Africa—to coalesce around a common enemy.

Such coalition-building is most evident within multilateral institutions. For much of the late twentieth century, the United Nations and other international organizations were instrumental in advancing gender equality globally. Feminist advocates built alliances with friendly states in order to shift international norms, gradually working toward universal commitments.⁵ The resulting agreements, from the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to the 1995 Beijing Declaration and the Sustainable Development Goals, created external pressure on governments to implement reforms.⁶

Today, these same institutions have become battlegrounds. Conservative governments and advocacy groups are resisting new gender equality commitments as well as contesting the language of previously agreed-upon norms, particularly around sexual and reproductive rights, LGBTQ protections, and references to “gender” more broadly. They are also increasingly pressing for alternative normative frameworks centered around the family, religion, and national sovereignty.

Taking stock of this new global landscape, this paper argues that heated political struggles over gender playing out in several regions of the world are more than just isolated or temporary reactions to recent progressive reforms: They are a key front in a larger cultural and political realignment. Liberal gender norms have become a central target for contemporary illiberal mobilization, functioning as a symbol of everything that is wrong with modern culture and the current world order.

To probe these trends in greater detail, this analysis proceeds in four parts:

- **The problem:** The first part outlines the key manifestations of anti-gender backlash globally, focusing on legislative and policy rollbacks, rising attacks on women’s and LGBTQ rights activists, and greater norm contestation and reversals in multilateral institutions.
- **The drivers:** The second part unpacks the drivers of anti-gender backlash in different parts of the world, highlighting the interplay between broader structural factors such as socioeconomic and cultural changes and demographic trends and the strategies of ultra-conservative and far-right civic movements, governments, and leaders.
- **Local and international responses:** The third part charts the existing policy and advocacy responses by those seeking to preserve and expand past gender equality gains.
- **Four ways forward:** The paper concludes by examining the core strategic and tactical dilemmas complicating these responses and highlights four directions for future action that emerge from existing counter-mobilization efforts.

The Problem: Mounting Pushback Against Gender Equality

The global backlash against gender equality manifests at multiple levels. First, across various political contexts, new legislative efforts have curtailed rights related to sexuality education, LGBTQ protections, reproductive healthcare, and gender-based violence, often alongside the closure or weakening of gender-focused institutions. Simultaneously, governments and non-state actors have escalated their repression of women's and LGBTQ rights activism, deploying surveillance, legal restrictions, harassment, and online abuse to silence dissent. These domestic shifts are fueling growing polarization at the multilateral level, where anti-gender actors are increasingly promoting alternative norms centered on the family, national sovereignty, and religious conservatism.

Legislative and Policy Rollbacks

Over the past decade, the most striking manifestation of anti-gender backlash has been the rollback of past gender equality policies, laws, and rights protections and, in some areas, the diffusion of new restrictive laws in different parts of the world. To date, most of these rollbacks have centered on the private sphere, targeting issues of sexuality, gender norms, and reproduction—rather than, for example, women's economic rights or political participation.

One of the most common targets has been comprehensive sexuality education, which religious and ultra-conservative actors frame as undermining parental authority and encouraging undesirable sexual norms and behavior. Russia was an early opponent, banning sex education in public schools in 2010 with its Protection of Children from Negative and Harmful Information Act and subsequently prohibiting the dissemination of LGBTQ-related information to minors (the law was expanded in 2022 to ban any “promotion” of non-heterosexual relations).⁷ Bulgaria, Georgia, and Hungary have followed suit, with Hungary banning LGBTQ representation in school materials and removing gender studies from accredited university programs.⁸ Similar trends are unfolding in Latin America, the United States, and Africa. Brazil, El Salvador, Paraguay, and Peru have all introduced restrictions on sex education or increased parental control over such education.⁹ In Nigeria, the government in 2022 removed sex education from the curriculum, shifting responsibility to parents and religious institutions.¹⁰ In the United States, Florida has pioneered bans on teaching about gender identity and sexual orientation, with at least seven additional states—including Arkansas, Indiana, and Iowa—passing similar laws over the past two years.¹¹

A second wave of legislative efforts has targeted LGBTQ rights, most commonly through the criminalization of same-sex relations, new restrictions on free speech and freedom of association, the weakening of anti-discrimination provisions, and regressions in legal gender

Figure 1. Policy and Legislative Regressions 2010–April 2025

	Regressions	Thwarted or reversed regressions	Ongoing attempts
Restrictions on comprehensive sexuality education and gender studies	Brazil El Salvador Hungary Indonesia Nigeria Paraguay Peru Russia South Korea Tanzania Uganda United States United Kingdom	Poland Romania	
Weakening of legal protections against gender-based violence	Argentina Guatemala Russia Türkiye	Dominican Republic Gambia Kazakhstan Poland United States	Bolivia Nigeria Uruguay
New anti-LGBTQ legislation or policies	Bangladesh Belarus Bulgaria Georgia Hungary Kyrgyzstan Malaysia Namibia Nigeria Oman Russia Uganda United States	Kazakhstan Pakistan	Ghana Indonesia Kenya Romania
New restrictions on reproductive healthcare access	Croatia Honduras Hungary Iran Peru Poland United States		Argentina Brazil
Closures or restructuring of state institutions focused on women	Afghanistan Argentina Canada El Salvador Hungary Israel Senegal Türkiye United States	Brazil Ecuador Guatemala Mexico Romania	Peru South Korea
Reversal of measures to ensure women's political representation	Afghanistan Indonesia Tunisia		
Weakening secular law governance of family matters	Brunei India Indonesia Iraq Türkiye		
General restrictions on women's citizenship or participation in public life	Afghanistan Iraq Jordan Libya	Tanzania	Iran

recognition.¹² Russia was once again an early mover with its 2013 “anti-gay propaganda” law, but its crackdown has since escalated, with the Russian Supreme Court declaring the “international LGBT movement” an “extremist organization” in 2023.¹³ In addition to banning LGBTQ-related information in schools, Hungary and Georgia have also enacted new restrictions on same-sex adoption and legal sex changes.¹⁴ In the United States, state legislatures passed forty-nine new anti-LGBTQ laws in 2024 alone, many of which targeted trans rights in particular. Dozens more are currently pending.¹⁵ Even in countries that already restrict same-sex relationships, governments have moved to tighten existing laws. Nowhere is this more evident than in Uganda, where the 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act imposes life imprisonment for same-sex conduct.¹⁶ New laws criminalizing consensual same-sex acts have also been introduced in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Iraq, Kenya, and Mali.

A third target has been sexual and reproductive healthcare. Globally, the trend in abortion access has been largely positive, with more and more countries decriminalizing abortion in recent decades. But over the past several years, restrictive measures have once again become more common, often driven by religious constituencies and their political allies. Poland is a prominent example: Despite already having one of Europe’s strictest abortion laws, the country’s Constitutional Tribunal in 2020 effectively imposed a near-total abortion ban by removing fetal defects as grounds for pregnancy termination. Even after the Law and Justice (PiS) government was voted out of power, religious conservatives within the new ruling coalition have stalled attempts to ease the abortion ban.¹⁷ In the United States, the Supreme Court’s 2022 decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* has also triggered a wave of restrictions, with twenty-two states banning or severely limiting abortion access.¹⁸ Elsewhere, the government of Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán imposed new procedural hurdles to abortion access, Honduras amended its constitution to entrench its abortion ban, and Peru passed a fetal personhood law in 2024.¹⁹ In Brazil and Argentina, new abortion restrictions have been introduced in the legislature but have so far been stalled by significant political pushback.²⁰

A fourth line of attack focuses on protections against gender-based and domestic violence. Russia led the way in 2017 by decriminalizing certain forms of domestic violence and reducing penalties to small fines—a move that was backed by the Russian Orthodox Church.²¹ In another prominent example, Türkiye withdrew from the Istanbul Convention in 2021, with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan claiming that the treaty undermined family values.²² There have also been efforts to weaken protections that were later reversed. In Poland, for example, the PiS government started the process of exiting the Istanbul Convention in 2020, but its successor administration reversed course.²³ In Gambia, lawmakers in 2024 advanced a bill to overturn the country’s ban on female genital mutilation, citing Islamic leaders’ recommendations—only to withdraw it after significant domestic and international backlash.²⁴ Legislative efforts to weaken protections remain under discussion in Bolivia and Uruguay.²⁵

Two additional measures are worth highlighting. First, some Muslim-majority countries have rolled back the secular foundations of marriage and family law. In Türkiye, for instance, the Constitutional Court in 2015 overturned a requirement that couples obtain a civil marriage before a religious one, and the parliament later allowed state-approved clerics

to officiate civil marriages.²⁶ Brunei, meanwhile, in 2019 enacted a Sharia-based penal code that mandates death by stoning for extramarital sex, anal sex, and abortion.²⁷ Several states have also imposed sweeping new restrictions on women's participation in public life. Nowhere has this been more extreme than Afghanistan under the Taliban, where women are now once again barred from education, most jobs, free movement, and political life.²⁸

A final trend has been the closure or restructuring of women's rights institutions to foreground the role of the family. Türkiye set the precedent in 2011 by replacing its Ministry of Women and Family with a Ministry of Family and Social Policies, a model later followed by Brazil under former president Jair Bolsonaro (though reversed by his successor Lula da Silva), El Salvador under President Nayib Bukele, Hungary under Orbán, and, more recently, the new Senegalese government.²⁹ Argentina's Javier Milei has fully dismantled the country's Ministry of Women, Gender, and Diversity.³⁰ In general, between 2012 and 2018, thirteen European Union (EU) member states downgraded or deprioritized their gender equality bodies, while eighteen reduced their commitments to gender mainstreaming.³¹ These institutional shifts have often been accompanied by significant funding cuts to gender-focused programs and women's groups in civil society.³² Together, these efforts signal a political deprioritization of gender equality and, in some countries, an increasing tendency to see women's rights only through the lens of the family.

Repression of Women's and LGBTQ Activism

Governments are also making it more dangerous for activists to contest these legal and policy changes by criminalizing, surveilling, harassing, and restricting the women's and LGBTQ movements that oppose them. In autocratic and backsliding regimes, these repressive tactics are usually part of a broader crackdown on independent civil society and political dissent. In India, for example, foreign funding laws have choked international support for rights organizations, including many women's rights groups, and the government has used sedition charges to launch lawsuits against thousands of activists since 2010.³³ In Nicaragua, dozens of feminist organizations have been shut down, particularly those assisting survivors of gender-based violence.³⁴ Chinese women's rights activists routinely face harassment, detention, and politically motivated trials.³⁵

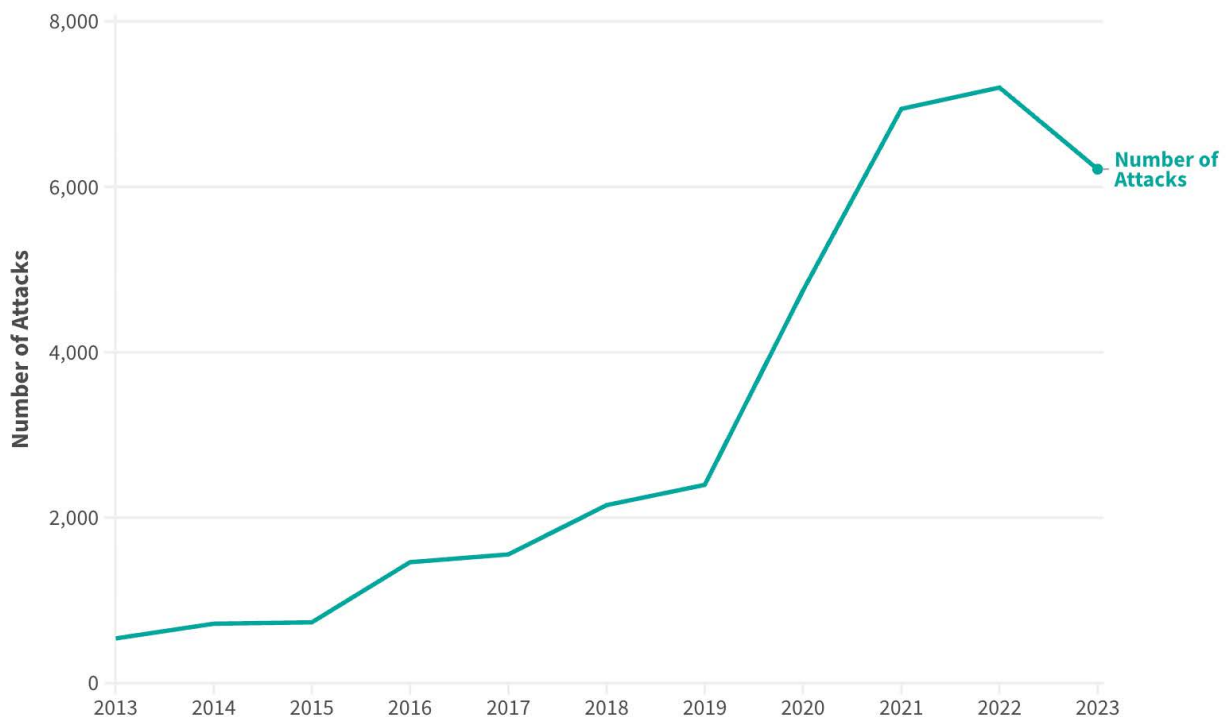
In addition to repression by state authorities, advocates who challenge traditional gender norms are also at high risk of attack from non-state actors, including extremist groups spurred on by politicians' stigmatizing and dehumanizing rhetoric. The result is an increasingly hostile and dangerous environment for women's and LGBTQ rights activism. A 2023 survey of 458 women human rights defenders conducted by Kvinna till Kvinna across sixty-seven countries, for instance, found that three in four had faced threats or harassment—up 15 percentage points since 2021. Nearly a quarter had received death threats, and thirty-seven women had survived assassination attempts, with activism for LGBTQ rights, opposition to anti-gender rhetoric, and anti-corruption efforts putting advocates at particularly high risk.³⁶ Recent data from the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights

Defenders paints a similarly stark picture. In El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua, the organization recorded more than 35,000 attacks against nearly 9,000 women rights defenders between 2012 and 2023. Both studies found that state-linked actors were the primary perpetrators of attacks in around half of reported cases, with additional threats coming from traditional leaders, religious figures, and anti-gender movements.³⁷

LGBTQ activists and communities also face heightened risks. A 2023 survey conducted by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, for example, found that hate-motivated violence against LGBTQ people increased between 2019 and 2023, with 33 percent of respondents across thirty-nine European countries saying they had experienced three or more violent attacks in the past five years (compared to 26 percent in 2019).³⁸

New AI tools and disinformation spread on online platforms are exacerbating these threats. State and non-state actors opposed to feminist and LGBTQ movements are increasingly weaponizing social media to spread narratives that undermine gender equality, while also

Figure 2. Attacks Against Women Human Rights Defenders in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Nicaragua (2013–2023)



Source: Marusia López Cruz et al., “Data That Hurt Us, Networks That Save Us: 10+ Years of Attacks Against Women Human Rights Defenders in Mesoamerica,” IM-Defensoras, June 2024, <https://im-defensoras.org/en/2024/04/resumen-ejecutivo/#los-derechos-que-defendemos>.

targeting prominent activists with coordinated smear campaigns.³⁹ In El Salvador, for instance, reproductive rights advocates have faced waves of digital attacks, misinformation, and public vilification.⁴⁰ In Thailand, Amnesty International found that women and LGBTQ activists who are critical of the government have been unlawfully targeted with digital surveillance tools; many also confront hateful and abusive online speech, smear campaigns, doxing, and threats of gendered violence.⁴¹ Across different regions, studies have also shown that women politicians are disproportionately targeted with gendered disinformation campaigns that make use of humiliating and sexually charged language and images to undermine their credibility and legitimacy.⁴²

In most cases, these attacks are not the acts of isolated individuals. Instead, invasive surveillance, online harassment, and gendered defamation campaigns serve as explicitly political tools that governments, political parties, and civil society groups use to silence critical voices and stigmatize them in the eyes of their communities and audiences.⁴³ Recent steps taken by tech companies like Meta and X to water down rather than strengthen their anti-hate speech policies and content moderation efforts have only exacerbated these risks.⁴⁴

Gridlock, Reversals, and Alternative Norm-Building in Multilateral Institutions

The intensifying anti-gender backlash has given rise to greater political polarization, gridlock, and heightened norm contestation at the multilateral level. A growing coalition of states and allied non-state actors is working to reshape international gender norms at the United Nations, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Council of Europe, and in other international institutions. Once dominated by the Vatican and a handful of religious autocracies, this coalition now includes conservative autocracies, backsliding democracies led by right-wing populists, and culturally conservative democracies that are working hand-in-hand with influential conservative civil society groups. Their tactics range from restricting feminist civil society access to multilateral fora to challenging gender-related language in international agreements, often demanding the removal of terms like “gender” or “sexual and reproductive rights.”⁴⁵ As a result, negotiations on gender equality—such as within the framework of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)—have become increasingly fraught. For gender equality advocates, these trends fuel the perception that transnational spaces have become sites of regression rather than progress.⁴⁶

In addition to resisting or rolling back progressive gender norms in international negotiations, however, various state and civil society actors are also working to establish competing international norms centered on the “natural” family, religion, and national sovereignty.⁴⁷ A central tactic has been the strategic reframing of rights language. For example, terms such as the “right to life,” “religious rights,” “parental rights,” and “family rights” have been inserted into Human Rights Council declarations to challenge universal human rights frameworks.⁴⁸ A similar shift is evident in UN outcome documents and resolutions on reproductive rights, which have moved away from explicit references to “sexuality,” “abortion,” and “sexual and

reproductive rights,” instead placing greater emphasis on families. Notably, language on abortion disappeared from CSW outcome documents starting in 2017, and references to comprehensive sexuality education were significantly altered in both CSW texts and UN General Assembly resolutions from 2018 onward. In some cases, states have refused to accept any mention of sexual and reproductive health, broadening the scope of past resistance that primarily centered on abortion.⁴⁹

Another important development has been the creation of alternative multilateral forums for norm-building (see figure 3). Coalitions like the Political Network for Values and the Group of Friends of the Family—which unites Muslim-majority states such as Iran and Malaysia with African nations like Nigeria, Uganda, and Zimbabwe—now work within the UN to jointly advance a socially conservative agenda. Since its creation by the first Trump administration in 2020, the Geneva Consensus Declaration has also become a focal point for alternative norm-building. The signatories, which include a diverse group of conservative-leaning governments, commit to the family as the “natural and fundamental unit of society” and reject an international right to abortion. In sum, multilateral arenas have shifted from serving as spaces of progressive norm diffusion to political battlegrounds where various state and non-state actors are reframing gender equality and LGBTQ rights as ideological impositions rather than as fundamental human rights.

The Drivers of Backlash

What explains this new wave of opposition against gender equality and progressive gender norms, both within countries and at the international level? No single factor fully accounts for the entire phenomenon and its varied manifestation. Long-standing structural conditions—including socioeconomic and cultural shifts, women’s increasing political and economic power, and demographic decline—have created fertile ground for resistance to progressive gender norms in some parts of the world. However, these dynamics are being amplified by the strategic efforts of transnational civil society networks and right-wing populist and conservative nationalist governments.

A Reaction Against Sociocultural Change

One explanation for growing opposition to gender equality is that it represents a reaction to the rapid socioeconomic and cultural shifts of recent decades.⁵⁰ While these transformations have created new opportunities for many women by expanding their access to education, economic independence, and political power, they have also contributed to a sense of relative status loss among men, particularly those who once benefited from traditional gender hierarchies. Some men perceive these shifts as a threat to their social position, fueling resentment and greater support for anti-feminist or gender traditionalist norms.

Figure 3. New Global and Multilateral Alliances

Name	Year created	Members/Participants		Objectives
Group of Friends of the Family	2015	Bangladesh Belarus Comoros Egypt Indonesia Iran Iraq Kuwait Kyrgyzstan Libya Malaysia Nicaragua Nigeria	Oman Pakistan Qatar Russian Federation Saudi Arabia Somalia Sudan Tajikistan Turkmenistan Yemen Uganda Zimbabwe	"The Group of the Friends of the Family (GoFF) is a coalition of UN Member States that reaffirm that the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State." ^a
Geneva Consensus Declaration	2020	Bahrain Belarus Benin Burkina Faso Burundi Cameroon Central African Republic Chad Republic of the Congo Democratic Republic of the Congo Djibouti Egypt Eswatini The Gambia Georgia Guatemala Haiti Hungary Indonesia	Iraq Kazakhstan Kenya Kuwait Libya Nauru Niger Oman Pakistan Paraguay Qatar Russian Federation Saudi Arabia Senegal South Sudan Sudan Uganda United Arab Emirates United States of America Zambia	"(a) to secure meaningful health and development gains for women; (b) to protect life at all stages; (c) to declare the sovereign right of every nation to make its own laws protecting life, absent external pressure; and (d) to defend the family as foundational to any healthy society." ^b
UN Family Rights Caucus	2008	Concerned citizens Government, religious, and civil society leaders Non-governmental organizations		"The mission of the United Nations Family Rights Caucus is to protect and promote the natural family as the fundamental unit of society as called for in Article 16 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights." ^c
Political Network for Values	2014	Legislators Senior government representatives Civil society leaders from different countries		"Global platform of worldwide political representatives and leaders who actively promote and defend the values of family, life and freedom." ^d

^a See: Uniting Nations for a Family-Friendly World, <https://unitingnationsforthefamily.org/background-2/organisers/>.

^b "Letter Dated 2 December 2020 from the Permanent Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations Addressed to the Secretary-General," UN General Assembly, December 7, 2020, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n20/344/30/pdf/n2034430.pdf>.

^c "About Us," UN Family Rights Caucus, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://unfamilyrightscaucus.org/about/>.

^d "Political Network for Values," Political Network for Values, accessed May 5, 2025, <https://politicalnetworkforvalues.org/en/>.

This sense of status loss appears to be particularly pronounced among young men. Researchers had traditionally assumed that modernization and economic development would continue to produce more egalitarian gender norms among younger generations.⁵¹ Instead, recent survey data suggests that young men in many developed countries are diverging from this trajectory. Although they have grown up with better educational opportunities and increased exposure to diverse cultures, they show less support for social inclusion and diversity policies than older generations and their female peers. For instance, the *Financial Times* analyzed polling data from across twenty developed countries, and found that by 2020, a significant gender gap in liberalism had opened up between men and women aged eighteen to twenty-nine in societies as diverse as Germany, South Korea, and the United States (with young women becoming significantly more liberal than young men).⁵² A thirty-country survey conducted by Ipsos in 2024–2025 similarly found that men across all ages were significantly more likely than women to agree that “men are being expected to do too much to support equality,” though young men were 16 percentage points more likely to agree than older men (59 percent vs. 43 percent). The same survey found that Gen Z men were 20 percentage points more likely to think that women’s equality discriminates against men than Gen Z women (57 percent vs. 36 percent).⁵³

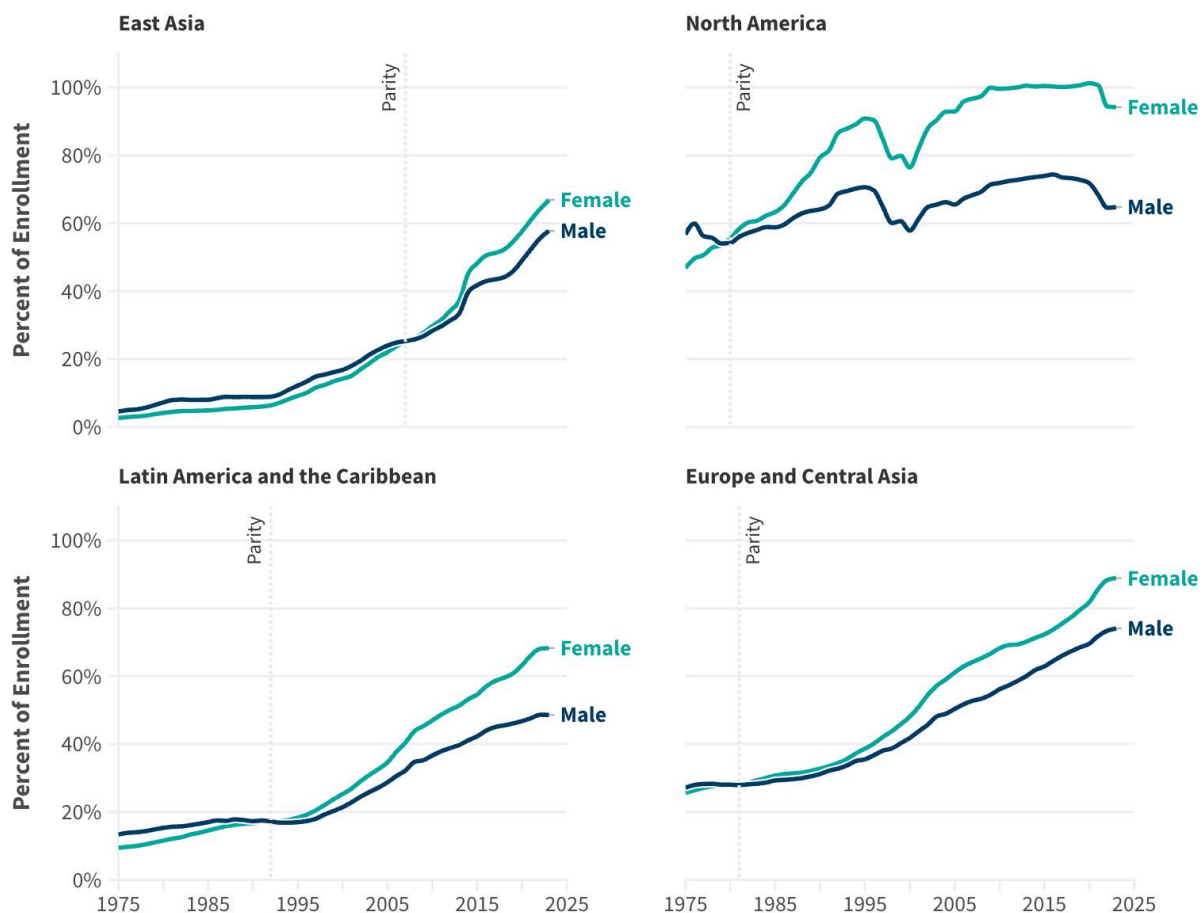
Studies highlight a combination of cultural and economic factors driving this trend. At the macro level, globalization, the erosion of labor unions, and technological progress have fueled a rise in economic precarity and declining social mobility in many advanced industrialized economies.⁵⁴ These changes have hit working-class men particularly hard: While a small, mostly male elite has reaped vast benefits from economic and technological disruption, men are also overrepresented in the blue-collar jobs most negatively impacted by these global economic shifts. These trends stand in direct tension with the male “breadwinner” ideal that is at the core of traditional conceptions of masculinity.

Yet economic anxieties are not confined to working-class men. Among middle- and upper-middle-class men, particularly those at the beginning of their careers, the growing presence and success of women in higher education and the workplace have also created new status concerns. Although many economic gender disparities persist, most notably in the form of a stubborn wage gap, women’s labor force participation has steadily increased, and their enrollment in tertiary education now far surpasses men’s in many developed countries (see figures 4 and 5). Their increased access to high-status professions also challenges traditional gendered hierarchies.⁵⁵

In this context, it is the perception of *relative status loss* that appears to be fueling anti-feminist resentment.⁵⁶ In South Korea, for instance, studies have found that young men with pessimistic views of their economic status—or those who are reminded of women’s economic advancement—express less support for gender-equality policies, even though South Korea has the largest gender wage gap and the lowest representation of women in business among

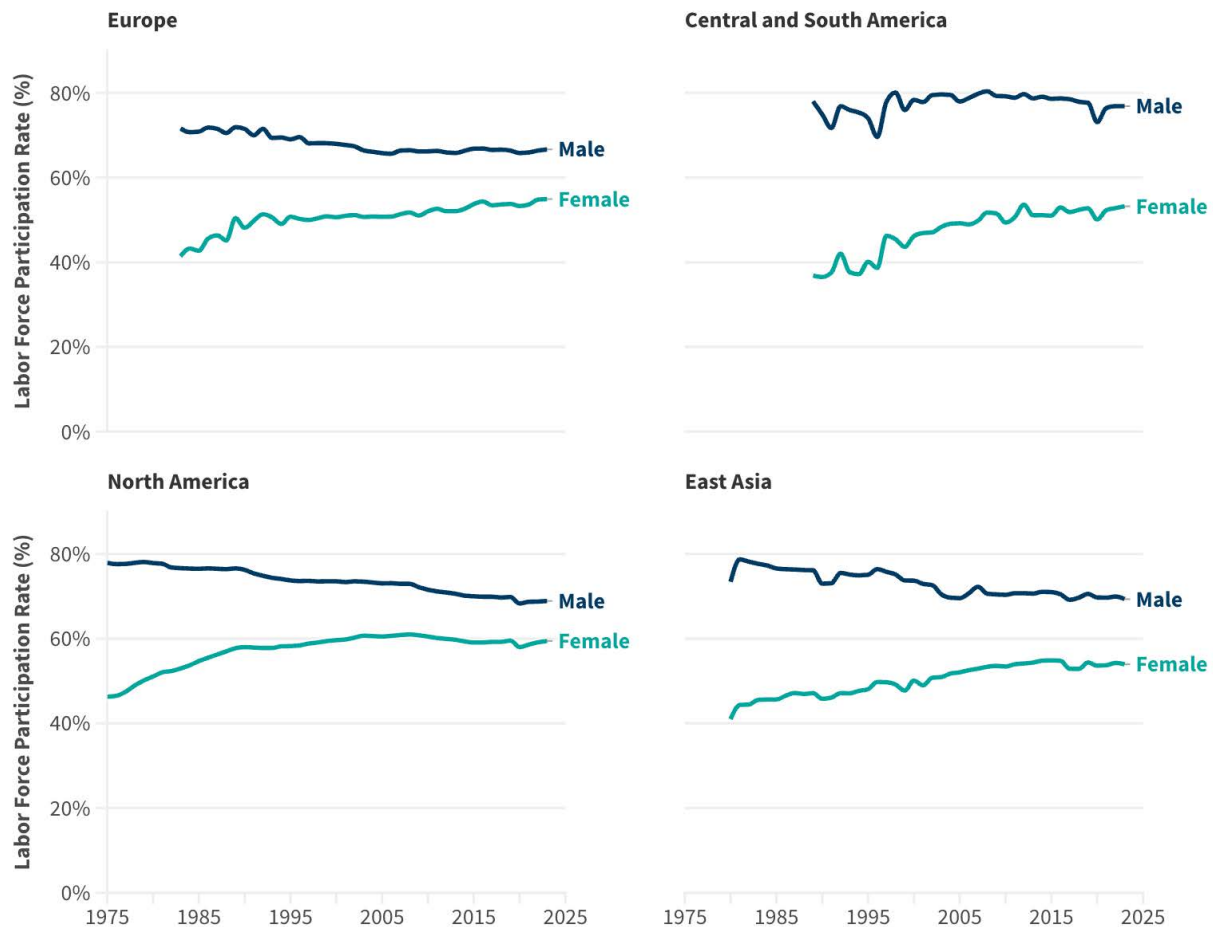
OECD countries.⁵⁷ Also in Korea, researchers have documented that a perceived decline in socioeconomic status relative to one's parents is a significant predictor of male victimhood ideology among middle- to upper-class men.⁵⁸ In Europe, a 2022 study similarly concluded that young men's opposition to feminism was most pronounced in European regions where unemployment rates were high.⁵⁹ In the UK, perceptions of discrimination against men were particularly pronounced among younger men who are not employed.⁶⁰

Figure 4. Men vs. Women in Tertiary Education



Source: "Gross Enrolment Ratio for Tertiary Education," UNESCO, accessed May 13, 2025, <https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org/view#catatorPaths=UIS-SDG4Monitoring%3A0%3AGER.5T8%2CUIIS-SDG4Monitoring%3A0%3AGER.5T8.M&geoMode=regions&geoUnits=WB%3A+East+Asia+%26+Pacific%2CWB%3A+Latin+America+%26+Caribbean%2CWB%3A+North+America%2CWB%3A+Europe+%26+Central+Asia&browsePath=EDUCATION%2FUIS-SDG4Monitoring&timeMode=range&view=chart&chartMode=multiple&tableIndicatorId=GER.5T8&chartHighlightSeries=&chartHighlightEnabled=true&indicatorPaths=UIS-SDG4Monitoring%3A0%3AGER.5T8.M%2CUIIS-SDG4Monitoring%3A0%3AGER.5T8.F&years=1975%2C2023>.

Figure 5. Women’s Increased Labor Force Participation Across Regions



Note: East Asia excludes China due to a lack of regular data.

Source: “Labour Force Participation Rate by Sex and Age (%) - Annual,” International Labour Organization, accessed May 13, 2025, https://rshiny.ilo.org/dataexplorer59/?lang=en&id=EAP_DWAP_SEX_AGE_RT_A.

Men’s pessimism about their economic prospects is further compounded by cultural anxieties about their role in society and in the private sphere. In many developed democracies, dominant cultural frameworks expressed through mainstream media, popular culture, and workplace and government policies have increasingly emphasized and promoted gender equality and women’s empowerment, alongside other liberal values such as multiculturalism and diversity. Moreover, feminist activism—most visibly through the global #MeToo movement—has drawn public attention to long-standing negative and harmful behaviors by men, including pervasive sexual harassment that generations of women have experienced

in the workplace and in public life. Among many men, these shifts appear to be fueling a sense of social and cultural dislocation and a loss of certainty about what socially valued masculinity looks like in modern society.⁶¹ In some countries, men's diminishing prospects of marriage—linked to women's increasing sexual and economic independence and rising standards for what represents a successful partnership—are deepening these status anxieties, further predisposing young men to sexist beliefs.⁶²

Over the past decade, far-right entrepreneurs and movements have recognized the depth of this economic and cultural upheaval and stepped in to capitalize on male feelings of grievance, dislocation, and resentment. They have latched onto the idea of a wounded, victimized, and emasculated man as a symbol for everything that is wrong with cosmopolitan social liberalism and contemporary society writ large, often by linking threats to masculinity emanating from feminist movements to threats posed by an invading, racialized “Other.”⁶³ These ideas first took hold as part of the men's rights movements and the broader “manosphere” that emerged online in the 2000s and 2010s: an ecosystem of websites and message boards focused on male insecurities and resentment that are explicitly misogynistic and conspiratorial in their orientation and often have strong overlaps with the alt-right. The anonymity and algorithms governing these platforms rapidly amplified their reach.⁶⁴

In recent years, however, anti-feminist and gender traditionalist narratives have increasingly entered the political mainstream, with conservative and right-wing populist parties and affiliated media ecosystems in parts of Asia, Europe, and the Americas adopting the same discourse. By framing feminism and progressive gender norms as direct threats to men's status, these actors have successfully mobilized backlash not only against gender equality but also against broader liberal ideals—a trend described in greater detail below.

Falling Birth Rates and Demographic Panic

In East Asia, Europe, and North America, concerns about falling birth rates are further fueling the rise of anti-gender politics. From Hungary to Japan, fertility rates have plummeted, with some countries seeing numbers as low as 1.2 children per woman (see figure 6).⁶⁵ Existing research suggests that this demographic shift is driven by rising incomes as well as expanded educational opportunities for women, which lead them to delay childbearing until later in life. Parents today also invest more resources and time per child than in the past, which makes larger families harder to sustain.⁶⁶ As a result, governments increasingly worry about labor shortages, shrinking tax bases, and the economic burdens of an aging population that is not being replenished. In many developed democracies, the most obvious solution to these economic problems—welcoming more immigrants—has become politically fraught as a result of rising nationalist sentiments, deepening the sense of crisis.

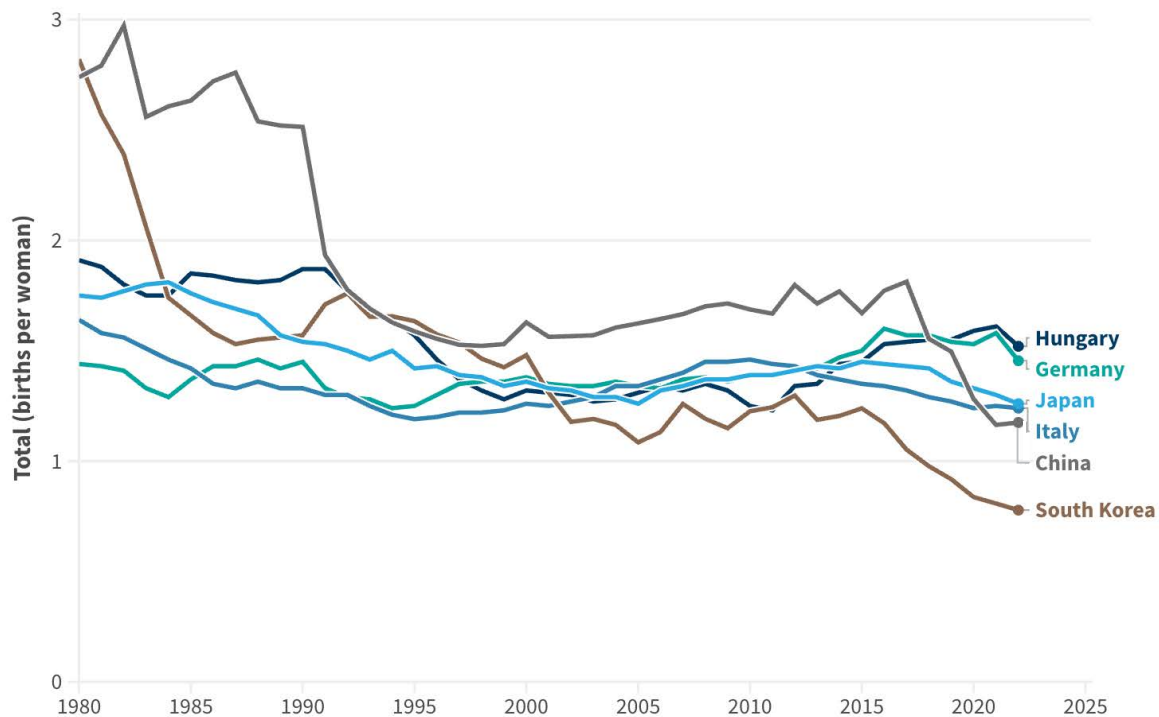
Against this backdrop, ultra-conservative and right-wing populist politicians and civil society groups have pointed to women's career ambitions and their rejection of traditional gender roles as the main culprits for declining birth rates. The link between declining fertility and anti-feminist sentiments is perhaps most evident in East Asia, and in South Korea in particular. South Korea currently has the world's lowest fertility rate, with women having less than one child on average.⁶⁷ There are multiple causes for this trend, including high costs of living and long working hours. But South Korean women are also rebelling against restrictive gender norms that still saddle them with the bulk of domestic and caregiving tasks, even though they increasingly have careers outside the home. Reflecting this challenge, a 2022 survey found that 65 percent of Korean women do not want children, compared to only 48 percent of men.⁶⁸ Some Korean women have gone as far as embracing the radical 4B Movement, which invites women to reject marriage, childbirth, dating, and sex in protest against patriarchal gender norms.⁶⁹

For South Korea, a rapidly shrinking population represents a significant threat. The country relies on conscription to sustain its military, and fewer births will make it more difficult to maintain the country's current military posture in the future.⁷⁰ The government has tried to tackle the problem through various family-friendly policies, including financial incentives and support for childcare. However, conservative political factions have also used the country's declining birthrate as a reason to attack feminism and gender equality policies, arguing that they undermine traditional family structures.⁷¹ Exemplifying this view, President Yoon Suk-yeol, who was elected in 2022 and impeached in 2024, suggested feminism was to blame for preventing "healthy relationships" between men and women.⁷²

In China, the government over the past several years has similarly leaned into traditional gender roles as a means of incentivizing childbearing. China has followed the same trendline as other rapidly developing economies: As incomes have risen and quality of life has improved, people live longer while also having fewer children. 2023 was the first year that deaths in the country outnumbered births since Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward in the 1960s.⁷³ Chinese officials have sought to reverse the country's population decline by relaxing its previous "one-child" policy and raising the limit to three children in 2021, but the birth rate has not increased.⁷⁴ Marriage rates have also gone down, with first marriage registrations dropping by 41 percent between 2013 and 2019.⁷⁵

In response, the Chinese government under President Xi Jinping has urged women to return to their traditional roles in the home. In October 2023, for instance, he called on the All China Women's Federation—a government-led organization—to "actively cultivate a new marriage and childbirth culture, strengthen guidance of young people's views on marriage, parenthood and family, as well as promote policies to support childbirth."⁷⁶ State media routinely push young people to get married and have babies, while deriding single or childless women who have chosen a different path.⁷⁷ But recent policy changes, such as a new rule requiring a cooling-off period before a civil divorce, appear only to have made women more reluctant to enter traditional relationships.⁷⁸

Figure 6. Fertility Rate, Total (Births per Woman): Italy, Japan, South Korea, China, Hungary (1980–2022)



Source: “Fertility Rate, Total (Births per Woman),” World Bank Group, accessed May 21, 2025, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN>.

In Europe, where many governments are similarly grappling with rapidly aging populations, far-right parties and governments are also linking falling birthrates with LGBTQ rights and women’s deprioritization of their traditional roles. Their concerns about population decline tend to be amplified by ethnonationalist anxieties. Encouraging reproduction among the ethnic majority population becomes a means of preventing the “great replacement” by non-White and non-Christian migrants.

Hungary’s Orbán has positioned himself as a global leader in advancing policies that promote the “traditional family” to counter demographic decline and forestall what he has characterized as “civilizational suicide.”⁷⁹ The government’s pushback against progressive gender policies has been accompanied by a wide range of pro-natalist measures, including tax breaks and subsidies for mothers. The government also organizes a biennial international conference titled the Budapest Demographic Summit that brings together right-wing politicians and thought leaders to discuss Europe’s declining population, with panels and speakers that emphasize the heteronormative family as the solution to demographic decline.⁸⁰ In Italy, the ruling Brothers of Italy party has similarly stressed the importance of traditional family

units and opposed same-sex parenting: In 2023, one of the party's senators stated that young women's primary mission should be to have children.⁸¹ In sum, falling birthrates, combined with ethno-nationalist anxieties about immigration, create a fertile ground for conservative politicians to contest liberal gender norms, which they view as undercutting young people's (and particularly young women's) commitment to marriage and childbearing.

Long-Term Organizing, Transnational Learning, and Diffusion

Building on and reinforcing these two structural drivers—male status threat driven by socioeconomic and cultural change and declining birth rates—is a third phenomenon: the gradual rise of a highly organized and well-funded transnational movement promoting socially conservative gender policies, particularly in the Americas, Europe and the Caucasus, and Africa, as well as at the multilateral level. Associated organizations and campaigns focus on a recurring set of issues. They oppose the liberalization of abortion rules, the expansion of LGBTQ rights, access to comprehensive sex education, and the spread of “gender ideology,” a vaguely defined concept referring to the idea that gender is socially constructed rather than strictly biologically defined. Instead, this new generation of “anti-gender” activism is putting forward an alternative value system centered on the nuclear, heteronormative family as the foundation of social stability, child welfare, and national and religious revival.⁸²

Changes in traditional gender norms have always triggered opposition from religious authorities and socially conservative constituencies. However, the contemporary wave of civil society mobilization differs from these familiar forms of entrenched resistance in several ways. First, it is driven by highly professionalized Western and international organizations that are forging new alliances with local religious, cultural, and political actors in different countries to produce and disseminate knowledge, provide training, launch litigation, and advocate for policy change.⁸³ Although these alliances remain rooted in (primarily ultra-Catholic and Evangelical) religious organizations and values, they have broadened to involve a wider range of actors, including nationalist and conservative politicians, secular activists, journalists, and business communities.⁸⁴ Second, it is fundamentally transnational in character, even though movement-affiliated actors often claim to be opposing a neocolonial, elitist, and cosmopolitan gender equality agenda.

The current surge in organized anti-gender opposition did not come out of nowhere: It is the product of decades of strategic evolution, organizational learning, and alliance-building. Its roots lie in the broader resurgence of ultra-conservative politics that began in Europe and the Americas in the 1970s and has steadily gained momentum ever since, accelerated by globalization and the spread of digital technologies.⁸⁵

The trajectory of anti-abortion activism in the United States exemplifies this pattern. Before the 1970s, abortion was not a unifying issue for the political right, and opposition was mostly concentrated among Catholic communities.⁸⁶ The Supreme Court's decision legalizing abortion in *Roe v. Wade* became a critical catalyst: By the late 1970s and early 1980s,

evangelical leaders and organizations joined the anti-abortion movement in increasing numbers, framing the issue as a symbol of America's supposed moral decay. The Republican Party also began to embrace anti-abortion politics as part of a wider appeal to social conservatives.

When the anti-abortion movement stumbled in the 1980s, weakened by internal divisions and growing popular support for reproductive rights, activists responded by shifting their strategy.⁸⁷ They moved from confrontational grassroots tactics to legal and political advocacy, and started to focus on electing anti-abortion candidates, securing judicial appointments, and lobbying for incremental subnational restrictions.⁸⁸ In order to broaden their appeal beyond religious conservatives, they also reframed their messaging to emphasize women's health, safety, and the rights of third-party actors like employers and insurers.⁸⁹ This strategy proved very effective at eroding abortion access at the state level. It was only once the broader political environment became more favorable, in large part because of Donald Trump's ascent to the presidency and a more conservative judiciary, that radical demands for total abortion bans gained renewed traction.⁹⁰ In sum, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 and the resulting wave of abortion restrictions followed decades of strategic organizing that prepared the movement to seize a political opportunity. Since then, the ruling has been used by anti-abortion groups and politicians in India, Kenya, Nigeria, and elsewhere to argue against abortion liberalization.⁹¹

The globalization of religious networks has expanded anti-gender movements to new parts of the world, enabling activists to exchange tactics, resources, and ideological frameworks across borders. The diffusion of new anti-LGBTQ laws in Africa exemplifies this dynamic.⁹² U.S. and European religious groups began focusing on debates over homosexuality in Uganda as early as the 1990s, partnering with local religious groups and framing the issue as part of a broader ideological struggle over traditional family values.⁹³ Figures like Pastor Martin Ssempe, backed by U.S. evangelical organizations, spearheaded campaigns against LGBTQ rights, leveraging media platforms, churches, and public rallies to galvanize opposition.⁹⁴ Over time, the movement's rhetoric evolved to incorporate nationalist and security concerns, portraying homosexuality as a Western import that threatened Uganda's sovereignty.⁹⁵ By 2009, efforts to pass an anti-homosexuality bill intensified, with both Ugandan and foreign conservative actors lobbying politicians. The bill was ultimately passed in 2014, though it was subsequently annulled by the Constitutional Court on a technicality.⁹⁶

Yet the movement remained politically energized. By 2023, several factors converged to allow the passage of an even more punitive Anti-Homosexuality Act (AHA), which criminalizes LGBTQ identity in Uganda. Evangelical Christian groups had grown more organized and influential. President Yoweri Museveni, facing mounting political opposition, sought to consolidate his support among religious and conservative voters. At the same time, the influence of Western donor governments in the region had decreased, reducing external pressure against illiberal legislation.⁹⁷ As a result, the AHA passed with near-unanimous support in parliament, with lawmakers framing it as a necessary measure to protect children and defend Uganda from Western interference. Once passed, the AHA quickly became a

blueprint for anti-LGBTQ policies and laws across Africa. The Ghanaian parliament passed a law that essentially parroted the language of the Ugandan bill, whereas the Kenyan parliament is currently considering a similar “Family Protection Bill.”⁹⁸ In both Tanzania and Nigeria, the Ugandan example has catalyzed new anti-LGBTQ measures and activism.⁹⁹

Over the past decade, a core group of organizations has emerged as a node for this form of transnational learning and coordination, particularly across Europe, Africa, and the Americas. It includes several religious international nongovernmental organizations based in the Global North, such as the International Organization for the Family, Family Watch International, the Alliance Defending Freedom, the Center for Family and Human Rights (also known as C-Fam), the World Youth Alliance, and CitizenGO. These organizations partner with local groups, religious institutions, political parties, and informal citizen campaigns across various countries, and coordinate international networking hubs like the Political Network for Values and the World Congress of Families. Supporting their efforts are various ultra-conservative donors such as the Russian Istoki Endowment Fund or the U.S.-based National Christian Foundation, right-leaning executives and businesses, and religious institutions like the Vatican and the Russian Orthodox Church.¹⁰⁰

The tactics of these international civil society actors emulate the approaches pioneered by the global women’s and human rights movements, from protests and social media campaigns to training for activists and politicians, lobbying, and strategic litigation.¹⁰¹ Perhaps most critical to their success, however, has been their messaging. Their campaigns have caught on in no small part because they frame ultra-conservative and often radical demands in the language of rights, values, and common sense, while painting their opponents—feminists, LGBTQ rights advocates, human rights activists, progressives—as totalitarian in their dogmatism and out of touch with the concerns of ordinary people. They have also been astute at broadcasting their ideas in ways that resonate locally. Within Western countries, those mobilizing against progressive gender norms tend to lash out against cosmopolitan elitism; in the Global South, they often embrace anti-imperialist messaging.

Despite the centrality of these transnational actors and linkages, their role in fueling anti-gender backlash varies across regions. Whereas contemporary anti-gender equality movements in Latin America, Africa, and Europe have been closely linked to international Evangelical and Catholic networks, for instance, this has not been the case in the Middle East and many parts of Asia. Moreover, across country contexts, new strands of ultra-conservative activism connect to locally specific political, cultural, and religious legacies. The feature below describes these cross-regional variations in greater detail.

Regional Manifestations

Latin America A key feature of anti-gender mobilization in Latin America has been the merging of an older, primarily Catholic infrastructure focused on opposing abortion rights with a newer wave of Evangelical activism linked to U.S. networks. Increasingly, the resulting coalitions also include secular actors, particularly conservative politicians, political parties, and business elites. Alongside abortion, they typically focus on the defense of the “traditional family” as their unifying cause.^a

Another important characteristic of anti-gender organizing in the region is activists’ deployment of anti-Marxist discourse and the merging of religious fundamentalism with neoliberal principles. Catholic and Evangelical actors contesting the spread of progressive gender norms and policies often describe “gender ideology” as the new face of Marxism in Latin America. This focus partly reflects the influence of missionaries from the United States, who have contributed to the growth of Evangelicalism in the region while often tying their religion to free market beliefs.^b

Across Latin America, ultra-conservative mobilization against gender and gender-related issues first took off during the mid-1990s, but has intensified over the past decade. Brazil and Argentina have been at the forefront of the trend. In Argentina, for instance, various religious and secular forces coalesced to mobilize against the 2018 abortion referendum. Since then, their focus has expanded to contest “gender ideology,” including by mobilizing against the country’s Comprehensive Sexual Education Law.^c

^a Sonia Corrêa, ed., *Anti-Gender Politics in Latin America: Summaries of Country Case Studies* (Sexuality Policy Watch, 2022), <https://sxpolitics.org/GPAL/uploads/E-book-Resumos-completo.pdf>.

^b Gabriela Arguedas Ramírez, “‘Gender Ideology,’ Catholic Neointegresimo, and Evangelical Fundamentalism: The Anti-Democratic Vocation,” in *Anti-Gender Politics in Latin America*, ed. Sonia Corrêa (Sexuality Policy Watch, 2022), <https://sxpolitics.org/GPAL/uploads/E-book-Resumos-completo.pdf>.

^c Corrêa, *Anti-Gender Politics in Latin America*.

Africa A defining characteristic of anti-gender backlash on the African continent is the embrace of anti-colonial rhetoric.^a European colonial powers placed women, family, and sexuality at the heart of their imperial project. Local religious actors can therefore easily frame their defense of conservative gender norms as preserving “authentic” African traditions against another Western colonial enterprise.^b This narrative is somewhat paradoxical, given the influence of Western Christian organizations in promoting anti-LGBTQ and anti-abortion measures on the continent. Yet it has allowed anti-gender organizations and movements to build a broader audience for their demands. It also serves as a vector for asserting geopolitical independence from Western donor governments, including within multilateral forums.

Like in Latin America, religious actors—particularly Evangelical and Pentecostal churches and groups—have emerged as critical drivers of anti-gender mobilization in Africa, often with the support of U.S. and European organizations. However, rather than fighting “gender ideology,”

their opposition has centered on sexual and reproductive rights, LGBTQ rights, and comprehensive sexuality education.^c As legal frameworks across the continent are already restrictive, many campaigns have focused on tightening existing laws or preventing liberalization.

This trend is particularly evident in Anglophone Africa, where the American Christian right has built strong alliances with local religious leaders.^d In Uganda, for example, conservative religious groups supported by U.S. organizations have opposed comprehensive sex education in schools and pushed for the highly restrictive AHA passed in 2023.^e In Kenya, abortion rights have become an important flashpoint, with the Kenyan Christian Professional Forum, the Kenyan branch of CitizenGo, and other groups launching extensive advocacy and media campaigns to prevent any expansion of abortion rights.

^a Patrick Awondo, Emmanuelle Bouilly, and Marième N'Diaye, "Introduction: Considering Anti-Gender in Africa," *Politique Africaine* 4, no. 168 (2022): 5–24.

^b Awondo, Bouilly, and N'Diaye, "Introduction: Considering Anti-Gender in Africa."

^c Satang Nabaneh, Kuukuwa Andam, Kerigo Odada, Åsa Eriksson and Marion Stevens, "Contesting Gender and Coloniality: A Lens on Conservative Mobilisations in South Africa, Kenya and Ghana," *Politique Africaine* 4, no. 168 (2022): 25–51.

^d Ogby Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 190; and Kapyr Kaoma, *Christianity, Globalization, and Protective Homophobia: Democratic Contestation of Sexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Springer, 2017).

^e Caleb Okereke, "How U.S. Evangelicals Helped Homophobia Flourish in Africa," *Foreign Policy*, January 29, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/19/africa-uganda-evangelicals-homophobia-antigay-bill/>.

Russia and Post- Communist Europe

The post-communist region is marked by strong state-led mobilization against gender equality, unlike other regions where movements against progressive gender norms have mostly been driven by civil society. The Russian government already in the early 2010s strengthened its ties to the Russian Orthodox Church and institutionalized gender traditionalism to bolster its domestic legitimacy. Since then, many Russian laws on LGBTQ and gender issues have served as blueprints for other governments in the region, including in Belarus, Georgia, Hungary, and Bulgaria.

Anti-gender discourse in the region is closely linked to nationalist narratives and opposition to Western liberalism, as exemplified by the European Union and its associated normative frameworks. The Kremlin in particular has exported its anti-gender agenda to other countries as part of a broader effort to position itself as a defender of "traditional values" against the liberal West. In addition, conservative politicians in the region often link gender equality and LGBTQ rights to demographic threats and population collapse, tapping into popular concerns about immigration and low birth rates.

East Asia

In East Asia, new waves of feminist mobilization have been met with growing anti-feminist backlash driven primarily by local men's rights groups and male influencers. Against a backdrop of plummeting birth rates, these actors are forging alliances with conservative politicians, media outlets, and political parties.^a

In Japan, for instance, anti-feminist mobilization gained steam in the early 2000s, in reaction to women's postwar political and economic advancement but also as part of a resurgent nationalist movement.^b It brought together long-standing conservative forces with a newer coalition of grassroots activists, conservative media outlets, and politicians who blamed the government's pro-equality policies for fostering various social ills. The resulting movement has tapped into resentment among young men frustrated by Japan's bleak economic outlook and decline in international status.^c

Across the region, online spaces have been particularly contentious. In China, women's online activism related to sexual harassment and romantic relationships has sparked countermobilization by men's rights activists and male social media users, who have accused women of fueling national instability and "gender conflict."^d Their narratives have been amplified by an increasingly nationalist, anti-Western, and conservative state media and educational system under Xi.^e

In response to a strong and militant #MeToo movement, South Korean men's rights groups have similarly used their significant online following to vilify prominent women leaders and activists, threaten businesses with boycotts, and stage anti-feminist street protests.^f More so than in other parts of the region, anti-feminist sentiments have also spilled over into Korean politics. Ahead of the 2022 election, the former People Power Party (PPP) chairman Jee Jun-seok emerged as a powerful symbol of male discontent through his open embrace of misogynistic rhetoric. The degree to which gender became a central political cleavage was evident in the election result: 60 percent of young men supported the PPP presidential candidate Yoon Suk-yeol, whereas 60 percent of young women supported his opponent Lee Jae-myung.^g

^a Matthew D. Jenkins and Hannah June Kim, "The Role of Misogyny in the 2022 Korean Presidential Election: Understanding the Backlash Against Feminism in Industrialized Democracies," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 24, no. 2 (2024): 169-196.

^b Kazuyoshi Kawasaki, "Queers and National Anxiety: Discourses on Gender and Sexuality from Anti-Gender Backlash Movements in Japan since the 2000s," in *Global Perspectives on Anti-Feminism: Far-Right and Religious Attacks on Equality and Diversity*, ed. Judith Goetz and Stefanie Mayer (Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

^c Ayako Kano, "Backlash, Fight Back, and Back-Pedaling: Responses to State Feminism in Contemporary Japan," *International Journal of Asian Studies* 8, no. 1 (2011): 41-62.

^d Angela Xiao Wu and Yige Dong, "What Is Made-in-China Feminism(s)? Gender Discontent and Class Friction in Post-Socialist China," *Critical Asian Studies* 51, no. 4 (2019): 471-492.

^e Qian Huang, "Chinese 'Incels'? Misogynist Men on Chinese Social Media," Australian Centre on China in the World, March 8, 2024, <https://www.thechinastory.org/chinese-incels-misogynist-men-on-chinese-social-media/>.

^f Youngmi Kim, "Mirroring Misogyny in Hell Choson: Megalia, Womad, and Korea's Feminism in the Age of Digital Populism," *European Journal of Korean Studies* 20, no. 2 (April 2024): 101-133; and Choe Sang-Hun, "The New Political Cry in South Korea: 'Out With Man Haters,'" *New York Times*, January 1, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/01/world/asia/south-korea-men-anti-feminists.html>.

South Asia

Across South Asia, opposition against gender equality manifests as entrenched patriarchal resistance as well as new and intensified forms of mobilization against changes in traditional gender roles and norms.^a Religious organizations and conservative community leaders have been the main drivers of resistance, sometimes in coalition with right-wing political parties.^b These actors regularly characterize feminism as a Western incursion threatening cultural and religious practices. In both Pakistan and India, recent manifestations of backlash are more organized and aggressive than in the past, often reinforced not only by political parties but also by online harassment and threats.

As Pakistani women's activism has intensified over the past decade, including in online spaces, counter-mobilization has also gained steam. The Aurat March, an annual women's rights rally that began in 2018, has sparked virulent opposition from Islamist parties, conservative media outlets, and extremist religious organizations that have framed the march as an anti-Islamic Western conspiracy and targeted activists with online threats and accusations of blasphemy.^c Since the passage of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act in 2018, conservative clerics and Islamist parties have also started to focus on gender inclusivity and LGBTQ rights, which were not central topics of debate in the past.^d

In India, the rise of the BJP under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has strengthened the political influence of Hindutva ideology, an ethno-nationalist movement advocating for Hindu religious supremacy alongside traditional gender roles.^e Although both Modi and allied religious groups have often endorsed women's empowerment in their rhetoric, they have done so in ways that reinforce traditional gender hierarchies and position Hindu women as symbols of national purity in need of protection (particularly from the country's Muslim minority).^f Feminist groups have faced increasing opposition from both state authorities and Hindu extremist groups, who target them with online harassment, public shaming, and, in some cases, physical violence. Hindutva networks also increasingly extend beyond India's borders and have built links to far-right movements in the United Kingdom and the United States.

^a Chung-Ah Baek et al., "Building Solidarities: Gender Justice in a Time of Backlash," Institute of Development Studies, November 21, 2024, <https://www.ids.ac.uk/publications/building-solidarities-gender-justice-in-a-time-of-backlash/>.

^b Sohela Nazneen, "De-Democratisation in South Asia Weakens Gender Equality," *The Loop* (blog), European Consortium for Political Research, March 7, 2024, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/de-democratisation-in-south-asia-weakens-gender-equality/>.

^c Baek et al., "Building Solidarities: Gender Justice in a Time of Backlash."

^d Sarah Zaman, "Pakistan's Progressive Transgender Law Faces Opposition 4 Years Later," *Voice of America*, September 28, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-s-progressive-transgender-law-faces-opposition-4-years-later-/6768168.html>.

^e Savera, "Hindu Supremacy and the Multiracial U.S. Far Right," *Political Research Associates*, October 30, 2024, <https://politicalresearch.org/2024/10/30/hindu-supremacy-and-multiracial-us-far-right>.

^f Mrinal Pande, "Gendered Analysis of Hindutva Imaginaries: Manipulation of Symbols for Ethnonationalist Projects," *Journal of Modern European History* 20, no. 3 (2022): 407–422.

Middle East and North Africa

In the Middle East and North Africa, women's movements primarily confront entrenched sociocultural and political resistance rather than new forms of anti-feminist backlash. Patriarchal religious and cultural traditions remain deeply embedded in the region's legal and policy frameworks. Policy battles therefore tend to focus on personal status laws governing marriage, divorce, and inheritance, with Islamic actors opposing efforts at secularization as Western impositions.

Although authoritarian regimes across the region have sometimes used women's rights to bolster their domestic and international legitimacy, these reforms have typically been tightly state-controlled and have failed to challenge traditional power structures.^a For instance, when Saudi Arabia first codified its personal status law in 2022 to introduce a legal age for marriage, outlaw secret divorce, and increase mothers' custodial rights over their children, the reform simultaneously entrenched the country's male guardianship system.^b

However, echoing trends in other regions, there are several examples of recent policy rollbacks rooted in a political assertion of authoritarian nationalism and/or Islamic gender norms. In Türkiye, Erdoğan has rolled back domestic violence protections, framing them as an affront to national identity, sovereignty, and traditional Turkish values.^c In Tunisia, President Kais Saied has weakened the country's quota for women's political representation, attacked feminist activists, and opposed gender equality in inheritance.^d Facing declining popularity, Iraqi political parties associated with the governing Shia Coordination Framework have also leaned into gender traditionalism. In 2023, the government banned the word "gender" in all communications, and, one year later, it amended the anti-prostitution law to include harsh punishments for LGBTQ activities.^e The parliament has also changed the country's personal status law to give Islamic clerics more power over divorce, marriage, and inheritance.^f

^a Aili Mari Tripp, *Seeking Legitimacy: Why Arab Autocracies Adopt Women's Rights* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

^b "Saudi Arabia: Law Enshrines Male Guardianship," Human Rights Watch, March 8, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/08/saudi-arabia-law-enshrines-male-guardianship>.

^c Hürcan Aslı Aksoy, "What Lies Behind Turkey's Withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention?," Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 29, 2021, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/what-lies-behind-turkeys-withdrawal-from-the-istanbul-convention>.

^d Ikram Ben Said, "Women and Democracy Under Threat in Tunisia," *Sada* (blog), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 19, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2023/10/women-and-democracy-under-threat-in-tunisia?lang=en>; and Kenza Ben Azouz, "President Saied Derides the Economic and Social Rights of Tunisian Women," Human Rights Watch, September 1, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/01/president-saied-derides-economic-and-social-rights-tunisian-women>.

^e Taif Alkhudary, "As Iraq Backslides on Gender Equality, Where Are Its Women MPs?," *Al Jazeera*, September 9, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/9/9/as-iraq-backslides-on-gender-equality-where-are-its-women-mps>; and Abdulrahman Zeyad and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Passage of Harsh Anti-LGBTQ+ Law in Iraq Draws Diplomatic Backlash," Associated Press, April 28, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/iraq-lgbtq-law-85e5e55cde7a581631c484ad83b0773c>.

^f Associated Press, "Iraqi Lawmakers Pass a Bill That Critics Say Legalizes Child Marriage," CNN, January 21, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/01/21/middleeast/iraq-child-marriage-lawmakers-criticize-bill-intl-hnk/index.html>; and Alkhudary, "As Iraq Backslides on Gender Equality, Where Are Its Women MPs?"

Right-Wing Populism, Conservative Nationalism, and Democratic Erosion

Local and transnational activism by ultra-conservative and religious civil society has been most effective at dismantling rights protections, legislation, and policies where it has been embraced by powerful political actors. In recent years, activists have found particularly willing partners in illiberal and far-right populist parties and leaders who have woven gender traditionalism and opposition to feminism and LGBTQ rights into the fabric of their political ideology and mobilization efforts. Christian conservative campaigns against “gender” and “gender ideology” are thus being turbocharged by populist far-right politicians who have embraced the same rhetoric as part of a broader crusade against “wokeness” and liberal cosmopolitanism.

While right-wing populist movements vary in their ideological approaches to gender, they share several common tenets. They tend to equate women’s rights with family policy, defend “natural” differences between the sexes, and reject feminism and LGBTQ rights as corrosive.¹⁰² Leaning into gender-related debates also serves important strategic functions for these movements. It sharpens their binary distinction between a virtuous, family-oriented “silent majority” and corrupt, globalist elites, infusing their nationalist and nativist rhetoric with moral urgency. It also allows them to mobilize the support of both socially conservative constituencies and aggrieved male voters. For instance, an analysis of the 2017 European Values Study showed that holding traditional views on gender increased an individual’s likelihood of supporting the radical right across twenty-three European countries.¹⁰³ In the United States, various studies have shown that hostile sexism (alongside racism) similarly predicted positive attitudes toward Trump among White voters.¹⁰⁴

For many far-right populist leaders who have successfully come to power through elections, anti-gender politics have also become a tool of power consolidation and democratic erosion. For one, divisive cultural topics serve as a ready-made justification for restricting civil society and silencing opposition. If you can convince at least a part of the electorate that feminism and LGBTQ rights are threats to the nation, then cracking down on progressive activists, restricting independent media, and politicizing oversight institutions that are meant to uphold individual rights can be framed as moral imperatives.¹⁰⁵ Attacks on women’s and LGBTQ rights (alongside other minority rights) also serve as entry points to undermine broader liberal rights protections. By using the power of the state to lash out against “diversity, equity, and inclusion” policies and “gender ideology” at universities and in the private sector, for instance, the Trump administration opens the door to a broader crackdown on civil rights and anti-discrimination protections under the mantle of fighting excessive “woke ideology.”¹⁰⁶

Accelerating democratic erosion in turn makes it more difficult for rights advocates to fight back. By limiting funding for civil society, passing restrictive NGO laws, or labeling feminist and LGBTQ organizations as foreign agents, governments create a power vacuum that

extremist or illiberal actors can exploit to expand their influence. Courts that once upheld gender equality laws may be packed with ultra-conservative judges, and media outlets that once promoted pluralism may be co-opted by corporate actors currying the government's favor. This has been the pattern in Türkiye, where a gradual politicization of the courts has enabled the reversal of past women's rights protections and empowered religious institutions' authority over family law.¹⁰⁷

Non-populist authoritarian regimes—such as Xi's China, Vladimir Putin's Russia, and Daniel Ortega's Nicaragua—also use anti-gender policies as tools of legitimation, repression, and social control. By positioning themselves as defenders of traditional values, these regimes can mobilize conservative and religious constituencies while discrediting liberal ideas of individual rights and equality and reinforcing hierarchical social structures. Scapegoating feminists, LGBTQ activists, and human rights advocates also allows authoritarian leaders to divert public attention away from economic problems and governance failures that might otherwise undermine their legitimacy.¹⁰⁸ In China, for example, Xi's government has promoted traditional gender norms as part of a broader nationalist revival, cracking down on feminist activism and censoring discussions of LGBTQ rights as threats to social and political stability.

Global Geopolitical Realignments

Finally, besides right-wing populism and democratic erosion, the rise of transnational anti-gender alliances is also riding a larger wave of geopolitical realignments and tapping into deeper anxieties about national sovereignty, the future of the West, and the structure of the international system.¹⁰⁹

For decades, advocacy for gender equality has been entwined with the postwar liberal international order. Much has been written about the limits and contradictions of that order, which advanced stability and prosperity in some parts of the world while entrenching inequality, conflict, and repression in others.¹¹⁰ Yet at the heart of the liberal framework is a strong emphasis on individual rights and liberties—concepts that, while historically centered on men, have offered a normative basis for extending rights to women and vulnerable minorities.¹¹¹ Women's movements across the world thus successfully leveraged liberal institutions, including international human rights frameworks, multilateral bodies, and Western-backed funding mechanisms, to push for domestic reforms.¹¹² The 1990s were a high-water mark of this cross-border norm-building. After the end of the Cold War and in the wake of the third wave of democratization, women's organizations had both the political space and the international institutional backing to make significant gains.

Today, this post–Cold War liberal order faces a sustained counter-ideological pushback. Various actors are converging to reject the expansionary liberalism of the 1990s. They oppose not only its economic and political scripts but also its moral claims, which positioned gender

equality, LGBTQ rights, and humanitarian cosmopolitanism as litmus tests for legitimacy in the international system. Civil society actors and minority groups—who particularly benefited from liberal internationalism—are now increasingly framed as threats to national sovereignty and traditional values.¹¹³

This pushback is driven by two major forces: non-Western, authoritarian great powers—especially Russia and China—that are contesting Western geopolitical dominance, and right-wing populist movements and leaders both within the West and in other regions that reject liberal cosmopolitanism and multilateralism in favor of nationalism and cultural traditionalism.¹¹⁴ Other countries, particularly in the Global South, are trying to maximize their power and alliances within this more competitive and multipolar system. While these various actors differ in their ideology and geopolitical objectives, they share a preference for a world that is more sovereigntist and more tolerant of multiple forms of governance. Pushback against progressive gender norms and a parallel emphasis on religion and “traditional values” thus represents one front in a broader challenge to the liberal internationalism of the post–Cold War era.¹¹⁵

The use of gender as a part of a broader geopolitical strategy is most evident in Russia. By positioning itself as the defender of “traditional values” against a corrupt and morally bankrupt West, the Kremlin justifies its aggressive foreign policy—whether in Ukraine or elsewhere—as a necessary defense of its culture and civilization.¹¹⁶ The same tactic also serves to expand Moscow’s global influence and consolidate opposition to Western liberalism. Within the Russian neighborhood, for example, Putin has tried to foster opposition to EU integration and democratic expansion by portraying European values as singularly focused on sexual minority rights.¹¹⁷ Russia is also relying on cultural battles over gender norms to destabilize European unity, for instance by supporting campaigns against LGBTQ rights in Eastern and Southeastern Europe.¹¹⁸ In sum, Russia’s weaponization of gender politics is not just about promoting conservative values, but also about countering Western influence and preventing the spread of political norms—liberalism, democracy, and individual rights—that pose a threat to the Russian regime.

Local and International Responses

Even as the anti-gender backlash has grown in scale and intensity, responses by gender equality advocates and their political allies have often been tentative. Policymakers have struggled to grasp the full scale of the phenomenon. Moreover, the rapid illiberal drift within major democracies—particularly in the United States—has caught many reformers and activists off guard.

Today, three sets of actors are driving the global response: women's and LGBTQ groups and movements mobilizing within their own countries, the global network of international NGOs and foundations engaged in promoting gender equality, and (mainly Western) governments that have long championed women's and LGBTQ rights through diplomatic and aid channels. The next section outlines the main categories of responses before examining recurring dilemmas and challenges preventing more concerted action.

Mass Protest and Mobilization

In many countries, anti-gender backlash has surged in direct response to successful feminist mobilization, from the “Green Wave” driving abortion rights liberalization across Latin America to the global #MeToo movement against sexual violence and harassment. As conservative and illiberal forces have proposed or secured new restrictions, however, women and their allies have also taken to the streets in large numbers in protest. This cycle of mobilization and counter-mobilization so far shows no signs of slowing down.

One of the most prominent examples of mass protest against rights rollbacks took place in Poland in 2016 and 2020. In 2016, women's activism successfully blocked the proposed criminalization of all abortions, a citizen initiative drafted by a hardline conservative advocacy group.¹¹⁹ In 2020, over 400,000 turned out to protest a Constitutional Court ruling outlawing abortion in cases of fetal abnormalities, the primary legal ground for pregnancy termination in Poland at the time. The protest, spearheaded by women and young people, quickly morphed into a broader mobilization against the illiberal PiS government.¹²⁰ Although the Polish protests were unusual in their size, women have led similar demonstrations in many countries, including in Türkiye against the government's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and in India and South Korea against political leaders' lack of action against sexual violence.

The overall track record of these mass movements has been mixed. In some cases, they have contributed to stalling proposed restrictions. In Gambia, for instance, popular resistance combined with international pressure helped ensure that a proposed reversal of a ban on female genital mutilation was rejected in parliament in 2024.¹²¹ But in many other cases, the impact of protest has been more diffuse. In Poland, women's mass mobilization could not reverse the near-total abortion ban even after women's sustained activism helped defeat the ruling PiS government. At the same time, the Polish experience highlights that large-scale demonstrations can be effective at influencing public opinion. Polish women protesters effectively positioned themselves as “ordinary women” fighting for the rights of all Poles, thereby challenging the right-wing populist vision of “the people” being on board with the government's agenda. The fact that they were joined by other groups upset with the government's policies, including taxi drivers, farmers, and miners, only strengthened this message.¹²²

Strategic Litigation, Legal Defense, and Advocacy

As anti-gender positions and ideas have gained prominence within political and state institutions, women's and LGBTQ rights advocates have also doubled down on advocacy, legal defense, and litigation. Around the world, regressive bills have consistently been challenged in domestic, regional, and international courts. For example, after the Hungarian government in 2021 enacted a Child Protection Act imposing strict restrictions on depictions of homosexuality and gender reassignment in the media and in educational materials, the European Commission initiated a case in front of the European Court of Justice, arguing that the law violated EU rules. The case is currently pending, with a ruling expected in mid-2025.¹²³ Advocates have also used strategic litigation to continue advancing both LGBTQ and sexual and reproductive rights. Across Latin America, for instance, legal victories won by feminist organizations have played a key role in liberalizing anti-abortion laws in recent years, including in Mexico and Colombia.¹²⁴

However, opponents of reproductive choice and LGBTQ rights are also increasingly using the courts to advance their positions, for instance by claiming the right to conscientious objection or attempting to restrict the grounds on which abortion is permitted. As a result, courtrooms have emerged as strategic sites in a “broader sociopolitical battle between organized, antagonistic groups.”¹²⁵ In this context of continuous “lawfare,” civil society actors and movements fighting for liberalization have been most successful when they have sustained broad-based legal mobilization over time and have combined their legal strategies with broader societal outreach. In Colombia, for instance, the rapid expansion of LGBTQ rights between 1992 and 2022—in the face of significant religious-conservative counter-mobilization—was driven by a broad and dense network of LGBTQ activists, allies from other social movements, supportive politicians, and academics who initiated litigation but also provided information and lent legitimacy to legal claims, thereby gradually building judicial support.¹²⁶

In pursuing legislative and legal reform, advocates have also had to be strategic in how they frame their demands. In several Eastern European countries marked by strong resistance against the Istanbul Convention, for instance, women's rights groups have had more success in pushing for the reform of domestic laws focused on gender-based and domestic violence rather than demanding the ratification of a now highly politicized international treaty.¹²⁷

Building and Broadening Coalitions

However, faced with more coordinated resistance, gender equality advocates increasingly recognize that the gains of the past decades cannot be defended in the courts alone, particularly if there is a gap between legal advances and majority public opinion. New efforts have thus focused on building popular support and cultivating stronger alliances in society.

Some of these coalition-building efforts have prioritized collaboration with other progressive movements that previously saw their struggles as disconnected. In Central and Eastern Europe, for example, women's movements have often operated separately from other rights and democracy groups. Yet common threats have brought these previously disparate actors closer together.¹²⁸ In Brazil, India, and Mexico, new networks are gathering diverse progressive civil society groups that all face resistance and attacks from the same coalition of right-wing populist actors.¹²⁹

Philanthropic foundations have also made efforts to work across issue silos, share information, and create pooled funds. For instance, the Global Philanthropy Project over the past several years has convened different grant-makers working at the intersection of faith, human rights, and social justice to develop joint strategies to counter anti-gender movements.¹³⁰ Its Shimmering Solidarity Summit in 2021 led to the establishment of the Responding to Anti-Gender Initiatives group focused on energizing and coordinating donor responses.¹³¹ Some funders have stepped up their support for cross-movement collaboration. In Türkiye, for instance, one funder supported a Muslim feminist group, a group working on sexual and reproductive rights, and a peace organization to work together; this coalition has since grown to include over thirty different groups (some with no prior background in gender issues).¹³²

A second set of efforts has focused on reaching across the proverbial aisle and fostering coalitions with actors who may not be ideologically aligned but nevertheless worry about extremist and antidemocratic forces. For example, both women's rights and LGBTQ rights groups have sought to reach out and engage in dialogue with faith-based organizations who may be able to challenge some of the language and positions of ultra-conservative groups from a religious perspective.¹³³ In Türkiye, secular women's rights organizations have sought collaboration with women in conservative and religious groups to jointly advocate for protections from gender-based violence; as a result, many of the latter joined the protests against the government's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. In Malawi, reproductive rights organizations have also built alliances with religious leaders, who, after several years of trust-building and engagement, are now willing to speak publicly in favor of abortion rights.¹³⁴

Finally, some groups have tried to bolster their popular constituencies, recognizing that legal and legislative advocacy needs to go hand-in-hand with changing hearts and minds. Major advances secured in recent years, such as the overturning of the Irish abortion ban, occurred in large part because organizers invested in grassroots outreach to target voters who were not their traditional allies.¹³⁵ Adopting this approach, some organizations have prioritized new forms of community engagement, such as launching online petitions and letter-writing campaigns and generating media attention through public art installations, video campaigns, and billboards.¹³⁶ Social media has also become a more important tool, with some organizations seeking to cultivate the support of influencers who have audiences that go far beyond

traditional activist circles.¹³⁷ The civil society umbrella organization CIVICUS has launched the Resilient Roots initiative, which seeks to help civic groups be more accountable to local constituencies and thus develop greater resilience to government pressure and other shocks.¹³⁸

Disseminating Counter-Narratives

Besides building broader coalitions, gender equality groups are grappling with formulating better counter-narratives to anti-gender movements. The latter's focus on "family values" and "gender ideology" has proven highly effective in its simplicity and emotional resonance. In contrast, many progressive groups feel that they are losing the communication battle. Their instinct to simply debunk inaccurate messages with facts or double down on human rights and public health terminology has often proven ineffective, and they are struggling to defend themselves against claims that they are radical, elitist, and out of touch with ordinary people. A new consensus has emerged directing advocates to appeal less to abstract rights and focus more on people's daily problems, such as unemployment, health, and inequality, while also centering appeals to love, dignity, and community rather than only documenting harms.¹³⁹

There are still few documented examples of what this looks like in practice. Across Latin America, movements for abortion rights have moved away from purely rights-based frames to talk about the issue as one of social justice, for instance by documenting the disparate impact of abortion restrictions on young and poor women.¹⁴⁰ In Brazil, rights advocates have similarly observed that referencing human rights often alienates people who view the term as synonymous with the political left; instead, they have found greater success in documenting and disseminating real people's stories.¹⁴¹ Under the Bolsonaro regime, they were successful at reframing restrictions on legal abortion as sexual violence, specifically by highlighting the case of an eleven-year-old child denied access to abortion and framing the judge's and prosecutor's actions as torture. This narrative culminated in the rallying campaign "Children Are Not Mothers," which succeeded at winning abortion access for the child.¹⁴²

A related area of action has been countering disinformation, given that campaigns against abortion or LGBTQ rights are often based on distortions of scientific evidence. Reproductive health advocates, for instance, have been grappling with viral social media posts claiming that medical abortion pills are unsafe and that abortions increase the risk of various health complications, even though there is no evidence suggesting that this is the case. Similarly, LGBTQ organizations have had to contend with accusations that they are promoting "pedophilia." To counter these trends, some studies have shown the effectiveness of leveraging trusted public figures as messengers, including doctors and faith leaders.¹⁴³ However, such debunking strategies can be resource-intensive and ineffective at addressing the harm caused by the initial disinformation campaign, particularly given that current social media business models rely on rapidly amplifying disinformation rather than reducing its reach. Women's rights and democracy organizations are also only beginning to develop early

warning systems that could detect anti-gender narratives and misinformation before they spread on social media.¹⁴⁴ Ahead of the 2024 European elections, for instance, the European Digital Media Observatory instituted a task force that published daily information about the latest disinformation threats, including on gendered disinformation targeted at women politicians.¹⁴⁵

Resourcing Feminist Movements

On the side of concerned governments and funders, one strategy has been to make more resources available to feminist movements. These groups have long called for more flexible funding to adapt to new threats, particularly since research on far-right and anti-gender funders shows that they are funding over longer time horizons and with fewer constraints than those supporting human rights, democracy, and gender equality work.¹⁴⁶ In response, some funders have set up new mechanisms to direct core funding to women's rights groups and established new lines of support that focus on the safety needs of grantees.¹⁴⁷ New collaborative funds such as Numun and Nebula are also seeking to shift more resources to local movements and nurture cooperation rather than funding competition.¹⁴⁸

However, these efforts are running up against significant headwinds. Many attacks against women's movements and rights activists are happening in middle-income countries like Brazil where international support for civil society was already limited, or in countries where governments have tightly regulated such external support. Moreover, various Western donor governments are either cutting back their foreign aid or directing gender-focused aid to other priorities. In the United States, the second Trump administration has halted close to all foreign aid disbursements and dismantled the U.S. Agency for International Development in a number of weeks, while also expressly targeting domestic and international policies and funding related to gender, diversity, and inclusion. The Netherlands' new right-wing government has similarly announced that it would cut back development aid by more than two-thirds over the next three years, and singled out projects focused on gender equality as priorities for termination.¹⁴⁹ The UK and Germany have also cut back their foreign assistance spending, which reduces both governments' gender-related investments.¹⁵⁰ As more and more European donors prioritize bolstering their defense budgets, further spending cuts appear certain.

Private philanthropy has not fully stepped up to meet the challenge. Some high-profile philanthropists, such as Melinda Gates, have launched new gender equality investments. But others have been slow to respond. A 2020 report by the Global Philanthropy Project found that 70 percent of surveyed funders did not have a clear strategy for countering the rise of transnational anti-gender networks. Many foundations still see gender equality as part of their broader human rights portfolio, rather than as an issue requiring a targeted, proactive response.¹⁵¹ Moreover, the philanthropic sector is suffering from internal weaknesses, including divisions between trustees, founders, and staff over the conflict in Gaza and strategic uncertainty around how to respond to the Trump administration in the United States.¹⁵²

Defending Multilateral Frameworks

Finally, various governments have prioritized defending international gender equality frameworks and norms within multilateral institutions. One tactic involves greater collaboration between countries that remain committed to liberal rights norms in order to advance joint positions during critical negotiations at the United Nations and in other multilateral fora. For instance, during the 2023 CSW negotiations, a coalition of Western and Global South countries worked together to ensure the inclusion of reproductive rights language in the final conclusions, despite strong opposition from conservative states and religious groups.¹⁵³

Another strategy has been to foster closer relationships with the delegations of non-Western countries that have adopted progressive legal frameworks on gender equality but have traditionally not spoken out on these issues in multilateral spaces. This effort has involved behind-the-scenes relationship-building, with diplomats and civil society advocates in New York and Geneva working to build trust and share information with newly appointed delegates, often through informal channels. A third approach has been to improve grassroots activists' access to international fora as well as to delegates representing their respective countries within international organizations, to ensure that the latter's positions are built on accurate information about the situation on the ground.¹⁵⁴

Advocates also continue to use multilateral mechanisms such as the Universal Periodic Review process and the UN Human Rights Committee to call out and seek redress for rights violations. For instance, in a January 2025 case brought forward by a coalition of reproductive rights organizations, the UN Human Rights Committee ruled against Ecuador and Nicaragua for denying abortions to children and forcing them into early motherhood.¹⁵⁵ Although these decisions are not legally binding, they remain tools for international pressure, norm-building, and advocacy.

Strategic Challenges and Four Directions for Action

Despite these varied local and international responses, many within the gender equality sector worry that they remain on the back foot, playing catch-up and reacting to new setbacks rather than setting the agenda.¹⁵⁶ Complicating their responses are a range of tough strategic choices—including whether and when to prioritize broad coalition-building or take a more uncompromising stance, and how to balance short-term pragmatism with longer-term transformative goals. This final section examines these dilemmas and outlines four directions for action that can help guide policymakers, funders, and advocates in the years ahead.

A Core Pillar or a Side Battle?

One recurring challenge in countering the anti-gender backlash is that mainstream democracy and human rights organizations do not necessarily see gender equality as central to their fight. Despite the overlapping and mutually reinforcing threats to women's and LGBTQ rights and democracy in countries governed by right-wing populists and nationalist conservative autocrats, they sometimes treat these issues as a separate policy battle—important, perhaps, but also culturally divisive and not essential to democracy's survival.

There are several reasons for this disconnect. Some democracy advocates—even those on the progressive left—are themselves ambivalent about gender equality and LGBTQ rights, whether because they see them as secondary to more urgent economic and political struggles or because they are part of male-dominated movements and organizations operating in socially conservative contexts. In Zimbabwe and Belarus, for instance, women have sometimes struggled to carve out space within militaristic pro-democracy movements that dismiss their issues and priorities as less important.¹⁵⁷

In other cases, democracy defenders are not necessarily opposed to gender rights but find themselves unsure about where the boundaries lie between legitimate policy debates—whether to impose limitations on second- and third-trimester abortion access, for example, or how to regulate gender-affirming care for minors—and the ways in which gender traditionalism is wielded to erode liberal democratic norms. In fact, some within the pro-democracy camp worry that progressive activists have pushed too far on gender issues and adopted positions too far removed from the majority opinion in many countries, for instance by attacking anyone who questions their positions as misogynistic and transphobic and thereby creating a more fertile ground for reactionary movements and politicians to build support.

These concerns are not wrong: There *is* a difference between democratic disagreements over gender-related policies and illiberal attacks on individual rights. Scapegoating and dehumanizing sexual minorities in particular is a well-worn strategy for fueling polarization, eroding liberal equality norms, and legitimizing authoritarian power grabs.¹⁵⁸ However, the line between these domains can sometimes be difficult to identify, and different constituencies may draw the line in different places.

Recommendation 1: Be ready to make the case. Gender equality advocates seeking to build bridges with broader pro-democracy movements need to be ready to show when, how, and why attacks and restrictions on gender equality and LGBTQ communities become warning signs of democratic erosion. At the same time, however, they also need to prioritize broadening the political coalitions supporting their policy and normative goals. They should no longer assume a broad consensus around progressive values, whether within specific countries or within international institutions. Instead, they must prepare for a period of greater contestation over alternative social models and norms.¹⁵⁹

In the past, gender equality funders and organizations often prioritized mobilizing their core constituencies, which remains an important strategy for building political power. However, to stem the current tide of backlash, winning over *new* supporters is equally important. Expanding public support for women's and LGBTQ rights must therefore be a strategic priority, not an afterthought. This does not mean that all opposition is legitimate and should be engaged on its own terms. Disinformation campaigns and harassment are designed to delegitimize and undermine feminist and LGBTQ activists rather than engage with their demands. However, dismissing all resistance as illegitimate or anti-democratic risks alienating potential allies and reinforcing polarization. Instead, advocates should try to differentiate between entrenched opponents and persuadable audiences and acknowledge the anxieties that some groups—such as young men, faith communities, or center-right political actors—may have about rapid gender norm change. In any given context, it is critical to reach out to those communities and actors most at risk of persuasion by reactionary forces. At the international and regional level, for example, reformers should intensify their outreach to governments that may be open to joining the Geneva Consensus Declaration or similar ultra-conservative norm-building initiatives.

Double Down or Divert Focus?

Some democracy defenders recognize that gender is key to the authoritarian playbook. However, they worry that making it a focal point for political organizing is *tactically* unwise, as it could fracture the broad coalition needed to push back against antidemocratic politicians and movements.¹⁶⁰ They are particularly concerned about losing the support of socially conservative voters who may oppose democratic backsliding but are also skeptical of progressive cultural politics.

This concern raises a broader strategic question: When is it effective to refuse to cede ground in the fight for gender justice, and when does it make more sense to shift the political debate to other topics, thereby avoiding further cultural polarization? Many frontline women's and LGBTQ activists believe that doubling down is necessary. Although they recognize the need to build new coalitions and shift their narratives, they also fear that silence or retreat could embolden opposition forces and allow them to set the terms of debate. For funders, politicians, policymakers, and other institutional allies, however, the calculus is often more complicated. In contexts where right-wing populist leaders have successfully framed gender equality activism as a symbol of elite liberal overreach, for instance, some reform-oriented actors believe that spotlighting the issue would only reinforce the narratives of anti-gender movements.

Ahead of Poland's 2020 presidential election, for instance, incumbent President Andrzej Duda launched attacks on what he termed "LGBT ideology," comparing it to communist indoctrination. In contrast, opposition candidate Rafał Trzaskowski, known for his liberal stance on LGBTQ rights as the mayor of Warsaw, focused on the country's economic and

governance challenges to avoid playing into the ruling party's strategy.¹⁶¹ A study conducted by the Center for Feminist Foreign Policy similarly found that in some international institutions, progressive gender-related language has been blocked up front by higher-level officials, who fear that it would trigger strong counter-mobilization and stall negotiations.¹⁶² Proponents of gender equality provisions have also opted for constructive ambiguity or intentionally vague formulations (rather than maximalist positions) to allow agreements to proceed without resistance. While this can be the most pragmatic choice, it also risks accumulating concessions that eventually erode existing gender equality frameworks.

Recommendation 2: Improve existing messaging. One strategy for defending progressive gender equality norms without alienating potential allies is to invest in more effective messaging and outreach. As the media and information landscape has evolved in recent years, advocates can no longer rely only on their traditional communication strategies, which typically focus on convincing policymakers with research-heavy reports and press releases. Nor can they win narrative battles with anti-gender movements by doubling down on human rights arguments that tend to have weak public backing.

Instead, they need to develop counter-narratives that reach different audiences where they are. For example, when attempting to engage religious groups and constituencies, advocates should emphasize shared values such as dignity, care, and compassion, rather than rejecting faith-based perspectives outright. Choosing the right messenger is also crucial, as people are more likely to listen to those who are trusted within their own communities. Male allies may be more effective than women in countering narratives that portray feminism as anti-male, while faith leaders or conservative figures are better positioned to reach religious audiences on sensitive topics like abortion.

To act on these insights, funders should help local groups test what constitutes an effective counter-narrative in their respective contexts and dedicate resources to improving their communications strategy and capacity. They should also invest in groups and messengers that are already reaching non-traditional audiences. Various innovative approaches are already underway and could be expanded. The Nebula Fund, for instance, is helping local movements develop counternarratives to anti-gender campaigns, while ILGA-Europe in 2025 launched a dedicated Communications Support Group to help LGBTQ activists refine their public messaging and outreach strategies.¹⁶³

Balancing Coalition-Building with Progressive Principles

Beneath the debates about doubling down versus diverting focus lies a broader question: What coalitions are gender equality advocates trying to build? Should they prioritize broad coalitions that increase their political influence, even if it requires ideological and political compromises, or should they pursue more radical, transformative change?

Existing evidence suggests that cross-cutting coalitions bringing together political parties, civic associations, labor unions, and business groups are essential to pushing back against authoritarian and illiberal threats.¹⁶⁴ Women's rights movements have also secured major policy victories by aligning with a wide range of political allies. In Argentina, for instance, feminist advocates successfully campaigned for the legalization of abortion in 2020 by building a coalition that spanned the political spectrum and framing reproductive rights as a public health issue rather than a radical demand.¹⁶⁵ However, broad-based alliances tend to require strategic trade-offs. Some coalition partners may insist on excluding or downplaying more controversial issues like LGBTQ rights or structural critiques of patriarchy, capitalism, and heteronormativity. Such compromises sit in tension with rising demands *within* progressive movements to center historically marginalized groups, including queer people and racial minorities.

Prioritizing the most marginalized can strengthen internal movement legitimacy and help address legacies of injustice, but it can also fuel fragmentation. Efforts to address historical power imbalances within feminist movements, for instance, have sometimes led to divisive internal debates over priorities and representation that make it harder to put up a united front against illiberal or authoritarian actors. This challenge became evident in the lead-up to and aftermath of the Women's March that took place following Trump's first inauguration in 2017. The organizers sought to build a broad movement against Trump, but internal divisions over race, religion, and political strategy ultimately fractured the coalition leadership. Black and Latina feminists criticized White feminists for failing to address systemic racism and economic justice, while some Jewish feminists voiced concerns over antisemitism within the organizing group.¹⁶⁶

Similar tensions can arise between women's and LGBTQ rights advocates. Particularly in patriarchal and religiously conservative societies, some women's rights groups may prefer to distance themselves from LGBTQ advocacy to avoid weakening their own legitimacy or provoking additional repression. They calculate that achieving their narrow policy goals—such as combating gender-based violence—will be more politically feasible if they do not publicly align with heavily stigmatized or criminalized LGBTQ causes. However, given that anti-gender movements increasingly treat feminist and LGBTQ activism as closely linked threats, it is unclear whether such strategic distancing effectively shields women's rights organizations in the long term.

Recommendation 3: Build and support locally rooted campaigns. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution to these tensions over coalition-building, funders and advocates should prioritize building locally rooted campaigns that fit the social, political, and cultural context in which they operate and genuinely represent the populations they claim to serve (and not just a small group of activists or elite networks). Moreover, rather than insisting on total ideological agreement among their members and allies, gender equality organizations and movements should ensure that the everyday needs of their constituencies—and of the citizenry more broadly—remain at the forefront of their messaging and advocacy.

Doing so will require a mix of both defensive and proactive strategies. On the defensive side, urgent financial support must be directed toward protecting gender equality and LGBTQ activists and organizations who face mounting risks, from legal challenges to physical threats. Emergency funding mechanisms covering security expenditures, legal assistance, relocation, and other urgent priorities are essential to ensure that these activists can continue their work without the constant fear of harassment and repression. Their access to spaces and services dedicated to mental health, resilience, and wellbeing is also vital.

On the proactive side, investments in advocacy remain critical to effectively combating the growing backlash against gender equality. Legal victories, such as Latin America's decade-long push for abortion rights, demonstrate that real progress requires years of advocacy, public education, and alliance-building with lawyers, civil society, media outlets, and politicians, especially if the goal is not only a favorable ruling or piece of legislation but lasting changes in policy and practice. Local organizations must therefore be empowered to develop long-term coalition-building strategies that go beyond short-term crisis responses.

Given that the global funding environment for gender equality advocacy is likely to be more difficult in the years to come, with major governmental donors stepping back to prioritize security and defense spending or even aligning themselves with anti-gender movements, those who remain committed to supporting this work need to think carefully about prioritization. Monitoring and focusing on countries and issues that appear most at risk of legislative backsliding may be necessary. Advocates should also be supported in developing alternative income-generating strategies—such as social enterprises and cooperatives—that can reduce their reliance on short-term project funding. Initiatives like the GATE Innovation Lab offer promising examples of this shift.¹⁶⁷ Finally, funders should also invest in regional coalition-building and South-South partnerships that help advocates continue exchanging lessons and strategies across borders.

Supporting Men and Boys While Preserving Feminist Progress

The field of gender justice faces another important strategic challenge: how to address the underlying issues that are driving men and boys into reactionary and misogynistic movements without diverting focus and resources from women's rights initiatives.

Some progressive activists worry that emphasizing men's issues and challenges might inadvertently validate reactionary narratives suggesting that women's empowerment is a zero-sum game that inevitably marginalizes men. They fear that attempts to address the struggles facing men and boys, such as economic dislocation, shifts in traditional gender roles, and mental health challenges, can easily be co-opted to suggest that feminist activism has gone "too far," that men are the real victims of change, or that further investments in gender equality are no longer needed. For example, concerns about boys' declining education

outcomes could be used to divest from the barriers that continue to disadvantage girls in education in many countries, with insufficient attention paid to the various drivers behind boys' relative underachievement.¹⁶⁸

These fears are compounded by the fact that women's organizations in most countries struggle with chronic underfunding—a challenge further exacerbated by recent cuts in development aid budgets by major bilateral donor governments. Although few advocates deny that men and boys need to be part of gender equality efforts, some are concerned that a growing emphasis on men and masculinities could dilute the already limited resources available for feminist and LGBTQ organizing.

Recommendation 4: Include men in gender equality work. Despite these valid concerns over funding competition, countering anti-gender backlash in the long run will require breaking out of zero-sum thinking. Failing to address the challenges facing boys and men will only leave more room for anti-gender forces to fill the vacuum.

Social media represents a critical area for intervention. As more boys and young men retreat into online spaces, they are at risk of being drawn to influencers on the reactionary right who recognize that men face real struggles—such as shifting gender roles and declining mental health—but respond by promoting misogyny and grievance politics rather than constructive solutions. One strategy to counter these trends is to require greater accountability from social media platforms. The European Union's Digital Services Act, which came into effect in 2024, marks an important step in this direction. While it does not specifically address gendered disinformation, it establishes obligations for major platforms to mitigate the spread of false or harmful narratives.¹⁶⁹ Advocates must closely monitor the effectiveness of these measures, continue tracking and reporting on harmful online content, and push for additional regulations that explicitly tackle gendered disinformation while safeguarding freedom of expression. Equally important are digital literacy programs that help young people critically engage with online content and understand the business models behind influencers who profit from polarizing narratives.¹⁷⁰

Addressing the deeper social and psychological factors driving young men toward reactionary movements is another priority. Interventions have to occur at multiple levels. Preventative mental health work should focus on fostering emotional resilience and creating spaces where boys and young men can openly discuss challenges, whereas schools and community programs can create opportunities for boys to experience success and develop positive mentors and role models.

To scale up work in these and related areas without compromising resources for women's rights activism, new sources of funding will be needed. In this vein, it is promising that Melinda French Gates recently offered \$20 million in grant-making funds to both Gary Barker of Equimundo, a global gender equality organization focused on boys and men, and Richard Reeves, who is spearheading the American Institute for Men and Boys. Both will be able to use these funds to build the evidence base and invest in promising initiatives.¹⁷¹

Various promising efforts have recently taken off. In the UK, for instance, the Labour Party is planning to help schools develop young male mentors who can teach students how to question the content they may see on social media.¹⁷² In Norway, a governmental Men's Equality Commission recently published its final report, titled "Equality's Next Step," which also contains a wide range of policy recommendations to address the challenges facing men and boys.¹⁷³ These examples underscore what an expanded gender equality movement could look like in the years to come: a healthy ecosystem of policies, campaigns, and initiatives that promote the rights and well-being of girls, women, and LGBTQ communities while also addressing the unique challenges facing boys and men.

Conclusion

The current backlash against gender equality is not just a passing "culture war"—it is a core front in a broader contest over democracy, individual rights, and political power playing out across multiple regions, driven by rapid sociocultural change, ultra-conservative and far-right mobilization, and transnational diffusion. To counter this backlash and secure hard-fought policy gains, this paper argues for responses that are rooted in a commitment to gender justice but also focus on maximizing political effectiveness. To put this approach into practice, advocates should distinguish between staunch opponents to gender equality and persuadable audiences, expand their coalition-building and messaging efforts to reach the latter, invest in locally rooted advocacy strategies, and make men's and boys' flourishing and well-being a central goal of the global gender equality movement. As authoritarian and illiberal actors grow more skilled at weaponizing gender, proponents of gender equality must also become more politically astute in how they grow their movement. Their success will depend not just on who is mobilized, but also on who is persuaded.

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