

# POWER OVER RIGHTS

*Understanding and countering the  
transnational anti-gender  
movement*

*Volume I*

By Damjan Denkovski, Nina Bernarding, and Kristina Lunz

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Power Over Rights: Understanding and countering the transnational anti-gender movement  
Volume I

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# *List of Abbreviations*

ADF – Alliance Defending Freedom  
CSU – Christian Social Union  
CDU – Christian Democratic Union  
AfD – Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany)  
ECOSOC – United Nations Economic and Social Council  
AKP – Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party)  
AWID – Association for Women’s Rights in Development  
CEDAW – Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women  
C-Fam – Center for Family and Human Rights  
CSE – Comprehensive Sexuality Education  
CSW – Commission on the Status of Women  
ECLJ – European Centre for Law and Justice  
EU – European Union  
FAZ – Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung  
FWI – Family Watch International  
GONGO – Government-organised non-governmental organisation  
HRC – United Nations Human Rights Council  
IPCD – International Conference on Population and Development  
KADEM – Women and Democracy Association  
LGBTQI\* – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex  
NGOs – Non-governmental organisations  
OAS – Organisation of American States  
SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals  
SRHR – Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights  
TERFs – Trans exclusionary radical feminists  
UDHR – Universal Declaration of Human Rights  
UN – United Nations  
UNFPA – United Nations Population Fund  
US(A) – United States of America  
WCF – World Congress of Families  
WHO – World Health Organisation  
WPS – Women, Peace and Security

# *Purpose of the study*

**“What queers know, like migrants know, like anybody with a womb will know, is how easily freedoms can disappear.” (Baker, 2017)**

In April 2019, UN Security Council resolution 2467 became the first-ever follow-up resolution to UN Security Council 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) which was not to be passed unanimously. Moreover, due to the pressure by the United States, the resolution does not contain language on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) – as previously agreed upon in other WPS resolutions. At the same time, since early 2019, several Polish municipalities, counties, and regions have declared themselves free from “LGBTI ideology” (Hoctor, et al., 2020), and in March 2018, thousands demonstrated in the Croatian capital Zagreb against the country’s ratification of the Istanbul Convention (Reuters, 2018).<sup>1</sup>

These diverse examples demonstrate that actors working to restrict and undermine the rights of women and LGBTQI\* people are gaining new ground – in multilateral fora, on the streets, and in local municipalities. It is no surprise that feminist civil society and pro-gender governments are increasingly raising awareness of countering these developments, and the importance of protecting and advancing the rights of women, LGBTQI\* persons, and other (politically) marginalised groups.<sup>2</sup>

This study aims at supporting these actors. Its purpose is to help them better understand anti-gender campaigns and to support them in identifying ways on how to counter these attacks, and to advance human rights for all. This is important, as for most of the past two decades, pro-gender actors failed to seriously engage with the threat that the anti-gender movement present.

This study highlights the interconnectedness and transnational nature of the actors working against the women’s and LGBTQI\* rights agenda and provides a broad comparative analysis of these movements, emphasising that the attacks we are witnessing are not merely a pushback against perceived achievements by human rights proponents. Instead, we argue that what we are witnessing is a highly organised (but not centralised), well-funded, transnational movement working on the domestic and international level to undermine women’s rights, LGBTQI\* rights, and civil society participation in policy discussions and decisions. Further, we argue that the anti-gender actors are not mobilising against gender or the rights of women and LGBTQI\* as

1 The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence is a human rights treaty passed by the Council of Europe which came into force in August 2014. Currently, 34 states have ratified the convention. The following members of the Council of Europe have not ratified the Convention: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lichtenstein, Lithuania, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Slovak Republic, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland.

2 While LGBTQI\* people represent both a minority within society as well as within the political sphere women are no minority within society but in the political sphere. To account for this, we use the term of political minority throughout the study.

such, but that they use them to reinforce or increase their power, and to maintain or promote social and political hierarchies that benefit them in the face of their (perceived) decline. Their efforts aim at advancing an alternative understanding of the world order, one where the rights of certain groups take precedence over others. Understanding these features of the international anti-gender movement and placing them within the wider context of increasing anti-democratic tendencies is critical to developing effective strategies to counter them.

Extensive research has already been undertaken to conceptualise the anti-gender movement, specifically within the contexts of Europe and Latin America. This study draws on the current literature in the field. However, there is broad consensus that new ways of responding to the anti-gender movement are still needed. To date, there has been no comprehensive analysis of the international anti-gender movement from a policy perspective. This is the gap that this study intends to address.

The study is published as two volumes. In part I of this volume, Section 1 analyses the emergence and characteristics of anti-gender campaigns. Section 2 focuses on the actors, their overlaps, connections, and funding. Section 3 deals with the issues that anti-gender campaigns engage with as well as the narratives they employ. Finally, Section 4 looks at the strategies of the anti-gender movement. In part II, we reflect on factors for successful movements to advance and defend women's and LGBTQI\* rights, finally providing policy recommendations for a possible way forward. Here, we also sketch out issues and questions on this topic which need further analysis and research.

The second volume consists of five case studies, which are also featured throughout Volume 1. Denise Hirao analyses the anti-gender movement in Brazil in the context of Jair Bolsonaro's presidential campaign and rise to power. Katrine Thomasen and Adriana Lamačková from the Centre for Reproductive Rights analyse the impact of anti-gender campaigns on the legal and policy level in the European Union (EU). Lucille Griffon and Laura Clough from EuroMed Rights, together with Charlotte Pruth and Maria Johansson from the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, provide an analysis of the situation of gender equality in Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey<sup>3</sup>, while Siobhan Guerrero McManus discusses how the rise of anti-gender actors, the diminishment of secularism, and the COVID-19 pandemic have led to sexual and reproductive rights emergency in Mexico. Finally, Rebecca Sanders and Laura Jenkins outline how conservative and evangelical NGOs are shaping US policies on women's and LGBTQI\* rights. While we make numerous references to the case studies in the text that follows, we highly recommend reading the case studies for an in-depth analysis of anti-gender activities in specific contexts.

We want to express our gratitude to the donors for this project, the German Federal Foreign Office and the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs for enabling us to do this work. We are also very grateful to the case study authors, as well as the experts who agreed to be interviewed for the study, and David Paternotte, for his comments on earlier drafts of the study. We are especially

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<sup>3</sup> There is disagreement among researchers about whether the examples of these countries (Egypt, Tunisia, and Turkey) fit into the definitions of the transnational anti-gender movement, which was coined in reference to the campaigns in Europe. However, in this study, we classify their activities and narratives in the spheres of women's and LGBTQI\* rights as anti-gender activities, and we believe that the case studies provide additional context to the scope and diversity in the attack on the freedom and dignity of these populations.



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# *Executive Summary*

By providing an analysis of the origins of the anti-gender movement, the actors who drive it forward, the issues they mobilise against, and the narratives and strategies they employ, the purpose of this study is to support pro-gender governments and other like-minded actors in better understanding anti-gender campaigns and developing effective strategies to defend human rights for all. By analysing these movements comparatively from a policy perspective, this study builds on existing literature and debate in the field and provides concrete actionable recommendations to governments aiming to counter these movements.

The first assertion that we make is that it would be erroneous to understand the anti-gender movement around the world as simple pushback against gender mainstreaming, the right to abortion, LGBTQI\* rights, or sexuality education, or even the culminated successes by human rights proponents to realise human rights for all. Instead, over the past decade, we see an increasingly transnational movement consisting of actors as diverse as the Catholic Church, governments, and right-wing think tanks shifting towards efforts to develop and produce alternative norms which are inimical to the concept of universal and indivisible human rights. Indeed, we argue that what we are witnessing is a highly organised (but not centralised), well-funded, transnational movement working to undermine women's rights, LGBTQI\* rights, and civil society. These efforts are not about 'gender' as such, but it is about power and about maintaining or promoting social and political hierarchies in the face of their (perceived) decline. These efforts take place in the streets across the world, in local and national governments and at the international level. Human rights advocates and progressive governments, believing in the unstoppable and teleological progress of human rights, have spent too long not taking the threat seriously and not responding adequately.

We, therefore, argue, that the anti-gender movement must be analysed within the context of the general decline in freedom around the world, in particular the shrinking space for civil society. This is particularly pertinent when looking at the interconnectedness between the anti-gender movement and the far-right. On the one hand, the global rise of right-wing politics and disinformation campaigns has aided the growth of the anti-gender movement. On the other, there are significant overlaps in the discourse used by the anti-gender movement and right-wing actors: their resistance to globalisation and scepticism of international norms, nationalism, and racial anxieties, scapegoating, and the construction of conspiracy theories. At the same time, it is important to note that while there are considerable overlaps and interactions between the anti-gender movement and the far-right, they are not the same – left-wing actors can take up anti-gender positions, and right-wing actors can take up feminist rhetoric as part of xenophobic and racist argumentation.

The concept of a ‘gender ideology’, developed by the Vatican, Catholic scholars, and activists in the 1990s, and disseminated and entrenched into mainstream discourse since then, is helpful to understand how actors with such diverse ideological positions, backgrounds, and goals can converge under a common umbrella. ‘Gender ideology’ refers to a set of notions revolving around the idea of radical ‘gender feminists’ and the homosexual agenda advancing an idea that dismisses the natural order of things (i.e., the natural hierarchy of men and women, for instance), which in pushing for individual identity over social expectations undermines the anthropological basis of the family and, therefore, society. This concept provided both a framework for understanding the advances of women’s and LGBTQI\* rights in international fora and an umbrella term for the anti-gender movement to mobilise around by framing gender as a threat to society.

However, when analysing the actors that constitute the anti-gender movement, we see significant diversity. One can divide the actors into three groups: the old, the new and the allies. The group of old actors is comprised of actors such as the Catholic Church and right-wing think tanks and institutions, many from the United States. These actors have established relationship with power centres around the world – either through populating local and national administrations with their representatives or surrogates, securing observer status in international fora, or through the investment of large sums of money to advance their political goal. The group of new actors is comprised of groups specifically created in the last decade to fight against ‘gender ideology’. Many of them take the form of concerned parents or concerned citizens initiatives which – across the globe – show significant overlap in terms of the visual identity, branding, and message. The group also includes GONGOs and other institutions advancing anti-equality ideas, as well as political parties around the world who have either been created for this purpose or jumped on the bandwagon for political points. Finally, the third group are the allies, which includes academics, politicians, co-operations, and journalists/media outlets.

These actors do not come from the same ideological matrix, and they often do not share “the same ideological framework” (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017a, 259). They are occasionally even in opposition to each other on specific issue areas, and their motivations to either drive or support anti-gender campaigns vary strongly. However, they have successfully constructed the empty signifier or ‘gender ideology’, which sublimates multiple issues into one threat that is easy to emotionally mobilise against. What unites them is the ability to “squeeze different discourses into one big threat” (ibid), and construct ‘gender/gender ideology’ as “an attack on at least one of the three Ns”, which these actors claim to defend: nature, the nation, or normality (ibid).

The anti-gender movement targets their opposition to a variety of policy areas, the most common being their opposition to ‘gender’ as a concept (including gender mainstreaming, gender studies and international conventions such as the Istanbul Convention), LGBTQI\* rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights, as well as sexuality education.

To advance their ideas, the anti-gender movement deploy a variety of narratives and discursive framings, all of which are fear-based. Before the advent of the new generation of anti-gender

movement, much of the rhetoric was focused on the defence of what is perceived to be normal, or natural, often couched in religious terms. Some of the arguments were specifically geared to elicit emotional responses from parents who would be concerned for the future and well-being of their children (in the event of exposure to ideas such as gender being socially constructed, or family diversity, or contraception). While much of the argumentation of the anti-gender movement has since moved away from naturalistic and religious arguments, the fear for the well-being of children continues to resonate well with the target audience of these movements. The new generation of anti-gender actors has reimagined how the opposition to women's and LGBTQI\* rights is constructed – we find an increasing reliance on secular, scientific or even human rights language to argue against equality. Some of the arguments claim that gender equality has already been reached, others that we should shy away from it because it is a totalitarian ideology. These approaches rely on establishing hierarchies of rights, i.e., that some rights (in this instance, those rights that are seen to conform with 'traditional' values take precedence over the rights of women and LGBTQI\* persons). In this way, all of these ideas are united, as mentioned above, by their reliance on fear-based reactions, and by their assertion that equality of human rights for all is a radical, destabilising idea.

Once this notion is deconstructed, and we observe that there is nothing radical about expanding the concept of human rights to include traditionally marginalised groups, we see that it is, in fact, the anti-gender movement itself which advances radical ideas intending to promote a world order which maintains the dominance of the White Heterosexual Cis-Male from the Global North.

There is a variety of strategies that the anti-gender movement uses to pursue their goals. Community organising and marches, disinformation campaigns, and the harassment of progressive activists are used to sway public opinion towards opposing equal rights for all. At the same time, there is evidence of efforts by the anti-gender movement to seize state power (either directly or through lobbying), as well as efforts to engage in and disrupt policy-making processes at the international level. Through the secularisation of their discourse and the increasing adoption of the rights-based language, the anti-gender movement has been engaging in legislative and legal challenges to policies aiming for equality. Perhaps the most crucial strategic tool at the disposal of the anti-gender movement is funding: on the whole, they are largely much better funded than human rights advocates. At the same time, defunding key state services or civil society organisations has a significant impact on the ability to both produce knowledge on these topics and provide essential services to marginalised populations.

These challenges have been made even starker in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic we see the situation of many marginalised groups, in particular women and LGBTQI\*, further deteriorating while many anti-gender actors have used the pandemic to reinforce their narratives and restrict the opportunities of human rights civil society to challenge them.

While it is neither possible, nor advisable, to provide a concrete recipe for organising a social movement to advance women's and LGBTQI\* rights, we can learn a great deal from the successes and failures of movements and campaigns that have already taken place. Analysing the

case of the legalisation of abortion in Ireland allows us to conclude that finding a narrative and communication strategy that resonates with the public, establishing a broad yet unified coalition and mobilising both on- and offline are crucial elements to a successful movement. Learning from other contexts such as Uruguay, Argentina, or Kenya provides additional insights related to: catering to the context and timing of the intervention, building wide coalitions, setting concrete goals and formulating clear narratives. Finally, all examples show that funding is the sine qua non for successful movements. Drawing on those insights and the preceding analysis, the study finally offers outlines seven areas of action for governments committed to protect and advance the rights of political minorities internationally. Two of them are internally focussed; aiming at: 1) Building internal capacities and 2) Ensuring (political) minorities have the same rights at home that the governments are protecting internationally. The final five action areas encourage governments to 3) Widen and strengthen alliances, 4) Strengthen outreach and communication, 5) Invest political capital in advancing gender equality internationally, 6) (Financially) Support feminist civil society and 7) Enable continuing research on anti-gender campaigns, particularly in specific (political) contexts.

Above all, we hope that the study contributes to raising awareness that countering anti-gender campaigns is one of the biggest challenges of today, and a development that already renders many women and LGBTQI\* people around the world insecure.

## *Key takeaways*

1. Anti-gender campaigns are not an academic or policy debate but a development that renders many women and LGBTQI\* people around the world insecure. Many of the activists we interviewed in this study highlighted the situation is worse than it has been in a very long time. They are doing their best to defend the ground they have so painstakingly gained over the last decades but fear they are losing this battle.
2. The attacks we are witnessing are not merely a pushback against perceived achievements by human rights proponents but a highly organised (while not centralised), well-funded, and transnational movement, working on the domestic and international level to undermine women's rights, LGBTQI\* rights, and civil society participation. Further, we argue that the anti-gender actors are not mobilising against gender or the rights of women and LGBTQI\* as such, but that they use them to reinforce or increase their power, and to maintain or promote social and political hierarchies that benefit them in the face of their (perceived) decline. Their efforts aim to advance an alternative understanding of the world order, one where certain groups' rights take precedence over others.
3. Anti-gender campaigns are not a new phenomenon. The discourse surrounding what these actors term 'gender ideology' was crafted in the 1990s by the Vatican, and mobilisations have been ongoing since (and, to a different extent, even earlier). Nowadays, 'gender ideology' is entrenched in public discourse beyond explicitly anti-gender circles.
4. Over the last two decades, there has been a shift in many contexts. Previously, anti-gender actors were generally isolated and confined to the national level. However, the increasingly transnational nature of their activities, their growing capacity to mobilise on the streets and within national and multilateral institutions and their ability to connect these processes means there has been an expansion in the number of state actors willing to invest political capital in promoting anti-gender ideas.
5. Anti-Gender campaigns are both a manifestation and reinforcement of the wider anti-democratic trend. Increasingly, democratically backsliding governments openly embrace calls for heteronormative and patriarchal family models at the expense of women and LGBTQI\* communities. The dynamic of shrinking space for civil society organisations is specifically harmful to the rights of women and LGBTQI\* as they traditionally rely disproportionately on civil society to protect and advance them.
6. Anti-gender actors are hugely diverse and can include concerned citizens' initiatives, Christian religious organisations, right-wing think tanks, governments from Russia to Brazil, Egypt, Tunisia, and the United States. Anti-gender initiatives at the multilateral level are mainly driven and initiated by the Holy See or Christian countries, occasionally joined by other faith groups.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The extent to which the US can be considered an anti-gender is influenced by which party is dominating the White House and/or Congress. E.g. For the last four years, the Trump/Pence administration has been an active anti-gender actor, but we do not expect the Biden/Harris administration to cater to the anti-gender agenda

7. In most cases, anti-gender actors do not share the “the same ideological framework” (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017a, 259) and their motivations to either drive or support anti-gender campaigns vary enormously. What unites them is the ability to “squeeze different discourses into one big threat” and construct ‘gender/gender ideology’ as “an attack on at least one of the three Ns”, which these actors claim to defend: nature, the nation, or normality (ibid).
8. For the last two decades, pro-gender actors have failed to seriously engage with the threat that the anti-gender movement presents. They are much less well-coordinated and funded. The threat posed by anti-gender campaigns for politically marginalised groups and democratic societies continues to be underestimated.
9. There is not a teleological, given progress to realising human rights for all. Advancing the rights of women and LGBTQI\* people will require governments’ determination to invest human, diplomatic, and financial resources to do so and the willingness to challenge and confront anti-gender actors and enable feminist civil society to challenge patriarchal and racist structures.
10. Governments committed to protect and advance human rights for all should predominantly act in the following seven areas of action: Two of them are internally focussed; aiming at 1) Building internal capacities and 2) Ensuring (political) minorities have the same rights at home that the governments are protecting internationally. The final five action areas encourage governments to 3) Widen and strengthen alliances, 4) Strengthen outreach and communication, 5) Invest political capital in advancing gender equality internationally, 6) (Financially) Support feminist civil society and 7) Enable continuing research on anti-gender campaigns, particularly in specific (political) contexts.

# *1. Introduction: What are we dealing with?*

The increasing visibility of the various attacks on women’s and LGBTQI\* rights in recent years has led to the perception that we are dealing with something new – an intensifying pushback against the progress of realising human rights for more people. This understanding is mainly rooted in the steady progress of recognising the rights of women and LGBTQI\* in international human rights law, and national policies, and the general support for these issues in multilateral institutions. This progress had created the illusion of ‘unstoppable’ progress among progressive actors due to a teleological understanding of these developments. In Europe, “until 2010 there was the idea of constant progress and moving towards more rights“ (Paternotte, 2020)<sup>1</sup>. It seemed that “Europe was on an unstoppable way towards “full” gender equality and sexual citizenship” (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017, 3). Examples of domestic hostility to sexual and reproductive health and rights in EU member states were and continue to be considered as outliers, which would eventually fall in line. For example, Malta and, until recently, Ireland.

However, anti-gender campaigns are not a new phenomenon. The discourse surrounding what these actors term ‘gender ideology’ was crafted in the 1990s and mobilisations have been ongoing since then (See Section 2). Still, over the last two decades, there has been a shift in many contexts (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017a). Previously, these actors were generally isolated and confined to the national level, but the increasingly transnational nature of these actors, their growing capacity to mobilise in the streets, and in national and multilateral institutions as well as their ability to link these processes together, means there is an expansion in the number of state actors willing to invest political capital in promoting an anti-gender world view. Indeed, over the past decade, we have witnessed an increasingly organised and transnational network of anti-gender actors. A diverse network including so-called concerned citizens initiatives, Christian religious organisations, right-wing think tanks, governments from Russia, to Brazil, Egypt, Tunisia, and the United States are increasingly collaborating across borders and learning from each other. This has created a new dynamic in the national context as well as the international system – the opposition to women’s rights and LGBTQI\* rights has gone beyond being mainly reactive and shifted towards efforts to develop and produce alternative norms which are inimical to the concept of universal and indivisible human rights.

Recognising this dynamic should firstly inform our thinking about protecting and advancing the rights of women and LGBTQI\* individuals. Scholar and activist Lucia Pizzarossa argues with regard to reproductive rights that they must be understood as historical creations, rather than timeless givens and that to fully realise them, they must be analysed as past trends of how they evolved and the conditions under which these changes occurred (Pizzarossa, 2018, 1). Similarly, academic Rebecca Sanders asserts that the development of women’s rights, and in particular SRHR, internationally “seems to confirm many assumptions of constructivist Inter-

<sup>1</sup> Interview, 10 July 2020.



national Relations theory. A trans-national advocacy network successfully generated support for women's rights norms", with rights at the UN level moving through "a norm life cycle" towards acceptance and a norm cascade of greatly expanding rights, leading to their institutionalisation in a variety of instruments" (Sanders, 2018, 275). Recognising the continuous advocacy and work – specifically by (feminist) civil society – as crucial to the advancements of the rights of women and LGBTQI\* people, cautions us against a simplistic, teleological view of progress and reconfirms the responsibility and urgency to better organise to counter these efforts by the international anti-gender campaigns.

Secondly, recognising and understanding anti-gender campaigns as a proactive attempt to produce alternative norms is a crucial first step in developing effective counter narratives and strategies. Moreover, it is also important for (pro-gender) internal strategic reasons as academic David Paternotte outlines. He argues that thinking of it as a backlash takes the rights of women and the rights of LGBTQI\* people outside of the context of other societal debates about power relations (e.g., race, culture, religion), potentially preventing pro-gender actors from building alliances coalitions beyond the issue they advocate for. The framing of anti-gender campaigns as a pushback exacerbates the problem of women's and LGBTQI\* rights campaigners working and respond to issues in silos, as it makes it difficult to see beyond the attacks on their specific issue. This could (partly) explain why most feminist activists were late to react, as the attacks of the anti-gender movement were targeted to specific SRHR and LGBTQI\* issues, from abortion to trans rights to the next issue under attack.

For these reasons, the next section will discuss what is meant by anti-gender campaigns, why articulating what is happening in terms of pushback or backlash is problematic (1.1) and why it is important to contextualise these campaigns within the trends of democratic backsliding and the shrinking spaces for civil society (1.2) and the overlap with right-wing extremism (1.3).

### ***1.1. Not a pushback but the promotion of a radical alternative order***

Many academics and politicians refer to the increasingly organised efforts to roll back and restrict the rights of women and LGBTQI\* people as a pushback or backlash (see Juhász & Pap, 2018, Cupać & Ebetürk, 2020a, Kimio, 2014, Sanders, 2018). However, increasingly researchers and civil society representatives have cautioned against this framing. As Neil Datta, the Secretary of the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, puts it: "Saying pushback or backlash is underestimating. It is an alternative political and social system. They are not against us, we are a victim along the way of a much bolder and more ambitious social, economic, and political project" (Datta, 2020).<sup>2</sup>

The anti-gender movement is not just attacking women or LGBTQI\* persons, but the very concept of universal human rights, through the lens of the individual actors, and the principles of our multilateral system.<sup>3</sup> As others have pointed out, the anti-gender movement has learned to engage with the multilateral system – for example see Cupać & Ebetürk (2020b, forthcoming)

<sup>2</sup> Interview, 17 July 2020.

<sup>3</sup> References to backlash continue to appear throughout the study, both in the case studies and the synthesis report, as it is often used by researchers to categorise the developments.

and Sanders (2018). However, it is important to view this engagement not as a recognition of the principles on which the multilateral system is based but as a mean to an end. Alternative multilateral fora are actively being developed to accommodate the paradigm shift. One of the most prominent examples of this dynamic are attempts to set up a Global Health Compact as an alternative to the World Health Organisation (WHO), and the push by Poland to set up a Family Rights Treaty as an alternative to the Istanbul Convention (see Section 5.6 where we discuss the increasing adoption of rights language by these actors).

### *A Note on the Terminology of Anti-Gender Actors*

*In this study, we refer to the phenomenon under discussion as the anti-gender movement. This should not detract from the assertion that the anti-gender movement does not oppose 'gender' as such but advances alternative value systems to maintain existing power dynamics. At the same time, many campaigns are expressed in terms of their opposition to 'gender' and related concepts and rights. Therefore, in keeping with the literature that we draw on in this study, we continue to refer to them as the anti-gender movement, but this should not be understood as an acknowledgment of the existence of a 'gender ideology'.*

*Moreover, while we argue that what we are witnessing is a non-centralised movement, we do believe that all of the individual anti-gender campaigns can be understood to be part of a (loosely defined) anti-gender movement. Therefore, we will refer to the movement using the singular, with the caveat that it is an umbrella term for a variety of individual campaigns.*

These examples, as well as the setting up of an Unalienable Rights Commission in the State Department by the Trump administration in 2019, demonstrates how the anti-gender movement is promoting an alternative world view, in which the universality of human rights, and equality, have no place. These alternative institutional structures aim at making the point that gender and sexuality issues have nothing to do with human rights or that human dignity cannot be taken away by a state entity (Commission on Unalienable Rights, 2020). Such an elaboration erases the real impact of gender-based violence on lived experiences and existential threat that is experienced by women and LGBTQI\* populations and further entrenches hierarchies of which or whose rights are valid.

These efforts should be considered as nothing less but radical. As Sanders and Jenkins argue in the case study on the United States,

*“although Trump and other patriarchal populists try to paint feminists and SOGI [sexual orientation and gender identity] rights as the radical threat, their attack on human rights and goal of going back (to making America great again, to the founding fathers' inalienable rights, to a pre-feminist era) is itself a radical agenda that has contributed to rising extremism”.*  
*Sanders & Jenkins (2020).*

### ***1.2. Anti-Gender as a manifestation and reinforcement of the wider anti-democratic trend***

In addition to understanding anti-gender efforts to promote a radical alternative order, it is critical that the anti-gender movement is understood within the context of the general decline in freedom and democratic values around the world and the shrinking space for civil society.

Freedom House's most recent report found that global freedom has been in decline for fourteen years running and that we have seen democratically elected leaders<sup>4</sup>, such as in the United States or India, who are "increasingly willing to break down institutional safeguards and disregard the rights of critics and minorities as they pursue their populist agendas" (Repucci, 2020). We have also seen "that many of the [democratically] backsliding regimes [that] promote state projects to enforce heteronormative and patriarchal family models, aim to curtail reproductive rights and are strongly opposed to the rights of sexual minorities" (Roggeband & Krizsan, 2020, 9). Many countries that can be characterised as repressive or backsliding regime are part of the Group of the Friends of the Family (the group arguing that the heteronormative-cis nuclear family model is the fundamental unit of society at the UN)<sup>5</sup> through which they strive to advance their restrictive concepts of the family also at the international level. According to Cupać & Ebetürk (2020a) this group sits within the larger trend towards right-wing mobilisation on the international level.

Moreover, for years, the space for civil society and academic freedom has been shrinking.<sup>6</sup> While specific restrictions vary by country, "common elements of restrictive laws include increased powers for governments to decide which NGOs can register, increased scrutiny of NGO and university activities and sources of funding; and in some cases, a requirement for government approval for those seeking cross-border funding" (Ariadne, 2016, 4). Since 2012, over one hundred laws aimed at restricting funding, operations, and registration of civil society organisations have been passed in different countries across the world (Roggeband & Krizsan, 2020, 9). It is important to note that it is not only autocratic states that pass such laws. A "contagion effect" can be observed where repressive laws are copied across borders, shrinking the space for civil society on a regional level (Ariadne, 2016, 5). This dynamic is specifically harmful to rights and freedoms that depend on an active civil society for their defence and advancement, such as the rights of women and LGBTQI\* people, and especially in contexts where those in power are opposed to these rights and actively fund government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) to advance their agendas. For instance, in the Mexico case study, the author points out how the traditional bulwarks defending human rights (NGOs, academia, decentralised state institutions tasked with human rights) "face challenges that threaten their capacities as counterbalances to power as the new administration has opted for austerity policies that have feminist and human rights NGOs without funding, at the same time cancelling state-run programs focused on women and minorities [...]. These budget cuts threaten the feasibility of the NGOs, decentralised state institutions and even universities" (McManus, 2020). The case study on the EU details the example of Poland where numerous municipalities

4 For Freedom House, freedom is defined using a score card based on a variety of questions related to personal and political freedoms. The right to abortion and the rights of LGBTQI\* people are explicitly analysed in the framework (Freedom House, 2021).

5 Members of the group are: 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.

6 For more information, see reports on the shrinking space for civil society and how civil society is responding by: Pornschlegel (2020); DG for External Policies (2017); Kode (2018) and Unmüßig (2016).

which declared themselves LGBTQI\*-free zones have committed themselves to not funding any civil society activities promoting equal rights. In response to the EU cutting funding to these municipalities as a result of this decision, the Polish government committed to stepping in and fill the gap (Hocor, et al., 2020). The result is that anti-gender activities can be fully funded from the national budget, whereas equal rights initiatives can neither receive domestic nor EU funding for their work. Apart from restricting funding, harassing civil society is a common measure to restrict the space of civil society. In the case study on Brazil, civil society organisations reported fifty-four cases of harassment against women journalists to the UN Human Rights Council in 2020 while important SRHR advocates went into exile after multiple death threats against them and their families, which was the case of Jean Willys, a close friend and ally of the late Marielle Franco, a Congresswoman, and Debora Diniz, a professor. The harassment is committed by both by government officials and right-wing trolls (Hirao, 2020).

### ***1.3. The anti-gender campaigns and right-wing populism***

Finally, when conceptualising anti-gender campaigns, it is essential to explore the crossover and interaction between anti-gender campaigns and right-wing populists.

The United States, Hungary, and Brazil are three examples where anti-gender and right-wing actors overlap or visibly cooperate and pursue a similar agenda. The former US-President Donald Trump and the Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro are both close to Evangelicals in their individual contexts. In Hungary and Poland, traditionalist, anti-gender, and right-wing are at the core of the current government coalitions. In other contexts, such as in Germany and Austria, anti-gender actors are important drivers of anti-gender campaigns, albeit not mainly from within the government. As Paternotte and Kuhar (2018) elaborate, in some contexts, right-wing populists are the main drivers of anti-gender campaigns. In particular in Europe, “the current right-wing populist wave has decisively contributed to the success of anti-gender campaigns” (ibid., 12). Paternotte and Kuhar (2018) further show that in these contexts, their discourses strongly overlap (scepticisms towards European integration, national and racial anxieties, and resistance to globalisation) as well as their rhetoric (victim-perpetrator reversal, scapegoating, and the construction of conspiracy theories) and their repertoires of actions (skilful use of social media, attacks on the traditional media, referenda, and petitions). The appeal of the ‘gender ideology’ for right-wing populists appears to be its opportunity to bind “together various actors who might not share the same ideological strand across all issues they address” (Ibid, 12). We elaborate on this in section 3.

Moreover, Argentinian academic and activist Maria Esperanza Casullo argues that the language and issues of anti-gender campaigns is extremely attractive for right wing-actors, as it allows them “to use that language for a defence of the hierarchical structure in society as a whole. It ties the defence of the hierarchy of the father with the hierarchy of the business owner over the employee, with the hierarchy over people” (Casullo, 2020).<sup>7</sup> A similar situation is witnessed in Brazil, where the presidential campaign of Bolsonaro was embedded in messaging that tied the anti-establishment message to ‘traditional values’ and framing himself as the

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<sup>7</sup> Interview, 17 September 2020.

defender of traditional values (Hirao, 2020a).<sup>8</sup> Messaging that employs ‘traditional values’ and appeals to ‘the natural order of things’ can be deployed to refer to anything from militarism and the justification of torture to the subjugation of women and LGBTQI\* persons. Concepts such as the ‘filthy/degenerate’ other that is constructed as a threat to the innocence of the in-group’s children/families/women are shared between anti-gender and right-wing narratives.<sup>9</sup> Sociologist Franziska Schutzbach argues that

*“anti-feminism and anti-gender have thus become a central key which makes the centring of right-wing ideologies possible, through which right-wing stances thus become socially acceptable in various political settings: because the rejection of feminism or gender – unlike xenophobia or plump nationalism – does not, offhand, appear distinctly right-wing. Put simply: anti-feminism and anti-gender enable, for example, democratic premises, such as equality, to be delegitimised without having to resort to “Foreigners Go Home” rallying cries.”*  
(Schutzbach, 2019)

While anti-gender campaigns and right-wing populists overlap and interact, it is important to note that they are not the same and neither is wholly subsumed by the other (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). This is for example exemplified by right-wing populists who do not embrace anti-gender rhetoric, but indeed eschew it and focus on their support for women’s rights and LGBTQI\* rights. These are juxtaposed with the perceived values of, for example, Muslim immigrants, consequently, framing a xenophobic point in feminist language (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). For example, following the sexual assaults on New Year’s Eve in Cologne, Germany in 2015, there were feminist organisations that shared the anti-immigration messages touted by right-wing actors.<sup>10</sup> Both of these examples also show elements of homo-nationalism and femo-nationalism – ideas where white women and white gay men are included in constructing the national unit, the ‘we’, which externalises and racialises (sexualised) violence and defines the welfare state in national terms (e.g., excluding immigrant communities from the list of beneficiaries of the welfare state) (Lieback, 2017).

Moreover, it is important to note that also actors of the left have joined forces with anti-gender campaigns. For example, the current president of Mexico, López Obrador, ran together with the Evangelical party *Encuentro social*, an anti-gender actor. And, as the next section outlines, the origin of anti-gender campaigns is not linked to right-wing populism but is a Catholic project. These examples serve to illustrate the danger of overstating the link between the opposition to gender and right-wing populism. Additional research on the usefulness of anti-gender campaigns to right-wing actors, could help to better understand their interaction, particularly in specific contexts.

In sum, due to the scope of the attack, and its interconnectedness with broader anti-rights

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8 Interview, 3 July 2020.

9 Othering is an interdisciplinary notion that refers, amongst other things, to differentiating discourses that lead to moral and political judgment of superiority and inferiority between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and within groups’ (Dervin, 2015). The term was coined by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978).

10 It is important to note that other feminist voices decried the abuse of apparently feminist slogans for racist/right-wing purposes, including *ausnahmslos.org*, an intersectional feminist collective of twenty-two feminists which include CFFP co-founder Kristina Lunz.

rhetoric and interdependence with the decline in freedom and democratic values, it is imperative to understand that the opposition to women's and LGBTQI\* rights is recognised as part of a system that goes beyond any single issue (Paternotte, 2020).

*Anti-gender campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic:*<sup>11</sup>

*The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the rights of women and LGBTQI\* people in multiple ways: On the one hand, it has reinforced existing gender inequalities. For example, women are disproportionately affected by the pandemic because they make up the majority of the health care sector force (Lunz et al., 2020, 10). Online and offline gender-based violence, in particular intimate (former) partner violence perpetrated by men has been on the rise since the beginning of the pandemic. In some contexts, such as in France, reported cases are up to 30% (France 24, 2020). Violence and abuse against trans people have also increased during the pandemic, and the stigma and discrimination they have historically faced in accessing health care has also been exacerbated by the pandemic (Rahman, 2020). Moreover, initial studies show that the pandemic has led to a re-traditionalisation of gender relations in the private sphere (Blum, 2020), and the gender care gap is also widening (Azcona et al., 2020).*

*On the other hand, anti-gender actors have been able to use the pandemic to reinforce their narratives. In many countries, including in the US, the pandemic is being used as a political opportunity to restrict women's access to reproductive services by declaring them 'non-essential' – at a time, when access to contraceptives is increasingly limited. Sociologist Rebekka Blum (2020) highlights how in Germany, anti-feminists have used the pandemic to reinforce traditional family patterns: "The publicist Birgit Kelle, for example, posted [...] an article titled "Die ersetzbare Mutter – ein Mythos hat Pause" [The replaceable mother – a myth takes a break]. She also highlights how the pandemic is being used to mobilise against Gender Studies: "In March 2020 the association Deutsche Sprache e. V., also seized on the coronavirus situation to tout its anti-feminist agenda. In one case in point, the association promoted its anti-feminist call to oppose the "gender nonsense" by claiming that German universities lacked the required funding to conduct virus research. It blamed this state of affairs on the allegedly immense expenditures assigned to Gender Studies." Blum (2020) furthers elaborates on the commonalities between anti-feminism and 'coronavirus conspiracy', including abstract enemies, an anti-modern worldview, and non-science-based arguments as well as similar rhetoric. She warns of the "danger that anti-coronavirus protests will serve to instil an ideology in their supporters that will act as a gateway to a fixed, conspiracy worldview permanently associated with misanthropic ideologies such as racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-feminism"(ibid). Lastly, we have also seen governments use the pandemic as an opportunity to augment their power and limit civil liberties and rights, and restrict the opportunities for pro-gender actors to challenge them. According to findings by Human Rights Watch (2021) released in February 2021, at least 83 countries have used the COVID-19 pandemic to justify violating the exercise of free speech and peaceful assembly. This is particularly detrimental for contexts, in which anti-gender actors are in power and civil society and academia are the main actors to protect or advance the rights of women and LGBTQI\* people.*

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11 For a more detailed reflection on why the COVID-19 pandemic is a feminist issue, refer to Lunz et al. (2020).

## *2. The emergence of 'gender ideology': All roads lead to Rome*

As this study will demonstrate, the various issues the anti-gender movement mobilises against can all be sublimated in the concept of 'gender ideology', an idea so fluid and divergently conceptualised that it is difficult to define. However, what is important is the framing of gender as a (totalitarian) ideology. This serves the purpose of positioning it, on the one hand in opposition to science (nature, biology), and on the other in opposition to 'common sense'. Gender ideology, as a concept, stems from the Vatican's deliberations in the 1990s but has evolved far beyond its inception and been integrated into the mainstream. It is now being used by (conservative) political actors and the general public, not just anti-gender actors specifically.

### *2.1. Where does it come from, what does it mean?*

The Programme of Action of the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993 reiterated the clear position of women's rights within the human rights framework. Subsequently, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing marked the start of "the golden age of SRHR" (Pizzarossa, 2018, 5), by operationalising several key definitions, all which asserted the equality of men and women in decisions on family planning and recognised that government policies must be based on/compliant with international human rights law. The ICPD 1994 and the Beijing Platform for Action contribute the iterations of women's right to sexual freedom and the respect for bodily integrity and security of the person as basic underpinnings of SRHR (Petchesky, 1995, 154-155). During the 1990s, global discussions on population and demography issues were also increasingly tied into the mainstream human rights discourse with references to the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Framing SRHR in these terms embedded them in the International Bill of Human Rights,<sup>12</sup> obliging all states parties to respect and promote those rights as well as subjecting them to international monitoring through the various UN mechanisms. Discussing SRHR in terms of rights and not demography or population control also shifted the debate to women as subjects with agency, instead of objects in a conversation that men were having without women present.

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<sup>12</sup> Consisting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

However, already in Beijing in 1995, resistance to gender-sensitive language and SRHR was visible, and partly successful in even stronger iterations of women's reproductive rights. In response to the perceived decline of the Vatican's influence in global reproductive matters during the preparatory meetings of the Beijing conference and at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, religious and conservative governments and non-state actors organised themselves and successfully blocked the inclusion of sexuality rights in its final outcome documents of the Beijing Conference.<sup>13</sup> In a widely criticised move at the time, the Vatican successfully delayed any debate on paragraph 8.25 of the outcome document dealing with abortion for two days (Crossette, 1994). The final text states that abortion cannot be considered a method of family planning. "For the sake of reaching a diplomatic consensus with the Holy See and some conservative Islamic countries,<sup>14</sup> the dilution of the original more scientifically based draft recommendations on subjects such as sexual and reproductive health, abortion, adolescents, and family diversity was accepted" by the participants at the Conference (Avramov & Cliquet, 2016, 101-102). Similarly, a binary and restrictive definition of 'gender' was introduced by the Holy See during preparatory meetings for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Specifically, the document states that gender, as used in the Platform for Action, "was intended to be interpreted and understood as it was in ordinary, generally accepted usage", i.e., emphasising the biological aspects of gender, instead of the social construction of gender roles and expectations (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017, 9). Until today, the Holy See insist on defining gender as agreed upon in Beijing, e.g., in the OSCE and UN. For example, in 2011, in its address to the CSW, the Holy See stated, "a different and radical understanding of gender had been circulated during informal discussions, but was rejected" (Laici, 2011).

Despite their (partly) successful interventions, the Holy See was concerned that "sexual and reproductive rights [as mentioned in the Beijing Conference outcome document] would become a vehicle for the international recognition of abortion, attacks on traditional motherhood and a legitimization of homosexuality" (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017, 9). This is likely why, despite the achievements by anti-gender actors, Cairo and Beijing were seen as a defeat to patriarchal understandings of gender and sexuality, by both conservative and progressive actors. Consequently, Cairo and Beijing should also be understood as the moment when key features of the anti-gender movement began to take shape: their alliances, narratives, and strategies.

### First iterations of 'gender ideology'

Dale O'Leary, a US Catholic close to Opus Dei and an anti-choice activist, is regarded as the first person to referred to gender as an agenda or ideology with a view of explaining what had happened at Cairo and Beijing. Picking up and internationalising ideas from the US Christian right, she criticised

*"the strategy of gender feminists [...] to push the evolution of human rights protected by the Unit-*

13 The Holy See had met with leaders in Iran and Libya in 1994, and the Al Azhar Islamic University in Cairo, issued a statement denouncing the draft Cairo document as offensive to Islam, in a statement paralleling that of the Vatican. See more at Tagliabue (1994); Crossette (1994)

14 On the presence of the Holy See in the United Nations, see Catholics for Choice (2013).



*ed Nations to include “sexual and reproductive rights and health” and use the mechanism of the United Nations to enforce these rights worldwide. In her publications, O’Leary characterises this feminism (considered ‘radical’) and the homosexual movement as constructors of a ‘gender agenda’ which seeks, through the influence of the United Nations, to impose itself in various countries. Her ideas presented a condensed, accessible narrative about what occurred during the conferences and provided a political framework that would allow for different appropriations, meanings, and tactical uses. The labelling of gender as an ideology was later incorporated into Vatican documents and displaced the ‘culture of death’ as the framework for understanding the threat.”*  
Vaggione (2020, 255-256)

Their efforts continued to be successful, and the concepts were picked up and incorporated into the existing lobbying strategies against abortion or marriage equality by actors such as Mary Ann Glendon, former Ambassador of the US to the Holy See and former Chair of the Unalienable Rights Commission (2019-2020). Speaking about the ICPD+5 in 1999, participant Charlotte Bunch writes “we often found ourselves reduced to defending the turf gained in Beijing or seemingly only making incremental advances. Conservative nongovernmental forces, primarily from the religious right-wing in North America, were present in large numbers and worked with representatives from a handful of determined and very vocal countries and the Holy See to water down the Beijing commitments or at least stall any efforts to go forward from them” (Bunch, 2001, 133).

While the perceived defeat in Beijing has been the main driver behind the Vatican’s motivation to develop the school of thoughts on ‘gender ideology’ in the 1990s and 2000s, it is important to highlight that even before the 1990s, mobilisation against the rights of women, specifically SRHR, have been present. As the conversation about SRHR shifted from demographers to governments in Bucharest at the Second International Conference on Population and Development (IPCD) in 1974, the Holy See and other conservative states already began to oppose international consensus on family planning, modern contraception, and to advance patriarchal ideas of the family and the role of women. By the third IPCD in Mexico City in 1984, as the topic of SRHR began to be discussed in terms of human rights, the Holy See and the US had managed to ensure that abortion will not be considered a method of family planning, just as President Ronald Reagan introduced the global gag rule<sup>15</sup>, which to this day stifles the provision of reproductive health care in a large part of the world. Since then, opposition to women’s rights, and more recently also LGBTQI\* rights, in multilateral fora has grown into increasingly connected, skilled, and well-funded transnational phenomenon. In the next section, we look at this evolution.

## ***2.2. Entrenching of the anti-gender discourse***

According to activist and scholar Doris Buss, (cited in Catholics for Choice, 2013), the biggest achievements of the Holy See at Beijing was the framing of reproductive rights and feminism as an outdated, Western relic of imperialism while its position was deemed to be “still fighting for [women and girls]” otherwise “abandoned” by reproductive rights activists. As we demon-

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<sup>15</sup> Otherwise known as the Mexico City Policy, the rule prohibits any recipient of US federal grants to promote or discuss abortion, even when they do so with their own, or third party, funds.

strate in Section 4, this narrative is still being applied by anti-gender actors today. Since then, the Vatican has elaborated several versions of its opposition to the term ‘gender’ and SRHR into the broader human rights framework<sup>16</sup>, defending the power of religion to define law and therefore protect the symbolic order of society (Vaggione, 2020). As recently as 2019, the Holy See argued that the “anthropological underpinnings of gender ideology, by denying the “difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman,” by promoting a “personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female,” ultimately makes human identity “the choice of the individual” and undermines the “anthropological basis for the family” (Nuncio, 2019). Note the references to gender equality, gender roles, and gender identity (difference and reciprocity), as well as the reference to the family, which serve the discursive purpose of speaking out against the diversity of families beyond the heterosexual ‘father+mother+child(ren) model’ and against the equality of men and women (since they are understood to be complementary, and therefore do not need to be equal). Simultaneously, arguing that ‘gender ideology’ is a threat to the ‘natural anthropological order’, serves to frame societal norms as superior to individual choice over societal norms.

Over the last two decades, we have witnessed a significant transnational organisation of the anti-gender movement (also in the domestic context) as well as the emergence of new anti-gender actors, new strategies, and a further entrenchment of the anti-gender discourse. This has been particularly visible in Europe and Latin America. Although several mobilisations took place before (Spain, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia), it was after the visibility and success of the La Manif pour Tous movement in France in 2012, a wave of similar ‘concerned citizens’ grassroots protests began taking place in Europe. While each national movement was triggered by a current or expected policy debate in their context, many examples in Europe between 2010 and 2015 revolved around marriage equality and equal rights for LGBTQI\* persons. The initiatives also began to display an overwhelming similarity in terms of language, symbols, and narratives. Around the same time, the anti-gender movement in Latin America gained momentum, and anti-gender actors have been increasingly working to engage in Africa and Asia. The great majority of what is considered the new generation of anti-gender actors has contributed to a further entrenchment and normalisation of the ‘gender ideology’ discourse in the public discourse, beyond explicit anti-gender circles. Across the globe, politicians have taken up the language of gender ideology.

*“[a]t the peak of [the anti-gender] campaigns it was not uncommon for ‘gender ideology’ or political correctness to be portrayed as the new incarnation of Nazism and Leninism (Polish MP Beata Kempa), bemoaned for enslaving the people (Ukrainian Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk), presented as a threat to children comparable to paedophilia (Slovak MP Pavol Gorisak), or blamed for turning American campuses into ‘ivy-covered North Koreas’ (American public intellectual William Lind)”*  
Grzebalska, et al. (2017)

The programme of the German CSU party – which forms part of the current German government – states that families need to have freedom from “gender ideology” (CSU Landesleitung, 2016). Mexican researcher Siobhan Guerrero McManus points out how prevalent and normalised the concept of gender ideology has become: “The general population has taken up

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16 See Vaggione (2020) for a more detailed history.

the vocabulary of these groups. People ask ‘oh, you work on gender ideology?’ believing that it is a thing” (McManus, 2020).<sup>17</sup>

By developing and advancing the concept of ‘gender ideology’, anti-gender actors have created a dynamic, within which the notion of ‘gender’ is threatening, uniting separate issues associated with the “progressive agenda under one umbrella term”. This will be further elaborated in the next section, which will discuss anti-gender actors themselves before elaborating how the concept of a ‘gender ideology’ serves as “symbolic’ glue” (Grzebalska, et al., 2017) bringing together various actors and issues.

## *3. Anti-Gender Actors*

The anti-gender movement consist of a wide range of actors, which depending on the context and timing, take upon different roles and/or mobilise against various issues. The following section builds upon Kuhar and Paternotte’s classification of anti-gender actors into three groups: the old, well-established groups; the newly established ones; and the allies (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017a, 259–260). This section discusses each of these groups and the interlinkages between many of these actors. However, it is by no means an exhaustive analysis of all the actors at play.

### *3.1. The ‘old’*

The ‘old’ category includes actors who have existed before the 2000s and are in many cases well-established within domestic but also international politics. This includes anti-abortion groups, family groups, men’s and father’s rights groups, far-right and religious organisations, conservative think tanks, and faith-based professional organisations, such as the Catholic Medical Associations (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

The most visible ‘old’ actors are the Catholic Church and other Christian religious organisations. As mentioned before, the Catholic Church has been instrumental in developing and advancing the so-called ‘gender ideology’ (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). Although the role of the Catholic Church varies significantly across contexts, it continues to act “as a fundamental discourse producer, and a space for intellectuals and activists to meet and exchange views and strategies, as well as an extremely powerful mobilization and diffusion network” (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017a, 262). Increasingly, lay believers, such as Opus Dei or the Charismatic Review, and associated actors, are also playing more important roles (ibid). The conservative French think tank Fondation de service politique (founded in 1992), for example, was instrumental in the anti-gender mobilisation in France in 2010s (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017) when lobbying against inclusive and gender-sensitive sexual education. Other religious groups including Muslim, Protestant, Orthodox, and Jewish also support and advance anti-gender campaigns.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview, 3 July 2020.

For example, in 2018, the Romanian Church backed the Coalition for Family launching a petition for a referendum against same-sex marriage (Hoctor, et al., 2020). At the multilateral level, there has also been cooperation between Christian and Muslim actors, such as in Beijing when the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation joined the Holy See (and others) in advocating for a biological definition of gender. A more recent example is Egypt and Indonesia's co-sponsorship of the Geneva Consensus Declaration along with the United States, which the Washington Post (Berger, 2020) describes as formalising "a coalition united in opposition to the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which forms the basis for the characterization of abortion and same-sex marriage as human rights under international law". However, interviews and research conducted as part of this study demonstrate that that initiatives at the multilateral are mainly driven and initiated by the Holy See or Christian countries, occasionally joined by other faith groups.

Another important actor in the group of 'old actors' are right-wing think tanks and institutions, such as the US-American Heritage Foundation. Founded in the early 1970s, with the explicit goal of "creating, selling and injecting deeply conservative ideas into the American mainstream" (Mayer, 2017, 94). As an action-oriented think-tank, actively cultivating and influencing politicians, it embodies the idea of a new sort of think tank as a disguised political weapon (ibid). Like many other conservative and right-wing think tanks established at this time in the US and funded by a small group of extraordinarily wealthy families, the Heritage Foundation focused initially on lobbying for free-market policies and against government regulations – from taxes to environmental protection and welfare. From the 1990s onwards, they increasingly focused on "conservative and moral issues and in particular family values" (Mayer, 2017, 103). Most recently, the Heritage Foundation repeatedly spoke out against the Equality Act, a legislation proposed by the US Congress which would amend existing civil rights law, such the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in, for example, employment, housing, credit, education, public spaces, and services, federally funded programs, and jury service (Human Rights Campaign, 2020). The Heritage Foundation falsely claimed that "the Equality Act would further inequality by penalizing everyday Americans for their beliefs about marriage and biological sex", lead to the "erasure of women" and normalise "ideological 'education' in schools" (The Heritage Foundation, 2020).

A significant characteristic of many of these 'old actors' is their well-established connectedness within national and international politics, which allows them to directly influence political processes. In the case of the US, these conservative and right-wing NGOs and think tanks – the Heritage Foundation, the Center For Family and Human Rights (C-Fam), the World Congress of Families or the Alliance Defending Freedoms "funnel political donations, provide ideological leadership (...), draft model legislation, vet judicial nominees, train activists and engage in public advocacy" (Sanders & Jenkins, 2020). In 2018, the New York Times reported how the Heritage Foundation managed to place hundreds of its people in the Trump-Administration, in just about every government agency (Mahler, 2018). Moreover, both the Heritage Foundation and C-Fam were part of the official US delegation to the 2017 UN Commission on the Status of Women, and many of these conservative and right-wing NGOs enjoy consultative status at the UN (Sanders & Jenkins, 2020). The Vatican is an official participating State to the

OSCE and has permanent observer status to the UN and participates as an observer in various other regional intergovernmental organisations, including the Council of Europe, the Organisation of American States, and the African Union (Holy See Mission, 2004).

In addition to their political networks, many of these ‘old actors’ are able and willing to spend vast sums of money to advance their political goals. In October 2020, OpenDemocracy revealed that twenty-eight US Christian right groups, including the Heritage Foundation and other organisations with ties to the Trump administration, have spent at least USD 280 Million to influence foreign laws, policies, and public opinion against the rights of women and LGBTQI\* people outside of the US since 2007 (Provost & Archer, 2020). As all of these organisations are registered as tax-exempt non-profit organisations, they do not need to disclose their donors (ibid). The largest share of the USD 280 Million went to Europe, which was mainly channelled through two organisations: The American Center for Law and Justice, founded in 1990 and currently run by President Trump’s personal lawyer Jay Sekulow, via its European Branch The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ), and the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF). Both the ECLJ and the ADF also have consultative status at the UN (ADF, 2010) (ECLJ, n.d.). As OpenDemocracy reports: The ECLJ “has intervened in two cases to defend Italy’s position against gay marriage. It has also intervened in at least seven cases involving Poland, including at the European Court of Human Rights, to defend that country’s conservative policies including against divorce and abortion” (Provost & Archer, 2020).

### *The challenges philanthropy poses to gender-equality*

*This political influence bought by these right-wing institutions should be seen within the wider dynamics of philanthropy. In his newest book, Paul Valley (2020) discusses the impact of philanthropy on the democratic system. One of the problems he discusses is the fact that the priorities of the rich do not necessarily align with the priorities of the society they claim to improve. A study from 2013 shows that “the richest 1% of Americans are considerably more right-wing than the public as a whole on issues of taxation, economic regulation and especially welfare programmes for the poor” (Valley, 2020). This also appears to be true in the case of reproductive rights in the US. The position by the Republican Party and influential think tanks do not reflect the majoritarian opinion. “Polls indicate that 79% of Americans favour access to abortion in some (ranging from most to a few) or all circumstances (...). Likewise, 67% of Americans favour same-sex marriage rights” (Sanders & Jenkins, 2020). Moreover, philanthropists concerned about inequality tend to focus on the symptoms – building schools, housing, infrastructure, while conservative and right-wing philanthropists focus on influencing public debates as well as social and political change in such a way that the results accommodate their conservative, right-wing, and neoliberal worldview. Conservative philanthropists “fund climate-change-denying academics, support free-market thinktanks, strike alliances with conservative religious groups, create populist TV and radio stations, and set up “enterprise institutes” inside universities” (Valley, 2020). Progressive philanthropists, however, are “disinclined to back groups that challenge how capitalism operates. They are reluctant to back groups lobbying to promote the empowerment of the disadvantaged people”, tend “not fund initiatives to change tax and fiscal policies that are tilted in favour of the wealthy” and “rarely think of investing in the media, legal and academic networks of key opinion-formers in order to shift social and corporate culture and redress the influence of conservative philanthropy” (Valley, 2020).*

*This reluctance to support and finance political organisation, including feminist organisations, is not only an issue of philanthropists. Last year, The Guardian reported that while governments and international organisations are increasingly committed to funding gender equality, they are reluctant to fund feminist or women's rights organisations: "The latest figures from 2016–2017 show that a meagre 1% of all gender-focused aid went to women's organisations" (Staszewska, et al., 2019). Already in 2015, the Association for Women's Rights and Development (AWID) reported that "the median budget for 740 women's organisations all over the globe was a miserly US\$20,000" (Durán, 2015). Most recently, AWID revealed that "99% of foundation grants and official development assistance do NOT reach feminist movements and women's rights organisation" (Dolker, 2020). At the same time, even governments committed to human rights fund anti-feminist organisations: In 2020, the governing coalition in Germany decided to fund the anti-feminist organisation Forum für Soziale Inklusion with 400.000 Euros in 2021 (Spiegel, 2020).*

### 3.2. The 'new'

The group of new actors includes newly established groups that were specifically created to combat 'gender ideology' over the last decade. This includes civil initiatives and 'concerned citizens', new think tanks, and institutions as well as political parties (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). The activist movement "*La Manif Pour Tous*", which emerged in the early 2010s in France in opposition to same-sex marriage is one of the most well-known examples of this group of actors. By now "*La Manif pour Tous*" has 'inspired' activists all over Europe (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017) including Germany ("*Demo für Alle*") and Finland ("*Aito avioliitto*"). Other examples include the "*Frente Nacional por la Familia*", established in 2016 in Mexico by both Catholic and evangelical groups (McManus, 2020). One of the key characteristics of these 'new actors' is their ability to mobilise beyond the "original ecclesiastical confines and into the public spotlight" (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017, 81) and organise mass demonstrations.

Many of these movements around the world adopt the same visual/brand identity, use the same slogans and arguments, and often exchange speakers and prominent figures (Casullo, 2020).<sup>18</sup> Even in Iceland, which does not have a prominent anti-gender movement, "in comments under recent news stories about trans issues we see the same kind of behaviour that we see in Europe, same terminology and even the same jokes" (Arnarsson, 2020).<sup>19</sup>

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18 Interview, 17 September 2020.

19 Interview, 12 October 2020.



2. An example of the logos of several citizen initiatives in Europe, all using similar visual identities and language (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2018).

In addition to the mobilisation of civil initiatives, the newly created institutions of various kinds form part of the ‘new actors’. Recently, Mexico has witnessed the creation of centres and clinics promoting so-called conversion therapies (McManus, 2020), a practice which can amount to torture, according to UN Independent Expert on sexual orientation and gender identity Victor Madrigal-Borloz. Many of these centres are backed by “groups close to the Vatican” (ibid). Another example is the Women and Democracy Association (KADEM), a Turkish government-close women’s rights organisation, founded in 2013, which as the authors argue in the case study on MENA, is the “[Justice and Development Party (AKP)]’s attempt to hijack the independent and powerful feminist movement in Turkey” (Griffon, et al., 2020). KADEM’s former President, Sare Aydin Yilmaz (who is now an AKP deputy) argues “universalist/feminist demands on equal rights and ‘liabilities’ bring more harm than good for populations with different needs” (Ayhan, 2019). While KADEM has spoken out in favour of the Istanbul Convention, they did not fail to use the moment to highlight that they consider homosexuality as a threat to the family (BIA news desk, 2020). As academic Tutku Ayhan argues “the gender ideology it disseminates is one that essentializes both women and men, ignoring the social construction of both masculinity and femininity. KADEM hinders the work of other feminist organisations, which challenge those conservative ideals, and is at its core, entirely anti-gender” (Ayhan, 2019). According to its own accounts, KADEM has received funding from the EU (Schneider, 2019).

The group of new actors also includes parliamentary groups and political parties, such as the STOP Gender Ideology in the Polish parliament (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). In some instances, ad-hoc civil society initiatives have turned into political parties, such as in Slovenia and Croatia, or the case of “*La Manif Pour Tous*”. The newly founded party *Frente Nacional Anti-AMLO* in Mexico openly embraces anti-LGBTQI\* and anti-feminist rhetoric (McManus, 2020). In addition to political parties on the national level, new anti-gender actors also operate in regional parliaments: “[i]n Poland, since early 2019, several municipalities, countries and regions have adopted to refrain from taking any action to encourage tolerance of LGBTI people and funding civil society organisations working to promote equal right” (Hoctor, et al., 2020).

### ***3.3. The allies***

The group of allies, as identified by Kuhar and Paternotte (2017a), includes academics, politicians, co-operations, and journalists/media outlets. As will be detailed in Section 5, anti-gender actors make strategic use of social media platforms, but traditional media outlets are also hugely important for them to reinforce the anti-gender discourse in public debates. This includes right-wing media, but also conservative media. For example, scholar Paula-Irene Villa explains that mainstream (conservative) German newspapers (like the FAZ, Die Welt) contribute to shaping the anti-gender public debate by providing much space for anti-gender rhetoric which describes gender as political correctness without scientific basis, contributing to gender becoming a part of an assumed cosmopolitan international ivory tower which is totally detached from real people and their problems (Villa, 2020).<sup>20</sup>

Established political parties and individual politicians can also represent allies to anti-gender campaigns. In some instances, they support or ally themselves with anti-gender campaigns to secure more votes, build political alliances or to increase their visibility. This holds true for conservative and Christian-democratic parties in France, Spain, Slovenia, or Croatia, as well as right-wing parties (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). In other instances, politicians embrace the anti-gender campaign, and once elected, anti-gender policies become part of their and the state's agenda (ibid). During the presidential campaign in Brazil, Bolsonaro appealed to the large evangelical population by establishing strong ties with religious leaders and portraying himself as a bastion of traditional family and religious values (Hirao, 2020). Similarly, in 2013, as Ukraine was struggling to decide “whether to continue its application to the European Union, or to join Vladimir Putin's new “Eurasian customs union”, Russia's President Putin quickly presented this choice as one between “gayropa” and a traditional Orthodox Slavic society” (Gevisser, 2020, 21). “There was even a popular punning rhyme on the Russian television many Ukrainians watched: ‘The way to Europe is through the ass’” (ibid). By now, fighting ‘gender ideology’ is an essential part of the state policy, and both the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church are instrumental in developing and supporting anti-gender campaigns (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). While most political parties that embrace and/or support anti-gender actors are conservative at best, left political parties have also aligned themselves with anti-gender actors. For example, already in 2013, leftist Ecuadorian president Rafael Corréa denounced ‘gender ideology’ as destructive to the family (ibid) (see section 1.3).

### ***3.4. Gender as a ‘symbolic glue’***

As the previous section has shown, anti-gender actors are hugely diverse. In most cases, these actors do not share the “the same ideological framework” (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017a, 259) and their motivations to either drive or support anti-gender campaigns vary strongly. What unites them is the ability to “squeeze different discourses into one big threat” (ibid), and construct ‘gender/gender ideology’ as “an attack on at least one of the three Ns”, which these actors claim to defend: nature, the nation or normality (ibid). As Marks Gevisser outlines, for example, in Poland, Hungary, and Russia: “public homophobia was part of a greater project of asserting a national identity against migrants, another perceived negative consequences – along with gay

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<sup>20</sup> Interview, 1 July 2020.



visibility – of open borders” (Gevisser, 2020, 22). He further notes, that throughout the entire region, nativist nationalist politicians “began to use LGBT rights as a way to re-establish a sovereignty they felt had been conceded to Europe” (ibid).

*“Gender ideology’ has come to signify the failure of democratic representation, and opposition to this ideology has become a means of rejecting different facets of the current socioeconomic order, from the prioritization of identity politics over material issues, and the weakening of people’s social, cultural and political security, to the detachment of social and political elites and the influence of transnational institutions and the global economy on nation-states”*  
(Grzebalska, et al., 2017).

The various connections outlined so far, demonstrate how the anti-gender movement has made use of the unifying capacity of ‘gender ideology’. What unifies all of these actors is their attempt to either maintain or promote social and political hierarchies that benefit them – and not so much their resistance to the rights of women and LGBTQI\* per se. Gender serves as a ‘symbolic’ glue” (Grzebalska, et al., 2017) bringing together various actors that otherwise do share a same worldview.

## *4. Issues and Narratives*

What are the issues anti-gender campaigns mobilise around? Within this section, we detail the opposition against four core issues that we have identified: 1) ‘gender’ as a term and concept; 2) SRHR, including the right to abortion and reproductive technologies; 3) sexuality education; and 4) LGBTQI\* rights. However, this is not an exhaustive list. In the following analysis of the core issues, we outline the main narrative used to contest them.

### *4.1.1. ‘Gender’ as a term and concept*

Anti-gender campaigns often target ‘gender’ as a term and concept both on the policy and the academic level. This manifests itself for example in mobilisation against Gender Studies; gender equality initiatives such as diversity and representation quotas, gender-neutral language or gender-disaggregated data; or international treaties that specifically address gender inequality, such as the Istanbul Convention.

For example, in June 2014, following anti-gender civil society mobilisation, the National Congress of Brazil, the legislative body of Brazil’s federal government removed references to ‘gender equality’ in the proposed ten-year national strategy for education before passing the bill. In the case study on the MENA region, the authors describe how Gender Studies is routinely attacked in Tunisia for ‘promoting homosexuality’ (Griffon et al., 2020). Similarly, in Turkey, Gender Studies has been attacked by the exclusion and marginalisation of and queer and feminist researchers from university positions (ibid).

Increasingly, the Istanbul Convention is being attacked, even by countries which have ratified it, such as Poland, which is now threatening to withdraw from the treaty completely. The arguments made by anti-gender actors against the Istanbul Convention are numerous, and mainly false, including claims about the purpose and scope of the Convention. For example, that it forces a non-defined ‘gender ideology’ or that it would institute a third gender. In Section 4.2.2 we outline how anti-gender campaigns have mobilised against the Istanbul Convention in Bulgaria.

In other contexts, actors have not directly attacked gender as a concept, but advance their own understanding of gender. The ruling AK party in Turkey has, in the past decade, “started to bypass gender equality laws in favour of pro-natalist policies promoting motherhood” and ‘gender justice’, which refers to the concept of gender roles being God-given and naturally complementary, but not equal (Hülagü, 2020). In Turkey, gender equality has been described as the “harmonious matrimonial unity between a responsible and protective man and an empowered but still modest woman” (ibid). In the United States, some Christian religious actors often use the concept of ‘gender complementarity’ which refers to the complementarity of men leading and women following. (The Reformation Project, n.d.)

As we demonstrate in 4.2, the common threat of the narratives advanced by anti-gender actors against gender as a concept depict ‘gender’ as radical and/or revolutionary ideas aiming to break down all categories that hold well-ordered societies together.<sup>21</sup> There are also elements of nativism/xenophobia, and a demographic panic, which we explore in more detail below.

#### ***4.1.2. SRHR including the right to abortion and reproductive technologies***

Sexual and reproductive health and rights, specifically the right to abortion and new reproductive technologies, are also frequent targets of attack of anti-gender actors.

In the early 2010s, the government of Macedonia reversed the policy that legalised abortion from the 1970s and introduced several restrictions such as biased counselling regulations and a mandatory “reflection” period, making abortion next to impossible. In Germany, “abortion remains illegal [...] until today, with important exceptions (obligational counselling, up to the second trimester under certain conditions) being exempt from punishment” (Villa, 2020).<sup>22</sup> Moreover, doctors performing abortions are not allowed to inform about the procedure, and abortions are still not a compulsory part of the medical curriculum in German universities. Across Europe “anti-equality and anti-SRHR actors have pursued legislative and judicial initiatives seeking to remove grounds for legal abortion, to introduce new barriers to access to abortion into legislation, and to expand legal protections for medical professionals who refuse to provide abortion care on grounds of conscience or religion” (Hoctor, et al., 2020). In Section 5.7. we discuss such legislative challenges in more detail, including the most recent abortion ban in Poland. In Finland, despite its fifty-year long history of safe and legal abortion, an MP

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21 See, for instance Kuhar (2018) and Apperly (2019).

22 Interview, 1 July 2020.

has proposed that the right to abortion should be enshrined in the Constitution, for fear of upcoming attacks from the anti-gender movement (Korhonen, 2020).<sup>23</sup>

In some areas, efforts to legalise abortion have been met with fierce resistance and, in some cases, reprisals. In Mexico, as certain progressive states (Mexico City, Oaxaca) legalised abortion until the twelfth week of pregnancy, other states reacted by further restricting their abortion laws (McManus, 2020). Recent efforts to decriminalise abortion in South Korea have been met with fierce resistance from conservative actors arguing that life starts at conception (Ryall, 2020).

Anti-gender actors are also increasingly targeting African states, which is particularly problematic in places where SRHR is largely provided by (international) NGOs. CitizenGo, a platform for ultraconservative campaigners launched in 2010, has been organising raids and social media attacks against abortion clinics in Nigeria, Niger, Tanzania, Kenya, and Malawi, among other places. In South Africa, those NGOs providing SRH are largely depend on US funding and are thus subject to the global gag rule, resulting in a situation where “only wealthy women can have access to proper sexual and reproductive health care” (Mofokeng, 2020). Six Latin American countries ban abortion altogether, while nine further countries only allow it when the mother’s life is in danger (Ryall, 2020; Adegbeye, 2019; Goñi, 2018; Vivaldi, 2019). While finalising this study, the lower house of Parliament in Argentina passed a bill legalising abortion, mainly due to the prioritisation of the issue by the current government and the relentless campaigning by local feminist activists (Politi, 2020).

In addition to the right to abortion, other issues related to SRHR that anti-gender actors mobilise against include reproductive technologies, such as in-vitro fertilization or fertility medication. In Slovenia, the civil partnership law does not extend to same sex couples’ access to joint adoption or in-vitro fertilisation. In the United States, medical professionals are legally allowed to decline care when it violates their personal beliefs, which hits trans and intersex persons particularly hard (National LGBTQ Task Force, 2019). In Germany, egg cell donation is illegal, as is the use of donated egg cells for in-vitro fertilisation. Statutory health insurance only covers the full costs of in-vitro fertilisation for married, heterosexual couples and unmarried heterosexual couples and homosexual women also struggle to get tax deductions for such procedures. With lesbian couples, only the birth mother is considered as a parent, the other partner must officially adopt the child before they are recognised as a parent (LSVD, n.d). In Finland, automatic parentage is recognised for both homosexual female partners (Koop, 2018). Lesbian couples also have more family rights than gay male couples, as sperm donation is allowed (YLE, 2019). At the same time, public hospitals do not handle egg cell and sperm donation, which in practice means that homosexual couples must bear the costs of the procedure themselves.

### ***4.1.3. Sexuality education***

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and education against gender stereotypes in schools

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23 Interview, 26 October 2020.

24 Interview, 17 July 2020.

is also a major topic anti-gender actors mobilise against, despite (or due to) the fact that multiple studies have demonstrated a link between access to sexuality education, gender equality, and SRHR (UNESCO, 2015). The rationale advanced by anti-gender campaigns is that sexuality education in schools exposes children to degenerate ideas, which they are not ready to process, transforming them into sexual deviants. There are examples of this across Europe (Poland, Slovenia, France, Italy, Croatia, Czech Republic), South Africa, Chile, Mexico, the United States, and others (Casullo, 2020;<sup>25</sup> Jarkovská, 2020; Mofokeng, 2020;<sup>26</sup> McManus, 2020;<sup>27</sup> Vivaldi, 2019; Kuhar & Zobec, 2017). Depending on how narrowly the goals of opposition are defined, anti-gender actors can either object to the very idea of sexuality education being included in school curriculums or demand the respect of ‘parental rights’ to decide what their children learn in school. For instance, Mexican anti-gender actors took up the idea of the ‘parental pin’ from their Spanish counterparts, which is the requirement that parents must approve what is taught in schools – specifically developed to oppose comprehensive sexuality education and discussions on diversity. As we see in the Mexico case study, the state of Aguascalientes passed such a bill, but it was challenged by the Mexican Supreme Court of Justice and its future is now uncertain (McManus, 2020).

Similarly, the EU case study details legal attacks against sexuality education coming from national parliaments: In Romania, Parliament passed a bill in 2020 (later declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court of Romania) forbidding educational institutions from propagating theories and opinion on gender identity where gender is a separate concept from biological sex. In Poland, the parliament is examining a draft law entitled “Stop Paedophilia”, which seeks to criminalise the provision of sexuality education and evidence-based information on sexual and reproductive health and rights to adolescents (Hector, et al., 2020). In Italy, grassroots and citizen initiatives blocked the introduction of mandatory comprehensive sexuality education and children’s books on family diversity have been pulled from the curriculum (Hector, et al., 2020). The case study on the US details how the Heritage Foundation argues references to sexuality education should be opposed in multilateral fora as well (Sanders & Jenkins, 2020). Indeed, during the 2019 Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) discussions, the US along with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Malaysia, and Russia petitioned to remove previous language from the conclusions of the CSW, including on comprehensive sexuality education (Sanders & Jenkins, 2020).

The consequences of the challenges and the frequent acquiescence by authorities to water down or scrap plans for comprehensive sexuality education in schools have real consequences for the lived realities of women and LGBTQI\* persons. Sexuality education has positive effects, especially when it is gender-focused, towards increasing young people’s knowledge and improving their attitudes related to sexual and reproductive health and behaviours (UNESCO, 2018). Raising awareness about sexual consent can contribute to decreased violence against women and learning about diversity in the context of CSE can help to eliminate prejudice and societal bias. Moreover, overcoming gendered stereotypes, in particular sexualised femininity or destructive masculinity, can sustainably contribute to gender equality.

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25 Interview, 17 September 2020.

26 Interview, 17 July 2020.

27 Interview, 3 July 2020.

#### **4.1.4. *LGBTQI\* rights***

The progress to ensure the equality of rights for LGBTQI\* persons and protection against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity is also a target of anti-gender attacks. As (Gevisser, 2020, 12) argues, there is a new human rights frontier between those “places increasingly integrating queer people into their societies as full citizens, and those finding new ways to shut them out now that they had come into the open”. The anti-gender movement takes issue with LGBTQI\* mainstreaming, marriage equality, adoption by same-sex families, gender identity recognition, and intersex recognition. Paternotte and Kuhar (2018) argue that LGBTQI\* rights work as the biggest trigger for the new generation of anti-gender campaigns in Europe.

The Russian state and its laws against gay propaganda are well known, as is the fact that consensual same-sex relations can lead to imprisonment or even the death penalty in a multitude of countries. According to ILGA, almost sixty countries foresee imprisonment for consensual same-sex relations, and eleven envisage the death penalty (ILGA, 2020). In the contribution on the MENA region, Griffon et al (2020), describe laws against ‘debauchery’ in Egypt, and ‘propaganda’ in Turkey that are used to imprison and pressure LGBTQI\* activists.

The case study on Europe details the example of Croatia, where following the government’s preparation of a draft law to allow same-sex couples to register as “life partners”, a petition for a referendum against same-sex marriage was initiated by a Catholic group called In the Name of the Family. This led to a referendum in 2013, which resulted in a constitutional change defining marriage as a union “between a man and a woman”. Slovakia and Hungary also introduced such definitions in their constitutions in 2014 and 2011, respectively. In Slovenia, an inclusive definition of family and recognition of marriage and adoption rights of same-sex couples was repealed following a public referendum in 2011. In 2020, Hungary banned the legal changing of gender for transgender and intersex persons (Hector, et al., 2020). In the Mexico case study, the author points out how 470 people were murdered due to their sexual orientation or gender identity between 2012 and 2018. Several Mexican federal states are currently making it increasingly difficult for trans persons to have their identities recognised, and several other states have opened conversion camps to ‘cure’ homosexuality (McManus, 2020). In 2020, twenty-one countries in Europe (eight of which are EU Member States),<sup>28</sup> still require trans persons to undergo mandatory sterilisation to qualify to legally change their gender.<sup>29</sup>

It is important to note that the LGBTQI\* movement and trans persons, specifically, can also be attacked by groups who do not agree that feminism should be concerned with, or supporting, trans women, i.e., arguing that trans women are not women, rather portraying them as sexual predators and males in female spaces. These Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) argue that the LGBTQI\* movement “defends an agenda that erases women or legitimise their oppression by promoting surrogacy and the recognition of trans identities” (McManus, 2020). This is a division also routinely exploited by the anti-gender movement.

28 The full list includes the following EU Member States: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, and Slovakia. It also includes Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kosovo, Lichtenstein, Monaco, Montenegro, North Macedonia, San Marino, Serbia and Turkey. (TGEU, 2020).

29 See more: Amnesty International (2017) and Valojää (2018).

## ***4.2. Narratives of anti-gender campaigns***

Having sketched out a non-exhaustive list of the issues against which anti-gender actors mobilise, we proceed with an analysis of the narratives and arguments they use to advance their agenda. We discuss the naturalistic narratives that argue that ‘gender ideology’ destroys appeal to nature and tradition/religion as the true values of society, fear-based narratives with a focus on the trope of “saving the children”, the narratives that frame anti-gender discourse as science, narratives that advance a mutually exclusive view of human rights, narratives that gender equality has already been achieved, and finally narratives which argue that gender is a colonial import or totalitarian ideology of some sort. Like with the issues above, this is not an exhaustive, nor detailed list. Instead, it serves to illustrate in a general way the various narrative frames deployed by anti-gender actors in a variety of contexts.

### ***4.2.1. Naturalistic and religious narratives***

A common narrative for the anti-gender movement is the appeal to nature and tradition/religion as the true values of society. The two narratives are different, but in both ‘gender ideology’ is understood as seeking to destroy the natural and traditional social order. A recent report by EuroMed Rights and the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation describes this narrative as: “men and women are, by nature, different and therefore unequal. Men and women are to be regarded as complementary and gender and feminism are against the design of God and religion. Depending on the context, sometimes these arguments are not linked to religion but to a certain scientific anti-feminist discourse that is prevalent in more secular societies” (Griffon, et al., 2019). For example, in countries like Germany the resistance to gender equality does not come from a religious conviction but rather “the strong secular common belief” that gender equality forces men and women out of their traditional roles and endangers the family and therefore society (Villa, 2018, 104). Even in religious places, the reaction is not always framed in religious terms: “important parts of society think that the patriarchal structure is the natural structure of society and authority has to fall upon the parents, specifically the father. Often, people who complain say they are religious, but they never frame the topic in religious terms, they simply refuse to give up their authority as a father”. In fact, “this is the basic structure of the discourse. They have an idea of natural hierarchy and gender is a crucial dimension of that order, but it is just one dimension. You have gender, the family, labour, all filtered through the same discursive lens. It is all about defending and defining a society in which white rich straight males are in charge” (Casullo, 2020).<sup>30</sup>

An example of this narrative is the Polish member of European Parliament Janusz Korwin-Mikke who, in 2017, claimed women did not deserve equal pay as they are naturally smaller, weaker, and less intelligent (Griffon, et al., 2019). Another example is the Heritage Foundation which, in a report on ‘Marriage and Family’ argued that “marriage exists to bring a man and a woman together as husband and wife to be father and mother to any children their union produces” (Anderson, 2013).

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30 Interview, 17 September 2020.

- The tropes prevalent within this narrative are contextually dependent but centre on:
- The inherent linking of women with the concept of ‘motherhood’ and the emphasis on women’s reproductive capacity as their main *raison d’être*.
- The emphasis of ‘family’ consisting of a father and mother plus children as the fundamental unit of society.
- Categorising ‘gender’ as a culture of death (about abortion, but also contraception or euthanasia) vs the traditional culture of life.<sup>31</sup>
- Framing “the equality of men and women in all spheres of life, the distinction between biological sex and gender, and sexual and reproductive health and rights, as unnatural, radical, and immoral”,<sup>32</sup> and presenting the traditional values they advocate as the only bulwark against it.
- The notion that gender equality denies both masculinity and femininity, therefore destroying traditional culture.<sup>33</sup>

The argument is premised on the dismissal of the role of society and norms in constructing different lived experiences of different genders. Instead, it focuses on biology (in the limited way that it is understood by anti-gender actors) as the only source of true knowledge (and by extension, social stability, and cohesion). This notion is then discursively linked to a variety of problems (social and economic) and the destabilising influence of gender is argued to be their cause. “The naturalisation of certain socially highly relevant differences such as gender, race, or sexuality is evoked once again as an antidote to “liquid modernity” (Villa, 2018, 111). The implication being that traditional values and power structures are a haven from the aberrant world outside.

Goetz (2020, 25) points out how the anti-gender movement tends to enjoy a narrative advantage here, “since they defend what is seen as familiar and accepted traditional social virtues”. She quotes an interviewee from the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (an international, feminist, membership organisation working towards gender equality, sustainable development and women’s rights established in 1982): “even progressive states won’t challenge the idea of family values” (ibid). This enables actors to use these narratives to advocate for what are essentially human rights violations, such as sexualised abuse of minors, commonly referred to as ‘underage marriage’. For example, in 2020, in Turkey, the AKP introduced a bill in parliament that proposed suspended sentences for child sex offenders if the parties are/get married and the age difference was less than ten years. This was premised on the argument that these men are not rapists or predators and these marriages are consensual. The bill has been widely criticised by women’s organisations in Turkey, arguing that it essentially legitimises statutory rape and child marriage. A similar bill had already been introduced in 2016 and was withdrawn amidst massive protests (Girls Not Brides, 2020).

#### ***4.2.2. Fearmongering / ‘Save our children’***

Fear is an underlying current in all the narratives advanced by anti-gender campaigns and described in this section: However, the fear-based arguments deployed ‘in the defence’ of chil-

31 See Vaggione (2020) on the Catholic Church’s deployment of this narrative.

32 See the case study on the United States for more on this.

33 See Kimio (2014), who explores this narrative in the context of Japan.

dren, who are framed as vulnerable, ‘the weakest link of any society’, are particularly concerning (Kuhar, 2020).<sup>34</sup> It is mainly being used to advocate against sexuality education in schools or LGBTQI\* rights. To provide just one example, in the Brazil case study, the author points out how, while gearing up for his campaign, President Bolsonaro referred to “the innocence of children in schools” during a 2016 speech to Congress.<sup>35</sup> In Russia, the anti-gay propaganda law was adopted with the formal reasoning that it “aimed at protecting children from information promoting the denial of traditional family values” (RFE/RL, 2018). During protests against sexuality education in California in the United States in 2019, parents argued “[w]e don’t want our kids raised with this kind of nuttiness,” [...] “We are a bunch of angry mama bears and papa bears protecting our kids and kicking political correctness in its teeth” (Bharath, 2019).

Following an attack by a group led by the Society and Values Association, the National Strategy for Children 2019–2030 in Bulgaria was withdrawn (National Network for Children, 2019). The group wrongly argued that the National Strategy will prohibit corporal punishment of children (which was already illegal) and would allow the state to take away children from Bulgarian families for trivial reasons (not buying them ice cream, for instance). The rhetoric drew a connection between the Norwegian funding to some of the organisations who had participated in the elaboration of the National strategy and concluded that, once the state takes away children, it will ‘give’ them to Norwegian gay couples who would then rename the children ‘Mohammed’ (National Network for Children, 2019). In this example, it is particularly interesting to note that the framing of the issue manages to combine disinformation with racist overtones and the idea that their opposition is to protect Bulgarian society against western imperialism. When the Bulgarian Orthodox Church spoke out against the National Strategy, they made it clear that they also oppose abortion and sexuality education (Leshtarska, 2019).

The underlying argument of fearmongering goes that ‘gender’ is inherently detrimental to the well-being of children. It rests on two pillars: the notion that children are empty vessels which are extremely vulnerable and impressionable and the premise that “the organised fight for gender equality is part of an LGBTQI\*+ conspiracy. Ultimately, gender and feminism will lead to the end of our civilisation” (Griffon, et al., 2019, 13).

The argument takes a variety of shapes:

- Comprehensive sexuality education in schools is a plot by the gender/LGBTQI\* conspiracy to turn our children gay/sexually loose/not reproduce.
- Same-sex marriage/parenting and pride marches expose impressionable children to deviant and aberrant behaviour.
- Feminism teaches children to hate men.

This idea is couched in the patriarchal fear delineated in the naturalist and religious narratives above. Children becoming gay/asexual/trans is bad in and of itself in this conceptualisation. The implied answer to the question of why that is bad would be that if our children use

<sup>34</sup> Interview, 3 July 2020.

<sup>35</sup> This was said in the context of the vote to impeach Dilma Roussef and was a reference to the trope that “communists eat children”, who must therefore be protected. The discursive links between the left/communism/feminism/gender vs the right/traditional values serve the purpose of compounding fears of corrupting the children.



contraception or get an abortion or become gay/asexual/trans and deviate from the *natural family* then they will not reproduce, therefore destroying our civilisation. This argument is inherently racist and xenophobic, as stokes fear that the others will take over because they, unlike *us*, continue to reproduce.<sup>36</sup> It further ignores entirely the fact that without “socially constructed binary divisions between male and female, between masculine and feminine, and the normativity that accompanies them,” there would be no LGBTQI\* people (Brown, 2021).

In making this argument, it would be misleading to say that parents themselves, exposed to one story only, are not genuinely concerned about the wellbeing of their own children. These fears can be very real and warrant engagement. What was problematic in the example discussed, is that anti-gender gender actors exploited these fears while the Bulgarian government, on the other hand, made no effort to publicly clarify that the National Strategy in no way foresees the measures that anti-gender actors are opposing.

#### ***4.2.3. Framing the anti-gender discourse as a scientific discourse***

In addition to naturalistic narratives and fear-based narratives, over the past years, anti-gender actors have made a “discursive shift to more technical and scientific analysis” rather than just religious or traditionalist appeals”. This new discourse “[a]ppeals to “science” and aims to excise gender as a social construction and reinforce a biological and binary conception of sex” (Sanders & Jenkins, 2020). As an example, the German organisation *Kirche in Not* (Church in Need) has argued that both “the Bible (Genesis) and natural sciences agree in their ideas on gender complementarity” (Mayer & Sauer, 2018, 30).<sup>37</sup> This argument is inextricably linked to the notion that the concept of gender, including Gender Studies, by contrast, is not science (Griffon, et al., 2019, 13) but rather an almost theological ideology. This is the case in a multitude of contexts. In Austria, for instance, the argument has been presented that Gender Studies does not adhere to scientific standards, that it follows predetermined political goals. Since it has no empirical basis and follows political goals, the argument goes, Gender Studies cannot be considered science – therefore it is an ideology (Mayer & Sauer, 2018, 30), whereas the anti-gender movement is grounded in science. In Germany, prominent newspapers like the FAZ, die Welt, NZZ, TAZ have published articles arguing that “Gender Studies are not scientific, but a sort of ideological, or religious belief, since the very notion of gender would deny any scientific evidence (as in biology, medicine, chemistry or evolutionary theory). On this basis, Gender Studies are accused of being a new form of creationism [...] this accusation reproduces well known ideological oversimplifications and epistemological primitivism” (Villa, 2018, 111).

In the US case study, Rebecca Sanders and Laura Jenkins write about how competing social science articles or expert witnesses provide an entry point for the anti-gender movement’s arguments against marriage equality, adoption by same-sex couples, and reproductive technologies, among other topics. They also discuss the argument that life begins at conception, which has also been increasingly framed in scientific terms, and the alleged mental health toll

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<sup>36</sup> Either as migrants in the home countries or through a surge in the populations of other countries and the geopolitical consequences of that.

<sup>37</sup> See Section 4.1.1. where we elaborate the concept of gender complementarity as understood by some anti-gender actors.

of abortion.<sup>38</sup>

#### ***4.2.4. The (false) notion of competing human rights***

Increasingly, the opposition to gender equality has been framed in terms of competing human rights. The underlying assumption is the belief that inalienable rights only include some rights (Cupać & Ebetürk, 2020b, forthcoming, 13), such as the right to religious freedom, but not the right to safe abortion or adequate health care for trans persons. This was exemplified by the Trump administration's setting up of an Unalienable Rights Commission, which acknowledged the rights grounded in the US founding principles and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) only, precluding references to any rights as codified in UN or other mechanisms after 1948, such as reproductive rights. The Commission on Unalienable Rights (2020, 33), in its report, also argues that the principle of subsidiarity inherent in the UDHR "accords to states significant discretion in interpreting and implementing those universal principles of human rights", thereby justifying both a regressive understanding of human rights aimed at curtailing the rights of (political) minorities and the rejection of international oversight.

Some of the rights which are often brought up in this context as being inalienable:

- The 'right to life' is often invoked by conservative NGOs at the UN who argue that "the human rights of the unborn child were clearly recognized in the foundation of modern international human rights law" (Family Watch International 2015), and to substantiate this claim, they cite the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, and the Convention on the Right of the Child. They maintain that, combined, these documents stipulate that life begins at conception, thus rendering abortion an act that clearly violates the right to life" (Cupać & Ebetürk, 2020b, forthcoming, 12). Needless to say, this argument is not scientifically supported and contradicts the established human right of women to have access to safe and legal abortions.
- Parental rights are also frequently invoked, specifically concerning the topic of sexuality education and gender identity recognition. In other words, the notion that parents should have a say in what their children learn in school, and "educate their children in accordance with their values and beliefs" as e.g. evidenced in the EU case study. The Strategy for Children 2019-2030 in Bulgaria (as described above) is one example of institutional failure, and the attempt by the government to launch a sexuality education programme in Croatia in 2012 is another.
- Freedom of religion is also invoked, often in the context of the right to decline rights or services. This ranges from the freedom of a medical professional to conscientiously object to performing an abortion to not perform gender reassignment surgery or even to not bake a cake for a gay wedding (Barnes, 2017). In addition to the issue of introducing hier-

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<sup>38</sup> For instance, they refer to the "postabortion traumatic stress syndrome". This syndrome is not recognized by either the American Psychological Association (APA) or the American Psychiatric Association (Cohen, 2006). The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges in the UK also found that such a syndrome does not exist (Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, 2011). The WHO itself does not have an official statement on this issue, but in the official catalogue of diseases (ICD-10) and the catalogue of mental health issues (DSM-V) there is no mention of this "condition" and therefore there is medical consensus this is a neglectable 'disease'. Certain actors take it further, arguing that men are also hurt by the wrong choice that is abortion: "Guilt and fear after an abortion can undermine a man's ability to trust God, women, and authorities." (Save One Europe, 2020)

archies of rights, referring to freedom of religion is problematic as an argument as it rests on a monolithic understanding of religion and believers, often serving to underpin power structures perceived to be at risk instead. UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief, Ahmed Shaheed, in his latest report argued that “in many religions, a plurality of self-understandings exists, some of which may be more committed than others to advancing gender equality and non-discrimination” (UN News, 2020) and that religion cannot be grounds for denying rights. There are a variety of religious actors working to explain how gender equality fit within the logic of their respective religions.<sup>39</sup>

- Freedom of speech is another right that is often invoked in defence of anti-gender positions. As an example, the Alliance Defending Freedom filed a suit with the US Supreme Court in 2014 defending the right of “sidewalk counsellors” to knowingly approach and provide materials to people outside abortion clinics (Bursch, 2020) or in opposition to the proposed State of California “truth-in-advertising” bill, which would force anti-abortion clinics to disclose the nature of their services (Totenberg, 2018). Incidentally, the Supreme Court declared the bill unconstitutional as it violates free speech.

#### ***4.2.5. Gender equality has already been achieved – what more do you want?***

Although no country in the world is set to reach gender equality by 2030 as envisaged in the SDGs (Plan International, 2018), a common trope by anti-gender actors is to argue that there is no need for further engagement with the topic of gender, in some cases going further and arguing that further research and action will be detrimental.

The argument can take a few different directions:<sup>40</sup>

- Gender equality is already achieved, and women’s rights are already protected. This argument is usually premised on the idea that legal protections are sufficient (cf. Germany’s Basic Law which details that the state must implement full gender equality in society without reviewing what this entails practically (in 2019, Germany, e.g., had the second highest gender pay gap in the EU, after Estonia (DW, 2020)). The legalistic framing of this argument ignores the social construction of gender, and the differential expectations and opportunities it affords different genders. It further does not assess whether gender equality laws are a) any good or comprehensive enough and b) successfully implemented.
- Gender equality has not only been achieved, but it has also gone too far, men are in crisis and under threat from the man-beating, bra-burning feminists. This follows the same logic as the statement “it is really difficult to be a straight white male these days”. This assumes that as the rights of one group (women or LGBTQI\* persons) being expanded means that others will lose their rights – the confusion being between loss of rights and loss of undue privilege.
- Gender is a dictatorship of political correctness, the domination of a loud minority over a silent majority “with its cannon of virtue, and suffocating freedom of opinion”.<sup>41</sup>

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39 For some examples, see Catholics for Choice (2013); Musawah (2011); Ferreira & Wilson (2020).

40 See (Griffon, et al. (2019) and (Schutzbach (2019) for more elaboration on how these arguments are deployed.

41 Quote from Klaus J. Groth’s 1996 book, *Die Diktatur der Guten: Political Correctness (The Dictatorship of the Good Ones: Political Correctness)* as cited in (Schutzbach, 2019).

This narrative is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, it depends on examples of prominent women in positions of power, or legal protections, to argue that the equality framework is already set up – the implication is that any women/minorities who do not ‘make it’ in this world are blamed for their own failure (cf. arguments in the USA against racial justice or arguments in Europe about immigrants on welfare). This is the problem with assuming the solution is in an ‘empowerment’ narrative, which implies women need the help of men and or society to be empowered to function and thrive in society. Instead, to ensure all people have an equal opportunity to thrive, oppressive power patriarchal structures must be dismantled.

Finally, this narrative also exposes a certain self-heroisation (Schutzbach, 2019; Villa, 2018, 113), framing anti-gender actors as valiant actors to speaking behalf of the silent majority about the oppression of the loud minority/queer and women’s lobby/the West/the East/insert-your-straw person-here. The self-heroisation also has an element of rebelling against external forces, framing anti-gender actors as the underdogs working to protect society against deprivation and resonates well with populist narratives. The issue of gender and anti-gender has become central to populist movements from Brazil to Hungary (Casullo, 2020).<sup>42</sup> The framing is related to the totalitarianism narrative explored below.

#### ***4.2.6. Gender is a (colonial) import/a totalitarian ideology imposed by (corrupt) elites***

The notion of gender being imported/imposed centres around the idea that anything related to gender is coercive (Villa, 2018), and imposed from actors external to us. They in this conceptualisation can take several forms, the most common one being the corrupt elite, framed in opposition to the real people. This Völkisch notion is very much connected to general populist narratives.<sup>43</sup> As the authors of the US case study point out: “this “thin ideology” is always layered with other ideologies” (Sanders & Jenkins, 2020).

Depending on what needs to be achieved with the argument, the reasoning revolves around the ideas that:

- Gender/homosexuality is a Western import and has no relevance and grounding in our society.<sup>44</sup>
- Gender is something that technocrats in Brussels made up to control and manipulate the EU Member States.
- Gender is a totalitarian<sup>45</sup> ideology/ a Marxist<sup>46</sup>, fascist, or capitalist plot (depending on cultural context).
- Gender is the ideology of a loud minority; we must defend the silent ‘normal’ majority.

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42 Interview, 17 September 2020.

43 Völkisch refers to ethno-nationalist perspectives which idealise the “original nation”.

44 This trope is common in the countries discussed in our MENA case study.

45 See the Mexico case study on how anti-gender actors have argued that the government espouses a Marxist and gender ideology.

46 References to Marxism and other totalitarian ideologies are particularly effective in contexts where people are historically wary of the state entering the private sphere (Eastern Europe, Latin America) (Casullo, 2020; Interview, 17 September 2020).

This narrative is often used in combination with the one advocating for traditional values, which can be strengthened by framing the concept of gender as something which can only have originated externally. The support for these arguments tends to take the form of pointing out that the EU (for example) is forcing the Member States to act against common sense, and that international funds often support civil society advocating for equality in the respective domestic context – thereby meddling with internal affairs.

For example, in Germany, we see that in the West, the arguments against gender frame position it as a Marxist plot, while in the East, gender is positioned as a capitalist plot. In both cases, the EU is somehow advancing both agendas (Villa, 2018). In “Turkey, Islamist elites and members of the government believe that secular “Western feminism” is contradictory to the Islamic roots of Turkey, and that “Western” influences have degenerated Turkish women, destroyed the true Turkish family, and brought immorality to Turkish society” (Griffon, et al., 2019, 12). Russia takes this further, and within the context of its ‘state homophobia’ has aimed to frame Russia-as-not-Europe in opposition to the decadent, immoral West, trying to strengthen its own role in the fight for geopolitical control, especially in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.<sup>47</sup>

### *Feminism – a colonial project?*

*A version of this narrative that should be detailed separately is the idea that feminism and gender equality is a colonial project. The logic is that feminist ideals originate from and are imposed by the Global North as a neo-colonial project to prevent people in the Global South from having multiple children to maintain European/North American dominance (Datta, 2020)<sup>48</sup>, or that poor states have to accept feminism as a condition for financial aid (Cupać & Ebetürk, 2020b, forthcoming). While this argument is not robust, the basic premise deserves attention. The core criticism of this narrative is that white, Western feminist thought has been dominating the discourse on equality for centuries and is portrayed as the only legitimate reference point to pursue feminist strategies. Actors from the Global North, NGOs, and donor governments alike, far too often assume to know and understand the needs and challenges experienced by people with different intersecting identities in contexts different from their own, directly and indirectly contributing to an exacerbation of the challenges they are seeking to address. However, the argument of feminism as a neo-colonial project only holds if the starting point of understanding gender equality is a white feminism, specifically white supremacist feminism.<sup>49</sup> In the words of CFFP Advisory Board Member Rosebell Kagumire:*

*“The notion” is rooted within the idea that we are backward people. I think the idea that people come to help us because we are weak and we do not have anything, erases the fact that we are doing our own work and that every day, women uphold countries and communities. For me, this response is downplaying the intellect and the historical struggles of women in these parts of the world” (CFFP, 2020).*

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47 For more on this, see Moss (2018).

48 Interview, 17 July 2020.

49 White feminism in general is oppressing by excluding all non-white lived experiences from achieving gender equality. White supremacist feminism is a part of white feminism. It is built on racial hierarchies where white people are identified as the superior biological race.

## 5. *Strategies of anti-gender campaigns*

The attacks against the rights of women and LGBTQI\* people follow similar patterns of behaviour. These patterns materialise in the strategies of the anti-gender movement elaborated in the analysis below. However, while there is a high degree of overlap in the examples presented below, context still is important and there is no evidence that the anti-gender movement uses an identical playbook in each country, or transnationally. There is further no evidence to support assertions that the anti-gender movement is centrally coordinated from an office somewhere in either Rome, Washington D.C., or Brazil (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017a). What is clear, is the high degree of exchange, socialisation, and application of lessons learned from multiple contexts. Moreover, we found that when anti-gender actors are in power, the campaigns tend to start there and rely on the power or support of the state (e.g., Russia, Hungary, Brazil). When (openly) anti-gender actors are not in power, more grassroots mobilisation tends to take over. Needless to say, both groups of actors interact with each other, overlap, and there is often a diffusion of the same persons across both groups of actors.

In general, we found it useful to differentiate between ten different strategies, which we elaborate on below: community mobilisation, disinformation campaigns, exploiting divisions within the progressive movement, ‘taking the state’ or securing positions of political power, disrupting policy processes, secularising discourse, initiating legal, legislative, and constitutional challenges, changing established international norms, funding and defunding, as well as the harassment of activists.

### *5.1. Mobilising the public*

Over the last years, many countries have experienced some form of anti-gender community mobilisation. These mobilisations are often triggered by proposed domestic legislative changes. For example, in many European countries (Slovenia, France, Italy, Spain, Croatia), a significant opportunity for anti-gender mobilisation was the public debate on marriage equality (Kuhar, 2020).<sup>50</sup> In other countries, mobilisation was ‘preventative’, deploying prepared strategies for anti-gender ideas, adapted to specific topics related to expected domestic changes after international advances in gender equality. For example, in 2014, Slovakia introduced a constitutional definition of marriage as being a union between a man and a woman in 2014, without there being a demand for marriage equality in the country, the phenomenon has been referred to as ‘anticipatory politics’ (Mos, 2020).

Mobilisations themselves can take different shapes: rallies, public speeches, conferences, flyers, billboards, (social) media campaigns, vigils, and sit-ins are just several examples. They

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50 Interview, 3 July 2020.

can target both the public and the authorities, usually both. For example, in 2016, the Front for the Family (*Frente Nacional por la Familia*) organised mass rallies in Mexico (McManus, 2020). In Turkey, the *Turkish Family Assembly* released an announcement on social media calling on people to ‘stop the global war on the family’. Their aim was to restore the importance of the family status and lift the ban on sexualised abuse of minor frames as underage marriages (Griffon, et al., 2019). In Brazil, the School without Party Movement advocated with federal authorities while also operating at the grassroots level by encouraging parents to pressure teachers not to address gender equality at schools.

Community mobilising on this front is not a new phenomenon. Citizen mobilisation against women’s rights and LGBTQI\* rights has been ongoing for decades. The major shift in the past decade, when it comes to community mobilisation against gender equality, has been the professionalisation of the movement and a re-branding of its image, making it more modern and more international. In the past decade, the faces of this movement have become notably younger, more urban, and attractive, and are often portrayed together with their family (Štulhofer, 2020).<sup>51</sup> The movement’s entire visual identity is modern and appealing. As will be discussed in Section 5.6., the language they use has (in many cases) shifted from religious to secular argumentation, and they have an excellent grasp of the power of social media and new technologies. Due to the diffused nature of the movements, there is a lot of locally tailored content, in both traditional and modern formats, all repeating the same messages (Paternotte, 2020). In traditional media, the anti-gender movement has also adapted to the news cycle, rotating representatives of organisations to give statements and maintain interest (Štulhofer & Hodžić, 2018).



*1. An example of the rejuvenation of the image, and the promotion of a young, heterosexual, white family consisting of a father, mother and (ideally) multiple children. This image currently appears*

51 Interview, 30 September 2020.

*on the homepage of the CSU Party Programme website (<https://csu-grundsatzprogramm.de/>, retrieved 26 February 2021).*

At the end of February 2021, Poland's public broadcaster, TVP – which “has for the last several years been squarely under the control of Poland's right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party” (Kalan, 2019) announced that it will launch TVP Women on International Women's Day, “as a unique gift for Polish women”. The channel targeted to female audiences of all ages will air “lifestyle programs on beauty, care, fashion, interior design, cooking, travel, as well as interesting documentaries or reports on social issue” (Poland In, 2021). The trailer, which is available on the English-speaking website Poland IN (which is part of TVP), shows young women, perfectly styled, happily doing chores inside the house to the song “Pretty Woman”:



*Trailer for the new TV channel TVP Woman by the public broadcaster TVP (<https://polandin.com/52514697/tvp-woman-unique-gift-for-polish-women-on-womens-day>, accessed 1 March 2021).*

## **5.2. Disinformation campaigns**

The anti-gender movement often employ disinformation tactics, presenting information that is false, or presenting correct information in bad faith or out of context. There are several ways that these can manifest. This strategy rarely aims to convince everyone or society-at-large. Rather, it aims to create polarisation within society to destabilise coalitions or make governments fearful of backlash if they implement specific policy objectives. Polarisation in and of itself can also be a goal for the anti-gender movement since deep divisions within society/parties/states/institutions play to their advantage in this context. This polarisation is supported by the current media culture: “it generates a hyper-fundamentalist and aggressive discourse when you debate it in the media context which thrives on click-baiting and extreme polarisa-



tion. It is a media logic-driven fundamentalisation of discourse” (Villa, 2020)<sup>52</sup>, which makes nuanced arguments difficult.

In situations where states are behind these campaigns, they often appear to aim to delegitimise political opposition at home and abroad (see the Brazil, Czech Republic, and Slovakia examples below).

A relatively new development is the increasing use of private messaging services for the dissemination of disinformation. For example, in the Brazil case study, Denise Hirao describes how Jair Bolsonaro had repeatedly argued against an anti-homophobia education project of the previous government. His message – that the project encourages paedophilia – was adopted and disseminated by his supporters through social networks, including a widely shared video that showed a penis-shaped baby bottle that was falsely claimed to be part of the campaign (LAB, 2018). Even though the courts blocked further dissemination of the message on YouTube, the disinformation campaign made its way into private WhatsApp networks. In Italy, the anti-gender movement used WhatsApp in attempt to convince parents to withdraw their children from school once a month to protest ‘gender ideology’. While in France, social media was used to pressure specifically working-class parents of colour to keep their children at home to protest new curriculum developments, which would include discussions on gender equality in school (Kuhar & Zobec, 2017, 29).

However, disinformation is not confined to private channels and messaging services. In Bulgaria, during the process of ratifying the Istanbul Convention in 2018, the parliamentary support was lost due to a disinformation campaign by some governing coalition members, the Orthodox Church, and civil society groups. They falsely argued that the Convention aims to institutionalise a “third gender” and “introducing school programs for studying homosexuality and transvestism and creating opportunities for enforcing same-sex marriages” (Cheresheva, 2018, Dermendjieva, 2020).<sup>53</sup> Pro-Russian government outlets in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia repeatedly published articles on the topic of sexuality education. Analysing such articles in the period 2007–2016 Jarkovská (2020) identified coordinated efforts to misrepresent guidelines, demonise advocates for sexuality education, and instil a sense of panic. Similarly, in Croatia, during the debate about introducing comprehensive school-based sexuality education, the anti-gender movement distributed leaflets arguing that sexuality education promotes child sex abuse, homosexuality, and is against family values (Štulhofer, 2020).<sup>54</sup> In Slovenia, anti-gender actors organised a campaign in which they deliberately misused research findings that same-sex relationships only last 1.5 years on average, by completely omitting the context of the research and its sample (Kuhar, 2020).<sup>55</sup> The conclusion they suggested was that marriage equality was unnecessary, because same-sex marriages are short-lived anyway. In Croatia, the anti-gender movement used the widely discredited 2012 “New Family Structures Study” (Regnerus study), which had erroneously concluded that there are detrimental social effects for children who have at least one LGBTQI\* parent in the context of the marriage referendum (Štulhofer & Hodžić, 2018, 68).

52 Interview, 1 July 2020.

53 Interview, 2 July 2020.

54 Interview, 30 September 2020.

55 Interview, 3 July 2020.

Unique to (disinformation) campaigns by the anti-gender movement is their broad reach, even offline. Specifically, in places where religious organisations, the Catholic and Evangelical Church, are involved in the anti-gender movement, they provide a very broad platform for exchange but also idea dissemination. Through collaboration with the Church, anti-gender actors can attend town-hall meetings in small villages and remote areas usually ignored by human rights activists (Paternotte, 2020).<sup>56</sup>

The challenge, especially with disinformation campaigns which base themselves on scientific data which they later misrepresent, is that it becomes very difficult to argumentatively break down the points they make. Once these soundbites make it into the public discourse, they become near impossible to stop. At the same time, polarisation is an end in itself for the anti-gender movement, as it creates enough noise about the issue to make policy change difficult, even for progressive governments. The success of such campaigns, which are grounded in science but do not report accurate facts can be seen most clearly in conspiracy theories and other resistance in the context of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>57</sup>

The strategy of polarising through misinformation, however, do not always succeed. During the campaign ahead of the referendum to remove the Eighth Amendment which illegalised abortions in Ireland in 2018, the anti-choice campaigners adopted a very graphic and emotional approach – putting up large images of fetuses in wombs with the message “abortion kills”, attempting to shift the debate from women and their rights to the unborn foetus (Smyth, 2020),<sup>58</sup> and polarising the debate to be one between the rights of women and unborn foetus. Their posters also wrongly implied that removing the Eighth Amendment would mean abortion will be allowed up to six months. The upsetting imagery backfired, and the misdirection campaign generated a backlash among the population. As Ailbhe Smyth, one of the organisers of the Together for Yes campaign points out “they were still telling people what to do on a moral level, without thinking about what happens in a woman’s real reproductive life” (Smyth, 2020).<sup>59</sup> See Section 6 where we reflect more in-depth on the campaign ahead of the referendum in Ireland.

### ***5.3. Exploiting divisions within the pro-gender movement***

Anti-gender campaigns also skilfully note and exploit potentially divisive topics within the human rights community: sex work, trans issues, and certain sexual/reproductive technologies, such as surrogacy.

For example, in 2019 the Heritage Foundation cooperated with Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) when the foundation, “which has long advocated against LGBTQ rights, hosted a panel in Washington [...] titled “The Inequality of the Equality Act: Concerns From the Left.” However, instead of highlighting the (alleged) left’s opposition to the Equality Act, which seeks to add LGBTQ protections to federal civil rights laws, all four panellists had one

56 Interview, 10 July 2020.

57 For further reading on conspiracy theories in the context of COVID-19, see Ball & Maxmen (2020).

58 Interview, 23 September 2020.

59 Interview, 23 September 2020.

thing in common: they oppose transgender rights.” (Fitzsimmons, 2019). Similarly, during the 2019 CSW, CitizenGo organised side-events and panel discussions which “featured ‘defectors’ – a former editor from *Cosmopolitan* magazine, [...] a lesbian former staff member of a family planning clinic, and a victim of gender-based violence – all emphatically opposed to recognizing trans women as women” (Goetz, 2020, 169). These were all women, ostensibly feminist, who publicly promoted transphobic ideas. In the Mexico case study, the author points out how TERFs, similar to their homologues in Spain and the UK, oppose the LGBTQI\* work to promote the recognition of trans identities.

It should be noted that, as Eszter Kováts points out, there are many definitions of ‘gender’ used by the pro-gender policy-making and activist communities. This makes anything related to ‘gender’ vulnerable to the attacks of the broadly conceived anti-gender movement, which exploits the confusion among the general public and ‘gender community’ about what ‘gender’ even is (Kováts, 2018). Thus, anti-gender campaigns exploit the potential that such a loosely constructed opponent presents in forming broad coalitions. For example, in the above example of Bulgaria, the disinformation campaign suggested a definition of ‘gender’ that was not in the text of the Istanbul Convention (i.e., that it would institute a ‘third gender’ (Vassileva, 2018), whereas the Istanbul Convention only defines gender as the social construction of norms), and the campaign resonated with the confusion of the general population, regardless of the inaccuracy of the statement.

#### ***5.4. Taking the state***

‘Taking the state’ refers to a strategy by anti-gender campaigns which aims at positioning anti-gender actors in, or close to, positions of state power, which grants them access to the resources of the state to change both policy and opinion, domestically and internationally.

In Mexico, for instance “the intention to ‘take the state’ is consecrated in the Santa Fe Declaration in which representatives of several anti-rights groups from all over the Americas and Spain participated and in which they explicitly stated that it was necessary to create new political parties or to increase their presence in pre-existing parties in the interest of their pro-family agenda” (McManus, 2020).<sup>60</sup> In the same vein, the grassroots anti-gender movement in Slovenia and Croatia also ran (unsuccessfully) as political parties on single-issue platforms against marriage equality (Kuhar, 2020).<sup>61</sup> In other countries, like Germany and Spain, parties like the AfD and VOX have picked up anti-gender discourse and are entrenching it within mainstream political discourse.<sup>62</sup> In Germany, Nathanael Liminski, currently the Chief of Staff of the Prime Minister of the Federal State of North Rhine- Westphalia and leader of the CDU, Armin Laschet (Germany), is a personality in German politics whose family is linked to the Opus Dei, advancing Christian fundamentalist ideas. In 2005 he founded the initiative *Generation Benedikt*, which also promoted ultra-conservative views and has spoken publicly against sex before marriage, homosexuality, and abortion (Reisener, 2018). In some places, like Brazil and the United States, Evangelicals have been appointed to key roles related to gender issues or are very close to the governing elites. Michael Pence’s appointment as Vice-President

60 <http://congresoiberoamericanoporlavidaylafamilia.org/declaracion-de-santa-fe/> [Accessed 02 March 2021]

61 Interview, 3 July 2020.

62 In Section 1.3. we discuss how anti-gender rhetoric is not only part of, but also centres right-wing discourse.

of the United States particularly illustrative in an article in *The Atlantic* from 2018:

*“Meanwhile, Pence’s presence in the White House has been a boon for the religious right. Evangelical leaders across the country point to his record on abortion and religious freedom and liken him to a prophet restoring conservative Christianity to its rightful place at the centre of American life. “Mike Pence is the 24-karat-gold model of what we want in an evangelical politician,” Richard Land, the president of the Southern Evangelical Seminary and one of Trump’s faith advisers, told me. “I don’t know anyone who’s more consistent in bringing his evangelical-Christian worldview to public policy.” (Coppins, 2018).*

### ***5.5. Engaging and disrupting policy processes at the international level***

“Conservative groups did not put-up strong opposition to women’s rights organisations in the UN in the 1990s and early 2000s. Their activities were more an annoyance than a serious threat to women’s rights agenda as they mostly consisted of symbolic action and blocking strategies “ (Cupać & Ebetürk, 2020b, forthcoming, 3). In the past decade, however, things have changed significantly from the 1990s and early 2000s. As mentioned before, many of the well-established non-state anti-gender actors now have consultative status at various UN agencies or are directly part of State delegations. Outside of the main plenaries, they focus on organising side-events, high-level meetings or disrupting official meetings. In March 2016, members of the Group of Friends of the Family joined numerous NGOs for an event on ‘Uniting Nations for a Family Friendly World’ at the UN economic and social committee (ECOSOC) (Sanders, 2018, 279). During the 2019 CSW, CitizenGo had a large blacked-out bus “painted with foetuses pleading for their lives” (Goetz, 2020). The case study on the United States also details examples of anti-gender representatives crowding or praying over delegates during meetings on gender issues, while reports of physical threats are also not uncommon. At some Organisation of American States (OAS) meetings, evangelical organisations have been known to “scream, they put up flags, they disrupt processes of dialogue...[their] group was much bigger than the human rights organisations, we could not have enough respect in the room, they are very aggressive, and they threaten people physically (Galli, 2020). Other approaches include “forum-shopping” where anti-gender delegates take up space and advance anti-gender positions in fora where the human rights movement is insufficiently represented, as well as actively trying to close space for civil society participation in meetings (Goetz, 2020).

Finally, anti-gender campaigns also conduct training and education on navigating the UN and EU system for their peers (Cupać & Ebetürk, 2020).<sup>63</sup> Family Watch International (FWI) has even developed a resource guide on how to argue for specific legal language in UN documents to advance anti-gender ideas.<sup>64</sup> FWI has also been organising annual training conferences for UN diplomats from African states on how to oppose LGBTQI\* rights and sexuality education motions (Cullinan, et al., 2020). Anti-gender organisations also often move their headquarters to New York City and Geneva for ease of transnational advocacy.

Researchers Jelena Cupać and Irem Ebetürk characterise this strategy of Engaging and dis-

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63 Interview, 23 September 2020.

64 <https://familywatch.org/wcontent/uploads/sites/5/2017/05/Resource-Guide-2013.pdf> (Accessed 15 November 2020)

rupting policy processes as ‘competitive mimicry’, arguing that anti-gender NGOs have been socialised into the UN system and have adopted the behaviour of feminist NGOs who have been successfully present in the system for a long time (Cupać & Ebetürk, 2020b, forthcoming).

### ***5.6. Secularising discourse/ adopting rights-based and feminist language***

Closely linked to their ability to navigate the UN (and national) system, is their strategy to framing anti-gender ideas in feminist, secularist, and human rights languages.<sup>65</sup>

The first feature of this strategy is the increasing diffusion up of religious narratives by (transnational) NGOs. The aim is to bring religious attitudes back into the public sphere (taking up space perceived to be lost), adjusting and modernising the language used to appeal to a broader audience and function within the multilateral system. Vaggione refers to this as “strategic secularisation” (Vaggione, 2005, 240). At the same time, they facilitate the formation of coalitions among conservative actors who support different religious ideologies.

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Further, anti-gender actors are increasingly framing their opposition in human rights language, by highlighting the ‘right to life’, ‘religious freedom’ when opposing women and LGBTQI\* rights.<sup>66</sup>

Moreover, anti-gender campaigns are increasingly framing their opposition to gender equality in feminist narratives. Goetz (2020, 169) describes how anti-gender actors are “praising the value of women’s care work (but not seeking to redistribute it to men), or condemning the harm created by overly rigid gender stereotypes (but rejecting individuals who transition genders) or condemning the exploitation of poor women in surrogacy contracts (but not supporting their capacity to shape such contracts”.

### ***5.7 Initiating legal, legislative, constitutional challenges against gender equality***

Another strategy by anti-gender campaigns is to introduce bills or constitutional amendments restricting the rights of women or LGBTQI\* or challenge existing laws and regulations and courts. For example, the case study on the European Union details several attempts by anti-gender actors in EU countries (Croatia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Romania, Hungary) pushing for legal provisions or call referenda which would make extending marriage benefits to same-sex couples difficult (e.g., by defining marriage in the constitution as a union between a man and a woman). On the right to abortion, restrictive legislation was proposed in both Poland and

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<sup>65</sup> See Datta (2018) for more information about the plans of ‘Agenda Europe’.

<sup>66</sup> Interview, 3 July 2020.

Slovakia. In Romania, Poland, Italy and Spain, several legal battles were fought over sexuality education, including between local and national authorities (Hoctor, et al., 2020). In Mexico, there were attempts to introduce legislation on the federal level banning sexuality education unless parents explicitly consented to it; but it was struck down by the Supreme Court (McManus, 2020).

These efforts are important to note, but they are not universally successful, in particular if anti-gender actors are not in power. While in Hungary the government managed to amend the constitutional definition of marriage, in Romania the referendum failed due to low turnout. Amid massive protests, the Polish government temporarily reversed course on its effective ban on abortion, but by January 2021, a near-total ban on abortion was in place in Poland. Strong civil society pressure also led to relaxing of the proposed legislation on abortion in Slovakia. However, in countries where anti-gender actors are in power, the effects can be severe. Hungary has essentially defined trans people out of existence, whereas several local authorities in Poland have declared ‘LGBTQI\*-free zones’ in their jurisdiction (Hoctor, et al., 2020).

Internationally, anti-gender actors have also used the European Citizen’s initiative to block EU policies on SRHR, with mixed success.<sup>67</sup> At the Council of Europe level, attempts to recognise the right of a medical professional to refuse to provide reproductive health services based on religious objections were rejected by the European Court for Human Rights.

### ***5.8. Spoiling and changing established norms***

Where legal challenges fail, anti-gender actors also apply the strategy to spoil and change internationally established norms, which result from the understanding of the relevance of the international system, by both state and non-state anti-gender actors.

Rebecca Sanders identifies several ways of spoiling and altering established norms, including proposing ‘pro-family’ language to modify the meaning of texts; introducing positive language that allows parties more flexibility in the interpretation or implementation of obligations;<sup>68</sup> and requesting to delete inflexible language and adding language that will minimise the negative outcomes of mandates handed to UN agencies or treaty bodies (Sanders, 2018). These reactionary approaches aim to remove key references from treaties and documents to destabilise the validity and acceptance of the norm, therefore creating space for interpreting human rights treaties through an anti-gender lens. Blocking any reference to SRHR from UNSC 2467 is an example of the reactionary strategies.<sup>69</sup> Alyward and Halford outline additional pro-active/offensive strategies, which include ‘blanket opposition’ against a range of SRHR issues (e.g., through resolutions aiming to ‘protect the family’), introducing new thematic resolutions linked to SRHR topics but without SRHR language, and introducing follow-up SRHR resolutions with key references omitted (Alyward & Halford, 2020). These approaches aim to construct a positive infrastructure of treaties and legal documents that support anti-gender

<sup>67</sup> An EU mechanism whereby citizens can launch petitions to ask the European Commission to propose new laws – the Commission reviews all proposals which have reached at least 1 million signatures.

<sup>68</sup> Positive language in treaties refers to obligations for the parties to do something, as opposed to negative language which prohibits parties from doing something.

<sup>69</sup> See more in Cupać & Ebetürk (2020c, forthcoming)

views. An example of an offensive strategy is the Human Rights Council (HRC)'s resolution on protecting the heterosexual, cis-gendered nuclear family model passed every year between 2014 and 2017. The resolution places the model of a family which produces children as the fundamental unit of society and obliges States to respect and support it.

### *Why is 'pro-family' language problematic?*

*In 2004, Qatar hosted the Doha International Conference for the Family. The outcome document "[reaffirmed] that the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society, as declared in article 16 (3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" and called upon states to "[d]evelop programmes to stimulate and encourage dialogue among countries, religions, cultures and civilizations on questions related to family life, including measures to preserve and defend the institution of marriage", "[e]valuate and reassess government policies to ensure that the inherent dignity of human beings is recognized and protected throughout all stages of life" and "[r]eaffirm that parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children" (UNGA, 2004). These statements seem rather innocuous at first glance but aim at restricting women's and LGBTQI\* rights, such as family and reproductive rights.*

*As this example illustrates, anti-gender actors are prone to use and employ pro-family language. Such language is considered generally acceptable and relatively innocent, since it builds on an idea of a traditional society comprised of familial units as its fundamental building blocks. The challenge is that such language usually refers to heterosexual, cis-gendered, married couples with children. By framing the 'family' in this way, and by insisting that this is the only valid form a family can take, anti-gender actors promote a world view where the protection of the family takes precedence over or is even in opposition to the reproductive rights of women and the rights of LGBTQI\* people, as the very exercise of these rights threatens the image of the family as defined by these actors. In this way, pro-family language becomes a trojan horse which limits the rights of political minorities.*

*Anti-gender actors often share best practices in advocating for pro-family language, e.g., at the World Congress on Families<sup>70</sup>, among other channels. Some of the opening statements at the 2019 World Congress of Families illustrate the link between 'pro-family' and anti-equality:*

*"Opening the conference, [President of the World Congress of Families Brian] Brown said: "We are here today to defend, promote, protect and lift up something so basic, true and beautiful: the family – a man, a woman, a child."*

*Giuseppe Zenti, the bishop of Verona, said: "Marriage between a man and woman is an essential mission," while same-sex relationships are "a choice"."*  
*Giuffrida, 2019*

*Among the themes discussed at the 2019 World Congress of Families were also: "the beauty of marriage", "children's rights", "growth and demographic decline" and "women's dignity and health" (ibid).*

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70 The World Congress of Families is, according to their website, "a major international public event that seeks to unite and equip leaders, organizations, and families to affirm, celebrate, and defend the natural family as the only fundamental and sustainable unit of society." Most of the participants and speakers belong to right-wing and ultra-conservative groups (WCFVerona, 2019)

*In practice, the “WCF promotes a strict view of family, one based exclusively on the marriage of one heterosexual man to one heterosexual woman and their biological children, to the exclusion of many different types of families. Closely tied to this ideology is an adherence to strict binary gender roles, in which men serve as the heads of households and women as their helpmates and the bearer of children.” (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.)*

*By advancing these narratives, they become clearly established norms within the UN human rights system (the WCF has consultative status with the ECOSOC, for instance) that can be referred to in upcoming submissions, developing soft law.*

Such efforts to spoil existing norms and create new ones have taken on more radical forms recently. In 2020, the United States, with thirty other countries, signed the Geneva Consensus Declaration, which is essentially an anti-right-to-abortion declaration. This points to an aspiration to not only alter or soften international norms on SRHR but to establish an entirely parallel system. This is the clearest example of the right-wing push to establish an alternative global order, which the anti-gender movement is a part of: they are not only ‘reactive’ to existing norms but inherently ‘productive’ in developing international norms.

### ***5.9. Funding anti-gender actors and defunding feminist actors***

Another strategy by anti-gender actors is defunding, or lobbying for the defunding, of institutions and CSOs that go against their worldview (negative defunding strategy). In parallel, they often establish, or fund CSOs or institutions that actively advance anti-gender ideas (positive funding strategy).

#### ***5.9.1. Defunding women and LGBTQI\* rights activists***

The best-known example of defunding being leveraged to limit women’s and LGBTQI\* rights is the Mexico City Policy (also known as the ‘global gag rule’), which, traditionally, has been suspended under Democratic administrations and reinstated by Republican administrations. On his first day in office, President Trump did just so. At the time of this report’s publication, President Biden has now revoked the policy. As mentioned in the US case study, the latest iteration of the policy refers to all US granting agencies and cuts off all funding (not just for family planning) to NGOs that do not comply (Sanders & Jenkins, 2020). The Trump- Administration has also either cut funding to or entirely withdrawn from international agencies and bodies important for women’s and LGBTQI\* rights, such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Human Rights Council, and the WHO. The Biden administration has since confirmed that they will rejoin the WHO and HRC and have restored funding to the UNFPA.

These defunding decisions have devastating impacts on real lives. The cutting of funding to UNFPA has caused problems in the provision of SRHR in Latin America, as detailed in the US case study. The Mexico case study further shows how, faced with shrinking domestic funding (even if this is not necessarily motivated by anti-gender ideas), and limited access to international funding (due to e.g., the global gag rule), Mexican activists and researchers promoting the rights of women and LGBTQI\* are facing an existential threat as a result. Shrinking space



for the functioning of civil society also means fewer resources to combat initiatives or even be present in discussions on the domestic and international level. In South Africa, far too much of public health programming is implemented by NGOs, which are largely funded by USAID. Due to the global gag rule, these organisations are not allowed to discuss or offer abortion, and with the insertion of anti-prostitution language in the latest iterations of the policy, they cannot offer help to sex workers. The challenge is not just present when the policy is actively enforced – even when Democratic presidents take power in the US, South African NGOs self-censor and avoid providing abortion for fear of future reprisals – leaving a very large part of the population without access to proper and safe reproductive care (Mofokeng, 2020).<sup>71</sup>

### ***5.9.2 Funding anti-gender civil society actors***

In other countries where anti-gender actors are in power, such as Hungary, Poland, and Russia, direct funding is provided to GONGOs, while defunding domestic and international progressive NGOs, creating a highly hostile climate for their work. See also section 3.1 where we elaborate in detail the funding provided also by conservative NGOs and right-wing philanthropy.

What is important to mention is that funding can nudge actors who are otherwise undecided towards a particular position. In Romania, for instance, it can be argued that the Church does not necessarily care about the issues as much as it does about the possibility of increasing their income and maintaining relevance. In Africa and Asia, conservative civil society is being funded by religious actors from the West who define the ideology, while local actors often follow along (Anonymous, 2020).<sup>72</sup>

### ***5.10. Harassing activists, feminists, women and LGBTQI\* rights activists***

Finally, harassing feminists, researchers, women and LGBTQI\* people is also a strategy employed by anti-gender actors. We see this in particular in contexts where the authorities are hostile to women and LGBTQ\* rights or are anti-gender actors themselves. This strategy manifest itself both online and offline. During the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased use of the internet, online violence against women has increased, according to (UN Women, 2020).

In Egypt, the government has been putting the online activity of feminist activists under surveillance for years and has recently been arresting young women due to content posted on Tik-Tok, for purported immorality. The Turkish state has been shutting down women's civil society organisations for years (Griffon, et al., 2020).

In Brazil, journalists and human rights advocates are routinely harassed by the state, and in the case study in the following volume, Denise Hirao asserts that there is evidence showing that part of this work is being coordinated by the government. During the campaign to impeach former Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, social media often referred to her as “ugly, evil, a whore” (Hirao, 2020), epithets the Bolsonaro campaign later deployed against his women critics. Congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro (Jair Bolsonaro's son) stated that right-wing women

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71 Interview, 17 July 2020.

72 Interview, 28 August 2020.

are more hygienic because they “shaved their armpits and did not defecate on the streets to protest” (ibid). These attacks follow the same logic as the Trump campaign referring to Hillary Clinton as “a nasty woman” during the third presidential debate in 2016 (Woolf, 2016). In the case study, the author concludes that “this type of remark served the purpose of linking ideological positions to models of femininity that generated repulsive feelings against his female opponents” (ibid).

These approaches are also increasingly resulting in physical violence, sexual violence, and death for human rights defenders. According to a report by Amnesty International (2019), “[women human rights defenders] are being killed at an alarming rate. Between 1 January and 1 October 2019, Front Line Defenders recorded 39 known killings of WHRDs from around the world including Guatemala, Honduras, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Kenya, South Africa, the Philippines, and Afghanistan”. As the report elaborates: “Those who defend the rights of sex workers face risks not just for being women or LGBTI people defending human rights, but also because they engage in a highly stigmatized profession which is often criminalized across the world, exposing them to the risk of being targeted by law enforcement officials and others” (ibid).

## *6. Examples of successfully protecting and advancing women’s and LGBTQI\* rights*

Providing a universal recipe on how to successfully advance women’s and LGBTQI\* rights, or how to defend against anti-gender attacks would be impossible and inadvisable. This section does not strive to do that. Instead, we offer a short reflection on selected movements that (partially) successfully advanced the rights of women and LGBTQI\* people amidst anti-gender campaigns. We believe that the insights from these movements, together with the recommendations below, provide a framework on how to devise effective campaigns to counter the anti-gender movement. While most of these examples focus on the domestic level, they still are valuable for governments looking to advance and defend these rights on the international level.

Firstly, we highlight the example of the Together for Yes campaign in Ireland in-depth, which

successfully campaigned for a ‘Yes’ in the 2018 referendum on the Thirty-sixth Amendment of the Constitution of Ireland, removing the Eighth Amendment’s, which recognised the equal right to life of the pregnant woman and unborn fetuses, thus illegalising abortions. Removing this constitutional ban on abortion in Ireland is one of the greatest successes in advancing women’s rights in the past decade. Secondly, we provide an overview of lessons learned and good practices to advance the rights for women and LGBTQI\* from various contexts.

### ***6.1. Key aspects for the success of the Together for Yes Campaign in Ireland***

Following several unsuccessful attempts to reform the abortion law in Ireland, including by referendum in the 1990s and early 2000s, the case of the young Indian woman Savita Halappanavar, who died in 2012 in a Irish hospital after being refused an abortion during a miscarriage, galvanised support for a renewed civil society movement to legalise abortion.<sup>73</sup> In 2013, twelve organisations came together to form the Coalition to Repeal the 8th Amendment, which evolved to play a leading role in the campaign ahead of the 2018 referendum. Eventually, the civil society Campaign was made up of over seventy organisations from diverse sectors of Irish civil society (Together for Yes, n.d.). In the following, we reflect on three key aspects that contributed to the Campaign’s success as identified by one of the campaigns convenors Ailbhe Smyth (Smyth, 2020): Finding a narrative and communication approach that resonates with the public; establishing a broad and unified yet feminist coalition; and mobilising on- and offline.<sup>74</sup>

#### ***6.1.1. Finding a narrative and communication approach that resonates with the public***

Since the early 2000s, public opinion in Ireland had been progressively growing more in favour of the right to abortion just as the influence of the Catholic Church was receding, partly because of its handling of sexual abuse by members of the Catholic clergy. In the beginning, the Together for Yes Campaign invested considerable time and resources in research, focus groups, and polling to understand what drove people to oppose the right to abortion or to remain undecided to identify the challenges to get to a majority ‘yes’ outcome of the referendum. This research was crucial in framing the debate and structuring outreach and communication in a way that resonated with the Irish public in several ways: First, the research allowed them to identify their core audience: the majority of Irish voters who were undecided on the matter of the right to abortion. Early on, the campaign decided to not (primarily) engage with the roughly twenty per cent of voters who were firmly against the right to abortion nor with the twenty-five per cent who were firmly pro-choice. Secondly, the research also allowed the campaign to choose the tone as well as the framing of the debate. Instead of emphasising the right to abortion itself, the campaign focused on who should make the decision about having an abortion. Still today, the campaign’s website reads that they respect the diverse views people hold on abortion but argues that the “Constitution is not the place to decide the complexities of crisis pregnancies because it is too blunt” (Together for Yes, n.d.). In a 2018 press statement, Sarah Monaghan, spokesperson for Together for Yes, said “The decision to have an abortion is

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73 (BBC, 2018) provides a very helpful timeline for understanding the right to abortion in the Irish context.

74 Interview, 23 September 2020.

a personal and private matter between a woman, her doctor and her family – it is not a matter for the Constitution.” Consequently, the campaign managed to shift the issue from a moral to a health one, and from being foetus-centric to being woman-centric. The debate focused on compassion with women and about the values Ireland as country wants to represent. One of the most prominent campaign posters read: “A woman you love might need your yes.” They also argued: “This referendum is a critical opportunity for all of us to create a compassionate, supportive environment for anyone who need abortions in Ireland” (Together for Yes, n.d.).

Additionally, the campaign focused on providing facts and information about the right to abortion, and avoided lecturing and arguments based on moral superiority. On Twitter for examples, they repeatedly reiterated that, on average, nine women a day travel to the UK and at least two take an abortion pills without medical support. Or they quoted doctors who vote yes because they “support evidence-based and compassionate healthcare between doctors and women”. With their compassionate yet factual approach, the messages of the Together for Yes Campaign was in stark contrast to the messages by those campaigning for a ‘No’. Their posters “A License to Kill” (Clinch, 2018) (a reference to the action movies James Bond) and “If Killing a Unborn Baby at Six Months Bothers you, Vote No” (Hunter, 2018) strongly stigmatised women who had and will have abortions and implied (wrongly) that removing the Eighth Amendment would mean abortion will be allowed up to six months.

### ***6.1.2. Establishing a broad and unified yet feminist coalition***

From the beginning, the convenors worked hard to build a broad platform of allies and activists, trade unions, NGOs, LGBTQI\* groups, and students. They pro-actively discussed the diversity of their supporter base. On their website, the campaigns states “We are broad and diverse, but we are focused” (Together for Yes, n.d.). The motivation behind building this broad coalition was the understanding that a pro-choice movement as such would not be enough. Instead, a broad, cross-sectoral support was needed to reach the threshold for the referendum to be successful and to reach constituencies not necessarily accessible or friendly to the pro-choice movement. “Talking to people across the country and taking our message to every street corner, every community and every home in Ireland” was their explicit goal (Abortion Rights Campaign, 2018).

Additionally, they highlighted that their campaign was a women-led and feminist one, with women designing and driving the campaign to ensure that actual needs of women are protected. The campaign provided a space for women who have had abortions (overseas) and doctors who have performed abortions to share their experience. This approach also ensured that women were driving the debates as subjects and not seen as objects. It further reinforced the ‘compassionate’ narrative and helped to centre the debate about women. These personal stories, specifically if they were told by women or doctors who were not known for being openly pro-choice, made a huge difference for the campaign.

### ***6.1.3. Mobilising on- and offline***

In the end, an entire movement coalesced around the campaign, both online and offline. Social

media, specifically Twitter, was an important aspect. Another important aspect was the mobilisation of younger people. With mail and online voting not an option for Irish citizens living abroad, thousands of Irish voters, notably younger women, travelled #HomeToVote as far as from Los Angeles and Sao Paulo to take part in the referendum. #HomeToVote trended on Twitter on the days before the referendum in May 2018 (Haag, 2018). Several of those who were not eligible to vote or unable to travel offered to cover the travel costs for those who could. And many crowdsourcing campaigns raised additional funds to enable people to travel and cast their votes (Newey, 2018). Several English universities subsidised the travel of Irish students eligible to vote but unable to afford to travel (Connolly, 2018).

## ***6.2. International good practices in defending and advancing the rights of political minorities***

Building on the case of Ireland, paired with examples of successful defence and advancement of women's and LGBTQI\* rights in contexts such as Uruguay, Argentina, Ukraine, and Kenya, the following section aims to provide some general guidelines as to how advocating for these rights can be made more effective. Successful movements have paid attention to their context and timing, built wide coalitions, set concrete goals and formulated clear narratives, and had substantive financial resources to drive their campaigns.

### ***6.2.1. Catering to the context and timing***

A key factor in the success of movements to protect and advance the rights of (political) minorities is whether they succeed in embedding their efforts in the current political situation in their context. Responding to social change is often key. As mentioned above, the decline of the influence of the Catholic Church in Ireland was crucial to the success of the referendum. The relative weakness of the Catholic Church in Uruguay paired with the election of José Mujica (who did not oppose decriminalising abortion) as President and a strong leftist coalition in parliament facilitated the decriminalisation of abortion during the first trimester in 2012 (Fernandez Anderson, 2017). In contrast, in 2008, President Tabaré Vázquez had vetoed a similar initiative after parliament approved it (BBC, 2011). The decline of the image and power of the ruling party, as well as the outpour of support from abroad in the context of the recent protests against the abortion ban in Poland forced the government to freeze the initiative, albeit only temporarily. In Argentina, the generational shift meant a change in societal attitudes especially among young women in Argentina. In combination with a President committed to gender equality, the movement there succeeded to pass a bill in both houses of Parliament to legalise abortion just as this study is being finalised at the end of 2020.

Timing activities carefully and capitalising on societal change can therefore help achieve the movement's goals. Needless to say, this also means that goals can and need to be different: While anti-gender campaigns were mobilising against same-sex marriage in France in 2012/2013, Ukrainian LGBTQI\* activists were fighting for "a much lower bar than marriage equality: to stave off a copycat anti-propaganda bill (...) promoted by Russian proxies and right wing Ukrainian nationalists alike, and to seek protection from the burgeoning public violence against queer people" (Gevisser, 2020, 22-23). Ukrainian activists had concluded that

talking about marriage equality would have been counterproductive as it could even play into the opposition's hands about the movement being European pawns. However, this does not mean that movements do or should compromise on their ultimate goals of securing equal status in society for (political) minorities. As Ukraine's leading LGBT activist Olena Shevchenko puts it: "Ukrainian society is not ready for LGBT rights. (...) But Ukrainian LGBTs, themselves, they cannot be restrained anymore. They go online. They watch TV. They travel. They see how things can be. Why should they not have similar freedoms?" (Gevisser, 2020, 23).

### ***6.2.3. Building wide coalitions***

In a similar vein, movements that successfully engage and build broad alliances tend to be more successful in achieving their goals. During the Together for Yes campaign in Ireland (as outlined above) as well as the campaign to decriminalise abortion in Uruguay, the campaigns engaged with friendly legislators and build a broad coalition encompassing trade unions, academics, human rights campaigners, and others, ensuring a united front was presented. In Uruguay, specifically, the feminist movement relied on the historical alliances between them and the labour unions in the fight for democracy during the military dictatorship, which meant that the labour movement also mobilised for the decriminalisation of abortion. Moreover, the coalition engaged pro-actively with the medical profession, as well as students, academia, and lawmakers (Wood, et al., 2016). In Argentina, the Ni Una Menos movement successfully linked their opposition to machista violence with the historical struggle for human rights in the country. It successfully engaged with youth on issues of patriarchal violence and grew from there. The coalition also took into account queer and indigenous identities and perspectives, recognising the intersecting inequalities between women as well. This positioning allowed the group to have a very broad, successful platform (Langlois, 2020). In Kenya, the 2014 campaign "My Dress, My Choice", or the 'mini-skirt protest', saw over 1,000 women and men protest against sexual harassment following an incident where a woman was stripped of her clothes, mugged, and violently attacked while travelling on a public bus. The campaign, which led to the resignation of the Minister of Internal Security, also succeeded in advocating for legislation to punish anyone who forcibly removes the clothes of another person with a ten-year prison sentence (Ruiz-Cabrera, 2020). The expansion of voices beyond the traditional defenders of women's and LGBTQI\* rights and the embedding of the work in broader efforts to promote equality and democracy has the benefit of securing broader popular support for the movement by reaching people that would not otherwise engage with the campaigns.

### ***6.2.4. Setting concrete goals and formulating narratives that resonate with the public***

It has proven successful that the goal the movement is working towards is clear, concise, and achievable, and that strategies employed to achieve this goal resonate with the public and context. For this purpose, dedicating enough time and resources in the beginning to research, planning, and strategising is important, to identify both the most appropriate strategy (protests, campaigns or strategic litigation). Mass protests can be important in generating a large amount of popular support, at home and abroad, while strategic litigation is critical to countering government policies that go against human rights. Framing the terms of the debate and

engaging in broad communication with the target audience is also key.

Moreover, as in the case of the Together For Yes campaign, framing the narrative is crucial to achieve the clear set goal. Mark Gevisser argues that the struggle of the LGBTQI\* rights movement in Latin America was more effective than the reproductive rights movement due to their “brand same-sex marriage unions as being about love and family”, playing to the strong familism present there, which allowed them to counter the Catholic Church’s influence (Gevisser, 2020, 35).

### ***6.2.5. Securing sufficient financial resources***

Finally, the key factor determining the success or failure of movements to advance or defend women’s and LGBTQI\* rights is funding. In Ireland, the Together for Yes campaign relied on donations from people in Ireland and registered corporate donors, raising almost 2 Million Euros. Due to their broad support, they were able to rely solely on donations. No government funding went towards the campaign. However, such broad mobilisation is not available to all movements to defend the rights of (political) minorities. Steady funding can allow NGOs to perform adequate monitoring in their contexts and provide adequate responses. Secure, long-term funding also allows movements to plan confidently for the medium and long-term, enabling them to engage in more ambitious projects such as strategic litigation or large-scale campaigning.<sup>75</sup>

## ***7. Recommendations to counter anti-gender campaigns***

Based on the research and interviews conducted as part of this study, we have identified seven areas of action for governments committed to protect and advance the rights of political minorities internationally. Two of them are internally focussed; aiming at: 1) Building internal capacities and 2) Ensuring (political) minorities have the same rights at home that the governments are protecting internationally. The final five action areas encourage governments to 3) Widen and strengthen alliances, 4) Strengthen outreach and communication, 5) Invest political capital in advancing gender equality internationally, 6) (Financially) Support feminist civil society and 7) Enable continuing research on anti-gender campaigns, particularly in specific (political) contexts. This list does not claim to be exhaustive but includes those areas of actions that we have deemed as most important. The following section contextualises these areas of

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<sup>75</sup> For more reading on the examples, see: Amnesty International, (2020); 28TooMany, (2018); Felter & Renwick, (2020); Human Rights Watch; (2018); Fernandez Anderson, (2017); El Feki, (2015); Heywood, (2020).

action within the findings of this study and recommends steps to follow.

### ***7.1 Taking the threat by the anti-gender campaigns seriously and building internal capacities***

This study has demonstrated that still too many political decision-makers tend to continue to understand human rights for all within a framework of unstoppable progress and view current resistance to, e.g., LGBTQI\* rights as a temporary roadblock. Even in contexts where there is some awareness of anti-gender campaigns, the risks they pose seems to be underestimated. We strongly recommend recognising the power and influence of anti-gender actors in promoting an alternative and radical social order where the rights of women and LGBTQI\* are severely limited and acknowledging the resources they have access to. This includes:

1. Internally and externally, reframe the work of anti-gender campaigns as organised, well-funded attacks on human rights of (political) minorities and liberal democracy (and not a pushback) that needs to be contextualised within in the wider attacks on democracy and multilateralism globally.
2. Acknowledge that many of these anti-gender actors are using the rights of women and LGBTQI\* to either gain or increase their power and ensure that the framing of anti-gender campaigns is not framed in a technical way but reflects the political nature of their goals and strategies.
3. Ensure that staff members throughout the government are aware of the work of anti-gender campaigns, specifically those working in the planning units, on human rights and gender, health, and education as well as those embassy staff members in embassy to multilateral organisations (e.g., New York City, Geneva, Vienna, Addis Ababa, Washington D.C.), and the Holy See. Include the topic of anti-gender campaigns in the diplomatic training track.
4. Linked to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, establish a joint task force bringing together different government departments and ministries working on LGBTQI\*, the ‘Women, Peace and Security’ Agenda, health, and education, and respective planning units, as well as women’s rights, LGBTQI\* rights and anti-right and anti-racism civil society and researchers working on anti-gender campaigns, which regularly assess joint challenges and develop joint action points.
5. Ensure that within government departments and ministries working on women’s rights, the rights of LGBTQI\*, the ‘Women, Peace, and Security’ Agenda, and education and health regularly exchange concerning joint challenges posed by anti-gender actors.
6. Highlight the threats posed by anti-gender campaigns to human rights of (political) minorities and democracy in speeches, statements, and on social media.
7. Encourage (through political and flexible, long-term financial support) regular evaluation of your governments capacities and strategies to advance the rights of women and LGBTQI\* individuals through your foreign policy.

### ***7.2. Ensuring credible allyship for gender equality***

Globally, many progressive governments are vocally defending the rights of women and LGBTQI\* through their foreign and security policy, although women and LGBTQI\* people do



not fully enjoy these rights at home. This is, for example, the case for both Germany and Finland, as evidenced by the examples of abortion being illegal in Germany and Finland requiring trans persons to prove that they are infertile before they can legally change their gender, as discussed in Section 4.1. We do not advocate for governments to not advance the rights of women and LGBTQI\* people through their foreign policy when these rights are partly limited at home. We acknowledge that in particular political coalitions can lead to progressive foreign policies and less progressive domestic policies, but we deem it important to call out ambiguities and to encourage governments to protect and advance the rights at home and abroad to the same extent. In particular, we deem these ambiguities problematic for various reasons: It reinforces structural discrimination against women and LGBTQI\* people at home and plays into the agenda of anti-gender actors as it makes it easy for them to call out this engagement as insincere. The ambiguity can also reinforce post-colonial tendencies when women's rights and the rights of LGBTQI\* people are primarily seen as issue of economically lesser developed nations.

Moreover, as research by Valeria Hudson, Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill, Mary Caprioli, and Chad. F Emmet et al. shows, the level of gender equality has direct impact on the states' international behaviour: The "higher the level of gender inequalities within a state, the greater the likelihood such a state will experience internal and interstate conflict" (Rees and Kapur, 2019, 138; based on Hudson et al., 2008/2009), fragility or terrorism (Hudson, 2020). In their book "Sex & World Peace" (2012, 19) they in particular highlight "three key wounds" inflicted against women in human society, which strongly impact to states actions on the international level: 1) lack of bodily integrity and physical security; 2) lack of equity in family law; and 3) lack of parity in the councils of human decision making.

For these reasons, we highlight the importance of governments to ensure that their commitment to protect and advance the rights of women and LGBTQI\* abroad is matched by an honest commitment to address violations of rights at home – in particular with regard to reproductive rights, family laws, and political participation. These rights must also be protected for migrant and refugee communities, and everyone who is facing multiple forms of discrimination (economic, linguistic, racial, religious, etc). Thus, we recommend to:

1. Ensure that women and all people with a uterus have the right to legal and safe abortion, without mandatory counselling and waiting periods. Ensure that abortion is part of the medical curriculum at universities. Ensure that medical services are easily and freely accessible, even during times when movement is restricted.
2. Ensure that all people wanting to change their gender can do so without the need to undergo sterilisation and without bureaucratic hassle. Ensure that self-determination is the guiding principle behind these laws.
3. Ensure that personal document laws allow for the possibility for non-binary persons to identify as neither male nor female.
4. Ensure that same-sex marriages are legally equal to heterosexual marriages, specifically concerning adoption and financial support of artificial fertilisation.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>76</sup> In line with many feminist thinkers, we would like to emphasize that even if marriage is available to homosexual and heterosexual couples (as it should be), "state-regulated marriage can further marginalise those individuals who are making their lives outside of marriage" (Enloe, 2017, 110).

5. Introduce science-based comprehensive sexuality education in schools and ensure the curriculum reflects best practices on introducing children and adolescents to sexuality and diversity in an age-appropriate manner.

### **7.3. Widening and strengthening alliances**

As the study has emphasised, the anti-gender movement should be understood within the wider context of democratic decline and in its relation to right-wing, anti-egalitarian ideas. Moreover, research and interviews conducted for the study have demonstrated that, across the world, a variety of (pro-gender) actors are either researching or working to advance the rights of women and LGBTQI\*, but they tend to work in isolation or siloes. Additionally, the work for gender equality, even if conducted jointly by women's and LGBTQI\* rights activists, tend to be disconnected from the wider struggle for democratic values and structures or research on anti-democratic actors. The expansion of voices beyond the traditional defenders of women's and LGBTQI\* rights and the embedding of the work in broader efforts to promote equality and democracy has the benefit of securing broader popular support for the movement by reaching people that would not otherwise engage with the campaigns. Finally, specifically in multilateral fora, the cooperation with pro-gender actors could benefit from an increased institutionalisation. This would allow for strategic exchange among like-minded actors specifically concerning protecting and advancing gender-sensitive languages in resolutions, declarations, and decisions.

Therefore, actors interested to promote gender equality need to actively widen and strengthen coalitions. This should include:

1. Review the partnerships built nationally and internationally and assess whether additional actors could strengthen efforts to challenge anti-gender campaigns. Progressive religious actors are just one option to strengthen messages of equality (such as the efforts by Muslims for Progressive Values at the ECOSOC to advance liberal understandings of sexuality and gender equality. Similarly, Catholics for Choice provide useful materials to understand the role of the Vatican at the UN and campaign against the Vatican's permanent observer status).<sup>77</sup> Other progressive religious actors work within their faith communities, providing space for a critical reflection on what is and is not allowed. Engaging with these actors can help reach religiously-inclined audiences by speaking their language.
2. Proactively raise awareness of the threat posed by anti-gender campaigns to human rights and our multilateral structures and build explicitly pro-gender alliances within multilateral fora. Ensure that these alliances are not only comprised of gender champions, but also those governments that are outspoken against right-wing extremism and pro-democracy.
3. Join the 'LGBT Core Group'<sup>78</sup> at the United Nations. Establish a pro-gender group at the

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<sup>77</sup> Rather than as an endorsement of these particular groups, the examples serve to illustrate the potential benefits of engaging with progressive religious actors.

<sup>78</sup> The United Nations LGBTI Core Group is an informal cross regional group of United Nations Member States established in 2008. The group is co-chaired by Argentina and The Netherlands, and includes Albania, Australia, Bolivia, Brazil, Cabo Verde, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Ecuador, El Salvador, France, Germany, Iceland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Malta, Mexico, Montenegro, Nepal, New Zealand, North Macedonia, Norway, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United States of America, Uruguay, the European Union (as an observer), as well as the

United Nations following a similar principle.

4. Join the Alliance for Multilateralism. Within the Alliance for Multilateralism, ensure that the gender focus is being strengthened and includes discussions on how to counter anti-gender campaigns, potentially through the Gender at the Centre Initiative.<sup>79</sup>
5. Work towards the establishment of an informal pro-gender working groups (alternative informal groups hosted by your embassies) within the OSCE, which serves as a coordination mechanism of pro-gender Participant States.
6. Work towards the establishment of a pro-gender EU Council preparatory body, or as an alternative, a pro-gender informal task force. Politically and financially support the work of bodies such as the High Level Group of Non-discrimination, Equality and Diversity, or the Expert Group on Social Determinants and Health Inequalities.
7. (Financially) support the institutionalisation of coalition building of civil society actors bringing together a range of pro-gender actors spanning across borders, generations, and institutional and thematic backgrounds (human rights, democracy, anti-racism, and anti-right-wing actors).

#### ***7.4. Strengthening outreach and improving communication***

An important factor in success has been the ability of the anti-gender movement to proactively dominate the public and political discourse about gender equality and advance narratives of ‘gender ideology’. Disrupting these narratives and proactively communicating efforts to advance human rights for all is a critical aspect of successfully advancing the goal of gender equality.

1. Through speeches, public campaigns, advertisements, and, specifically, on social media, raise public awareness of the need to further protect and advance the rights of women and LGBTQI\*, also to strengthen our democratic societies. Counter the idea that gender equality is unnecessary or gone too far. This will require a comprehensive assessment of the situation of human rights at home and abroad based on gender disaggregated data. If there is no data that shows that women or LGBTQI\* people are disproportionately affected by certain issues, it will be difficult take a transparent and evidence-based communication approach to addressing and justifying these issues. Ensure that the language used is inclusive and does not focus on white, cis, heterosexual women. Do not cater to the idea that trans rights endanger women’s rights.
2. Pro-actively fund and support awareness raising campaigns on gender equality. For example, coordinate with other pro-gender European governments to conduct EU-wide campaigns (online and offline) explaining and defending the Istanbul convention. Advocate for EU-wide ratification of the Convention in EU fora.
3. Anticipate opposition by anti-gender actors when rolling out new policies related to gender equality, both on the domestic and as well the international level. Accompany new policies on the issues of the rights of women and LGBTQI\* people with substantial public communication campaigns, explaining and justifying these policies. Partner with civil so-

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Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the non-governmental organizations Human Rights Watch and OutRight Action International (Secretariat).

<sup>79</sup> A G7 initiative to increase political leadership and advance the mainstreaming of gender equality in and through education.

ciety in these campaigns, but do not leave it to civil society to defend government policies when they are being attacked.

4. Target your communication strategies to the ‘undecided’, i.e., the silent majority and do not focus on extremist anti-gender actors. Ensure that the communication strategies are not limited to urban and elitist centres. Depending on the context, this might include facilitating debates about feminism and the work feminist actors do to counter the idea that feminist ideas are extremist ideas.
5. Do not be afraid of calling out anti-gender actors and contextualising their efforts as radical as they undermine agreed upon language and established human rights. Focus on the universalisation of human rights for all. Do not cater to the idea that women’s rights are new and progressive and that this is a debate between feminism versus tradition.
6. In cooperation with international feminist civil society, and ideally with like-minded states, develop effective counter-narratives to those narrative used by anti-gender campaigns (as outlined in section 4.2) that fit within your government’s commitments. Apply these counter-narratives.

### ***7.5. Strengthening cooperation with and (financially) supporting civil society***

(Feminist) civil society has been and continues to be critical for the protection and advancement of women and LGBTQI\* rights specifically, but also pro-democratic change in general. However, the work of defending human rights is challenging. Scarce resources make this challenge even harder to overcome and contribute to the feeling that the odds are stacked against us. As mentioned above, the median annual budget of feminist organisations globally is 20.000 USD annually. If funds are available, they are often short-term, project-based, and complicated to administer. Moreover, funds that support organisation to challenge the structures and shape political discourses are rare as most funds available tend to focus on addressing the symptoms of an unequal system. Political advocacy work is rarely funded. Moreover, a lot of the work of anti-gender actors manifests itself within multilateral fora, which civil society has barely access to. For these reasons, governments should:

1. Financially support civil society to conduct political advocacy work promoting gender equality, the rights of women and LGBTQI\*, and provide much needed support to women and LGBTQI\* communities on the ground, with the understanding that addressing the symptoms of gender equality (e.g., providing much needed health service to trans people) is as important as civil society’s ability to shape political and public discourses.
2. Provide long-term, institutional, and easily-to-administer funding for feminist and LGBTQI\* grassroots and civil society organisations, including loosely organised movements. Ensure that at least fifty percent of funds earmarked for gender equality actually goes to feminist grassroots and civil society organisations, including trans and LGBTQI\* organisations, and not international organisations or other governments.
3. Within multilateral fora, support smart sanctions. If funding sources are cut indifferently, as in the case of the EU funds to Polish municipalities that have declared themselves as LGBTQI\* free zones, pro-gender actors also suffer, reinforcing the imbalance as anti-gender actors continue to have access to funding from the Polish government. Ensure that pro-gender actors in these circumstances continue to be able to access funding from the

EU and the EU Member States.

4. If you fund civil society, specifically to provide or protect SRHR, ensure that the beneficiary civil society organisation does not oppose the right to abortion or exclude trans women.
5. Support and enable feminist civil society to shape discussions within multilateral fora by:
  - Inviting feminist civil society to advise national delegations to international conferences and processes (while compensating them adequately for their expertise).
  - Supporting the accreditation of feminist civil society as observers to multilateral organisations.
6. Offer regular briefings about recent discussions and dynamics around gender equality at the EU, the UN, and the OSCE level.
7. Ahead of international initiatives to protect or advance the rights of women and LGBTQI\*, such as introducing resolutions into the UN Security Council, work with feminist civil society, and jointly develop a strategy of countering resistance by anti-gender actors.
8. Through embassies and permanent representations, institutionalise regular exchange with feminist civil society abroad.

### ***7.6. Investing political capital in advancing gender equality internationally***

Many progressive governments are vocally defending the rights of women and LGBTQI\* through their foreign and security policy. Above, we have outlined the necessity to pro-actively strategise and coordinate with like-minded states. However, the best coordination or strategy will not be successful if states are not willing to invest political capital in advancing gender equality and stand up to anti-gender campaigns. Advancing human rights for all will require determination to invest human, diplomatic, and financial resources to do so, as well as the willingness to upset anti-gender actors. For these reasons, we suggest:

1. When leading the drafting of multinational initiatives – such as resolutions or decisions – ask for the maximum in the zero draft and do not try to appease anti-gender actors with weakened language as any language on gender will most likely be contested – regardless of how strong it is.
2. If the focus of the respective initiative is not gender equality per se, ensure that the ‘gender paragraph’ or any language on gender does not become a bargaining chip which is being agreed upon in the end, but ensure agreement on ‘gender’ early on in negotiations.
3. In cooperation with like-minded states develop early on a negotiation strategy of how to ensure the inclusion of gender-sensitive language in any international documents or the inclusion of issues contested by anti-gender campaigns (such as SRHR). Ensure that like-minded actors agree on a clearly defined joint ‘red line’.
4. As president/chair, etc. of any multilateral organisation, such as the Presidency of the EU, non-permanent member to the UN Security Council, OSCE Chairpersonship, or president/chair of international regimes, such as the Conference of States Parties to the Arms Trade Treaty pro-actively table gender equality, women’s rights and LGBTQI\* rights in an effort to expand the existing rights, resources, or opportunities for (political) minorities. The goal should always be to advance the rights of women and LGBTQI\* people, and not only to defend the status quo.
5. Pro-actively and regularly organise high-level events on the topic of anti-gender cam-

paings in or at the margins of important international gatherings, such as the CSW or the UN General Assembly – ideally in cooperation with other like-minded states. Highlight the threats posed by anti-gender campaigns to human rights of (political) minorities and democracy in speeches, statements, and on social media.

### ***7.7. Supporting activities and research that increase the understanding of anti-gender campaigns in specific contexts***

For almost a decade, (feminist) civil society and progressive governments have tended to underestimate and overlook the extent of the attack against the freedoms and our rights which have been enshrined in domestic and international law. We now need to play catch-up to understand the motivations, narratives, strategies, and alliances of anti-gender campaigns through ongoing research is imperative. Therefore, governments should:

1. Continue to fund research and analysis of the work of anti-gender campaigns, especially context-specific research. As a concrete step, an in-depth analysis of the lobby activities by US Christian organisations in Brussels – as outlined by OpenDemocracy – is urgently required to better understand their influence on decision-making policies of the EU (Provost & Archer, 2020).
2. Investigate which external actors are influencing policies and narratives in the European context. A first step in doing this, in line with the calls by more than fifty MEPs, would be to support the call for an urgent investigation into the funding sources of US Christian right groups. These groups have spent at least fifty Million in Europe over the last decade. An investigation should be conducted into the compatibility of these organisations with EU law, EU fundamental rights, and European values (Bychawski, 2019).
3. Building on the work e.g., by Paul Vallely (2020), the impact of philanthropy on civil society, democracy and the rights of (political) minorities needs further analysis.
4. Building on the work of e.g., Paternotte and Kuhar (2020), the usefulness of anti-gender campaigns for both the right and the left-wing populism needs further analysis.

## ***8. Outlook***

This study demonstrates that actors working to restrict and undermine the rights of women and LGBTQI\* people have been gaining new ground for decades. Progressive civil society had, to a large extent, not paid sufficient attention to these developments, neither nationally nor internationally. As the impact of anti-gender actors becomes more visible, this study joins a growing body of work produced by feminist civil society and pro-gender governments who are increasingly raising awareness of countering these developments, and the importance of protecting and advancing the rights of women, LGBTQI\* persons, and other (politically) marginalised groups. While the study draws heavily on existing literature on anti-gender campaigns,

it provides a unique analysis of the challenges posed by them from a policy perspective. We hope that in addition to supporting these actors by providing an analysis what anti-gender campaigns are, how they work and what they aim for, as well as by identifying ways to counter them, the study contributes to raising awareness of how dangerous anti-gender campaigns are for women, LGBTQI\* individuals, other politically marginalised actors – and our democratic values and structures. Further research is needed, in particular in the area of financing and coordination among anti-gender actors, the differential impact of policy decisions on people with differently intersecting identity categories, and on the potential for building broader, yet respectful coalitions among pro-gender actors. To protect and advance human rights for all against anti-gender campaigns, which are already rendering women and LGBTQI\* individuals across the world insecure, we urgently need to continue this discussion.

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