

# *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 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.