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.¹

¹ 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.