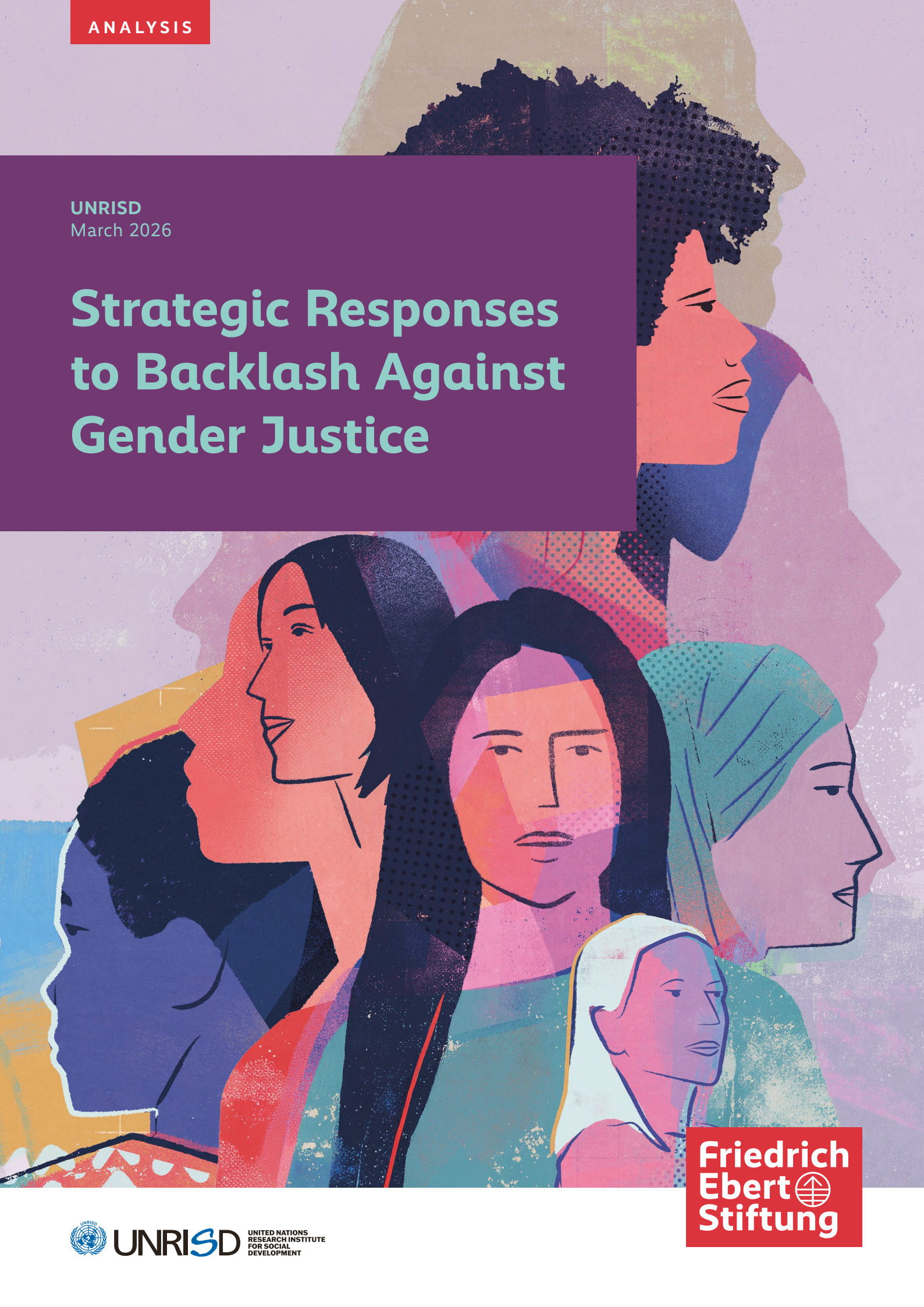


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Strategic Responses to Backlash Against Gender Justice



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Executive Summary

Backlash against gender justice has become a central instrument in contemporary processes of democratic erosion.

Across regions, gender equality and minority rights are deliberately weaponized to legitimize institutional capture, moral regulation, and the restriction of civic freedoms and human rights, particularly pertaining to women, girls, and LGBTQIA+ communities. What is often framed as a cultural or »values-based« disagreement is in practice a strategic political intervention aimed at reshaping democratic institutions, narrowing civic space, and consolidating authoritarian and exclusionary forms of governance. Backlash against gender justice is therefore not peripheral to democratic decline: it is one of its key drivers.

This paper draws on a closed UNRISD–FES expert group meeting convened in late 2025, complemented by recent research. It demonstrates that backlash operates as a political, economic, and religiocultural project embedded within wider patterns of democratic backsliding. Gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights are mobilized as symbolic targets to generate moral panic, polarization, and nationalist resentment, while also serving as practical levers for legal rollback, institutional defunding, and policy realignment. In many contexts, attacks on gender justice accompany restrictions on civil society, academic freedom, media independence, and judicial autonomy. Gender thus functions both as an early warning indicator of democratic regression and as a strategic entry point for authoritarian consolidation. This, in turn, requires responses that protect both rights on paper and the institutional and civic conditions that make those rights real in practice.

A core insight of this paper's analysis is that backlash against gender justice is not reactive, fragmented, or episodic, but constitutes a coherent political project sustained by transnational networks, long-term financing, and coordinated tactics across sectors and governance levels. Anti-gender actors have moved from oppositional mobilization to proactive agenda-setting and institutional embedding. They operate through political parties, state institutions, civil society, faith-based organizations, policy and litigation platforms, digital ecosystems, and multilateral arenas, allowing them to influence law, policy, and norms from within democratic systems themselves.

Several interlinked dynamics define this backlash. First, backlash actors are highly organized and professionalized, supported by dense transnational infrastructures that facilitate policy diffusion, strategic litigation, coordinated lobbying,

and narrative production. Second, their narratives systematically link gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights to broader anxieties about identity, sovereignty, demographic change, economic insecurity, and social order. By framing gender justice as an elite imposition or a threat to families and children, these narratives enable coalition-building across otherwise distinct regressive agendas while diverting attention from the structural drivers of inequality and precarity. Third, multilateral forums have become increasingly contested governance spaces, where coordinated anti-gender blocs engage in norm spoiling, procedural obstruction, and incremental dilution of international commitments related to gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and LGBTQIA+ protections. Finally, digital infrastructures play a central role in amplifying backlash through disinformation, algorithmic polarization, and gendered harassment, raising the political cost of equality advocacy and contributing to the contraction of civic space.

Taken together, these dynamics show that attacks on gender justice are not simply consequences of democratic erosion but mechanisms that actively accelerate it. Where gender equality is undermined, pluralism and democratic institutions weaken. Yet policy responses have often been fragmented, reactive, or insufficiently politically strategic. Gender justice has too frequently been treated as a social or identity-based side issue rather than as a core dimension of democratic governance, economic resilience, and institutional accountability. Underinvestment, siloed approaches, and a lack of political will have left hard-won feminist gains exposed to systematic rollback.

If democratic systems are to withstand and reverse current trajectories of backsliding, responses must evolve accordingly. Countering backlash requires strategic, structural, and cross-movement action, including: strengthening legal and institutional safeguards; advancing proactive feminist agendas grounded in economic justice and social protection; reclaiming narrative space by linking gender equality to democratic stability and material wellbeing; and treating digital infrastructures and civic space as core democratic institutions.

Crucially, countering backlash is both about preventing regression and strategically shaping democratic futures grounded in gender justice. Protecting gender equality is inseparable from safeguarding pluralism, institutional integrity, and public trust. The following recommendations set out concrete entry points for governments, multilateral actors, civil society, and democratic allies to act in coordi-

nated and politically informed ways to meet this challenge.

To support such a shift, this paper advances seven interlinked strategic recommendations aimed at governments, multilateral actors, civil society, and democratic allies. These recommendations are designed to operate across legislative, institutional, economic, narrative, and digital domains, and to be mutually reinforcing in practice.

Policy Recommendations

This paper advances seven interlinked strategic recommendations:

1. Strengthen legislative and institutional foundations for gender-equal democracy.
2. Advance strategic, values-based communication linking gender equality to economic wellbeing and democratic stability.
3. Set proactive feminist policy agendas grounded in economic justice and social protection.
4. Invest in evidence-based research and monitoring systems.
5. Advance multilevel, intersectional alliances across movements, sectors, regions, and policy areas.
6. Strengthen feminist and pro-democracy influence in multilateral arenas.
7. Significantly increase and safeguard funding for gender justice and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

These priorities underline that gender equality is not an isolated concern but a prerequisite for democratic resilience. Meeting the challenge of backlash requires coordinated, well-resourced, and politically informed action across movements and sectors, recognizing that no single institution or actor can counter these dynamics alone.

1.

Introduction

1.1 Background

In recent decades, significant progress has been made in expanding access, opportunities, and outcomes for women and girls, and – albeit more unevenly – for LGBTQIA+ communities across many parts of the world. These gains were institutionalized through a series of global commitments, beginning with the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (1995) and followed by Millennium Development Goal 3: *Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women* (2000) and Sustainable Development Goal 5: *Achieve Gender Equality and Empower all Women and Girls* (2015). Unanimously adopted by UN member states, these frameworks marked a time in which gender justice became firmly embedded within the global policy agenda and was widely framed as a shared international priority.

At the same time, the durability of this progress has become increasingly contested. While aggregate gains remain visible in many contexts, they coexist with sharp, localized reversals and rising defense costs that complicate assessments of overall progress. Following the Beijing Declaration, there was a significant increase in norms related to gender equality, leading to the widespread adoption of various initiatives and policy frameworks. This shift enhanced the implementation of instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), expanded the Women, Peace and Security agenda, strengthened donor engagement, and professionalized transnational advocacy. Additionally, the emergence of digital mobilization further boosted these efforts. Since around 2015, there have been various reinforcing shocks that have contributed to a backlash against progressive movements. These include the rise of authoritarian and populist politics that use »gender ideology« as a divisive tool, the stacking of multiple crises – such as austerity measures, pandemics, wars, and climate emergencies – that prompt governments to prioritize »hard security«. Furthermore, the amplification of outrage through algorithms and the reduction of civic space have often made backlash seem stronger. Whether regression outpaces progress is context-specific: key advancements such as progressive legal reforms, girls' education, women's political participation, and gender-responsive budgeting continue.

At the same time, sustaining recent gains in gender equality is more expensive than it was a decade ago. This is due to well-funded counter-mobilization, polarized politics, tighter regulations on civic space, and escalating demands for donor compliance and evidence. These factors force social movements and institutions to divert scarce resources into security, legal defense, administration, and rapid communications just to maintain the status quo. In sum, it appears that while progress persists in many contexts, it has become more uneven, contested, and costly to sustain (Eknor Ackzell, 2025).

The backlash we are witnessing is a well-funded, transnational effort to roll back hard-won progress and curtail women's and LGBTQIA+ rights. These anti-gender actors are increasingly embedded in institutions, disguised in technocratic language, and aligned with broader attacks on democracy, enhancing their perceived legitimacy. By co-opting development language and leveraging transnational networks, this movement seeks to undermine LGBTQIA+ rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and gender justice. Simultaneously spanning the cultural, ideological, and political, anti-gender movements are interconnected across regions and countries, often sharing strategies, tactics, funding, and a common objective: to restore a political and social order that is conservative and hierarchical (GATE 2024, McEwen & Narayanaswamy 2023).

In this volatile landscape, there is a pressing need for strategic, evidence-based, and politically grounded responses. Policy actors, particularly those committed to democratic governance and inclusive development, are grappling with how to respond. Many face growing political risks when advocating for gender justice and human rights, often being labelled as »ideological«, »western«, or »too woke«. Policy makers and practitioners require not only accurate analysis of what they are facing, but also actionable guidance on how to navigate it in terms of what language to use, what coalitions to build, what policies to prioritize, and how to sustain democratic values in the face of organized opposition.

This paper draws on the discussions of a closed expert group meeting co-organized by the FES and UNRISD in late 2025, which brought together senior experts and policy

makers from the fields of diplomacy, international relations, and social development from the multilateral system, governments, civil society, and academia. By synthesizing the conclusions drawn from the meeting and aligning them with current research, this paper aims to provide recommendations for policy makers, politicians, civil society, and international organizations. These recommendations focus on strategic responses to backlash against gender justice that aim to protect gender justice and reaffirm the values of inclusive governance and development.

1.2 Democratic decline and the rise of autocracy

The factors that have accelerated anti-gender movements are inherent to the systems in which we live. It is crucial to situate anti-gender movements within the broader context of democratic decline and the rise of autocracy (D'Angelo et al. 2024), which encompass a range of complex issues. These include: the unprecedented concentration of wealth and income, alongside uneven progress in poverty reduction; the rise of austerity; the elite capture of political processes and institutions; the privatization of essential services, and a retreat of state involvement (UNRISD 2022). We are also witnessing the growth of nationalism and right-wing extremism, coupled with a backlash against movements advocating for equality and human rights. Added to this are ongoing conflicts and insecurity, resulting in a surge of forcibly displaced people. Meanwhile, technological advancements are creating new divides, both within and between countries. All of this is set against the backdrop of a worsening climate crisis and biodiversity loss, which pose a fundamental threat to our survival. This intertwined economic, cultural, and political climate constitutes the larger context in which the anti-gender movements find support to underpin their agendas by exploiting current political, economic, and climate crises.

Across regions, attacks on women's rights, LGBTQIA+ rights, and gender justice function both as a tool and an accelerator of authoritarian politics. Anti-gender mobilization is increasingly used to undermine pluralism, restrict civic space, and delegitimize democratic norms by framing equality, inclusion, and human rights as ideological threats to national identity, sovereignty, or social order (Corrêa, Paternotte & Kuhar 2018).

In contexts of democratic erosion, gender becomes a particularly effective political instrument. Authoritarian and illiberal actors mobilize anti-gender narratives to polarize societies, consolidate political power, and weaken accountability. By portraying feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements as »elite«, »foreign«, or »anti-family«, anti-gender actors justify restrictions on civil society, academic freedom, media independence, and judicial autonomy. This dynamic aligns backlash against gender justice with wider authoritarian strategies aimed at hollowing out democratic institutions while maintaining formal electoral processes (UNRISD & UN Women 2025).

The targeting of women and girls, LGBTQIA+ communities, gender studies, and feminist civil society is an early warning sign of democratic regression. Restrictions on sexual and reproductive health and rights, bans on Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), attacks on academic institutions, and harassment of gender equality advocates frequently precede or accompany broader rollbacks of the rule of law, freedom of expression, and political participation. What is initially shaped as a moral or cultural campaign is thus often connected to and/or evolves into a structural assault on democratic governance (Papada et al. 2023 UN Women 2012).

Anti-gender movements deploy a recognizable set of tactics that mirror and reinforce authoritarian playbooks. These include: the strategic use of disinformation and moral panic; legal and institutional capture through courts, ministries, and multilateral forums; the stigmatization and criminalization of civil society; and the instrumentalization of public funding and policy frameworks to privilege exclusionary »pro-family« agendas. Importantly, these tactics are rarely confined to the national level: they are embedded in transnational networks that enable rapid diffusion, policy learning, and political normalization across contexts.

Understanding backlash against gender justice as part of a wider pattern of democratic decline has critical implications for policy responses. It underscores that defending gender equality is not a niche or sectoral concern, but a core democratic imperative. Conversely, failure to respond to anti-gender mobilization risks accelerating authoritarian consolidation, shrinking civic space, and eroding the foundations of inclusive governance.

1.3 Structure of the paper

Following this introduction, this paper is organized in two parts. Section 2: *Backlash against Gender Justice in the Context of Democratic Decline*, maps the backlash against gender justice in the context of democratic decline, outlining key global developments and analyzing the movement's core motivations, actors, financing, and tactics, including transnational networks and digital infrastructures. Section 3: *Policy Recommendations*, translates this analysis into strategic, actionable policy recommendations for governments, multilateral actors, civil society, and allies to safeguard and advance gender justice and strengthen inclusive democratic governance.

2.

Backlash against Gender Justice in the Context of Democratic Decline

2.1 Global developments

Backlash against gender justice is evident across the Americas, Europe, Africa, Southwest Asia and North Africa, and the Asia-Pacific. While the specific narratives, impact, and targets vary by context, anti-gender campaigns also display similarities in framing and tactics across regions. Common areas of attack for these movements are opposition to women's and girls' rights, LGBTQIA+ rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), and gender-inclusive education.

Aiming to provide an analytical foundation for the policy recommendations in Chapter 3, this chapter analyses the backlash against gender justice as a coherent political, cultural/religious, and economic project. It maps key global developments, examines the motivations and actors driving anti-gender mobilization, and unpacks the organizational, legal, financial, and digital infrastructures that sustain it. Understanding the coordinated and professionalized nature of this backlash is essential for developing effective, strategic responses that defend gender justice as a core component of democratic governance.

The funding landscape of anti-gender movements

The anti-gender movements are fueled by international funding that far exceeds the financing of progressive movements (Khan et al. 2023). Comparative data on the scale and sources of funding to anti-gender actors remains limited, owing to differences in campaign finance disclosures, tax reporting, and civil society transparency requirements across countries, as well as the strategic use of anonymous donor funds and other opaque financial vehicles that obscure the origins of capital and weaken accountability (GPP 2020). Nevertheless, the available evidence indicates that anti-gender actors are successfully consolidating a robust financial infrastructure, mobilizing both domestic and transnational resources to expand their capacity to shape policy agendas and erode national, regional, and multilateral commitments to gender justice (McEwen & Narayanaswamy 2023).

Their funding sources are diverse. They include membership-based contributions, particularly among grassroots faith-based organizations, as well as privileged access to national government funds – whether through grants, public contracts, or eligibility for service delivery – alongside indirect support through tax exemptions. Conspicuously, investigative research indicates that public funds – including national government resources and European Union funding streams – have in some cases been channeled to organizations advancing anti-gender agendas (Datta 2021).

On top of this, significant transnational resources flow from conservative religious institutions, far-right political parties and actors, philanthropic foundations, civil society organizations, and high-net-worth individuals, notably from the Russian Federation, the United States of America, and Europe (Datta 2021, Khan et al. 2023). For instance, a recent study suggests that 54 organizations based primarily in these countries and regions provided over \$700 million to anti-gender movements between 2009 and 2018 (Datta 2021).

More concerning still is that this funding appears to be increasing and coincides with a steep decline in international resources dedicated to gender equality and human rights, compounding the risks to hard-won gains. According to the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, annual anti-gender funding in Europe more than doubled between 2018 and 2022, reaching \$1.18 billion over this period (Datta 2025). These figures capture only documented flows; the true scale of financial backing is likely far greater, given the opacity of many funding channels. Such resources are being strategically deployed to finance litigation, lobbying, media campaigns, and grassroots mobilization aimed at rolling back LGBTQIA+ rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and gender equality.

Gender as a battleground

In contemporary society, gender has emerged as a crucial battleground where political, religious, and capitalist forces converge, each driven by distinct yet often overlapping motivations. This intersection is not simply about the regulation of bodies and identities but reflects broader struggles

over power, ideology, and social control. To understand why gender has become such a contentious issue, it is essential to explore the role of gender in maintaining social hierarchies, the influence of religious and political ideologies, and economic imperatives.

Gender is a key battleground because it sits at the intersection of multiple systems of power: political, religious, and economic (Datta 2021). These systems use gender to maintain control over individuals and societies, shaping identities, behaviors, and opportunities in ways that reinforce existing hierarchies. Understanding the motivations of these actors and the role of gender in their strategies is essential for anyone seeking to challenge these power structures and advocate for a more just and equitable world.

Gender is also a fundamental organizing principle of society, structuring not only personal identities but also social relations, institutions, and power dynamics (Connell 1987). Historically, gender norms have been – and still are – used to justify unequal distributions of power, with patriarchal systems privileging men over women and reinforcing heteronormativity as the default mode of social organization. This entrenchment of gender roles is not just a social convention but a mechanism of control that maintains existing power structures. Political, religious, and capitalist actors all have a vested interest in preserving these structures, as they provide a stable foundation for the exercise of power.

For political actors, controlling gender norms is a way to assert authority and legitimacy. Traditional gender roles are often invoked to promote nationalist ideologies, where the family unit is idealized as the bedrock of society, and any deviation from this model is perceived as a threat to the social order (Yuval-Davis 1997, Choi et al. 2024). Religious actors, particularly those aligned with conservative or fundamentalist beliefs, view the regulation of gender and sexuality as a moral imperative, essential to the preservation of divine or natural law. Capitalist forces, meanwhile, exploit gender norms to sustain consumer markets and labor divisions that maximize profit. Gendered expectations influence everything from the types of products marketed to different demographics to the roles individuals are expected to play in the workforce (Fraser & Jaeggi 2018).

The battleground of gender is not just about regulating bodies but also about controlling the narratives that define those bodies. Political, religious, and capitalist anti-gender actors all engage in what Butler (2024) might describe as the production and enforcement of the phantasm of gender. They create and disseminate powerful narratives about what gender is and should be, using these narratives to justify their actions and maintain their power. The next section includes a continuation of this discussion, considering the idea of gender as a »symbolic glue«.

Intersections with other regressive projects: Gender as »symbolic glue«

Anti-gender mobilization does not operate in isolation but intersects closely with other regressive political projects, including racism, anti-migrant rhetoric, xenophobia, homophobia, and authoritarian populism. Research shows that opposition to »gender ideology« often functions as a form of symbolic glue, bringing together various groups – such as religious conservatives, nationalist populists, anti-immigration movements, and far-right political parties – around a common set of perceived threats despite differing core agendas (Kováts & Pöim 2015, Pető 2015). By portraying gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights as signs of moral decline, elite imposition, or external interference, anti-gender discourse provides a simplified explanation for complex social, economic, and demographic changes.

Recent scholarship demonstrates that this symbolic function is not limited to rhetoric but actively embedded in broader political projects. Gendered narratives are strategically mobilized to link anxieties about cultural change, migration, and demographic futures, producing racialized and nationalist imaginaries in which women's bodies, reproduction, and sexuality become sites of political control (Indelicato & Magalhães Lopes 2024). In this sense, gender »binds« different grievances together and contributes to the construction of a common enemy through which exclusionary visions of citizenship, belonging, and sovereignty are normalized.

In this way, anti-gender discourse facilitates coalition-building across multiple regressive agendas, reinforcing authoritarian and illiberal politics while masking structural drivers of inequality and insecurity. Recognizing these intersections is critical for understanding backlash against gender justice not as a single-issue phenomenon, but as part of a wider ideological ecosystem in which cultural, economic, and national anxieties reinforce one another. The following section therefore turns to the main motivations and actors driving this backlash, examining political, religious, and economic motivations as well as how digital governance and infrastructure converge to sustain transnational anti-gender mobilization.

2.2 Anti-gender actors and motivations

Professionalized transnational networks and the ambivalent role of international actors

Anti-gender mobilization operates through dense transnational networks linking anti-abortion NGOs, conservative policy institutes, legal advocacy organizations, and training platforms across regions. These networks share funding pipelines, policy and litigation strategies, and narrative frames, enabling rapid diffusion of campaigns aimed at rolling back key gender justice gains, such as CSE, SRHR, and LGBTQIA+ rights. Rather than functioning as loose coalitions, they constitute a coordinated political infrastructure

with long-term strategic objectives (Corrêa, Paternotte & Kuhar 2018, Datta 2021).

This infrastructure has become increasingly professionalized, evolving from reactive or movement-based mobilization into a sophisticated ecosystem that mirrors and strategically exploits the procedures and legitimacy of international governance. UNRISD research shows that anti-gender actors actively position themselves as credible stakeholders in development, governance, and human rights arenas by adopting technocratic language and engaging institutional mechanisms such as shadow reporting, expert consultations, parliamentary hearings, and multilateral negotiations (McEwen & Narayanaswamy 2023). Across regions, they now operate through well-resourced think tanks, legal advocacy centers, policy institutes, training platforms, and digital content operations that generate policy briefs, legislative templates, strategic litigation, and targeted media campaigns.

International actors and institutions play an ambivalent role in this process. On the one hand, multilateral organizations, governments, and regional bodies have historically been central to advancing gender justice through diplomacy, funding, norm-setting, and the protection of civic space. Feminist engagement with international law, United Nations (UN) mechanisms, governments, and regional institutions has been critical to securing gains in SRHR, gender-based violence prevention, and equality frameworks. On the other hand, these same arenas have become key sites through which anti-gender actors professionalize, gain access, and contest norms from within (Cupać & Ebetürk 2020). These developments render anti-gender messaging harder to refute and call for research-based feminist and queer-inclusive visions of gender justice and women's rights.

Unintended harms caused by international actors have contributed to this situation. Programs that are siloed, along with depoliticized or overly technical approaches to gender justice that overlook power dynamics, combined with the reduction or withdrawal of funding for SRHR and feminist civil society movements, have weakened the progressive forces that serve as a counterbalance. In multilateral negotiations, repeated concessions on gender-related language (often justified as pragmatic compromises in otherwise »technical« agreements) have incrementally narrowed normative space and emboldened anti-rights actors' alliances (McEwen & Narayanaswamy 2023). These dynamics illustrate how professionalized anti-gender networks are able to exploit institutional risk aversion, fragmentation, and declining political commitment within international systems.

Training platforms and fellowships form a critical bridge between transnational networks and institutional influence. They produce lawyers, policymakers, diplomats, and communicators equipped to challenge gender justice norms within governments, legislatures, and multilateral institutions. This includes engagement not only in UN bodies but also in regional and supranational legislative

arenas, such as the European Parliament, where anti-gender actors increasingly operate through formal parliamentary procedures, expert hearings, and cross-party alliances (Mariani 2025, Mos 2025, McEwen & Narayanaswamy 2023). This institutional embeddedness enables norm-spoiling and policy rollback to proceed incrementally, often below the threshold of public scrutiny (Goetz 2020b; UNRISD & UN Women 2025).

Geopolitical shifts further reinforce these dynamics. Anti-rights coalitions have gained influence within the UN system and regional organizations by coordinating voting blocs, narrative strategies, and procedural interventions (Datta 2021 & 2025). These alliances increasingly draw on broader geopolitical tensions, sovereignty claims, and anti-Western rhetoric, positioning gender justice as a site of ideological contestation in global power struggles. As a result, international arenas have become increasingly politicized spaces for contestation, requiring coordinated, politically informed counterstrategies rather than more technical responses.

Taken together, the professionalization of anti-gender mobilization cannot be understood separately from the evolving role of international actors and institutions. International systems simultaneously remain essential to defending gender justice and have become key terrains through which backlash is institutionalized. This duality underscores the need for international engagement that is explicitly political, coordinated across sectors and governance levels, and attentive to how institutional practices themselves can either constrain or enable organized backlash.

Digital infrastructures

Digital infrastructures are central to the reach, speed, and political effectiveness of contemporary anti-gender movements. Social media platforms, alternative digital spaces, and algorithm-driven content ecosystems enable anti-gender actors to disseminate emotionally charged narratives that frame feminism and LGBTQIA+ rights as threats to family, masculinity, national identity, and economic security (Khan et al. 2023; McEwen & Narayanaswamy 2023). Influencers, manosphere communities, conservative lifestyle platforms, and pseudo-expert commentators translate anti-gender ideology into accessible and viral content, particularly targeting young audiences (Gerrand et al. 2025).

Anti-gender activists strategically exploit social media algorithms and recommendation systems that prioritize engagement, outrage, and sensationalism, enabling misogynistic and anti-LGBTQIA+ content to spread well beyond fringe communities. Platform algorithms can amplify harmful gendered content by prioritizing highly engaging material, thereby causing such narratives to appear repeatedly in mainstream user feeds and increasing their social legitimacy (University College London 2024). Studies of recommender systems further show that once users engage with polarizing or extremist content, algorithmic personalization can generate

feedback loops in which progressively more extreme material is recommended, reinforcing visibility and normalization over time (Whittaker et al. 2021). In addition, engagement-based ranking systems systematically reward sensational and divisive content, contributing to the amplification of extreme positions and polarization within digital ecosystems (D'Ignazi et al. 2025). Together, these dynamics allow anti-gender narratives to sustain reach and influence even in contexts of moderation or deplatforming, as content is continuously adapted, recycled, and redistributed across platforms.

Digital infrastructures also facilitate coordinated disinformation and harassment campaigns. Research shows that gendered disinformation and online abuse are increasingly organized through bot networks, troll swarms, and coordinated reporting practices that inflate anti-gender narratives, distort public debate, and intimidate feminist and LGBTQIA+ advocates through targeted harassment and reputational attacks (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2024, Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2025a, Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2025b). These practices function as a form of digital repression, narrowing civic space and raising the personal, professional, and political costs of gender equality advocacy.

Beyond communication, online spaces can operate as recruitment and radicalization environments. Studies on online misogyny demonstrate how »manosphere« and adjacent anti-gender communities channel grievances linked to economic precarity, perceived status loss, and cultural change into gendered and sexualized scapegoating, fostering hostile digital subcultures that normalize exclusion and abuse (Ging & Siapera, 2018). At the same time, anti-gender activists strategically shift frames – such as free speech, child protection, or demographic decline – to embed their agendas within broader far-right and illiberal mobilizations, enabling transnational diffusion and political normalization of anti-gender discourse (Kuhar & Paternotte 2017; UNRISD & UN Women 2025).

Overall, digital infrastructures amplify anti-gender discourse while actively shaping its form, scale, and impact. The digitalization of anti-gender movements has lowered the cost of transnational coordination, accelerated the normalization of extremist positions, and strengthened illiberal challenges to gender equality and democratic governance.

Religious motivations: Gender as a moral imperative

Religious institutions engaged in anti-gender undertakings frame gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights as threats to traditional gender roles, casting opposition as a moral defense. Religion has historically played a central role in shaping and enforcing gender norms. Many religious traditions prescribe specific roles and behaviors for men and women, often justifying these prescriptions as divinely ordained or natural. In this context, gender becomes not just a social category but a moral imperative, integral to the maintenance of religious order. For many religious actors,

the regulation of gender and sexuality is seen as essential to upholding the moral fabric of society (Foucault 1978).

In recent years, religious fundamentalism has experienced a resurgence in many parts of the world, often in response to what is perceived as the secularization and liberalization of society (Kuhar & Paternotte 2017, UNGA A/HRC/56/51 2024). This resurgence has brought a renewed focus on gender, with religious leaders and institutions advocating for the preservation of traditional gender roles as a bulwark against moral decay (Datta 2021). This advocacy often manifests in opposition to LGBTQIA+ rights, reproductive rights, and gender equality initiatives, which are framed as affronts to religious values and the natural order (Ahrens et al. 2022, GPP 2023).

The religious battle over gender is not merely about preserving traditional norms but is also a means of exerting control over broader social and political processes. By positioning themselves as defenders of morality, religious actors can influence public policy and shape societal attitudes towards gender and sexuality. This influence is particularly potent in regions where religion and state are closely intertwined, allowing religious doctrine to directly inform legal and political decisions.

Political motivations: Gender as ideological control

Right-wing and far-right politicians use anti-gender rhetoric to consolidate power, claiming to protect national identity and sovereignty (Datta 2021). The political stakes of gender are immense. In many societies, gender norms are deeply intertwined with national identity and cultural values. Political movements, particularly those on the right, often mobilize around gender issues to galvanize support and consolidate power. The promotion of »traditional« gender roles is frequently used to rally against perceived threats, such as feminism, LGBTQIA+ rights, or the erosion of family values (Edenborg 2022, UNGA, A/HRC/56/51 2024). This strategy serves to create a clear »us versus them« dichotomy, where the defense of gender norms becomes synonymous with the defense of the nation or the preservation of cultural heritage.

The use of gender as a tool for ideological control is not limited to conservative movements. Progressive political forces also engage in battles over gender, albeit with different aims. For example, the push for gender equality and the recognition of diverse gender identities are central to many left-leaning political platforms. However, this advocacy often encounters fierce resistance from those who view such changes as destabilizing. This resistance should be understood as a calculated effort to maintain existing power structures. By framing gender nonconformity as a threat, political actors can justify repressive policies and practices that reinforce their authority.

Capitalist motivations: Gender as economic strategy

Powerful donors support anti-gender narratives and actors to maintain social hierarchies and resist redistribution, particularly regarding (unpaid) work, wealth, and social rights. In the capitalist framework, gender is both a market and a mechanism for economic control. Capitalism thrives on the segmentation of markets and relies on gendered divisions of labor to maximize profit (Fraser & Jaeggi 2018), depending on the scaffolding of disproportionately feminized unpaid work. This gendered economic stratification is not accidental but is perpetuated by policies and practices that favor the interests of capital over those of the people.

The involvement of elites, represented by wealthy individuals, in funding political, religious, and social anti-gender movements worldwide (Datta 2021, GATE 2024, GPP 2023, McEwen & Narayanaswamy 2023) indicates that economic motivations are at least as significant as religious and political drivers. There are different strands of this economic agenda: one advocating for economic deregulation and another pushing for a regression towards kleptocracy, both of which ultimately lead to a form of oligarchy (Carpenter 2020, Datta 2021). These actors share a belief in hyper-capitalism, where wealthy entities – such as high-net-worth individuals belonging to the very elite of our global society, corporations, and aristocracy – seek freedom from what they perceive as an oppressive state, aiming to further enrich themselves at the expense of social cohesion and protections for the environment, consumers, and society. The pro-wealth agenda attracts social and economic elites across Europe, leading them to support emerging alt-right and far-right political parties, in what can be described as part of an elite capture of political processes and institutions (UNRISD 2022).

Gender justice pays

Gender justice yields economic, social, and democratic benefits. By expanding labor markets, increasing productivity, and strengthening political and socioeconomic rights for women, girls, and LGBTQIA+ people, gender justice achievements contribute to broad-based prosperity and social cohesion. Historically, advances in gender justice have been central to economic transformation, most notably through increased women's labor-force participation, improved educational outcomes, and productivity gains that benefit entire societies. These gains, however, are neither automatic nor evenly distributed. As Piketty (2021) demonstrates, economic growth and social reform alone have not prevented the continued concentration of wealth and power among elites. On the contrary, growth trajectories shaped by deregulation, weak redistribution, and reduced state responsibility have often benefited those at the top far more than the majority. This political economy context is crucial: gender justice delivers collective gains, but directly challenges economic models that rely on inequality, as well as unpaid and informal care and domestic work.

Research by Kabeer and Natali (2013) shows that the relationship between gender equality and economic growth is asymmetric: gender justice promotes economic growth, but economic growth does not necessarily advance gender justice. When gender justice is framed narrowly as an instrumental means to boost GDP rather than as a matter of rights, power, and redistribution, it risks being hollowed out. Such depoliticized approaches leave underlying hierarchies intact and fail to confront the structural conditions that limit women's and LGBTQIA+ people's full economic, political, and social participation (Arnfred 2011). Over time, this weakens both productivity and development outcomes by reproducing exclusion and precarity (Croppenstedt et al. 2013, Polavarapu 2011).

From a societal perspective, gender justice clearly pays for the great majority: it supports shared prosperity, social inclusion, and democratic participation. However, it may pay less – or even pose a threat – to certain economic and political elites. In particular, actors aligned with illiberal and anti-gender political projects often benefit from deregulation, reduced social spending, and the concentration of wealth and power (Datta 2021). For these actors, gender justice represents not only a redistribution of resources, but a redistribution of authority, autonomy, and voice.

This helps explain why gender justice has become a central target within broader illiberal projects. Attacks on the rights of women, girls, and LGBTQIA+ people are not cultural side battles, but integral to political strategies that seek to roll back democratic accountability, entrench hierarchical social orders and weaken social protection. In this sense, gender justice benefits people and democracy, but not necessarily elites whose economic and political power depends on inequality, deregulation, and the erosion of rights.

2.3 Main tactics and strategies

This section provides an overview of key tactics of anti-gender movements, including legislative flooding of regressive proposals, criminalization and legal repression, institutional capture and erosion of gender mechanisms, strategic disinformation and moral panic, and knowledge suppression and attacks on education.

Legislative flooding of regressive proposals

Anti-gender actors increasingly deploy legislative flooding: the strategic introduction of large numbers of regressive bills targeting such areas as sexual and reproductive health and rights, LGBTQIA+ protections, gender-based violence legislation, and education policy (McEwen & Narayanaswamy 2023, Roggeband & Krizsán 2018). These initiatives are often coordinated across issue areas and jurisdictions, reflecting the growing professionalization and resourcing of anti-gender networks. Even where proposals do not pass, their cumulative effect is significant: legislative overload

drains feminist actors' capacity and resources, normalizes anti-gender perspectives within political debate, and increases the likelihood of partial or indirect rollbacks through attrition or compromise (Roggeband & Krizsán 2018). In this way, legislative flooding functions less as a search for immediate legal victories and more as a mechanism for shifting policy baselines, causing democratic erosion (Goetz 2020a).

Criminalization and legal repression

Criminalization represents the most coercive tactic of backlash, mainly targeting LGBTQIA+ communities, journalists, educators, and human rights defenders through punitive laws, prosecutions, and administrative harassment (Moazami 2024). These measures range from explicit criminal bans on LGBTQIA+ identities and expression to the strategic use of morality laws, protest restrictions, and civil society regulations. Such legal repression raises the personal and political cost of gender justice advocacy, shrinking civic space and deterring free participation. These practices are particularly prevalent in contexts of democratic backsliding, where legal instruments are increasingly used to consolidate executive power and suppress dissent more broadly (Papada et al. 2023).

Institutional capture and erosion of gender mechanisms

Institutional capture is a key tactic used by backlash actors to undermine gender justice commitments from within the state. This includes defunding or dismantling gender equality bodies, narrowing institutional mandates toward »family« or demographic objectives, and appointing ideological loyalists to key bureaucratic positions (Goetz 2020a, UNRISD & UN Women 2025). Such changes are frequently incremental and framed as technical or administrative reforms, allowing governments to maintain formal compliance with equality obligations while undermining them in practice (Roggeband & Krizsán 2020). Over time, the weakening of national gender machineries and independent oversight institutions reduces state capacity to implement, monitor, and defend gender justice policies, aligning gender rollback with broader processes of democratic de-institutionalization.

Strategic disinformation and moral panic

Strategic disinformation is central to delegitimizing gender equality by constructing moral panic around key issues such as feminism, LGBTQIA+ rights, and sexuality education. Anti-gender actors circulate misleading or false narratives that frame gender justice as a threat to children, families, religion, or national sovereignty, enabling diverse political grievances to be articulated through a shared moral register (Corrêa, Paternotte, & Kuhar 2018, McEwen & Narayanaswamy 2023). Digital platforms amplify disinformation through engagement-driven algorithms, coordinated harassment and smear campaigns, and increasingly AI-enabled content pro-

duction, accelerating reach and normalization (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2024, 2025a, 2025b). Disinformation thus operates not only as a mobilization tool but as a means of eroding shared factual ground, weakening democratic deliberation and supporting illiberal policy responses.

Knowledge suppression and attacks on education

Suppressing knowledge is a deliberate strategy aimed at weakening the intellectual foundations of gender justice. Anti-gender actors target gender studies, feminist research, and inclusive curricula through bans, defunding, censorship, and intimidation of scholars and educators (Pető 2016; Antić & Radačić 2020). Universities and schools become key sites for contestation, with gender and sexuality framed as illegitimate or harmful fields of inquiry. These attacks restrict academic freedom, limit access to evidence-based education, and reinforce misinformation. Over time, knowledge suppression narrows civic imagination and undermines democratic pluralism, contributing to longer-term regression in equality norms (UNGA A/HRC/56/51 2024).

2.4 Regional variations

Backlash against gender justice manifests in distinct regional and local forms, shaped by political systems, religious landscapes, colonial legacies, and socio-economic conditions. Generalizing about any one region is therefore fraught with difficulties, yet at the same time, discussions during the 2025 closed UNRISD–FES expert group meeting emphasized that regional expressions share important common traits. While backlash narratives and tactics travel transnationally, they are adapted to local political opportunities and constraints. Understanding these regional and local specificities is essential for developing politically grounded and context-sensitive responses. The following section briefly outlines key regional variations, drawing on discussions from the meeting and current research.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, backlash against gender justice is closely linked to austerity measures, far-right populism, and broader struggles over the social contract (Caminotti & Tabbush 2021, Corredor 2021). Meeting participants stressed that anti-gender projects in the region often combine moral panic with material rollback, particularly through defunding gender equality mechanisms, dismantling public services, and weakening social protection, thus allowing rights to be hollowed out without formal legal repeal (Zarembert et al. 2021, UNRISD & UN Women 2025). The Argentinian example highlights this, where aggressive anti-feminist rhetoric has been paired with drastic cuts to gender-based violence prevention, sexual and reproductive health services, and care-related programs, illustrating how fiscal policy functions as a vehicle for backlash (Amnesty International 2024). At the same time, the region remains distinctive for its strong feminist counter-mobilization. Mass movements around reproductive rights, gender-based violence, and

care have combined street protest, litigation, and engagement with state and multilateral institutions to protect advancements. Caribbean contexts add further complexity, shaped by colonial-era legal frameworks and strong church influence in some states, underscoring the need for highly localized strategies that are sensitive to the relationships between state and religion, as well as constraints on civic space.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, backlash against gender justice is shaped by uneven democratic consolidation and is frequently framed through anti-colonial narratives that depict feminism, SRHR, and LGBTQIA+ rights as foreign impositions. These framings resonate in contexts marked by colonial legacies and contested sovereignty, enabling anti-gender political and religious actors to advance punitive agendas and challenge women's equality in family law, protection from gender-based violence, political participation, and sexuality education (Awondo et al. 2022, Nabaneh et al. 2022, Tamale 2020). A prominent example is the intensification of criminalization of LGBTQIA+ identities, which combines severe penalties with broader restrictions on civil society and public expression, as exemplified in Uganda's severe anti-LGBT laws (Human Rights Watch 2025). Research and meeting discussions highlighted the role of transnational conservative funding – particularly from U.S.-based networks – in supporting policy-maker training, litigation, and narrative campaigns, demonstrating how anti-colonial rhetoric can obscure deeply transnational infrastructures (Datta 2021; McEwen & Narayanaswamy 2023). At the same time, feminist and human rights movements across the region continue to mount resistance through organization, litigation, and regional advocacy, often under conditions of significant repression.

In North America, backlash against gender justice is largely driven by long-standing religious nationalist projects that have evolved into highly coordinated political strategies, particularly in the United States of America. Gender is mobilized as a central wedge issue within broader efforts to reshape state institutions, constitutional norms, and democratic accountability. A defining example is the rollback of abortion rights following *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022), after which multiple U.S. states enacted near-total abortion bans or severe restrictions, illustrating the cumulative effects of judicial capture, strategic litigation, and legislative flooding (Human Rights Watch 2023). Backlash has also targeted LGBTQIA+ communities through state-level bans on gender-affirming care for trans youth, restrictions on school curricula, and »parental rights« legislation that reframes gender equality as a threat to children and family autonomy (ACLU 2025). These campaigns are reinforced by a dense ecosystem of conservative think tanks, legal advocacy organizations, and media platforms that coordinate narratives and strategies across states. While Canada has largely maintained stronger federal protections, meeting discussions noted the diffusion of similar frames – particularly around education and online mobilization – highlighting the cross-border circulation of

backlash narratives within shared media and digital ecosystems.

In Asia and the Pacific, backlash dynamics are highly heterogeneous but can be argued to share two recurring features: the entanglement of anti-gender politics with nationalist or authoritarian governance, and the growing centrality of digital backlash (Chopra 2021, UN ESCAP & UN Women 2024, UN Women 2023, Veritasia et al. 2024). It often takes the shape of state regulation of culture, education, and civil society, including censorship of LGBTQIA+ content, restrictions on NGOs, and administrative harassment of activists. In several contexts, anti-feminism has become an explicit political strategy, with gender equality framed as destabilizing social harmony, undermining masculinity, or privileging women at the expense of men. A prominent example is South Korea, where anti-feminist rhetoric has entered mainstream political discourse. Reporting on recent political and social dynamics highlights how narratives portraying feminism as unfair to men, and as contributing to social and economic insecurity, have gained traction in public debate and electoral politics, particularly among younger male voters (Rashid 2025). These narratives have been taken up by political actors and commentators, contributing to proposals and public discussion around weakening or dismantling gender equality institutions as a means of restoring perceived »fairness«.

Across Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA), backlash against gender justice is frequently enforced through morality governance, securitization, and legally enabled repression. Control over bodies, sexuality, and family life is closely tied to state legitimacy and religious authority, making gender justice claims particularly threatening to entrenched power structures (Moghadam 2020; Nagle 2020, UNRISD & UN Women 2025). Afghanistan arguably poses the most egregious example of backlash against gender justice in SWANA. Since 2021, the Taliban have systematically reinstated severe restrictions on women's rights to mobility, expression, assembly, education, employment, and public visibility as part of their religious fundamentalist governance. These measures have led to the near-total exclusion of women from public and social life, constituting an institutionalized form of misogyny that many experts characterize as »gender apartheid« (UN Women 2024). The Afghan context illustrates how fragility and protracted conflict create conditions in which exclusionary political projects can readily take hold. In addition, meeting participants also underscored cyber repression as a defining feature across parts of SWANA, including surveillance, online harassment, doxxing, and disinformation targeting activists. These practices function both as tools of repression and as deterrents, shrinking civic space through a combination of formal legal sanctions and informal intimidation (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2025b, Khan et al. 2023).

In Europe, backlash against gender justice is closely linked to the rise of right-wing and far-right populist politics, religious narratives, and broader democratic backsliding (Datta,

2025). Anti-gender agendas have increasingly targeted sexual and reproductive rights, LGBTQIA+ equality, and policies addressing violence against women. The progressive Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, also known as »the Istanbul Convention« (2011) has become a central focus of contestation, framed by opponents as a threat to national sovereignty, family values, and traditional gender roles, illustrating how efforts to address violence against women are increasingly politicized and contested (Krizsán & Roggeband 2021). Particularly punitive forms of backlash have emerged in Hungary, Poland, and the Russian Federation, where rollbacks of abortion rights, gender equality policies, and protections against violence have coincided with shrinking civic space and weakening democratic institutions (Roggeband & Krizsán 2020). Backlash dynamics are often embedded in wider illiberal ecosystems, typically overlapping with climate change denial, anti-migrant and anti-vaccine movements, and mobilizing racialized narratives that portray gender-based violence as a problem imported by migrants. These examples demonstrate how backlash dynamics are broadening in scope, extending into new and previously less-contested areas of progressive politics (UNRISD & UN Women 2025).

3.

Policy Recommendations

This paper has shown that backlash against gender justice is a central political, economic and religiocultural project situated within contemporary democratic decline. What is often strategically framed as a »values debate« has become a strategic, transnational effort to use gender as a lever for civic repression, institutional capture, repression of women's and LGBTQIA+ rights, and the normalization of authoritarian and exclusionary governance. Backlash against gender justice is not peripheral to democratic erosion: it is one of its key drivers.

Across regions, anti-gender actors have shifted from reactive mobilization to proactive agenda-setting. They are adaptive, well-funded, and deeply embedded in political parties, state institutions, religious networks, digital ecosystems, and multilateral arenas. Gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights function both symbolically – to mobilize moral panic, nationalism, and resentment – and materially, through legal, policy, and institutional rollbacks that weaken democratic safeguards. Faced with these challenges, responses by progressive actors have often been fragmented. Gender justice has too frequently been treated as a social side issue rather than as a core dimension of democratic governance. Underinvestment, siloed approaches, and a lack of political will have left feminist gains exposed to systematic rollback.

Backlash against gender justice does not advance only through formal legal and policy rollback. It also operates by undermining the institutional and civic conditions necessary for implementing and sustaining progress. Through budgetary defunding, administrative and legal pressure, coordinated disinformation and gendered online and offline violence, anti-gender movements can weaken equality institutions and civil society, reduce service delivery, and limit enforcement, even where laws remain formally in place. As a result, rights may remain formally recognized while becoming increasingly difficult to realize, and gains can be eroded through institutional capture and civic repression as much as through explicit legislative change.

If democratic systems are to withstand and reverse current trajectories of backsliding, responses must evolve accordingly. Countering backlash requires strategic, structural, and cross-movement action, including: strengthening legal

and institutional safeguards; advancing proactive feminist agendas grounded in economic justice and social protection; reclaiming narrative space by linking gender equality to democratic stability and material wellbeing; and treating digital infrastructures and civic space as core democratic institutions.

Crucially, countering backlash is both about preventing regression and strategically shaping democratic futures grounded in gender justice. Protecting gender equality is inseparable from safeguarding pluralism, institutional integrity, and public trust. The following recommendations set out concrete entry points for governments, multilateral actors, civil society, and democratic allies to act in a coordinated and politically informed manner to address this challenge. Implementation should be informed by risk and adhere to a do-no-harm approach, paying particular attention to partner safety.

Policy recommendations

1. Strengthen legislative and institutional foundations for gender-equal democracy.

- *Strengthen constitutional and legal guarantees of equality and non-discrimination*, including explicit protections on the grounds of gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity, and ensure their enforceability in practice.
- *Mandate gender impact assessments across all policy domains* – including fiscal, justice, climate, digital, and security policy – to prevent indirect discrimination and policy-driven inequality.
- *Safeguard the independence, mandates, and funding of equality bodies and gender institutions*, insulating them from political interference, defunding, and institutional downgrading.
- *Adopt parity and representation measures in public institutions*, including legislatures, courts, public administration, and regulatory bodies, to ensure balanced decision-making and democratic legitimacy.

→ *Embed gender equality and human rights standards into digital governance frameworks*, including platform regulation and AI accountability, recognizing digital civic space as a core democratic institution rather than a neutral technical domain.

→ *Pursue narrowly tailored tax and regulatory reforms to close loopholes that enable anti-gender actors to channel tax-exempt or tax-advantaged funding, particularly through opaque civil society or faith-based entities. At the same time, embed robust human rights safeguards to prevent these reforms from being weaponized against feminist and LGBTQIA+ rights, and against other progressive civil society actors.* Reform must be designed and monitored in accordance with international human rights standards.

2. Advance strategic, values-based communication linking gender equality to economic wellbeing and democratic stability.

→ *Anchor public communication in broadly shared democratic values*, such as fairness, security, stability, care, and dignity, while avoiding depoliticized or purely technical framing.

→ *Connect gender equality to material »bread-and-butter« concerns*, including jobs, wages, care systems, public services, and cost-of-living pressures.

→ *Institutionalize Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for responding to hate speech, moral panic, and coordinated backlash*, ensuring timely, consistent, and politically informed responses.

→ *Invest in and support independent journalism, feminist media, and storytelling initiatives* that humanize policy impacts, counter disinformation, and strengthen public trust.

→ *Apply behavioral insights and communication science* to test, adapt, and scale effective messaging strategies across different audiences and contexts.

→ *Develop coordinated digital response strategies* to counter algorithmic amplification of hate speech, disinformation, and moral panic, with particular attention to youth-facing platforms.

3. Set proactive feminist policy agendas grounded in economic justice and social protection.

→ *Advance feminist economic reforms*, including investment in care infrastructure, universal social protection, fair taxation, and redistribution that address structural inequality and precarity.

→ *Systematically integrate gender equality into climate policy, AI governance, digital regulation, and labor transitions*,

ensuring that major economic and technological transformations do not reproduce or deepen inequalities.

→ *Strengthen universal frameworks to prevent gender-based violence and protect bodily autonomy*, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, as foundational democratic guarantees.

→ *Position feminist policies as governance solutions* that deliver broad social and economic benefits while explicitly challenging elite models that rely on inequality, unpaid care, and democratic erosion.

4. Invest in evidence-based research and monitoring systems.

→ *Invest in research that maps backlash tactics, actors, and financing*, including transnational funding flows, legal strategies, and digital infrastructures.

→ *Establish early-warning and rapid-analysis mechanisms* to detect legislative regression, coordinated disinformation campaigns, and institutional capture threatening gender equality and democratic institutions.

→ *Regularly monitor and publicly report on gendered hate speech, regressive legislation, and civic space erosion*, improving accountability and public awareness.

5. Advance multilevel, intersectional alliances across movements, sectors, regions, and policy areas.

→ *Build alliances across labor, climate, digital rights, anti-racist, and youth movements*, recognizing shared stakes in democratic governance, economic justice, and civic space.

→ *Engage moderate and reform-oriented actors* within faith-based institutions, political parties, and civil services where this can prevent extremist capture and defend civic space, without compromising human rights standards or legitimizing anti-gender agendas.

→ *Promote cross-policy collaboration*, linking gender equality with trade, labor, climate, health, and economic governance agendas.

→ *Strengthen Global South feminist diplomacy and regional activist hubs*, ensuring leadership, resources, and agenda-setting power beyond Global North institutions.

→ *Create rapid-response coalitions* capable of coordinated action during legislative, judicial, or digital crises.

→ *Deepen collaboration with feminist tech actors and digital rights organizations* to develop secure communication systems, digital watchdog tools, and cross-regional tech solidarity.

6. Strengthen feminist and pro-democracy influence in multilateral arenas

- *Build progressive voting blocs and negotiation strategies* across multilateral forums to prevent norm spoiling, procedural obstruction, and institutional capture.
- *Increase transparency around actors influencing UN and multilateral norms*, including funding sources, affiliations, and lobbying strategies.
- *Train diplomats and multilateral negotiators on anti-gender strategies and counter-narratives*, including in technical and sector-specific negotiations where backlash is often less visible but frequently present and highly consequential.
- *Strategically use international human rights mechanisms* to document, challenge, and deter regressive policies and democratic backsliding.

7. Significantly increase and safeguard funding for gender justice and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

- *Scaled up, long-term, flexible funding* to feminist, LGBTQIA+, women's rights, and grassroots organizations, recognizing their expertise, leadership, and proximity to affected communities. Establish robust safeguards to prevent resource diversion.
- *Prioritize sustainability, country ownership, and locally led development*, ensuring resources support context-appropriate solutions and strengthen national capacities and affected communities.
- *Support for institutional sustainability*, not just short-term projects, enabling organizations to engage in advocacy, coalition-building, research, and community mobilization.
- *Safeguards against regulatory or fiscal misuse*, ensuring that efforts to increase transparency do not become tools to restrict or target progressive civil society actors.
- *Embed risk-informed safeguards* to protect partners and avoid unintended harm (do-no-harm), including support for security, legal, and digital safety needs, and careful information and exposure practices in high-risk settings.

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSE	Comprehensive Sexuality Education
FES	Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and other gender and sexual identities
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SOPs	Standard Operating Procedures
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
SWANA	Southwest Asia and North Africa
UN	United Nations
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

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Strategic Responses to Backlash Against Gender Justice

What is often strategically framed as a »values debate« is, in practice, a coordinated transnational effort to use gender as a lever for civic repression, institutional capture, and the repression of women's and LGBTQIA+ rights. Situated within contemporary democratic decline, backlash against gender justice is not peripheral to democratic erosion, it is one of its key drivers. Drawing on a UNRISD–FES expert group meeting and recent research, this paper shows how anti-gender actors have shifted from reactive mobilization to proactive agenda-setting, becoming deeply embedded in political parties, state institutions, religious networks, digital ecosystems, and multilateral arenas. It traces how gender functions both symbolically – to mobilize moral panic, nationalism, and resentment – and materially, through legal, policy, and institutional rollbacks that weaken democratic safeguards. The paper concludes with concrete entry points for governments, multilateral actors, civil society, and democratic allies to act in coordinated and politically informed ways, protecting both rights on paper and the conditions that make those rights real in practice.

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