

ADVANCING GENDER JUSTICE IN INTERNATIONAL NEGOTIATIONS: STRATEGIES OF RESPONSE TO ANTI-GENDER POLITICS



APPLIED RESEARCH PROJECT ARP 18

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Final Report

16 May 2025

Geneva, Switzerland

Word Count (excluding bibliography): 22.138 words

Cover Photos: Photo taken by Marianne Oliveira and UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré

Submitted for the **Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies**

And the **Gender Centre** of the **Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies**

Fulfilling the requirements of the **Master in International and Development Studies (MINT)**

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

United Nations (UN)

CEDAW Conventions on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
EEG Eastern European Group
ECOSOC Economic and Social Council
EU European Union
GoF IE SOGI Group of Friends of the SOGI Mandate
HLS High-Level Segment
HRC Human Rights Council
HRDs Human rights defenders
IESOGI Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity
ICCPR International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
UNAIDS Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
OIC Organization for Islamic Cooperation
SRHR Sexual and reproductive health and rights
SOGIESC Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity/Expression, and Sex Characteristics rights
SOGI Sexual orientation and gender identity
UNDP United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
UNFPA United Nations Population Fund
UPR Universal Periodic Review
WEOG Western European and Others Group

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) &

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

ADF Alliance Defending Freedom International
ACLJ American Center for Law and Justice
AWID Association for Women's Rights in Development
SRI Sexual Rights Initiative
CRR Centre for Reproductive Rights
CBN Christian Broadcasting Network
EPF European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights
ESWA European Sex Workers Rights Alliance
FWI Family Watch International
GPP Global Philanthropy Project
IAS International AIDS Society

ILGA World International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association
IOF International Organization for the Family
NCF National Christian Foundation
WaterStone The Christian Community Foundation
WCF World Congress of Families

Political Parties

AFD Alternative for Germany, Alternative für Deutschland
FDI Brothers of Italy, Fratelli D'Italia
PIS Law and Justice Prawo i Sprawiedliwość
Lega League, League of the North
RN National Rally, Rassemblement national
PVV Party for Freedom, Partij voor de Vrijheid
PRR Populist Radical Right
PRRP Populist Radical Right Party

Other agencies / stakeholders

CDC Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
NCAA National Collegiate Athletic Association
NPS National Parks Service
NIKK Nordisk information för kunskap om kön
ODA Official Development Assistance
ODIHR Organization for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
OSCE Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
ROC Russian Orthodox Church
USAID U.S. Agency for International Development
PEPFAR U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief
V.A. Veteran Affairs
WEF World Economic Forum

Wording

CSE Comprehensive sexuality education
DEI Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
GAC Gender-affirming care
GBV Gender-based violence
PMC Politicized Moral Conservative
PMC TAN Politicized Moral Conservative Transnational Advocacy Network
PMTCT Prevention of mother-to-child transmission
PJG Pro-gender justice
TAN Transnational Advocacy Network

1. Introduction and Overview

During the 2024 Beijing + 30 Regional Review Meeting a side event held by OSCE/ODIHR, entitled, 2+2=5: the propulsion potential of transnational peer networks in reversing gender backsliding was held and highlighted the need for action against the anti-gender movement (personal communication, October 22, 2024). It acted as a springboard for jumping into our research as it described gender backsliding as a transnational trend and the need to address it. The panelists highlighted current issues brought forward by the anti-gender movement and proposed methods to counteract. We highlight this event as a pivotal moment in the realization that the analysis that our project brings will serve a needed purpose.

In the midst of an era marked by significant political polarization and the resurgence of populist movements all around the world, gender justice faces unprecedented challenges. This report examines the complex interplay between gender justice movements and anti-gender justice movements across various geopolitical contexts. Particular attention will be given to the manifestation of the phenomenon within the international human rights framework. Within the United Nations (UN) Mechanisms, such as the Human Rights Council (HRC), the divergence is obvious, and a constant and growing polarization around these issues has been burgeoning in the last few sessions (Dupraz-Dobias, 2024). By documenting various ongoing dynamics, this report aims at contributing to the understanding of human rights challenges while providing insights for stakeholders committed to advancing gender equality in an increasingly polarized environment.

This political polarization is increasing across the world on global, regional, and national levels. It is greatly reflected in international and intranational negotiations, especially those related to gender justice issues such as women's rights, LGBTI+ rights, and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Countries around the world have changed their stances on the gender justice movement and have pulled back support, including funding, to vital efforts and organizations, affecting policy and aid globally. Right-wing governments, with the support of wealthy and organized anti-gender actors, have changed national laws to retract the rights of women and girls, LGBTQI+ people, and other marginalized groups.

Language and terminology are important for both sides of the discussion and the way the movements refer to themselves can shift and change depending on the context. Therefore, this research will refer to anti-gender movements also as "gender-traditionalist movements," except for some parts referring to them as "pro-family" or "pro-life". On the other hand, the progressivist movement will be referred to as "pro-gender justice" as well. Moreover, we also mobilize "non-like-minded" and "like-minded" to refer to them, which is a strategy that was learned after the conducted interviews.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Contextualizing Gender Justice and Anti-Gender Movements

2.1.1. Anti-Gender Movement and Populism

The narratives that are carried on by PRRP (Populist Radical Right Party) use a familist master frame that is presented and spread by conservative forces. These actors carry on an anti-gender populist mobilization, part of a culture war on liberalism (Lavizzari & Pirro, 2024). The clashes that arise between different ideals of womanhood and manhood are used as tokens to support national identification (Walby, 2006). At the same time, the topic of gender serves as the perfect hook to justify anti-immigration stances (Lavizzari & Pirro, 2024). Indeed, migrants – together with queer people – are seen as the “outsiders” and threats to the “original and natural” family that is composed of women (with the role of carers and reproducers) and men (with the role of protectors) from the above-mentioned threats. Concurrently, populism is based on the “ideational approach” where it is seen as a ‘thin ideology’ that centers moral superiority of people – supporters – and hatred towards the elites, suggesting that politics should echo directly what people want, and as such it can be attached to different political ideologies, that in this case act as “core” for the ideology, i.e., right or left wing (Mudde, 2017; Lavizzari & Pirro, 2024).

2.2. Gender Justice in International Negotiations within the Human Rights Council

2.2.1. Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) and the Double-Helix Model

The Politicized Moral Conservative Transnational Advocacy Network (PMC TAN) has several representatives that are organized and active in multilateral spaces focused on Human Rights, such as the HRC and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). For context, a Transnational Advocacy Network (TAN) is a collection of actors, primarily NGOs, that work internationally to advance specific agendas and advocate for particular topics and the gender-traditionalist TAN is referred to as a Politicized Moral Conservative (PMC) (Keck & Sikkink, 2018). The anti-gender movement is composed by voiceful actors such as the Alliance Defending Freedom International (ADF), the Family Watch International (FWI), and the International Organization for the Family (IOF) – formerly the World Congress of Families (WCF) (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024).

In opposition, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association (ILGA World) and the Centre for Reproductive Rights and Sexual Rights Initiative (SRI) comprise the progressivist block of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024). Due to

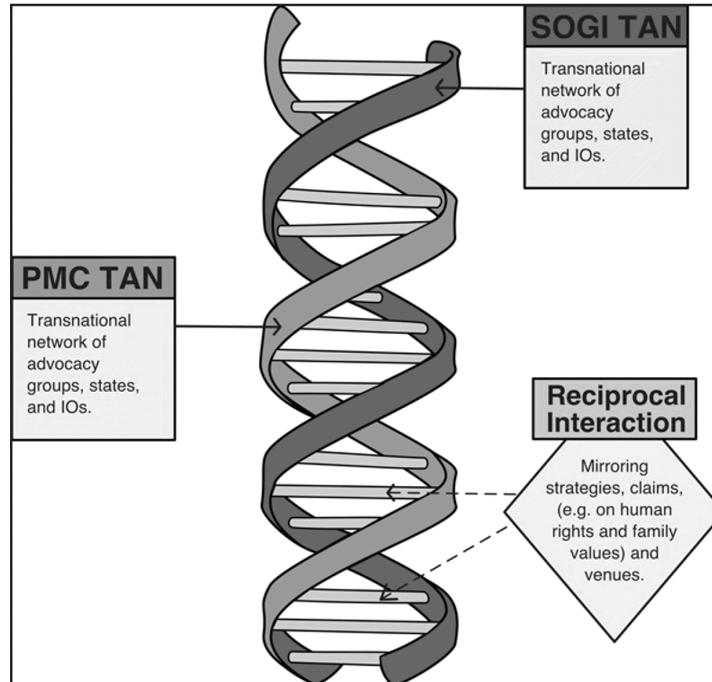
Ayoub and Stoeckl's (2024) focus on the efforts against LGBTI+ rights, the second TAN is quoted as the SOGI (sexual orientation and gender identity) TAN. This research will refer to it as pro-gender justice (PGJ) TAN, as it will be analyzing a broader range of issues that includes sexual and reproductive health and rights, women's rights, etc.

The PMC TAN term applies to actors constructing their strategies and programs around morality and politics. They press for their conservative agenda prioritizing "nationalism over globalism, particularism over universalism, legal sovereignty over international law, patriarchy over equality, hierarchy over democracy, the collective over the individual, religion over secularism and duties over liberties". It is important to note that the PMC TAN does stay up to date with new human rights language, specifically to use as a tool to further develop their agenda (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024, p. 12).

The advancement of gender justice in international negotiations and venues is the pursuit of the PGJ TAN actors (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024). By not just bringing up issues but pressing states to decriminalize same-sex relations, allow same-sex marriage, or prohibit discrimination based on SOGI, these actors utilize the United Nations Mechanisms - especially the HRC and the UPR as tools to advance their agendas and highlight the significance of these global processes. Despite the huge progress made, a growing backlash is being carried out via similar strategies by the PMC TAN, setting the stage for a mutual interaction (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024; Velasco, 2018).

Ayoub and Stoeckl (2024) propose the "double helix model" shown below. They suggest that the presence of two rival TANs complicates the five phases of the Spiral Model proposed by Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink (2013). At the end of the spiral, tranquility is often expected in the phase of rule-consistent behavior in which a state's practice conforms to international human rights norms. However, within the research context, the spiral transforms into a double helix, destabilizing the formalization of certain rights domestically and internationally (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024)

Hence, the fact that both TANs coexist in world politics means that both use international organizations such as the United Nations and its mechanisms as venues and platforms, mirroring each other's claims and strategies. This argument is made clear when observing gender justice NGOs increasingly speak in terms of "family values" and anti-gender NGOs strongly utilize a "human rights" discourse. Therefore, with this *modus operandi*, the two movements keep mobilizing and pursuing their goals about each other in, often, a tense way, which the double helix metaphor captures as well and the Spiral Model does not (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024).



Setting the stage for the section on the weaponization and instrumentalization of human rights language, it is important to highlight that the rival interpretations of human rights norms strongly reinforce the “myth of competing rights.” From the moment that an anti-gender actor mobilizes human rights law to push against developments such as the right to same-sex marriage based on freedom of religion, for example, a zero-sum logic appears, making a polarized scenario in which “the expansion of rights in one sphere naturally leads to the reduction of rights in another” (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024, p. 74).

In sum, the struggle between anti-gender and pro-gender justice networks transcends a simple linear progression toward ever-broader rights. Instead, Ayoub and Stoeckl’s “double helix” metaphor captures how two equally savvy TANS - one mobilizing traditionalist moral politics and the other pressing for expansive sexual and gender minorities’ rights actively mirror and weaponize each other’s strategies within the same international fora. Far from arriving at a stable “truce” of rule-consistent behavior, states and NGOs find themselves pulled in opposite directions: advancing non-discrimination and marriage equality on one hand, while invoking sovereignty, religious freedom, and “family values” on the other. This zero-sum framing entrenches the “myth of competing rights,” wherein gains for one set of rights are portrayed as direct losses for another. Recognizing this dynamic is critical, it reveals that human rights language itself has become the battleground, and that meaningful progress will require not only legal norms but also a deeper reckoning with how rights are framed, contested, and instrumentalized in global politics.

2.3. States and Blocs of States Pro-Gender Justice and Anti-Gender

In June 2021, the United States Mission to International Organizations in Geneva launched the Group of Friends of the SOGI Mandate (GoF IESOGI). It was an informal partnership of

countries working together proactively within the Human Rights Council to support the work of the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (IESOGI) (U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva, 2021). In June 2023, the GoF counted 35 countries with representation from all five regional groups of UN Member States (Ministério das Relações Exteriores, n.d.).

On the opposite side of the table, engaging with anti-gender justice approaches based on religion, culture, “Islamic family”, and “natural laws”, is a very prominent and active bloc of states called the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Working both collaboratively and individually, the 57 member states oppose statements and resolutions related to topics such as sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), and violence against women and girls (Blitt, 2018).

UN Resolution 50/10 is a great example to illustrate this polarized scenario. Approved with 23 votes in favor, 17 against, and 7 abstentions - 14 of the states against and 4 abstaining being members of the OIC, the resolution renewed the mandate of the IESOGI for three more years (United Nations General Assembly, 2022). After intense activism and lobbying from both TANs with almost 1300 liked-minded non-governmental organizations pressing to renew the mandate, FWI and others issued a formal public letter to thank the OIC for opposing the so-called “anti-family advocates” (Family Watch International, 2013; ISHR, 2022)

The aforementioned PJC TAN's report highlights the evolving stances of different regional groups within the United Nations regarding gender justice. It notes that the Latin America and Caribbean Group (GRULAC), historically supportive of gender justice, continues to advocate strongly for these issues. The Western European and Others Group (WEOG) also supports gender justice efforts. At the same time, the Eastern European Group (EEG) has a mixed approach, with some countries like Hungary opposing these efforts. The African Group, once strongly opposed to gender justice issues, now holds a more divided stance, with countries such as South Africa and some Francophone and Lusophone nations continuing to show support, while others remain less unified. Similarly, the Asia and Pacific Group demonstrates mixed positions, with countries like Fiji and Nepal as supportive, while others do not take a clear stance. Lastly and more obviously, the OIC remains consistently opposed to these issues, maintaining a firm voice against gender justice at the UN (ILGA World, 2019).

Furthermore, regarding individual anti-gender justice efforts, states such as Hungary, Russia, and the Vatican - with strong support from the Russian Orthodox Church - are pivotal to understanding state-led strategies. One example is the symbolic and linguistic statements such as Pope Francis' comparison of “gender theory” and “gender ideology” to the educational policies of Hitler and the destructive possibilities of the nuclear arms race that does not recognize the order of creation” (Baden, 2015; Butler, 2024a). These assumptions and declarations reinforce the fear of gender and the intention to ‘protect’ children from the supposed phantasm that aims to allegedly ‘destroy civilization.’

Moving forward, holding and instrumentalizing the anti-propaganda law that prohibits the ‘propaganda’ of non-traditional sexual relations to minors, Russia mobilizes a discourse of traditional values, illiberalism, and anti-Western exceptionalism to garner domestic and international support to press against gender justice. Hungary is currently considered the most challenging case for the European Union on anti-discrimination issues as the country has emerged more visibly in the PMC TAN and the Kremlin. Advancing anti-gender politics domestically such as the closing of the Department of Gender Studies of universities and hosting the WCF in 2017 with a keynote speech from Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the country rapidly moves to defending ‘Hungarian natural family and their children’ (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024; Butler, 2024a)

Influenced by Jean Laplanche, Butler mobilizes the theoretical approach of a ‘phantasmatic scene’ to analyze the fear of gender that anti-gender actors have. For the psychoanalyst, fantasy is not just a creation of the mind, but an organization of desire and anxiety following structural and organizational rules that draw on both unconscious and conscious material (Butler, 2024a). This understanding is very appropriate to analyze anti-gender rhetoric in politics because it reveals its various facets of the different absurdities and myths, including the fear of indoctrinating children with comprehensive sexuality education and the fear of sexual violence committed by transgender women in female restrooms, for example.

Religion plays a key role in the issue of anti-gender justice efforts within the United Nations and also in domestic contexts. However, something very remarkable about the international venues is the partnerships between the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Catholic Church in the name of “traditional family values”. One example is the Manhattan Declaration (2009) in which the alliance stated the urgency to “defend the unborn, defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman, and protecting religious freedom”. Entitled “A Call of Christian Conscience”, the declaration and the described scenario set the scene as a clear example of the actions of non-state and state actors within the PMC TAN (Ayoub; Stoeckl, 2024).

Finally, the Geneva Consensus Declaration, a document signed in 2020 and reaffirmed in 2021-2023 by 39 coalition member countries, is also an example of the PMC TAN effort. Hosted by the Government of Hungary, which is currently the Secretariat of the Declaration, it aims to “protect women’s health” and “strengthen the family”, the Declaration quotes the inexistence of the international right to abortion and recognizing the institution of family as made by men and women (Geneva Consensus Declaration, n.d.).

Finally, it’s essential to underline the issue of funding. The anti-gender justice movement has demonstrated strong organizational capacity and the ability to attract substantial financial support, sometimes three times more than pro-gender justice movements. They have secured robust funding streams through these well-coordinated networks to support their advocacy efforts. In contrast, organizations dedicated to advancing women’s rights and gender justice often face significant financial constraints, which can limit their capacity to respond effectively to opposition or to sustain long-term initiatives (Wilson, 2020). An entire section of the present report will explore this issue, including the current challenges, trends, and opportunities.

2.4. The Weaponization and Instrumentalization of Human Rights Language

The strategic manipulation of human rights language has become a salient feature of international negotiations on gender issues. Controversies surrounding narratives and concepts have become a defining feature of the international arena, significantly shaping negotiations on human rights. Language has emerged as a critical tool for advancing competing agendas in these debates, contrasting interpretations of the term *gender*. This contest has transformed human rights discourse into a battleground where terms such as “gender”, “family”, and “rights” are continuously reframed to align with particular values and political goals (Denkovski, 2022).

On one side, the self-identified “pro-family movement” asserts a fixed definition, stating that “gender” refers exclusively to the two biological sexes, male and female. This perspective draws on sources such as the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Article 7(3), which specifies: “For the purposes of this Statute, it is understood that the term 'gender' refers to the two sexes, male and female,” (Family Watch International, 2013). This definition is leveraged to argue against inclusive interpretations of gender that would encompass non-binary or transgender identities.

The competition over language is not only evident in international resolutions and treaties but also reflected in the types of investments made by anti-gender and pro-gender organizations. Both sides employ sophisticated strategies to influence public discourse and policy (Holmes, n.d.). For example, anti-gender activists frequently adopt human rights language and development rhetoric to challenge women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights. Terms like “natural rights,” “family rights,” and “the right to life of the unborn” are used to argue against abortion access, LGBTQI+ protections, and other measures promoting gender justice. To support their position, they have developed a growing infrastructure that includes think tanks, such as the *Family Research Council*, peer-reviewed publications, and a variety of public engagement initiatives, such as conferences, webinars, and workshops (McEwen & Narayanaswamy, n.d.)

Publications such as the *Resource Guide to U.N Consensus Language on Family Issues* (2013) provided detailed instructions for delegates to support anti-gender narratives into international policy documents. According to its creators, the guide is intended to “be used creatively by delegates in UN negotiations to affirm and strengthen the traditional family.” The anti-gender movement views this document as “a powerful tool to aid the efforts of delegates in preserving the family” (Family Watch International, 2013, p. 5).

Central to this perspective is the understanding of family as “the natural and fundamental group unit of society,” which, according to Article 16(3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), is “entitled to protection by society and the State,” (Family Watch International, 2013). Advocates argue that this framing reinforces the importance of the family in global policymaking and provides intellectual legitimacy to their efforts, helping to mainstream their agenda and equip negotiators in international discussions.

The guide encourages the use of human rights norms - such as the right to life, national sovereignty, and the rights of parents - to resist progressive gender policies. For instance, parental rights are emphasized as a rationale for excluding comprehensive sexual education and limiting children's autonomy (Family Watch International, 2013).

The guide emphasizes the importance of national sovereignty and the role of religious and ethical values and cultural background in shaping policy implementation. It advocates for the use of more flexible language in negotiated texts and highlights key policies related to the family, reproductive health, gender, and vulnerable populations. Furthermore, the document focuses on upholding traditional understandings of the family, parental rights, and the importance of responsible sexual behavior, often contrasting these with the understanding of abortion as family planning.

Additionally, the guide advises the strategic replacement of binding terms like "shall" and "must" with more flexible ones like "encourage" and "recommend" to dilute commitments to gender equality (Family Watch International, 2013). This linguistic tactic underscores how language becomes a tool of resistance against the perceived imposition of liberal values by international institutions.

Conversely, pro-gender equality actors utilize human rights discourse to promote SRHR, gender identity recognition, and protection against discrimination. However, their advocacy is often countered by anti-gender actors who frame such rights as threats to "traditional values" and "national sovereignty" (Holmes, n.d.).

In response to the rise of anti-gender movements, pro-gender justice organizations and their allies are developing innovative strategies to counteract these narratives. They focus on documenting successful approaches, fostering cross-regional solidarity, and creating counter-narratives that resonate with diverse audiences. By leveraging data and evidence, these organizations aim to reinforce the legitimacy of gender equality norms and sustain progress in the face of backlash (Holmes, n.d.).

In this debate, both sides recognize the power of narratives, and their efforts to influence global and local policies reflect broader struggles over the meaning and scope of fundamental rights. This ongoing contestation underscores the critical role of language and strategic communication in shaping the future of human rights. For anti-gender actors, the strategy involves embedding conservative norms within human rights frameworks, co-opting a discourse traditionally associated to progressive change. For pro-gender advocates, it means continuously defending and expanding the interpretative space of international norms to ensure inclusivity and equality.

3. Methodology

To fulfill the ambitions of the Applied Research Project, we aim to answer the following research question and subquestions:

a) In the fluctuating geopolitical context, how are actors (NGOs, States, academics, etc.) navigating the gender justice panorama?

- i) What dynamics at the Human Rights Council suggest changing trends concerning gender justice?
- ii) What unifying gender justice approaches can we develop in the context of geopolitical divides?

We answered the research question by analyzing a broad range of resources, which are both available online and offline. Our qualitative methods included document and discourse analysis, together with interviews and private meetings carried out within the spaces of the institute. The documents we reviewed consisted of Resolutions from the 58th session of the HRC and reports from NGOs, journal articles, academic papers, and books. In addition, we attended both the Beijing+30 Regional Review Meeting in October 2024 and side events of the 58th session of the HRC from February to May 2025. Finally, it is important to mention that the interviews that were conducted - among other things - integrated the knowledge that we gained and clarified the insights from the 58th session of the HRC.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 3.7 billion people in 72 countries around the globe went to the polls in 2024 – making this year the biggest election year in human history (UNDP, n.d.). Acknowledging the increasing resistance and present polarization around the topic of gender justice within electoral contexts around the globe, we made an effort to incorporate these results in our analysis. Therefore, we include the analysis of changes made by the new Trump Administration in the USA's positions and discourses in national and international contexts, as well as elected influential leaders on the subject from other countries in South America and Europe.

To sustain our hypothesis and help answer our research question and subquestions, eleven interviews with experts from International Organizations (IOs), International NGOs, and State representatives were carried out. For data analysis, a spreadsheet was used to visualize voting patterns of the states and or coalitions in matters related to gender justice. To analyze documents we focused on language and the way it's manipulated and weaponized by pro-gender justice and anti-gender justice groups to leverage their respective agendas. Furthermore, a diary was updated from the month of December 2024 to April 2025 where major events were reported, using source links and categorizing the issues at stake.

Finally, we were committed to upholding ethical standards throughout the whole research process, including obtaining informed consent from all interview participants and adhering to established ethical guidelines for data collection and analysis. All necessary approvals were secured prior to conducting the interviews. We are fully responsible for the content of the present report and declare that we have used generative artificial intelligence, specifically ChatGPT and Claude, as tools for providing insights related to the content, boosting the research speed, and structuring certain sections of this manuscript to enhance clarity and

coherence. Besides that, it was also employed to translate specific portions of the text originally drafted by the authors in their respective native languages into English. All content, including the ideas, analysis, and conclusions presented in this work, were conceived and developed by us. Hence, it is highlighted that the use of artificial intelligence assistance was limited strictly to those areas mentioned, with no influence on the intellectual or scientific integrity of the work.

3.1. Listening to the Ones in the Front: Interviews with the Movement

We conducted eleven interviews with interviewees coming from academia, civil society, and state representatives for this project. We are extremely grateful to our participants who gave us imperative insight from multiple different perspectives. Our interview questions varied, depending on what sphere and background our interviewee belonged to. Some form of a question measuring disjointedness within the gender justice movement was asked to all participants and the majority of them stated that within the movement in some sense there is no full alignment, citing various reasons for this disjointedness.

Almost all interviewees were somehow involved with HRC negotiations so questions related to this past HRC58 and general HRC negotiation tactics were asked. Our interviewees deplored the lack of gender related items on the agenda in the most recent HRC but still highlighting the “Women, diplomacy and human rights” resolution that was adopted as well as the debates around the “women’s human rights defenders” both of which will be discussed further in the report. Interviewees did express their understanding and caution for the upcoming HRC 59 in June and July where there are multiple different gender justice related resolutions up for debate as well as the “Annual Discussion on Women’s Rights” (*Programme of the Work for the 59th Session of the Human Rights Council (16 June – 11 July 2025)*, 2025).

All interviewees recognized a need to reform the movement. Majority of them highlighted the movement’s tendency towards reactivity and instead, suggested multiple other strategies to be deployed within negotiations. Some suggested ignoring provocative arguments from the anti-gender actors and refocusing on pushing the gender justice agenda forward. Instead, we should work to appeal to the middle 40% actors who are not firmly on a specific side of the issue, working to gain their support rather than constantly defending the like-minded platform from the non-like-minded.

When confronted about the fragmentation of the movement, the interviewees underlined that the main topics around which this fragmentation happen are the themes of trans peoples’ rights, sex work and surrogacy. On which the main approach suggested by themselves is to not be afraid to face uncomfortable conversation within the movement, but to actually ask questions vital to understand different stances and find a common ground. Indeed, finding common ground on these issues together with issues like sexual and reproductive health may be a strategic starting point. It was also brought up that the opposition has been incredibly effective because of their capacity to stand together on every topic. This is carried out by organizations directly liaising with diplomats, using framing and narratives that highly resonate with these diplomats’ capitals.

It has been observed that value-based narratives work better than reactive responses. Cross-regional and cross-themes coalitions and intersectional approaches are vital for the movement and for the advancement of gender justice. Furthermore, translating abstract concepts into accessible messages with personal stories is of deep importance. We were warned by many of our interviewees to be cautious with narratives that could be perceived as neocolonial, but to rather be aware of the cultural contexts where gender justice is being discussed, thus finding shared values that resonate across cultures. The “re-politicization” of gender was another point that was brought up, avoiding gender justice becoming merely an industry. It is important to work both inside and outside multilateral systems.

3.2. Moved by Fear and Grief: Active Coalitions of Anti-Gender Actors

Judith Butler (2024) highlights that there are several legitimate reasons to fear our world today: climate emergencies and disasters, forced migration, and war. Sexual and gender minorities and racialized people are constantly under attack and being murdered at high rates globally. Nevertheless, the right-wing and religious groups have different priorities related to fear. For them, the ‘gender ideology’ is the biggest threat to life, civilization, society, and thought, which triggers anxieties and moves politics (Butler, 2024a).

Not just individuals and groups, but nations and governments are afraid (and anxious) regarding gender. In the Russian Federation, it is considered a threat to national security, while in the Vatican, it is a threat to civilization and ‘man’ itself. For conservative and reactionary faith-based organizations around the globe, it is portrayed as a weapon to destroy the traditional family and to prohibit any reference to ‘mother and father’. When mentioning schools, the world has been witnessing campaigns in Brazil and the United States trying to erase gender from any discussion in the classroom to avoid ‘indoctrination’ and sexualization of children (Butler, 2024a).

Beyond that, gender is also targeted as a “totalitarian threat or the work of the devil”, being portrayed as “the most destructive force in the world, a contemporary and dangerous rival to God that must be countered, or destroyed, at all costs” (Butler, 2024b, p. 11). Therefore, when portrayed with this intrinsic power of destroying all structures of social life, a responsive power to eliminate the threat of gender becomes fair and just, and a war of ideas is officially installed.

The anti-gender actors are very well-organized, well-funded, and internationally coordinated. One of their main convening venues is the WCF, a project led by the IOF that serves as a conference to connect Christian Orthodox, Catholic, and Evangelical organizations devoted to defending the ‘natural family’ and strongly opposing LGBTI+ rights. Their philosophy is rooted in fallacious population studies and hoaxes that erroneously spread the idea that pro-LGBTI+ legislation and the right to abortion would bring a civilizational collapse due to the fall in birth rates globally (Butler, 2024). This is clear evidence of how fear is the primary foundation of this movement.

One of the most emblematic meetings of the WCF was held in Tbilisi in 2016, when various declarations supported by right-wing governments and religious groups were released. One of

these said that “Governments and transnational entities should cease all propaganda in favor of ‘gender theory’ and ‘sexual orientation,’ which have no basis in biological reality”, quoting LGBTI+ activists as ‘homofascists’ and ‘rainbow radicals’ that flag anti-religious and anti-civilizational propaganda worldwide (Butler, 2024a).

This rhetoric is part of the idea that LGBTI+ rights are the fruit of a global conspiracy, which occupies an important role in the anti-gender mobilization, which is directly connected with fear. Under the slogans to protect the nation, religion, children, women, and the family, they successfully position values related to gender justice as the enemies that must be annihilated, which exemplifies the aforementioned war of ideas (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024).

Therefore, after considering the arguments of the last sections, it becomes clear that fear is a mobilizing emotion in international affairs. The individual actors and their organizations feel the fear very deeply and organize themselves in transnational advocacy networks to flag anti-scientific, intolerant, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic views solely based on values and religion.

4. The Current Landscape of the Anti-Gender Movement

4.1. National and Regional Contexts

In this section we aim to contextualize the status of gender justice in multiple different states to show that gender backsliding is not a one case or one type situation. From South America to North America and across Europe, analyzing the current status of gender justice in seemingly different settings helps shed light upon the commonalities in gender justice backsliding.

4.1.1. ¡Viva la libertad, carajo!: The Milei Government in Argentina

In a very polarized national scenario and with the support of political leaders such as Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, the far-right outsider Javier Milei was elected as Argentina's new president in 2023. Under promises such as loosening gun laws, abolishing abortion - which was legalized in 2020 - and allowing the sale and purchase of human organs, 53% of Argentinians voted for him and his radicalized ideas (Buschschlüter, 2023).

He always positioned himself against the so-called ‘gender ideology,’ and since he took leadership in office, his administration has worked hard to implement restrictions on LGBTQI+ rights. One of his first measures was to modify the country’s pioneer Gender Identity Law (Law 26743). The legislation was the first in the world to allow the change of name and gender marker based on self-identification and to incorporate the right to comprehensive health care for transgender persons. Through the Necessity and Urgency Decree 62/2025, the far-right president prohibited access to gender-affirming care (GAC) for people under 18 and limited the accommodation of persons deprived of liberty according to their gender identity (ILGA World, 2025a).

According to ILGA's latest report on the new Argentinian positions, limiting transgender youth's access to their health needs is a clear violation of their right to health, as stated in Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Misgendering persons deprived of their liberty is a violation of human dignity under Article 10 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966). Both of these measures were read by civil society organizations (CSOs) as a severe backlash and threat to LGBTIQ+ lives in the country, and legal experts claimed that they do not comply with the country's Constitution (ILGA World, 2025a).

More recently, Milei instrumentalized the World Economic Forum (WEF) international stage in Davos to advance anti-gender politics and announce more initiatives. In his speech as Head of State, he compared homosexuality to pedophilia. He quoted the 'radical' [gender] ideology' as "outright child abuse", claiming the cure to the "mental virus or woke ideology that has colonized institutions" (World Economic Forum, 2025, p. 1). Also, in 2025, his government announced plans to remove femicide from the country's Penal Code, framing it as a distortion of the concept of equality. These movements by Milei's government are clear pieces of evidence of how anti-gender politics influence domestic realities and undermine the human rights of marginalized people (The Guardian, 2025).

In our conducted interviews during the research process and data collection, it was clear that the domestic political shift is reflected in multilateral spaces in New York and Geneva. Interviewees mentioned how Argentina was a very important stakeholder in negotiations, resolutions, and recommendations on SOGIESC, which is not the case anymore. Moreover, in 2024, Argentina was the only Member State of the United Nations to vote against a draft resolution to bolster protections against gender-based violence within the digital environment, which shocked world leaders, but reaffirmed the government's priorities (Buenos Aires Herald, 2024).

4.1.2. Back in Office: The 2025 Trump Administration in the United States of America

From day one of Trump's second term it has been made clear that he and his administration are actively dismantling what they call "gender ideology" (Trump, 2025a). From his first executive order to his most recent days in office, April 2025, there are at least 28 mentions of executive orders, public announcements or social media posts, reported by The New York Times collection of his administration's first 100 days in office, that negatively impact what we identify as the gender justice movement. Some of this media is authored by the President himself and others by members of his administration. Project 2025 is an example of a far right wing document that has grabbed the media's attention. The document is not authored or directly connected to Trump but some of those who he appointed into various governmental offices are authors of the document, giving them direct access to pushing the agenda within governmental bodies (Wendling, 2025).

On his first day Trump issued an executive order titled 'Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government', where he defined "gender ideology," and called it inconsistent and permitting false claims (Trump, 2025a). Furthermore, he removed the word 'gender' and replaced it with 'sex,' and ordered recognition of only 'female' and 'male' within the category of 'sex' (Trump, 2025a). This effectively gets rid of anything relating to the word 'gender' in all government related entities and documents. Trump also introduced, on the same day, another executive order that effectively got rid of all Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) clauses for the government (Trump, 2025b). These two executive orders are not the only ones that specifically target the exclusion of people who are not men. Another three executive orders directly target trans people, as Trump works to ban trans people within the military, takes away gender affirming care for minors, and bars trans women and girls from playing in sporting competitions (Trump, 2025c, 2025d, 2025f). All of these have a devastating effect across the nation as data, funding, and programs are being lost and cut. The language used in these orders are under the guise of protection, protecting women from transwomen, protecting children from mutilation, and protecting girls from so called 'unfair' sports competitions.

We see this is a tactic used across the world from among the anti-gender actors. A sense of fear is created by highlighting a need to defend women. In the case of the United States, women supposedly need protection from 'gender ideology,' a placeholder word for trans people. Trump's executive order that bans trans women and girls from playing women's sports is a clear example of this. He claims that trans women competing in women's sports, "deprive women and girls of fair athletic opportunities, which results in the endangerment, humiliation, and silencing of women and girls and deprives them of privacy," (Trump, 2025f). By victimizing women and girls here he and his administration is able to create the sense that they must be protected from the threats they identify that trans people represent. We found this tactic of victimization, fear, and defense mentioned multiple times in our interviews, highlighted as a strategy used by non-like-minded actors in and out of the HRC.

As a response to these executive orders hundreds of government web pages were removed and edited or removed completely to comply with his aforementioned executive orders on DEI and trans related issues (Singer, 2025). The removed web pages range from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) pages addressing many different health concerns to research methods and data sets from the Census Bureau as well as a startling removal of pages from the Department of Justice outlining LGBTI+ hate crimes (Singer, 2025). The entire government website for reproductive rights, reproductiverights.gov was taken down and is still not active. Some of these pages were restored but noticeably edited, often missing DEI language (Singer, 2025). All of these pages provide vital information and they're removal has caused problems for many who frequent these pages, not only the U.S. public but also those who use the data provided by many of these sites.

Among the edited website pages was that of The Stonewall Memorial page on the National Parks Service (NPS). All wording and representation connected with transgender people was edited out of the pages (Rosman et al., 2025). The change to the page makes it historically inaccurate as transgender people were an imperative part of the history of Stonewall and the

Stonewall Uprising such as Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, two prominent transgender women of the area and era (Rosman et al., 2025). By removing 'transgender' and its representation, the 'T' in LGBTQ+, history is being edited, which is analogous with Trump's work that tries to eliminate the existence of transgender people.

To comply with these executive orders, government organizations and actors have taken action. The Veteran Affairs (V.A.) has stopped its gender-affirming care, 26 states have gotten rid of their gender affirming care for minors, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) banned the participation of trans women and girls in competitions for fully funded schools, and multiple schools, of all levels, have had their funding pulled due to pushback against trans sports bans (Rabin, 2025; *Map: Attacks on Gender Affirming Care by State*, 2025; Macur, 2025; Bender & Blinder, 2025; Goldstein & Russell, 2025). In response, military service members have sued against the anti-trans policy, saying it violates the Equal Protection Clause, with success in a Washington court causing a block of the ban (Liptak, 2025). Also, the state of Maine has refused to comply with the ban of trans women and girls in sports and has highlighted the order violating Title IX and the Equal Protection Clause (Goldstein & Russell, 2025). Within our interviews we heard a consensus that transgender issues are a cause of division within the gender justice movement itself, with one interviewee attributing it to a lack of understanding of who transgender people are (Anonymous 5, personal communication, April 11, 2025).

We know that money is an imperative and rather hard to come by in the gender justice movement. It is certainly not as readily available as it is for the anti-gender, we hear this directly from our interviewees who state that they struggle with a lack of resources. The U.S. pulled their funding from international organizations, citing the HCR as protecting human rights violators in decisions related to the Israel-Palestine conflict as the reasons for pulling out of the bodies and pulling the funding (Trump, 2025e). Without the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funding of many multilateral actors will be greatly affected. Without the help of the USAID to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), HIV aid and prevention will take a major hit with a massive increase in the number of new HIV infections and deaths predicted (Paun, 2025; UNAIDS, 2025). In addition, Trump reinstated an abortion ban known as the "Mexico City Policy," that directly affects access to funding from the U.S. government global family planning fund for NGOs working abroad who support and/or provide abortions (Gay Stolberg, 2025; Moss & Kates, 2025a). A recent declination to further fund the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) citing the enforcement of the Kemp-Kasten Amendment¹ will cause work on more than 40 existing projects and decrease the ability to respond to need with creation of further projects (*Statement in Response to the United States Decision to Deny Future Funding to UNFPA*, 2025). Without the U.S.'s funding and its previously positive voice, efforts of the gender justice movement will be affected.

¹ Kamp-Kasten Amendment was first enacted in 1985 to prohibit any U.S. funds from supporting any organization or program "that supports or participates in coercive abortion or involuntary sterilization," (Moss & Kates, 2025b). The amendment was in response to the UNFPA's support of "China's coercive family planning policies," (Moss & Kates, 2025b). There is no evidence that the UNFPA supports either of these acts through corroborated data by multiple groups (Moss & Kates, 2025b).

The new Trump Administration's immediate attack on “gender ideology” aligns the government with the anti-gender mindset that is becoming prevalent on the international stage. The wording used by the administration provokes fear and a need for defense, a tactic being used in other national contexts, identified in the upcoming sections, as well as within scenes of international negotiations. The current climate for the advancement of gender justice in the U.S. is on the decline and from the U.S.’s status and influence on the world stage other countries have decided to follow suit and take steps back from supporting the movement.

4.1.3. *Unity on the Edge: The European Union at a Crossroads*

The 2024 European Elections sealed the materialization of an historical shift to the right for many countries in the European Union. Six countries nowadays have hard-right parties in the government, namely Italy, Finland, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia and the Czech Republic. Although, other countries were also influenced by this slow but steady shift towards the right. In the Netherlands, the leader of Party for Freedom (PVV, Partij voor de Vrijheid) signed a deal to create the most right-wing government in the recent history of the country (*Mapped*, 2024). In France, the National Rally (RN, Rassemblement national) has gathered 33.2% of the votes in the first round of elections (*France Election Results*, n.d.). In Germany, the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD, Alternative für Deutschland), was the second-most voted party with 20.8% of votes (*German Election Results Explained in Graphics – DW – 02/27/2025*, n.d.). Recently, the latter has been pronounced as a right-wing extremist party by Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, confirming that the party poses a threat to democracy (Nilsson-Julien & Brezar, 2025).

The European landscape has shown to be a fertile field to see toxic patterns for anti-rights actors to develop. Indeed, it has been observed that these leverage the same juridical tools to advocate for a shrinking of liberties and against the advancements of rights (Blokker, 2024). This has also been leveraged within the context of the United Nations, where non-like-minded states actively mirror resolutions to counter progressive initiatives (Anonymous 4, personal communication, April 29, 2025). This was the strategy adopted in 2020 by the first Trump administration creating the “Geneva Consensus Declaration on Promoting Women's Health and Strengthening the Family,” whose core supporters were largely authoritarian governments (Borger, 2020). And doing so, they also adopt the same human rights language repertoire, focusing on the “right of the family” in its most conservative connotation (Anonymous 1, personal communication, April 15, 2025). Besides, it was confirmed by one of our interviewees that thanks to anti-gender advocacy, a lot of things changed, making historical allies of the gender justice movement disappear from the panorama, even if these kinds of actors have been around forever (Anonymous 8, personal communication, April 4, 2025). Furthermore, it has been stressed that the space for the gender justice movement quickly shrunk (Anonymous 5, personal communication, April 11, 2025).

The way in which PRRPs (Populist Radical Right Parties) or PRR (Populist Radical Right) frame themselves and shape narratives varies by country, while sharing some commonalities. These narratives vary on three key dimensions, namely the level of contestation of gender issues in

their country, the resonance of anti-genderism among their electorate, their issue repertoire and historical trajectory (Reinhardt et al., 2024). Overall, these actors use narrative frameworks that resonate with people, using the “Us. vs. Them” narrative, leveraging cultural differences and instaurating a cultural fight for existence (Anonymous 8, personal communication, April 4, 2025) together with using the threat to “national identity” (Anonymous 1, personal communication, April 15, 2025). Furthermore, religion and tradition are enclosed within the “culture” framing, especially Christian religious influence shapes the population’s understanding of gender and sexuality (Anonymous 1, personal communication, April 15, 2025) - deeply influenced by the Holy See.

There has been a striking increase in harmful statements targeting trans women, always with the sake of protecting “parental rights” (Anonymous 4, personal communication, April 29, 2025), thus similar to the framework used in Hungary and in Italy. Albeit, in Sweden there’s a general positive stance towards gender and sexual equality, the PRRs wouldn’t have good traction contesting gender equality. This is why the Swedish Democrats focus on populist anti-elitism and monocultural nationalism – which is similar to the agenda carried on by AfD in Germany - focusing on cases of sexual violences committed by immigrants (Reinhardt et al., 2024). Clearly, countries suffer from embedded systemic racism and misogyny that is then leveraged and used by anti-gender actors.

4.1.3.1. Divine Diplomacy: Italy, the Vatican, and the Power of Interjection

In June 2024, the permanent mission of the Holy See to Geneva organised an event focused on “Preventing the exploitation and commodification of women and children” on occasion of the 56th Regular Session of the HRC. Among the panelists was the Minister for Equal Opportunities and the Family of Italy, Eugenia Roccella (*At What Price?*, n.d.). This is a clear example of how intertwined the history and diplomacy of Italy and of the Holy See are. For this reason it was chosen to analyse the case of Italy, for long being regarded as the “laboratory of populism” (Biancalana, 2024). At the same time, ever since the middle of the 20th century, the Holy See has been involved in politics and decision-making, acting behind the scenes (Rieck & Niebuhr, n.d.), and this analysis will show how that is carried out within the context of Italy, imagining then how this is carried out within larger spaces and contexts. Additionally, the Holy See uses narratives and framing that are familiar with the ones used by the second Trump Government (Anonymous 1, personal communication, April 15, 2025).

The PRRP panorama in Italy has two main actors – Brothers of Italy (FdI, Fratelli D’Italia) and League (Lega, formerly Lega Nord, i.e. League of the North), together these share common values of PRRPs, i.e. very strict on migration, Euroscepticism, endorsement of neoliberal economic agendas. Both actors have a very strong Catholic legacy, together with a strong and well-established traditional patriarchal culture, grounded on the “familistic model” of the welfare state (Lavizzari & Pirro, 2024). Lega dominates their narratives by migration, identity and nationalism, topped with law-and-order issues (Reinhardt et al., 2024). This clear positioning was conveyed through manifestos and sustained by interviews, speeches and statements

issued by party officials. For example, Giorgia Meloni, right after being elected Prime Minister, sent an official request to all the ministries, asking to be called “il Signor Presidente del Consiglio,” the article “il” in Italian refers to a male person (*C’è confusione su come chiamare Giorgia Meloni*, 2022).

The first mention of gender politics by FdI trails back to 2013, where the commitment to ‘promote natality and support the couple in their important educational role’ is found written on that year’s manifest (Redazione, 2013). In 2018, explicit references are found to the defense of the ‘natural family’ combating ‘gender ideology’ and battling pro-choice stances. In 2019, FdI clearly manifested their ideas against the practice of ‘utero in affitto’ (uterus for rent). In October 2024, the Italian Senate approved the law that would make surrogacy a “universal crime” (Lavizzari & Pirro, 2024). This would mean that people would be held criminally liable even if the surrogacy were to be carried out outside of the Italian territory. This provision is an integration to the previous provision – part of the Italian criminal framework since 2004 (*La gestazione per altri sarà “reato universale,”* 2024).

Historically, the Catholic Church has always been involved in the lives of Italian citizens, with the goal of inserting themselves and their secular law into the population’s everyday lives. Ever since the 1980s, the Catholic Church has been the main actor in carrying on a crusade against gender, fabricating the “gender ideology” (Shvanyukova, 2022). In the past, the Holy See was the one building consensus for non-like-minded states, whereas now this work is carried out by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (Anonymous 8, personal communication, April 4, 2025). There are plenty of instances of the Catholic Church getting involved with legislative bills being discussed in the Italian chambers, framing them as “political threats,” these inferences culminated in the summer of 2021 when the bill called “DDL Zan” passed in the lower chamber (i.e., Camera dei Deputati). The bill was aimed at enlarging the pool of people protected against hate speech, including a protection for discrimination against sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation and disability – also including ways to prevent discriminations and assaults carried out using these stances as justifications (*Misure di prevenzione e contrasto della discriminazione e della violenza per motivi fondati sul sesso, sul genere, sull’orientamento sessuale, sull’identità di genere e sulla disabilità*, 2020).

Communication from the Vatican’s Secretariat of State made a direct reference to an article of the Lateran Treaty. The latter is a series of documents signed by Benito Mussolini in 1929, that put an end to what was a 60-year-old dispute that had been ongoing between the Catholic Church and the Italian state (or what was of it at the time). This treaty recognized the existence of the Città del Vaticano as a free and independent state, together with promising preemption rights for the Catholic religion within the Italian state, for example having a crucifix in every public space and having the teaching of the catholic religion in schools (*La firma dei Patti Lateranensi, 90 anni fa*, 2019). Thus, the article would clash with guaranteed religious liberty for the church in the practicing and teaching of its beliefs. The secretary of the Vatican said that the proposed law, if passed as is, would trample on those rights, thus violating the Lateran treaty (Horowitz & Bubola, 2021). The bill was rejected by the Senate (Senato della Repubblica, the higher chamber in Italy) on 27 October 2021 (*Com’è finito il ddl Zan*, 2021).

Both Pope Benedict XVI, born Ratzinger, and Francis, born Bergoglio, pioneered substantial theoretical premises of Catholic anti-genderism (Shvanyukova, 2022). Cardinal Ratzinger has always been committed to maintaining a conservative doctrine within the Church, especially when it concerns topics around homosexuality, new reproductive technologies, masturbation and “radical feminism” (Ratzinger & Messori, 1985). What would make feminism “radical” is Benedict XVI’s statement of “total equality between man and woman and freedom from biologically determined roles” (Ratzinger & Messori, 1985). He arrived at the conclusion stating that human beings have been reduced to “an endangered species principally because of laws aimed at fighting discrimination, strike at the biological basis of the difference between the sexes” (Case, 2019). Pope John Paul II, born Wojtyła, during his pontificate, carried on the theological anthropology of sexual complementarity. Following the latter, equal dignity of man and woman is fundamental (Shvanyukova, 2022). In March 2024, Pope Francis, on occasion of the International Symposium “Man-Woman: Image of God” described “gender ideology” as the “ugliest danger” of our time, arguing that it excludes all human differences that make humanity unique (Zengarini, 2024).

On 8th May 2024 the new Pope was elected, indeed Pope Leo XIV, born Prevost, is the first pope from northern america in history. He opposes the ordination of women as deacons because that would “not solve any problem but would create many others” (*Cardinal at Synod on Synodality*, 2025). He opposes “gender ideology” being inserted in school curricula because it would “promote genders that don't exist” (Rich, 2025). He criticized the sympathy that homosexual couples and same-sex families receive within popular culture (Rich, 2025). Albeit, he criticized Trump’s administration stances on immigration (“The New Pope Doesn’t Seem to Be a Huge Fan of Trump or JD Vance,” n.d.). Overall, it seems like this Pope was chosen by the Conclave to have leverage in the United States, mainly to counteract what Trump is doing and working to achieve peace - the second most mentioned word during his speech - in the world. Thus, once again the theme of gender is sidelined because of the theme of war and security, forgetting how important gender justice is for the overall sustenance of democracy.

In 2003, the Pontifical Council for Family’s Lexicon: ambiguous and debatable terms regarding family life and ethical questions was published. This thousand-page book solidifies the Holy See’s strategy to handle the public discourse about gender and sexual policies (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2019). The Catholic Church played a vital role in introducing the word “il gender” (the gender) within the Italian public discourse, where it is still actively used as a substitute to “la teoria e ideologia gender” (gender ideology and theory), making it be a part of the “woke world” of feminism and homosexuality (Lavizzari, 2020). Bergoglio’s pontificate helped to push anti-genderism within the Catholic Church, which was also bolstered by his popularity as “Pope Francis.” Indeed, this gained agency gave his statements a lot of resonance within the Italian – and foreign – media. These comments range from referring to “ideological colonization” to comparing “gender theory” to “nuclear war, Nazism, and the destruction of creation, plot designs of death that disfigure the face of man and woman” (Case, 2019).

All of these factors are even more important within the Italian sphere of influence, because of how pervasive the culture of religion is. Furthermore, the inability from the opposition – i.e., traditional progressive parties – to manufacture a solid pushback to these claims. Thus, making it possible for the Catholic Church to easily find spaces and strategies to leverage the public opinion on their side (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2019).

As it has been demonstrated, the relationship between the Holy See and Italian populist right-wing parties represents a sophisticated model of religious-political alliance that operates through what might be called "soft theopolitics" where Vatican influence shapes policy outcomes without formal political power (Lesch, 2019). This alliance functions through multiple reinforcing mechanisms: shared discourse that reframes gender equality as an existential threat, extensive cultural infrastructure that maintains Catholic hegemony and strategic deployment of the Lateran Treaty for diplomatic leverage. The case demonstrates how religious doctrine transforms into political action through semantic appropriation of progressive terminology, threat narratives around gender "ideology," and biological essentialism that provides justifications that use the same scientific language repertoire for traditional positions.

This Italian model has broader implications beyond national politics, functioning as a template for conservative religious-populist alliances globally. Analysis through frameworks like political theology and cultural hegemony reveals how religious influence operates through civil society institutions to maintain consensus around traditional gender norms without requiring direct coercion. The effectiveness of this alliance is evidenced by concrete policy outcomes like the defeat of the DDL Zan and criminalization of surrogacy, sustained by demographic patterns where religious practice strongly correlates with conservative gender attitudes despite generational shifts toward progressivism. As this model potentially expands to other Catholic-influenced regions and new policy frontiers like bioethics and digital rights, the Italian "laboratory" offers critical insights into emerging patterns of religious influence in democratic systems facing populist challenges worldwide.

4.1.3.2. Poland's Gender Wars: Tradition, Resistance, and the Feminist Frontline

The case study of Poland was chosen to understand how an historically conservative country is changing and becoming more accepting in a context where backlash is taking place. Graff and Korolczuk (2022) give an in-depth case study of Poland and its struggle with the anti-gender movement. In Poland in 2006, the nationalist right-wing political actors started presenting the country as the "last frontier of Christianity in Europe," which was heavily supported by the Catholic Church, and the effects could be identified through "a process of 'symbolic thickening' occurring in Poland's public culture" (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022, p. 68). This Christian Polish nationalism persists and is a large reason why the public majority is against gender and LGBTI+ rights in Poland today. The strategies used to further the anti-gender agenda are similar to those described previously regarding the use of rhetoric. The many groups who have teamed up to fight 'genderism' range from priests to bloggers to NGO leaders. Much of their rhetoric is visceral and creates a sense of fear while relying on direct ties to the Catholic Church as well as their audience's pledge to it (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

In Poland, the Catholic Church describes children and the 'natural' family in harm's way due to the idea of 'gender' pushed by the West. They highlight protecting children from 'early sexualization,' and pedophilia which they associate with 'genderism' and the 'LGBT ideology.' They consider comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in schools part of this movement and state that parents should be deciding on what, when, and if their children are taught this (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). They proclaim that the natural family is at risk with 'genderism' on the rise. The Church says the move away from a heteronormative family unit would cause "promiscuity, chaos in gender, and depopulation," which are all things the religious and populist right groups are against (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022, p. 79).

Much of the discourse around 'genderism' in Poland is ascribed to the West and the European Union's guidelines on women and gender as well as on LGBTI+ people (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). These ideologies go against the Christian ethno-nationalist position that Poland has taken on and therefore give the Catholic and populist groups another point to appeal to the people. Both these groups also have an anti-discriminatory facet that feeds into nationalism. This anti-discriminatory movement is seen on a broader scale across Europe with many countries stating their concerns about increasing refugee populations in their countries (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

This is part of the strategy manufactured by Andrzej Duda, leader of the party Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PIS), from the united right alliance. The party was founded in 2001 by twin brothers that were coming from catholic-national and conservative parties, i.e. Christian democratic (Gwiazda, 2021). As part of his re-election campaign in 2020 – after the one he already won in 2015- he signed a "Family Charter" which included a pledge to prevent gay couples from marrying, adopting children and teaching about LGBTQI+ issues in schools (Inside Poland's 'LGBT-Free Zones', 2020). This was also the result of heavy pressure that was put upon the party from the Catholic Church – and its stakeholders – which were involved in the mobilisation of the electorate (Gwiazda, 2021). Indeed, the latter is pinpointed in "Catholic believers, voters with primary and vocational education, farmers and rural residents, people over 50 years old, pensioners, and workers" (Gwiazda, 2021). Following the resolution about the "LGBT free zones" the Commissioner for Equality from the European Union withdrew funding from 6 different cities, as a punishment for going against EU values and fundamental human rights. As a direct effect the Polish justice minister has compensated one of the cities with the triple the worth of the check (*Inside Poland's "LGBT-Free Zones,"* 2020).

To push back against the anti-gender movement, starting in 2016, Poland saw a huge mobilization of women. The main aspect of this was the Black Protests, originally to fight against restrictive abortion laws, where women identified that they needed to fight more than just the populist political groups. The Black Protests were "situated within the broader context of evolving relations between the Church and the state in Poland," allowing the women to expose the strong and persuasive connection the Church had with the government (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022, p. 140). The "anti-genderism" movement started grassroots and included many different social groups and utilized social media to mobilize and eventually morphed into transnational

networks (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). On Black Monday, 100,000–250,000 people mobilized in Poland and abroad in support. Ninety percent of this mobilization occurred in small towns across the country. After this, parliament rejected the restrictive abortion bill and continued to do so years later in the wake of yearly women's protests (Gaweda, 2022). Even now, with the rise of populism almost across the world, Poland has been able to mobilize and fight for the improvement of women's lives and rights. As a matter of fact, at the end of April the last LGBT-free zone was abolished, in southeastern Poland, after 6 years from the introduction of the provision (S.A, n.d.).

Poland's case illustrates how Christian nationalism and the Catholic Church's influence can directly shape gender politics through institutional alliance with right-wing parties, particularly Law and Justice (PiS). Unlike Italy's "soft theopolitics," Poland demonstrates a more explicit religious-political partnership where Catholic doctrine openly informs state policy, exemplified by the creation of "LGBT ideology-free zones" covering a third of Poland's territory and Andrzej Duda's "Family Charter" prohibiting same-sex marriage and adoption. The anti-gender movement in Poland strategically frames opposition to gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights as resistance to Western colonization and protection of national sovereignty, positioning Poland as the "last frontier of Christianity in Europe." This rhetoric effectively merges religious concerns about "early sexualization" and "natural family" with nationalist anxieties about cultural self-determination against EU influence, creating a powerful narrative that resonates with the party's core electorate of rural residents, older voters, and practicing Catholics.

Despite this entrenched conservative alliance, Poland paradoxically demonstrates the potential for effective progressive countermobilization. The Black Protests movement beginning in 2016 represents a significant grassroots resistance that successfully contested restrictive abortion legislation by explicitly challenging Church-state relations. This mobilization's effectiveness is evident in concrete outcomes: parliament's rejection of abortion restrictions and the abolition of the last "LGBT-free zone." The Polish experience suggests that when progressive movements directly confront religious-nationalist alliances rather than avoiding the issue of Church influence (as often occurs in Italy), they can achieve policy victories even in culturally conservative contexts. This countermovement's success derives from its ability to operate effectively in small towns across the country rather than just urban centers, its transnational support networks, and its strategic focus on exposing the political nature of religious influence rather than attacking religious beliefs themselves.

4.1.3.3. Hungary's Moral Majority: Gender, Nationhood, and the Illiberal State

Hungary provides an interesting case study to understand how the familial framework is deployed within the context of gender backlash, and the hypocrisy that is shown within that same context by political actors involved. The backlash against gender in Hungary started in 2008, when the perception of having the "gender ideology" agenda pushed into academic curricula started being felt among the overall society (Takács et al., 2022). Indeed, in Hungary a pattern is seen emerging: genderphobia enters into the public debate when gender is discussed within the debate about school curriculums. As a matter of fact, in 2010 the debate sparked from

a proposed amendment aimed at changing the preschool curriculum, integrating teachings that avoided strengthening stereotypes concerning social equality of gender. The amendment was quickly removed by the Fidesz government in that same year (Takács et al., 2022). Hungary has also refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention against domestic violence, in order to avoid the attempt from the “elitist” club of Europeans to push gender politics (Minkova, 2024). In 2012, the “fundamental law” came into effect, which defined marriage as the union of a man and a woman, saying that “the mother shall be a woman and the father shall be a man” (*The Fundamental Law of Hungary*, 2024). In May 2020 paragraph 33 was adopted, prohibiting transgender and intersex people from having their gender legally recognized (*Section 33. Legal Gender Recognition (2020-)*, 2020). In 2019, László Kövér - a Fidesz founding member - compared same-sex couples’ demand to be allowed to marry and adopt children, to pedophilia (Takács et al., 2022). Interesting stance, since both President Katalin Novák and Judit Varga - former Chair of the Committee on European Affairs - resigned over a scandal that involved paedophilic sexual abuse within Orbán’s alliances (Higgins, 2024).

In June 2021 the Hungarian parliament passed a law – known as act. 79, also sometimes framed as “Child protection act - that banned gay people from being featured in school educational materials or TV-shows for minors, this provision also listed a restricted number of individuals to carry out sex education classes in schools (Rankin, 2021). The latter has been carried out in order to avoid “organizations with dubious professional backgrounds ... often established for the representation of specific sexual orientations” (Rankin, 2021). Thus, we can see how PRRP leverages the “familist” framework to push for a regression in the protection of LGBTQI+ rights together with rejecting to advance gender equality.

Overall, Fidesz–KDNP pártszövetség, known as the Alliance of Hungarian Solidarity (Magyar Szolidaritás Szövetsége) has gained the supermajority in Hungary after the 2022 elections, that crowned Viktor Orbán prime minister – since 2010. As a direct effect, the European Commission announced the start of a budget conditionalities mechanism against Hungary, due to rule of law violation (Wonka et al., 2025).

Hungary represents perhaps the most comprehensive institutionalization of anti-gender politics in Europe, where Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz government has systematically embedded heteronormative family values within constitutional and legal frameworks. Unlike both Italy’s informal influence and Poland’s local-level restrictions, Hungary demonstrates how gender backlash can be elevated to constitutional status through the 2012 fundamental law. This constitutional foundation triggered many legislative actions: refusing to ratify the Istanbul Convention on domestic violence, prohibiting transgender legal recognition in 2020, and the 2021 Child Protection Act banning LGBTQ+ representation in educational materials and media for minors. The Hungarian approach strategically frames these restrictions as “child protection” rather than discrimination, positioning anti-gender politics as defense of children against “organizations with dubious professional backgrounds,” while simultaneously rejecting what they characterize as imposition of Western European values via EU pressure.

The Hungarian case also reveals the cynical political instrumentalization of family values rhetoric, exposed by the stark hypocrisy demonstrated when President Katalin Novák and

former Chair of European Affairs Judit Varga. This contradiction clearly shows the hypocrisy of how protecting children functions primarily as political rhetoric rather than genuine concern. With Fidesz-KDNP securing a supermajority in 2022 and continuing Orbán's premiership since 2010, Hungary illustrates the potential endpoint of unchecked religious-nationalist influence on gender politics: systematic constitutional entrenchment that proves difficult to reverse through normal democratic processes. The European Commission's initiation of budget conditionality mechanisms against Hungary for rule of law violations demonstrates both the transnational implications of domestic gender politics and the limited leverage international institutions have once anti-gender frameworks become constitutionally embedded.

4.1.3.4. The Feminist State?: Sweden, Equality, and the Contradictions of Progress

Sweden has consistently been ranked among the most gender-equal countries in the European Union (*Sweden | 2023 | Gender Equality Index | European Institute for Gender Equality*, n.d.). For this reason it is interesting to understand how gender backlash is carried out within a country with such a good level of equality, and not impacted by religious interference whatsoever. Notwithstanding that, feminist researchers brought evidence that there's still strong persistence of gender pay gaps, together with disproportionate burden of unpaid work on women – such as home making – and high number of incidents that report intimate partner violence (Karlberg et al., 2025). Furthermore, the way in which gender equality is corroborated in Sweden is far from being intersectional, indeed it “builds upon and produces naturalized, nationalist, hetero and cis-normative and racialized positions in a postcolonial and neoliberal time and space” (Martinsson et al., 2016). And in this environment, anti-gender actors molded their policies to the specificities of the Swedish panorama, where gender equality gives the appearance of being embedded into it (Karlberg et al., 2025). Thus, this example is different from the ones we analysed, and proves to be a site for us to understand how gender backlash is also happening within a context where we might assume that gender equality has already been achieved - or had a lot of advancement and theoretically no pushback. Indeed, it has been underlined during one of the interviews that we carried out that even states that are seen as “gender champions” use frameworks that are racist, and that frame whoever is not part of this “group” as inherently racist (Anonymous 4, personal communication, April 29, 2025). Furthermore, Sweden is the perfect site to understand the importance of having an intersectional approach. This has to be carried out and kept in mind especially when it comes to forging new alliances and coordinating, together with pushing for movements to think beyond human rights, encouraging them to think intersectionally (Anonymous 8, personal communication, April 4, 2025).

Recent events that go from the election of Trump to the ramping up of the Me-Too movement (Off, 2023) made the topic of gender very salient and one of the main topics for the conservative wing of politics to attack, together with the implementation of neoliberal reforms that proved to be detrimental for working-class women and women of color (Karlberg et al., 2025). Indeed, ever in 2018 the party Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats), which conveys particularly conservative gender values, became the third-largest party in the Swedish parliament, and has

kept growing (Off, 2023), piggy-backing on many political issues related to gender (Naurin & Öhberg, 2019). The anti-gender actors oppose some features of women's rights and sexual democracy (e.g., gender theory and trans rights), but they also have manufactured discourses around gender equality to leverage hatred towards ethnic and racial minorities. This phenomenon takes the name of "racialization of sexism" (Scrinzi, 2017) and it is a trend that has seen a spike in Western democracies (Karlberg et al., 2025).

Although it is clear – also from other case studies – that cultural backlash in PRRs is rooted on economic factors and controversial attitudes towards immigration (Muis & Immerzeel, 2017). The study conducted by Off is a great confirmation that the same dynamics happen also for the theme of gender, exploiting real-world increases in gender issues salience triggers backlash and nourishes already existing value gaps, thus triggering more backlash (Off, 2023). Anti-gender movement is an expression of cultural backlash and conservative backlash to more progressive gender values directly contributes to the rise of PRR parties (Off, 2023), even in environments such as the Swedish one, where the overall population has a positive idea and supports gender equality (Martinsson et al., 2016). Furthermore, the rise of PRR parties is a direct outcome of increasing opposition to gender equality measures – gender quotas or regulation of fathers' parental leave - and strengthening of LGBTQI+ rights (Off, 2023). This ramp in opposition is nurtured by the public debate being dominated by these, thus provoking conservatives' counter reaction (Off, 2023). Overall, scholars have observed a connection between anti-gender campaigns and a broader trend towards democratic backsliding, with a particular focus on political culture and democratic practices (Karlberg et al., 2025).

Differently from other countries tackled in this section, the Catholic clergy is not greatly influential in Sweden. Still, the religious community - the Catholic and Protestant clergy as well as civil society organizations such as Familjen Först Foundation, Människovärde, MRO – expressed anti-gender sentiments (Karlberg et al., 2025). People within the fringe of "gender critical feminist" expressed opposition to non-gender conforming people and trans people (Karlberg et al., 2025). Thus, the main anti-gender actors in the Sweden panorama are the politicians representing the above-mentioned Sweden Democrats and the Kristdemokraterna (i.e., Christian Democrats). After the 2022 elections the "Tidö Agreement" was signed between the government and the Sweden Democrats, which laid down governmental policies for the period that spans between 2022 and 2026; the agreement stirred strong opinions because of civil society voicing their doubts regarding its potential to undermine the rule of law and principles of liberal democracy (Karlberg et al., 2025), basis that lay solid grounds for gender to be attacked. As it has been noticed, when democracy is trembling, gender is the first topic and issue to be struck out.

Speaking with experts of the sector and people active within CSOs, we wondered what topics were stirring up and dividing people within the gender justice movement. It has been brought up that the topic of sex work is one of those (Anonymous 3, personal communication, April 14, 2025). It is a topic that is close to Sweden, indeed in 1999 the Sex Purchase Act was introduced, criminalising the purchase of sexual services (*Prostitution Policy in Sweden – Targeting Demand*, n.d.). However, in 2024 the European Sex Workers Rights Alliance (ESWA),

launched an Open Letter together with the Red Umbrella Sweden against the Swedish government's proposal (prop. 2024/25:124 – Chapter 6, pp. 28–38) to extend criminalisation to the purchase of sexual acts performed remotely. The Parliament wanted to extend criminalization such as webcamming and erotic modelling arguing that this measure would criminalise consensual digital labour and strip sex workers of vital income and autonomy (European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance, 2025).

However, evidence from various International Organizations and NGOs highlight that targeting digital sex work under the argument of protecting vulnerable individuals threatens basic rights to privacy and freedom of expression, undermining Sweden's own constitutional safeguards and setting a perilous precedent for digital labour rights. With that in mind, ESWA's recommendations and Open Letter called for the complete withdraw this proposal in its current form, urging for the Parliamentarians and the Government to listen to sex workers and include them in all discussions related to their labor, rights, and existences (European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance, 2025).

The phenomenon of anti-gender politics in Sweden is understood to be a case of insidious de-democratization, which is defined as a set of discourses and practices that weaken liberal democracy by excluding, silencing, and intimidating marginalized groups (Karlberg et al., 2025). Furthermore, the lack of intersectionality in enforcing policies helped to nourish the phenomenon of femonationalism and made it easier for anti-gender actors to formulate their own version of democracy, framing it into a racist and ethnonationalist framework (Karlberg et al., 2025). Thus, Sweden is the perfect example of the implication of supporting a limited – and not intersectional – version of gender equality being instrumentalized to destroy what are thought to be the pillars of the liberal democratic system (Karlberg et al., 2025).

Clearly, Sweden presents a distinctive iteration of gender backlash occurring within a context widely celebrated for its gender equality achievements, revealing how anti-gender politics can function even in seemingly progressive environments. Unlike the religious-nationalist coalitions seen in Southern and Eastern Europe, Sweden's backlash operates using Sweden's gender equality reputation as a cultural marker that distinguishes the enlightened Swedish majority from racialized minorities, particularly immigrants. This racialization of sexism enables the Sweden Democrats and other conservative actors to simultaneously embrace certain aspects of gender equality rhetoric while rejecting others, particularly transgender rights and gender theory. The Swedish case demonstrates how gender backlash in seemingly progressive contexts relies on exploiting real-world increases in gender issue salience following events like the Me-Too movement, transforming these moments into opportunities to reinforce conservative gender positions and nationalist narratives, while framing these positions as protection of “true Swedish gender equality” against external threats.

The Swedish example critically reveals the dangers of non-intersectional approaches to gender equality that fail to address how gender, race, class, and citizenship status intersect. Though lacking the strong religious influence seen in other European contexts, Sweden's gender backlash nonetheless finds support through unlikely alliances between gender critical feminists, religious minorities, and ethno-nationalist political actors united in their opposition to gender

theory and transgender rights. The 2022 Tidö Agreement between the government and Sweden Democrats represents a concrete outcome of this backlash, raising concerns about democratic backsliding. Sweden is the place where democratic values are undermined not through explicit rejection but through selective application that excludes and silences marginalized groups. The controversy surrounding Sweden's expansion of sex work criminalization into digital spaces further demonstrates how seemingly progressive gender policies can actually threaten privacy rights and increase state surveillance, particularly of vulnerable populations. Sweden thus represents the critical frontier of gender politics, revealing how gender champions can foster femonationalist frameworks that ultimately undermine intersectional justice and democratic values.

4.2. International Contexts

4.2.1. The Dynamics of the Human Rights Council

The United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC), established in 2006 and based in Geneva, functions as the central intergovernmental platform within the UN system for addressing human rights globally. Composed of 47 Member States elected by the General Assembly with equitable regional representation, the HRC operates through rotating membership to enhance its legitimacy (*Welcome to the Human Rights Council*, n.d.). The Council convenes multiple sessions annually to deliberate on urgent human rights issues, with participation from a range of stakeholders—observer countries, international human rights organizations, and civil society groups. Between 2006 and 2023, the Council held 54 regular sessions and passed 1,481 resolutions (OHCHR, n.d.).

In addition, the Council oversees the Universal Periodic Review process which assesses how UN Member States uphold human rights; establishes Special Procedures which appoint independent experts with thematic or country-focused mandates; creates emergency sessions due to urgent human rights concerns; and issues commissions and fact-finding missions to determine whether war crimes or crimes against humanity have been committed (*Universal Periodic Review*, n.d.).

While the HRC operates through established protocols, recent years have witnessed a growing challenge to consensus-building in the HRC. This polarization manifests not only in formal negotiations but also in procedural dynamics. According to Dupraz-Dobias, Member States have employed procedural delays and competing resolutions as tactical tools to avoid or dilute commitments on gender-related issues. These maneuvers underscore how the Council's procedural openness can be exploited to advance divergent ideological positions, thereby complicating its normative functions (*Tug of War over Gender Issues at the Human Rights Council - Geneva Solutions*, 2024)

Within the HRC, questions of gender equity position nations at opposite ends of the spectrum with minimal middle ground. Anti-gender movements operate within the HRC through various participatory mechanisms. At the national level, anti-gender movements exist in countries such as Russia, Hungary, and many nations affiliated with the OIC, consistently promoting "traditional family values" rhetoric while attempting to reverse policy equalization efforts.

Another key avenue for these movements is through NGO involvement, as many conservative NGOs with Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) consultative status—including Family Watch International, C-Fam and Alliance Defending Freedom—engage in formal proceedings and organize side events during Council sessions. Additionally, the development of informal cross-regional coalitions extends beyond traditional North-South and East-West divides, resulting in diverse states uniting in like-minded, conservative endeavors concerning gender issues.

Several critical thematic issues are promoted by these efforts for strategic purposes. Gendered sovereignty issues frame gender issues as sovereignty concerns rather than international human rights matters. The concept of the "natural family" portrays (CSE and LGBTI+ rights as negative intrusions upon the family unit. Consequently, parental rights arguments prioritize parental control over children's access to sexual and reproductive health information and autonomy.

The digital transformation of advocacy is evident as both progressive and conservative civil society organizations have adopted digital-first approaches, with advocacy developments and strategies increasingly occurring in digital spaces, transforming traditional engagement channels. Health and rights-related tensions have expanded as the overlap between health-focused and rights-focused agendas presents both opportunities and challenges, specifically following the politicization of public health since the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, regional realignments have emerged as historically stable regional voting blocs fracture over matters of gender and reproductive rights, with certain nations from Africa and Latin America breaking away from historically stable regional voting patterns.

The current state of the HRC reflects broader challenges to the multilateral system. Increased polarization regarding gender justice challenges not only the concept of universal human rights but also the capacity of international governance structures to implement health and rights-based agendas. While the resurgence of anti-gender sentiment presents significant challenges, effective multilateral governance and advocacy from diverse stakeholders suggest the outlook is not entirely bleak. The central question remains whether these bodies can move forward despite ideological divisions while upholding the fundamental principles of human rights: dignity, equity, and non-discrimination.

4.2.1.1. Without us at the Table: Reem Alsalem, Resolution A/HRC/56/48 and the Advancement of the Anti-Trans Agenda within the UN

Reem Alsalem, the UN Special Rapporteur for violence against women and girls is a vital piece for the gender traditionalist agenda. Many of our interviews highlighted the destruction that Alsalem has done in the wake of her appointment to this position. Alsalem has been connected with anti-gender CSOs and their oppositional stance on trans people (Anonymous 4, personal communication, April 29, 2025).

Under Alsalem's tenure, the call for input on her thematic report notably shifts from a gender-based to a sex-based framework, positing violence as "rooted in biology" rather than "socially constructed" power imbalances. She imposes a sex-based lens that reduces the complex, intersectional realities of violence to a binary understanding of sex, effectively excluding trans and gender-diverse experiences and undermining decades of progress in recognising gender as a social construct (AWID, 2023; Women Deliver, n.d.).

Alsalem's positions have been warmly received by anti-gender actors within and beyond the UN, who use her framing to bolster retrogressive language and challenge the inclusion of gender-related terminology in resolutions. According to Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), her advocacy mirrors strategies employed by states opposing "gender" in intergovernmental negotiations, weaponizing women's rights to justify discriminatory measures against trans people and legitimizing sensationalized myths about "male violence" in single-sex spaces (AWID, 2023; Women Deliver, n.d.).

Therefore, civil society organizations from all over the globe have been speaking out about her conduct, calling for an inclusive, evidence-based gender lens that recognizes violence as rooted in social norms and structural inequality, not biology (AWID, 2023; Women Deliver, n.d.). Moreover, they have urged UN bodies to refuse validation of the sex-based framing proposed by the Special Rapporteur, especially because of her background relationships with anti-gender NGOs such as ADF, according to some of our interviewees.

An example of her harmful arguments is her report HRC/56/48, entitled "Prostitution and violence against women and girls." Interviewees cite it as a problematic due to the language she uses, how she completely erases the voices of sex workers, and engages in advocating for the criminalization of various forms of sex work. According to Outright International (2024), despite overwhelming evidence from the UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls, UNFPA, UNDP, UNAIDS, and the 1995 Beijing Platform that voluntary sex work is distinct from forced prostitution and that decriminalization best protects sex workers' rights and safety. Alsalem's report recommended the adoption of the "Nordic model," criminalizing buyers of sex (Outright International, 2024). Nevertheless, this model, as documented by the Global Network of Sex Work Projects and numerous human rights bodies, has led to increased stigma, violence, and reduced access to justice and health services, particularly harming marginalized and trans sex workers (Outright International, 2024).

Interviewees have extensively highlighted how Reem not only represents anti-gender ideas in the UN, but provides legitimacy to anti-rights groups through usage of harmful terminology and misleading arguments. Moreover, they underline that the Special Rapporteur has severely violated the organization's Code of Conduct, attempted to change language during negotiations,

and intimidated civil society organizations, which are issues that should not be tolerated within such venues (Anonymous 4, personal communication, 29 April 2025).

Overall, CSOs have hesitated to criticize Reem or demand changes due to her pro-Palestinian positions. While her work potentially advances women's rights in Palestine, her controversial stances simultaneously provide ammunition for anti-gender equality actors to undermine progressive initiatives. Thus, this puts CSOs in a position where they need to choose which trade-off to agree upon.

To conclude, it is important to not accept anti-gender discourses within the United Nations, such as the arguments of the Special Rapporteur and force for the implementation of the correct language related to gender and sexuality issues. Therefore, although not having a clear connection with Alsalem's positions, it is possible to draw the conclusion that such reports such as the A/HRC/56/48 are boosters of harmful arguments and misunderstandings about sex work, which can increase legislations such as this one. This reinforces the crucial role that special rapporteurs play in the UN human rights system - and how easily their work can be manipulated.

4.2.2. *The Human Rights Council - 58th Session*

The 58th regular session of the HRC was held from February 24th to April 4th, 2025. Following a busy year for the United Nations, 2025 has witnessed significant geopolitical shifts. HRC58 constituted an extensive six-week session with comprehensive engagement, including eight panel discussions. More than 80 reports were submitted to the Council under its various agenda items, resulting in 32 adopted texts, comprising resolutions and decisions.

The final report of the HRC included an assessment on the situation in Nicaragua, while other issues before the Council included conditions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, demonstrating the Council's ongoing commitment to addressing situations requiring consistent monitoring and regulation. Furthermore, 2025 marks the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platforms for Action, emphasizing the critical importance of gender justice in the multilateral system due to persistent and emerging concerns (*Report on the 58th Session of the Human Rights Council | Universal Rights Group, 2025*)

This period of Council engagement occurred during a challenging transition period for multilateral entities, with limited options for governmental and civil society action. The United Nations system, already facing budgetary constraints, now faces more significant operational challenges. These problems extend beyond immediate functional viability to broader questions about the effectiveness of rights-based initiatives (Sexual Rights Initiative, 2025). As stakeholders reflected on the decades since Beijing, the Council assessed unmet expectations and intersectional realities to gender equality goals.

The current multilateral environment necessitates a nuanced reassessment of advocacy goals and engagement methods. This includes embracing diverse perspectives on structural inequities, acknowledging the relationship between economic governance systems and human

rights, developing sex-disaggregated approaches to rights, and emphasizing self-determination where applicable (*Report on the 58th Session of the Human Rights Council | Universal Rights Group*, 2025). These themes will continue to be addressed throughout the remainder of the 2025 regular session, 16 June —11 July, within an increasingly fragmented international arena.

4.2.2.1. The High-Level Segment

As the primary session of the Council, HRC58 opened with a High-Level Segment (HLS). The 2025 HLS featured addresses by about 70 high-ranking officials and distinguished delegates. The focus was on global human rights challenges, reaffirmation of accountability in Council operations, general areas of concern, and country-specific crises requiring urgent attention.

On March 3rd, 2025, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) Volker Türk delivered a comprehensive update to the 58th session of the HRC. His remarks outlined the status of human rights abuses worldwide and emphasized the connection between peace, development, democracy, and adherence to universal human rights principles (*Report on the 58th Session of the Human Rights Council | Universal Rights Group*, 2025).

Gender issues were a prominent theme in the High Commissioner's speech. He lamented the resurgence of adverse gender stereotyping and harmful masculinities, particularly as propagated through social media. Türk criticized the increasing appearance of misogynistic social media influencers as public speakers, the promotion of patriarchal expectations, and the global backlash against women's equality. Such developments, he asserted, contribute to increased violence against women both online and offline, particularly targeting women's rights advocates and women in politics. The High Commissioner emphasized that peace restoration efforts must be inclusive, with women participating in all aspects of conflict resolution and peace-related efforts, reaffirming the Women, Peace, and Security agenda's goals.

Reflecting on global developments, Türk called for awareness of vulnerable populations everywhere- not only in conflict zones but also in ostensibly peaceful countries. He highlighted the rise of populist rhetoric, noting how scapegoating and dehumanization become common political tactics, particularly during election season, undermining democratic processes and fostering divided societies.

Additionally, Türk acknowledged the growing influence of large technology companies and the potential consequences of unrestricted international surveillance. He recognized the disproportionate power wielded by unelected technology companies relative to state regulatory capacities. In response, he emphasized the state's responsibility to uphold human rights in digital spaces and to collaborate in preventing corporate overreach.

The High Commissioner's remarks established an overarching theme emphasizing the need to revitalize multilateralism, uphold the rule of law, and develop evidence-based policies. Responses to his presentation highlighted how human rights frameworks continue to provide

templates for addressing fundamental human needs—including education, healthcare, shelter, equity, and freedom of expression.

4.2.3. The Universal Periodic Review (UPR)

The UPR follows a structured review schedule and process. In its first cycle, the UPR reviewed 48 states per year, starting in May 2012, the second cycle reduced this to 42 states annually (OHCHR, n.d.). The UPR Working Group comprises all 47 HRC members, although any UN Member State may engage in the interactive dialogue. The three rapporteur states, collectively referred to as "troika," are selected by lot to facilitate the review of each state (OHCHR, n.d.).

Each review is based on three main sources: (1) national reports submitted by the state under review; (2) UN-compiled information, including reports from Special Procedures and treaty bodies; and (3) stakeholder submissions from national human rights institutions and non-governmental organizations (OHCHR, n.d.).

Following each review, the troika drafts an outcome report summarizing the dialogue, to which the reviewed state responds by accepting or noting the recommendations. The Working Group adopts the report no sooner than 48 hours post-review, followed by a two-week period for editorial revisions before final adoption by the HRC. The reviewed state has the option to implement recommendations and report progress during the next review cycle. The Council may intervene if a state fails to implement recommendations (OHCHR, n.d.).

4.2.3.1. UPR Outcomes During the HRC 58

During HRC58, the Council adopted Universal Periodic Review outcome reports for 13 of 14 reviewed Member States: Albania, Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominica, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Qatar, Portugal, and Norway (*Report on the 58th Session of the Human Rights Council | Universal Rights Group*, 2025). The Universal Periodic Review process generated 3,630 recommendations across these states, with a notable variation in response: 2,575 recommendations (71%) were accepted, 697 (19%) were noted, and 79 (2%) were partially accepted or acknowledged (*Report on the 58th Session of the Human Rights Council | Universal Rights Group*, 2025).

Notably absent from the adoption process was Nicaragua's UPR outcome report. Nicaragua announced its withdrawal from the Human Rights Council and affiliated mechanisms on February 27, 2025 (*Report on the 58th Session of the Human Rights Council | Universal Rights Group*, 2025), following the finding of the UN Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua, which identified 54 officials as potential perpetrators of systematic human rights violations in the country (*Report on the 58th Session of the Human Rights Council | Universal Rights Group*, 2025). Despite having completed its fourth UPR and receiving 279 recommendations, Nicaragua declined to communicate its reaction to these recommendations (*Report on the 58th*

Session of the Human Rights Council | Universal Rights Group, 2025)(Universal Rights Group, 2025). Consequently, the Bureau encouraged Nicaragua to re-engage with the process and deferred the adoption of Nicaragua's UPR outcome report until the 60th session.

4.2.4. Defunding Freedom? The Funding for Anti-Gender Movements

The global anti-gender movement is a dynamic and adaptive movement that implements strategies and tactics with foundations rooted in religious fundamentalism, patriarchy, and authoritarianism. However, the constant reframing of their narratives, posing them as in favor of “what is natural,” makes them attract a wide and diverse funding stream support worldwide through private donations, nonprofit charitable foundations, and financial sponsorships to events and projects (Wilson, 2020).

According to the Global Philanthropy Project (GPP), a coalition of funders and philanthropic advisors for LGBTIQ+ people in the Global South and East, from 2013 to 2017, LGBTIQ+ movements received approximately USD 1.2 billion in funding, while the anti-gender movement received USD 3.7 billion worldwide. Analyzing the publicly available financial disclosures, it is estimated that the aggregate revenue of anti-gender US-based organizations was of USD 6.2 billion for the same period (Wilson, 2020).

With these numbers in mind, it is clear that enormous financial architecture provides funding for these organizations. The National Christian Foundation (NCF) and The Christian Community Foundation (WaterStone) are among the most financially supportive organizations in the United States. In 2017, the NCF alone reported USD 1.5 billion in revenue and awarded USD 1.3 billion in grants to anti-gender organizations, including ADF , American Center for Law and Justice (ACLU), and the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), the major recipients (Wilson, 2020)..

Overseas, the funding from US-based organizations between 2008 and 2017 was USD 1 billion divided between South America (USD 248 million), Africa (USD 238 million), Europe (USD 174 million), Russia (USD 70 million), and Asia (USD 259 million). However, it is important to highlight that these numbers are very undercounted, especially because of the difficulties in tracking donations, the lack of accountability resources, and the fact that only 11 US-based organizations publicly shared their financial documents (Wilson, 2020).

It is essential to highlight the presence of well-organized anti-gender funders in Europe, mainly because of the variety of national laws that govern financial transparency for NGOs. However, reports mapped religious institutions, wealthy aristocratic families, and Russian oligarchs as the leading funders in the region, including those connected to the Tradition, Family, and Property Movement from the Catholic Right (Wilson, 2020). The European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF) conducted broad research on the origins of anti-gender funding in the region and found relevant data on more than 50 organizations across Europe (Neil, 2021).

The EPF identified over USD 700 million coming to anti-gender organizations originating from the region itself, the United States, and the Russian Federation. Politically, they mapped links to

anti-abortion initiatives in France, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, and the European Union (EU) level. On the other hand, on the issue of anti-gay marriage, they have been acting in Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Finland, Italy, Slovakia, and Romania, for example. This reality exemplifies how the anti-gender movement is well-funded and transnationally organized, being able to work in different national contexts (Neil, 2021).

Identifying that the majority of this funding comes from CSOs across the globe is significant to advancing politics that will affect people's lives. However, in 2025, we are facing another dimension of the issue: the process of funding withdrawal from major governments around the globe on gender justice initiatives, which is a threat that must be faced. Therefore, the report will address worrying scenarios and beacons of hope on the issue in the next sessions.

4.2.4.1. Hope from the North? The Nordic Gender Equality and LGBTI Funds

The Nordic countries encompass Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and the Åland Islands, with representatives elected to the Nordic Council of Ministers. This council is responsible for the NIKK, the *Nordisk information för kunskap om kön*, or the Nordic Information on Gender. The NIKK administers the Nordic Gender Equality Fund and the Nordic LGBTI Fund on behalf of these representatives, granting funds for organizations working on gender equality and LGBTI+ human rights in the countries of their Council (Nordic Co-operation, n.d.).

The purpose of the Nordic LGBTI Fund is to promote cooperation and inclusivity in the field of LGBTI+ rights in the framework of the Nordic Cooperation Programme for Gender Equality and LGBTI 2025-2030. On the other hand, the Nordic Gender Equality Fund finances collaborations and projects focused on this agenda. Both funds open their calls annually to applications and are intersectional, which positions the Nordic Council of Ministers in a position of leadership in the area in Europe (Nordic Co-operation, n.d.).

The Nordic Co-operation Programme for Gender Equality and LGBTI 2025–2030 further embeds the climate–gender nexus into funding priorities, encouraging cross-sectoral research on how climate action and digitalisation impact gender equality and LGBTI rights. Moreover, there is a growing emphasis on amplifying voices from rural, migrant, and disabled communities, reflecting an intersectional turn that seeks to bridge urban–rural divides and ensure that the most marginalised groups benefit from Nordic cooperation (Nordic Council of Ministers, n.d.). The situation of the Nordic countries is still better than the rest of Europe. In the next subsection, the report will delve deeper into the issues of Official Development Assistance (ODA) for gender justice in other European countries.

The purpose of this session is to exemplify how culturally similar countries are able to advance an agenda for LGBTI+ rights and gender justice within their own realities. Even if the nordic funds are available only to member states of the Nordic Council of Ministers, it is an example of how regional politics can be directed towards progress, not backlash. With that in mind, the Nordic countries can serve as a beacon of hope in the gender justice scenario worldwide,

especially because they always rank among the countries with most gender equality in the world and where LGBTI+ persons can enjoy their rights fully.

4.2.4.2. Strangling Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Gender Justice

According to ILGA World, in 2025, alongside the United States, both the United Kingdom and the Netherlands have announced significant cuts to their ODA, accompanied by forceful rhetoric and a retreat from supporting marginalized communities. Besides that, Switzerland, Belgium, and France have similarly unveiled plans or initiatives indicating they may take the same direction (ILGA World, 2025b). These shifts are likely to have a severe and damaging impact on at-risk communities and civil society organizations.

According to *ILGA World*, the United Kingdom has decided to reduce its international development spending by 40%, bringing it down to just 0.3% of its GDP, in order to boost defence spending by a modest 10%. This move prompted the resignation of UK International Development Minister Anneliese Dodds, who openly opposed the prime minister's drastic cuts to the aid budget (ILGA World, 2025b).

The Dutch government has always been a long-standing supporter of LGBTI+ human rights, being at the forefront in funding gender equality-related NGOs and projects. Following a similar trend, the Netherlands plans to slash EUR 2.4 billion from its development budget starting in 2027, citing that "Dutch interests will take precedence" (ILGA World, 2025b, p. 1) Notably, despite continued parliamentary support for aid initiatives benefiting women, girls, and LGBTI people, the Ministry's latest international development policy letter fails to mention LGBTI communities even once (ILGA World, 2025b).

Rutgers International (2025) also reports that the Dutch government has announced additional substantial cuts targeting civil society organisations - key actors in advancing global sexual health. Dutch organisations collaborate closely with local partners across the world, leveraging their shared knowledge and expertise to foster meaningful, transformative progress in health, safety, and equality. However, if these networks face severe funding reductions, their crucial efforts will be severely compromised, putting hard-won progress at serious risk (Rutgers International, 2025).

Meanwhile, Switzerland has confirmed a CHF 110 million cut to its foreign aid this year, Belgium intends to reduce its aid spending by 25% over the next five years under a new coalition agreement finalized last month, and France is preparing to cut public development assistance by up to 40% as part of a broader EUR 32 billion budget reduction for 2025 (ILGA World, 2025b)

4.2.4.3. Money is Political: The Role of Philanthropy

Philanthropy plays a key role in funding for development. Interviewees mentioned that even if the funders of the anti-gender movement are "donating" a huge amount of money, there are also great philanthropists providing resources for gender justice movements. FRIDA, the Young

Feminist Fund, quoted that “money is political” after the justification of accepting a USD 10 million donation from MacKenzie Scott, former spouse of Amazon founder, Jeff Bezos. This was the largest amount of money received from an individual or institution for FRIDA since its inception in 2008 (Ranganathan, 2022).

However, as some interviewees highlighted, these movements are very aware of the intersectionality and the cross-cutting aspects of justice-related issues. Therefore, even if the amount of money such as this can completely transform an organization and guarantee its sustainability, it comes with a legacy and a responsibility. Following that, FRIDA acknowledges that the source of this wealth is completely associated with one of the most exploitative companies in the world that commit issues such as extreme tax avoidance, poor working conditions, slave labor in the supply chain, as well as harming the environment.

Furthermore, “philanthropic giving exists because of inequality and exploitation” (Ranganathan, 2022, p. 1), so again quoting the interviews, while structural change remains the ultimate goal, sustained efforts must continue in the meantime, and that requires resources. Hence, to properly hack the system we must incentivize the movements to use available funding to push for bold, transformative change, especially because the donors themselves are far from perfect.

4.2.4.4. The U.S. is Out! Funding Cuts to HIV, Gender-Based Violence and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

Recent U.S. funding freezes and terminations have severely disrupted life-saving sexual and reproductive health services, HIV prevention and treatment programs, and gender-based violence protection, programs on which tens of millions of people depend. These funding cuts are part of a broader strategy of the new administration and are responsible to undermine progress on bodily autonomy, maternal health, prevention of vertical HIV transmission, and safe spaces for survivors of gender-based violence, threatening both individual lives and broader gender justice goals (Christian, 2025; IAS, 2025; UNAIDS, 2025).

The termination of over 40 UNFPA humanitarian grants totaling roughly US \$335 million, has abruptly cut off funding for maternal healthcare, emergency rape treatment, and protection services in more than 20 crisis-affected countries, threatening the lives and well-being of women and girls in those settings. To exemplify that with a real case, in Afghanistan alone, more than 9 million women stand to lose access to vital maternal health and broader reproductive services, and similar interruptions to mobile obstetric units and postpartum care are imminent in the occupied Palestinian territory (Christian, 2025). U.S. contributions, which averaged about US \$180 million annually to UNFPA and underwrote the training and deployment of midwives in emergencies, have been a cornerstone of efforts to prevent needless maternal mortality, and their sudden removal critically undermines global maternal health goals (*Statement in Response to the United States Decision to Deny Future Funding to UNFPA*, 2025).

Furthermore, the 90-day suspension of all U.S. foreign assistance - including the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) - halted vital HIV prevention and treatment activities across 55 countries, directly affecting services tailored for pregnant and

breastfeeding women. Although a narrow waiver later allowed the resumption of prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) services - such as PrEP distribution and HIV test kits for expectant and new mothers, the initial pause created dangerous gaps in a program that averts HIV transmission to newborns.

Besides, that, given that PEPFAR supports HIV treatment for over 20 million people, which corresponds to two-thirds of whom reside in sub-Saharan Africa, any interruption disproportionately endangers women and girls, who already face disproportionately higher barriers to adherence and continuity of care, risking increased maternal HIV transmission and mortality (UNAIDS, 2025)).

Therefore, by defunding UNFPA's gender-equality and human-rights programming, the cuts threaten to reverse hard-won progress toward eliminating harmful practices. With that in mind, the Geneva-based International AIDS Society (IAS) has warned that freezing PEPFAR jeopardizes not only critical treatment services but also the gender-transformative components of HIV programs, which included as women's empowerment initiatives, key populations-led services, and community mobilization efforts that are essential for reducing transmission, combating stigma, and advancing overall gender justice (IAS, 2025).

Regarding gender-based violence (GBV), UNFPA funded "safe spaces" for women and girls have been suspended in multiple crisis contexts, leaving survivors without refuge or essential services. These are critical hubs offering psychosocial support, legal assistance, and medical care to survivors of GBV, important structures to guarantee a humanized and hands-on support to the victims. Simultaneously, funding for rape treatment centers was part of the cut US \$335 million portfolio, halting these services heightens both immediate and long-term health risks for survivors. These centers provide emergency contraception, post-exposure prophylaxis, and counseling for the victims, whose majority are female (Christian, 2025).

5. Analysis of the Human Rights Council Resolutions from HRC55 to HRC58

Over the course of the 55th to 58th sessions of the HRC, the treatment of gender-related issues has reflected an increasingly complex interplay of normative advancement, political polarization, and strategic coalition-building. This period reveals both significant milestones in the institutionalization of gender perspectives and enduring resistance from Member States rooted in ideological, cultural, and geopolitical factors.

5.1. HRC55 (March 2024)

The 55th session marked a historic achievement with the adoption of the first resolution dedicated exclusively to the rights of intersex persons (A/HRC/RES/55/14), led by Finland, South Africa, Chile, and Australia. The resolution, adopted with 24 votes in favor, none against, and 23 abstentions, urged states to combat discrimination and harmful practices based on variations in sex characteristics and requested a report from the OHCHR on the status of

intersex rights globally (*Report on the 55th Session of the Human Rights Council | Universal Rights Group*, n.d.). Despite its normative significance, the high abstention rate underscored ongoing divisions within the Council regarding issues of sexual orientation, gender identity, and bodily autonomy.

5.2. HRC56 (June-July 2024)

At HRC56, gender issues gained broader visibility through both plenary discussions and resolution texts. The annual full-day discussion on the human rights of women focused on economic violence and the pursuit of a rights-based economic model (Universal Rights Group, 2024). Four gender-focused resolutions were adopted: on adolescent pregnancy prevention, technology-facilitated gender based violence, menstrual hygiene and equality, and the elimination of discrimination against women and girls. While all four were adopted by consensus, the resolution on gender discrimination faced amendment attempts-primarily from Russia-aimed at weakening provisions on SRHR, all of which were ultimately rejected (*Report on the 55th Session of the Human Rights Council | Universal Rights Group*, n.d.)

Significantly, the session also adopted a resolution on HIV that included explicit references to sexual rights for the first time within this thematic context, signaling progress in expanding accepted language on bodily autonomy and gender-related health rights (*Report on the 55th Session of the Human Rights Council | Universal Rights Group*, n.d.)

5.3. HRC57 (September-October 2024):

Although HRC57 did not adopt resolutions focused exclusively on gender, it reinforced gender integration across multiple agenda items. A key development was the annual discussion on integrating a gender perspective throughout the Council's work, which stressed the need for gender expertise in human rights investigations and called for victim-centered approaches ("HRC57," 2024)). The Council also addressed systemic gender persecution in Afghanistan, particularly under the Taliban regime, and civil society organizations advocated for accountability and the inclusion of Afghan women in peace processes (Universal Rights Group, 2024). In addition, the rights of Indigenous Peoples were discussed with particular emphasis on intersectional discrimination experienced by indigenous women and girls, reinforcing the necessity of gender-informed approaches in cultural and political rights protection (GCHRD, 2024).

5.4. HRC58 (February-April 2025):

The HRC58 was concluded with the adoption of 32 resolutions, marking a 6% decrease from the 34 resolutions adopted at the 55th session in March 2024 (UNOG, 2025). Of these, 20 resolutions (63%) were adopted by consensus, while 12 (37%) required voting procedures. The resolutions addressed both thematic concerns (17 resolutions) and country-specific situations

(15 resolutions) (*Report on the 58th Session of the Human Rights Council | Universal Rights Group, 2025*)

Country-specific resolutions were categorized under various agenda items: two under item 2 (annual reports of the High Commissioner, his Office, and the Secretary-General), seven under item 4 (human rights situations requiring the Council's attention), three under item 7 (human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories) and three under item 10 (technical assistance and capacity building) (*Report on the 58th Session of the Human Rights Council | Universal Rights Group, 2025*).

5.4.1 Gender-Related Resolutions at HRC58

This section examines two significant resolutions adopted during the 58th session of the Human Rights Council that specifically address gender-related issues in the context of contemporary challenges. These resolutions focus on critical aspects of gender equality, particularly in the areas of diplomacy and the protection of human rights defenders in the digital age (*Report on the 58th Session of the Human Rights Council | Universal Rights Group, 2025*)

5.4.1.1. Women, Diplomacy and Human Rights (A/HRC/58/L.15)

Resolution A/HRC/58/L.15 on “Women, Diplomacy, and Human Rights” was adopted by consensus and garnered support from 87 co-sponsors (HRC58, 2025). This level of support indicates broad international recognition of the importance of gender equality in diplomatic spheres, though the absence of opposition may also reflect the relatively non-controversial nature of the resolution's commitments rather than genuine consensus on implementation strategies.

The resolution acknowledges that despite decades of discussions toward gender equality, structural barriers continue to impede the full, equal, and meaningful participation of women at all levels of diplomatic action, including bilateral and multilateral processes within the United Nations system. These barriers represent not only a violation of women's rights to equal participation but also constitute a significant loss of diverse perspectives and approaches in international relations, potentially undermining diplomatic effectiveness in addressing global challenges (HRC58, 2025).

A crucial contribution of this resolution is its explicit recognition that sexual harassment and gender-based violence against women in diplomacy occurs not only through direct in-person interactions but also through digital channels. This acknowledgement reflects growing awareness of how gender-based discrimination and violence have evolved with technological advancement, requiring more comprehensive protection frameworks (HRC58, 2025)

The resolution calls for the establishment of an International Day of Women in Diplomacy on June 24th and advocates for panel discussions to address the elimination of structural barriers to women's participation (HRC58, 2025). Furthermore, the resolution encourages member states to collect gender-disaggregated data, place women in leadership roles, and implement

multi sectoral policy actions to eliminate structural barriers (HRC58, 2025). The emphasis on data collection represents an important acknowledgment of evidence-based policymaking, as the lack of comprehensive gender-disaggregated data has been identified as a significant obstacle to effective gender equality interventions across various sectors (World Economic Forum, 2024)

The resolution reinforces existing frameworks such as the Conventions on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. By situating itself within this established normative architecture, the resolution potentially strengthens these frameworks' application to the specific context of diplomatic engagement, thereby addressing an implementation gap in the international gender equality regime (HRC58, 2025)

5.4.1.2. Human Rights Defenders and New and Emerging Technologies: Protecting Human Rights Defenders, Including Women Human Rights Defenders, in the Digital Age (A/HRC/58/L.27/Rev.1)

The second resolution examined in this analysis concerns the protection of human rights defenders in the context of new and emerging technologies (*A/HRC/58/L.27/Rev.1*). Led by Norway with 65 co-sponsors, this resolution addresses the complex relationship between technological advancement and human rights defense (*Report on the 58th Session of the Human Rights Council | Universal Rights Group*, 2025).

The resolution navigates the dual nature of technology for human rights documentation, communication, and advocacy; they simultaneously expose human rights defenders (HRDs) to novel threats including digital surveillance, hacking, online harassment, and internet shutdowns. This nuanced approach avoids both technological determinism and reductionism framings of technology as either inherently empowering or threatening to human rights work (Sexual Rights Initiative, 2025).

A particularly significant aspect of this resolution is its recognition that female HRDs face disproportionate digital violence of a misogynistic nature compared to their male counterparts (Sexual Rights Initiative, 2025). Women face violence twice: against their work and against their gender. This gender-sensitive analysis reflects growing evidence from organizations such as the OHCHR and civil society organizations documenting how online violence against women HRDs often exhibits distinct patterns, including sexualized context, and threats that extend to family members (Sexual Rights Initiative, 2025)

The resolution requires States to ensure safe digital spaces for HRDs through gender-sensitive solutions addressing the unequal violence against women and girls (International Action for Peace & Sustainable Development, 2025). It specifically mandates protection measures regarding artificial intelligence and spyware technologies, demonstrating the resolution's forward-looking nature, anticipating rather than merely reacting to technological developments affecting human rights defense.

Significantly, the resolution extends responsibility beyond state actors to include the private sector, especially technology companies, requiring them to conduct human rights due diligence to prevent infringement upon HRDs' rights and safety (International Action for Peace & Sustainable Development, 2025). This multi-stakeholder approach acknowledges the complex ecosystem in which human rights defense occurs and the diffusion of power in digital spaces across state and non-state actors.

The resolution also assigns the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights the task of organizing regional workshops and producing a comprehensive report addressing digital technology threats to HRDs and potential responses (International Action for Peace & Sustainable Development, 2025)

The amendment process for Resolution A/HRC/58/L.27/Rev.1 provides valuable insights into geopolitical tensions surrounding digital rights and human rights defender protections. All proposed amendments originated from the Russian Federation, co-sponsored by China, suggesting coordinated efforts by these states to limit or qualify the protections indicated in the resolution.

One amendment proposed by Russia sought to add language stating that rights may be limited in accordance with international law to ensure order, morality, or welfare of democracy; this amendment was subsequently withdrawn (Sexual Rights Initiative, 2025). The withdrawal rather than defeat through voting suggests strategic calculation by the sponsors, possibly anticipating insufficient support or seeking to avoid explicit rejection of their position.

Three additional amendments were voted upon and rejected by the Council majority:

- i. Adding the phrase "criminalisation for legitimate activities" throughout the text;
- ii. Stating that mandate holders shall operate in accordance with the HRC Institution-Building Package and Code of Conduct for Special Procedures, and;
- iii. Acknowledging "unilateral economic, financial, or trade measures." (Sexual Rights Initiative, 2025).

The rejection of these amendments reflects the Council majority's commitment to maintaining robust protection for HRDs without qualifications that could potentially be exploited to justify restrictions. Particularly, the rejection of language on "legitimate activities" preserves the resolution's protective scope by avoiding subjective determinations of legitimacy that could be used to criminalize genuine human rights defense work (Sexual Rights Initiative, 2025).

The adoption of gender-focused resolutions at the 58th session of the Human Rights Council reflects both the evolving landscape of international human rights governance and the complex dynamic between normative advancement and political resistance. These resolutions illustrate the Council's growing responsiveness to contemporary challenges-particularly the integration of gender perspectives into diplomatic frameworks and the recognition of digital threats faced by women human rights defenders.

Notably, the resolutions underscore a critical institutional shift toward mainstreaming gender within multilateral processes. They contribute to the development of a more inclusive human rights agenda by expanding the normative framework to account for emerging forms of gender-based discrimination, especially in under-addressed domains such as diplomacy and digital security. However, their reliance on non-binding commitments and voluntary implementation mechanisms limits their transformative capacity, particularly in the absence of robust enforcement and accountability structures.

The opposition encountered during the amendment process further reveals the geopolitical contestation surrounding gender and digital rights, with certain states continuing to resist expanded protections on the ground of sovereignty and ideological divergence. These dynamics highlight the fragility of consensus in the current multilateral system and the need for sustained diplomatic engagement to safeguard and strengthen human rights norms.

Ultimately, the long-term significance of these resolutions will depend on national-level implementation, the responsiveness of private sector actors-especially in the technology industry- and the vigilance of civil society in monitoring compliance. Continued research is needed to evaluate their practical outcomes, identify best practices, and ensure that gender equality commitments move beyond symbolic affirmations toward real change.

In conclusion, the 58th session underscored the entrenched polarization of the Council. Two gender-focused resolutions- on women in diplomacy (A/HRC/58/L.15) and the protection of women human rights defenders in digital spaces (A/HRC/58/L.27/Rev.1)- were adopted but not without contestation. Proposed amendments by Russia and China aimed to introduce qualifiers such as “legitimate activities” or invoke sovereignty to restrict international scrutiny (Sexual Rights Initiative, 2025). These amendments were rejected, indicating a persistent commitment by the majority of Council members to uphold protections without compromise. However, the recurring pattern of resistance from certain states demonstrates the ongoing ideological struggle over the meaning and scope of gender rights in international law.

5.5. Looking Ahead: What to Expect of the HRC59

The agenda for the upcoming HRC59 (June-July 2025) signals a continuation and deepening of these trends. The Council will host a full-day discussion on the human rights of women, including the commemoration of the International Day of Women in Diplomacy, and examine structural barriers to women's participation and representation in decision-making (A/HRC/59/1, 2025). In addition, it will consider reports from UN-Women and the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, as well as reports on women and girls in criminal justice detention, and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls. These discussions are expected to build upon previous resolutions while addressing intersectional concerns, including age, disability, and detention-related vulnerabilities. Moreover, HRC59 will also hear the latest from the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

In sum, while implementation gaps and procedural maneuvering continue to hinder progress, the Human Rights Council remains a pivotal platform for advancing global norms on gender equality. The forthcoming HRC59 session is expected to generate further polarized debate, particularly around issues of women's participation and SOGI rights. However, such contestation is integral to the evolution of international standards. It is anticipated that new resolutions will emerge, yet their transformative potential will depend less on their adoption and more on their meaningful implementation into national policies.

6. Liberation For All: Towards a Global Movement for Intersectional Gender Justice

In our analysis we were able to piece together a snapshot of the gender justice movement within national and international scenes. The literature we reviewed revealed this anti-gender pushback is not new but that it has been increasing in recent years and has ramped up significantly within the past year or so. The election of far right governments, like Argentina, the USA, Italy, and Hungary are all examples of this increase.

Many of our interviewees identified a problem within argumentation. The exact language of the HRC resolutions weaponized and used against the pro-gender actors by the anti-gender is a strategy we see used in the HRC and other international and national negotiations. The UPR and Special Procedures are key examples where a variety of actors within the PMC TAN utilize this weaponized language. By using the double helix model we are able to recognize the downward spiral that gender related negotiations often fall into with the mirroring of negotiation strategy and human rights language usage which causes a difficult tension and can result in a myth of competitive rights. This feeds into a sense that the gender justice movement is risky and can cause actors in other areas of human rights defense to be wary of collaboration or co-support. This veneer of riskiness could also cause a “myth of competitive rights” between these other area defenders as they are not willing to taint the ability to further their agenda by getting tangled with the gender justice movement.

The case studies included cover North and South America with the new Trump Administration and the Milei government of Argentina as well as the European context with Italy, Poland, Hungary, and Sweden collectively illustrating the multifaceted nature of contemporary gender backlash. These countries' national contexts differ in extremism and timeline but all have in common a period where the gender justice movement was under attack from not just NGOs but official governments or administrations. Hungary's descent into strict gender rights and vehement opposition to the gender justice movement marks an early stage of this whereas the current political climate in the USA gives a fresh reminder that the struggle persists and potentially now with more fervor. The cases in Europe range from Italy's soft theopolitics, where the Vatican influence shapes policy indirectly, to Hungary's constitutional entrenchment of heteronormative family values, Poland's explicit Church-state partnership offset by effective countermobilization, and Sweden's paradoxical equality that weaponizes gender progressivism against minorities. These diverse manifestations of anti-gender politics converge at the HRC in Geneva, where the international architecture of human rights becomes a battleground. As seen by the Holy See's 2024 event on "Preventing the exploitation and commodification of women

and children," these national-level actors strategically internationalize their agendas through UN mechanisms, forming cross-regional alliances with non-like-minded states to constrain progressive interpretations of human rights instruments. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation has replaced the Holy See as the primary consensus-builder among conservative states, while European populist governments increasingly utilize their UN presence to legitimize domestic gender restrictions as protection of sovereignty against ideological colonization.

The most recent HRC sessions have had some significant resolutions on women and girls and SOGI but also a fair amount of pushback from anti-gender CSOs and member states. In HRC 55 and 56 there were some memorable advancements but the tension was visible with strategic abstentions from those considered adjacent to the pro-gender movement as well as some of those states actually voting against. The 57th and 58th HRC sessions both had less resolutions on women and girls and SOGI but still the conversation around these topics was pervasive and lively. The Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls has been identified as a danger to the advancement of gender justice through her direct connection with anti-gender CSOs and member states.

A loss of funding from various previous backers has the movement worried about a standstill and even more the loss of lives and rights due to a multitude of reasons including the AIDs epidemic and totalitarian regimes, such as Afghanistan. The withdrawal of USAID, a major backer in the UN system, takes with it the ability to continue many aid projects throughout the world, one of which affecting 9 million women in Afghanistan who will not receive maternal healthcare and 1,700 midwives laid off, affecting their economy as well (Christian, 2025). Another major backer for SHRH and SOGI, the Netherlands, cutting ODA budget as well as CSO aid.

With all of this being said, the current status of gender justice may seem grim. A feeling of weariness often started our interviews but many ended with hopeful comments of further collaboration and pushback against the pushback. From all this gathered knowledge we have responded to the concern about what direction to head by giving some possible recommendations.

6.1. Moving Forward Together: Our Recommendations

Considering the research and the interviews we carried out we have compiled three main recommendations aimed at the audience of this report, might they be CSOs or state missions that carry out vital work within the HRC, and within the panorama of gender justice.

1. **Proactive, Not Reactive:** We should stop countering the anti-gender actor's provocative arguments. In the past years a monumental amount of energy and resources have been put into observing and debating with them. It has been suggested to not reply to their solicits and to optimize resources. It is more effective to proactively appeal to "the 40%

middle ground,”² by gaining their support through culturally relative narratives as well as data.

2. **Data and Support Sharing:** There is a need to develop a document sharing hub, as member states and CSOs alike have voiced this for an easily accessible and up-to-date data. Hence, the organization of a database that includes good practices documents, compilations of corroborated talking points, a dictionary of terms used by the movement, easily digestible data, relevant spreadsheets and news would serve as a collective tool. The hub would be shared across the movement and with those that are new within the system, to ensure a continuity of efforts throughout mandates. This will directly improve collective arguing and promote a united front.
3. **Community Building:** From our data analysis we recognize the importance and need for community building among the movement’s direct actors as well as outside stakeholders. These actors range from national grassroots organizations to multilateral international groups, and throughout our analysis, we identified a sense of disjointedness. Only by working together we can form a cohesive front. Entities within the movement should find common ground to build a stronger community around the advancement of gender justice. Outside of the movement we know the issues that CSOs focus on cover a wide spectrum (e.g. labour rights, health, trade, etc.), but we need to foster a support system and help others understand that gender is just one of the many pillars of democracy and therefore is embedded in all their work. In a reciprocal sense we will support them, as gender is embedded in their work as well. Furthermore, to nourish this climate, we strongly encourage all parties involved in making gender justice more progressive to not be afraid of engaging into what might seem to be uncomfortable conversations, but can only lead to fostering community and creating a more united and inclusive front.

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² It has been shown multiple times how people and actors that sit at the extremes will not react to logical narratives, nor they will react to data and scientific proof. Thus, it is important to redirect these energies to states and actors that don’t have “strong” positions but would rather react to logic narratives supported by corroborated data.

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