

Family, rights and resistance: responding to anti-gender backlash

A practical resource for donors, multilaterals, governments and civil society seeking to defend and advance women's rights and sexual and reproductive health and rights in an era of shrinking civic and financial space.

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‘Quick read’ overview: What the document says

This resource argues that the family has become a central battleground in anti-gender and anti-rights organising. Anti-gender actors are using the language of family, protection, rights, democracy and care to undermine women’s rights, SRHR, LGBTQI+ rights, child rights and efforts to prevent violence against women and girls. The paper’s core message is that progressive actors should not abandon the language of family. Instead, they should reclaim it as a site of equality, safety, dignity, autonomy and freedom from violence.

What anti-gender actors are doing

Anti-gender movements are not fragmented or marginal. They are organised, well-funded and transnational. They bring together ultra-conservative religious actors, right-wing authoritarian movements, think tanks, advocacy organisations and political parties.

Key tactics include:

- Presenting themselves as “pro-family” rather than anti-rights.
- Using polished policy, academic and human rights language to appear mainstream.
- Co-opting UN frameworks, sustainable development language and rights-based language.
- Building cross-border coalitions that operate in global, regional and national policy spaces.
- Framing gender equality, SRHR, LGBTQI+ rights and CSE as threats to culture, children, religion, national identity and social order.

This paper highlights a major asymmetry: **anti-gender actors often receive long-term, flexible funding for broad narrative change, while progressive funders tend to support more issue-specific, project-based work. This can reinforce silos and weaken collective resistance.**

The seven family-focused anti-gender narratives

The paper identifies seven recurring narratives, used by anti-gender actors:

- **“Traditional” family structures are natural and necessary:** promotes the heterosexual nuclear family as the only legitimate model and reinforces rigid gender roles.
- **Declining fertility rates threaten national survival:** positions women’s reproductive choices as a demographic risk, often linked to nationalist, racist or xenophobic agendas.
- **“Gender ideology” is destroying social order:** uses fear to mobilise opposition to gender equality, inclusive education and LGBTQI+ rights.
- **Women need rescuing from rights-based movements:** presents feminism, abortion and SRHR as harmful to women, while restricting autonomy.
- **Women and children must be protected through regressive policy:** uses safety language to justify exclusion, discrimination and essentialist ideas of womanhood.
- **Comprehensive sexuality education undermines parental authority:** frames CSE as a threat to religious, cultural or moral education, rather than as health, safety and violence prevention.
- **VAWG is a private family issue:** prioritises family unity, honour or mediation over survivor safety, justice and accountability.

Why this matters for Violence Against Women and Girls

The paper demonstrates how the above narratives sustain violence against women and girls. By treating the family as private, sacred or beyond state scrutiny, anti-gender actors can minimise abuse, silence survivors and resist systemic reform. The result is a shift away from accountability and survivor-centred approaches towards reconciliation, mediation and preservation of family unity.

Progressive policy language already exists

Progressive international language on family is already available. Frameworks including the Beijing Platform for Action, the CRC, ICESCR, the Maputo Protocol and UN statements on diverse families recognise that families exist in many forms and that rights, consent, equality and freedom from violence must be protected within them.

This demonstrates that family and rights are not in opposition.

The proposed progressive counter-narrative

The resource proposes a rights-based family narrative:

- Families are diverse and should be equally supported.
- Equality strengthens families.
- Safety must come before family unity.
- Bodily autonomy and SRHR protect families.
- Comprehensive Sexuality Education supports safety, respect and healthy relationships.
- Care must be recognised, reduced and redistributed.
- Family policy must be cross-sectoral and connected to health, education, housing, labour, justice, social protection and social norms.

Conclusion

Anti-gender actors have weaponised the family by turning care, belonging and protection into arguments for restricting rights. The response should not be to avoid family language, but to contest and reclaim it. A progressive family narrative should insist that families are strongest when everyone within them has equality, autonomy, safety, dignity and freedom from violence.

1. Introduction

The family has become a key battleground in debates on women's rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights, violence against women and girls, LGBTQI+ rights, child rights and wider social justice. What may feel like a sudden shift is, in fact, the result of decades of investment, organising and coalition-building by religious and right-wing authoritarian actors.¹ These actors have built transnational alliances, strengthened their advocacy, and learned to use the language of rights, democracy, family, freedom and protection to advance regressive agendas.

The family is central to this strategy because it matters deeply to people. It carries emotional, cultural, political and religious weight. Anti-gender actors frame the family as under threat, then position women's rights, LGBTQI+ rights, migrant rights, child rights, and sexual and reproductive health and rights as dangers to it. This paper argues that rights-based movements cannot leave the language of family to those who use it to restrict rights.

The paper identifies seven recurring family-focused narratives used by anti-gender actors, set out in Figure 1 and explored in the sections that follow. These narratives do not sit neatly within one policy area. They connect anxieties about gender, sexuality, race, migration, fertility, nationalism, religion and social change. They allow regressive positions to appear protective, democratic and rights-based, and they gain power when progressive movements respond in silos.

The central argument is simple: families matter, and so do the rights of every person within them. Families, in all their diversity, can and should be places of equality, safety, dignity and freedom. A progressive approach to the family does not deny its social importance. It insists that family policy must protect people within families, not an abstract idea of "the family" that can be used to silence violence, restrict autonomy or exclude diverse forms of family life.

This resource is intended to help donors, multilaterals, governments and civil society actors recognise and resist these narratives. It explains how family-focused anti-gender arguments work, how they appear in policy and advocacy spaces, and why they matter for women's rights and protection from violence.

Within the document, seven narratives used by the anti-gender and anti-rights movement are identified. The table below provides a summary of these arguments and draws on this paper to provide counter-narratives. We hope you find this useful in your resistance.

¹ Cossutta, C., & Habed, A. J. (2021). From Verona, with Love: "anti-gender" mobilisations and Transfeminist (re)actions. *Mobilisierungen Gegen Feminismus Und ,Gender'*, 139–154. <https://doi.org/10.3224/84742528.09>

Anti-gender narrative	What it claims	What it does	Rights-based response
Traditional family structures are natural and necessary	The heterosexual nuclear family is the foundation of society	Delegitimises diverse families and reinforces rigid gender roles	Families are diverse. What matters is equality, safety, dignity and care within them
Declining fertility rates threaten national survival	Women's reproductive choices are a demographic threat	Turns women's bodies into instruments of national survival and can reinforce racist or xenophobic agendas	Support people to make free decisions about whether, when and how to have children
"Gender ideology" is destroying social order	Gender equality is an external threat to family, culture and tradition	Mobilises fear against women's rights, children's rights, LGBTQI+ rights and inclusive education	Focus on concrete rights: equality, safety, autonomy, services and freedom from violence
Women need rescuing from rights-based movements	Feminism, abortion and SRHR harm women	Uses protection language to restrict autonomy	Protection without autonomy is control
Women and children must be protected through regressive policy	Women and children are at risk from gender diversity and progressive policy	Uses safety language to justify exclusion and discrimination	Protection must not be used to restrict the rights of others
Comprehensive sexuality education undermines parental authority	CSE threatens religious, cultural or moral education within families	Restricts children's access to information on health, rights, consent and relationships	CSE supports safety, dignity, health and violence prevention
VAWG is a private family issue	Violence should be resolved within the family	Silences survivors and prioritises family unity over justice	Violence is not private. States must prevent violence, protect survivors and ensure accountability

Table 1: Quick guide to responding to anti-gender narratives

2. What anti-gender actors are doing

Historically, some of the earliest opposition to Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) which used narratives around the family came from ultra-conservative religious actors. In the UN and within global policy discourse, this opposition included state and non-state groups linked to Catholicism and the Orthodox Church. For example, in the mid-1990s, the Catholic Church and conservative groups worked together against the decisions of the World Conferences on Women in Cairo (1994) and Beijing (1995).² While this bloc remains influential, particularly in global forums such as the United Nations, there has been a growing role for other religious actors, including those tied to Evangelical Christianity, and some national movements including conservative groups linked to Judaism and Islam.³ These conservative religious movements have combined forces with right-wing authoritarian (RWA) political parties and movements.

RWA parties and movements use religious partnership to deepen public support and align members of religion with nationalist and authoritarian narratives. Conservative religious groups are well funded and offer financial support to RWAs, in exchange for policy alignment. Religious groups also serve as a channel for disseminating political messaging. For example, in Italy, the Catholic Church supplements state services through health, education, social care and even entertainment such as sports facilities and cinemas - offering extensive opportunities to promote anti-women's rights ideologies under the guise of family-focused values.⁴

Box 1: Defining 'Nativism' and 'Authoritarianism' as they relate to women's rights

Nativism: A combination of nationalism and xenophobia that views non-native ideas or people as threats to the nation. It emphasises preserving the nation through native reproduction rather than immigration, with the nuclear family regarded as the fundamental unit of society. Enhancing its reproductive role is seen as essential for ensuring the nation's survival.

Authoritarianism: A belief in a strictly ordered society where authority is upheld through severe punishment. This view supports traditional social hierarchies, including gender roles, with men dominating the public and employment spheres while women are confined to the private sphere and unpaid labour.

² Sinem Kourou, N. (2021). Sağ popülizm ve toplumsal Cinsiyet Karşılığı Hareketlerin Birlikteliğinde AKP Hükümetlerinin Aile Siyaseti ve popülist Siyasal Mobilisasyonu. *Feminist Tahayyul Akademik Arastirmalar Dergisi*, 2(2), 207–241. <https://doi.org/10.57193/feminta.2021.207>

³ House, C. (2022) Research on and Responses to Contemporary Anti-Gender Movements: Briefing Note to the Equal Rights Coalition Conference, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 8-9 September 2022.

⁴ Cossutta, C., & Habed, A. J. (2021). From Verona, with Love: "anti-gender" mobilisations and Transfeminist (re)actions. *Mobilisierung gegen Feminismus Und ,Gender'*, 139–154. <https://doi.org/10.3224/84742528.09>

Elsewhere, in Uganda, churches have significant influence through social services, and whilst many have contributed positively to community well-being, some have also mobilized opposition to sexual reproductive health rights, comprehensive sexuality education and LGBTQ+ rights through narratives centred on family values.⁵ Similar patterns have emerged in many of the world's economies, with religious organisations taking on responsibility for service provision in response to cuts in state-run services due to economic pressures.^{6 7 8}

Box 2: How is this movement funded?

Right-wing authoritarian and ultra-conservative religious groups are extremely well-funded, with funders reported to spend hundreds of millions of dollars annually on long-term, flexible financial support for broad campaigns against what they term "gender ideology."⁹

Research conducted by the Global Philanthropy Project (GPP) reveals that organisations based in the United States alone allocated over USD \$1 billion between 2008 and 2017 to support anti-gender initiatives (see diagram below). Additionally, new anti-gender networks have begun to take root and expand across Europe. In contrast, progressive funders tend to provide more specialised, targeted project funding of specific SRHR/GBV issues rather than creating progressive narratives, which can have the effect of creating 'silos and makes cross-issue, cross-sectoral, transnational, and intersectional collaboration difficult'.¹⁰

⁵ Moore, E. Et al. (2021). *Debating sex and sovereignty: Uganda's New National Sexuality Education Policy*. Sexuality, Research and Social Policy.

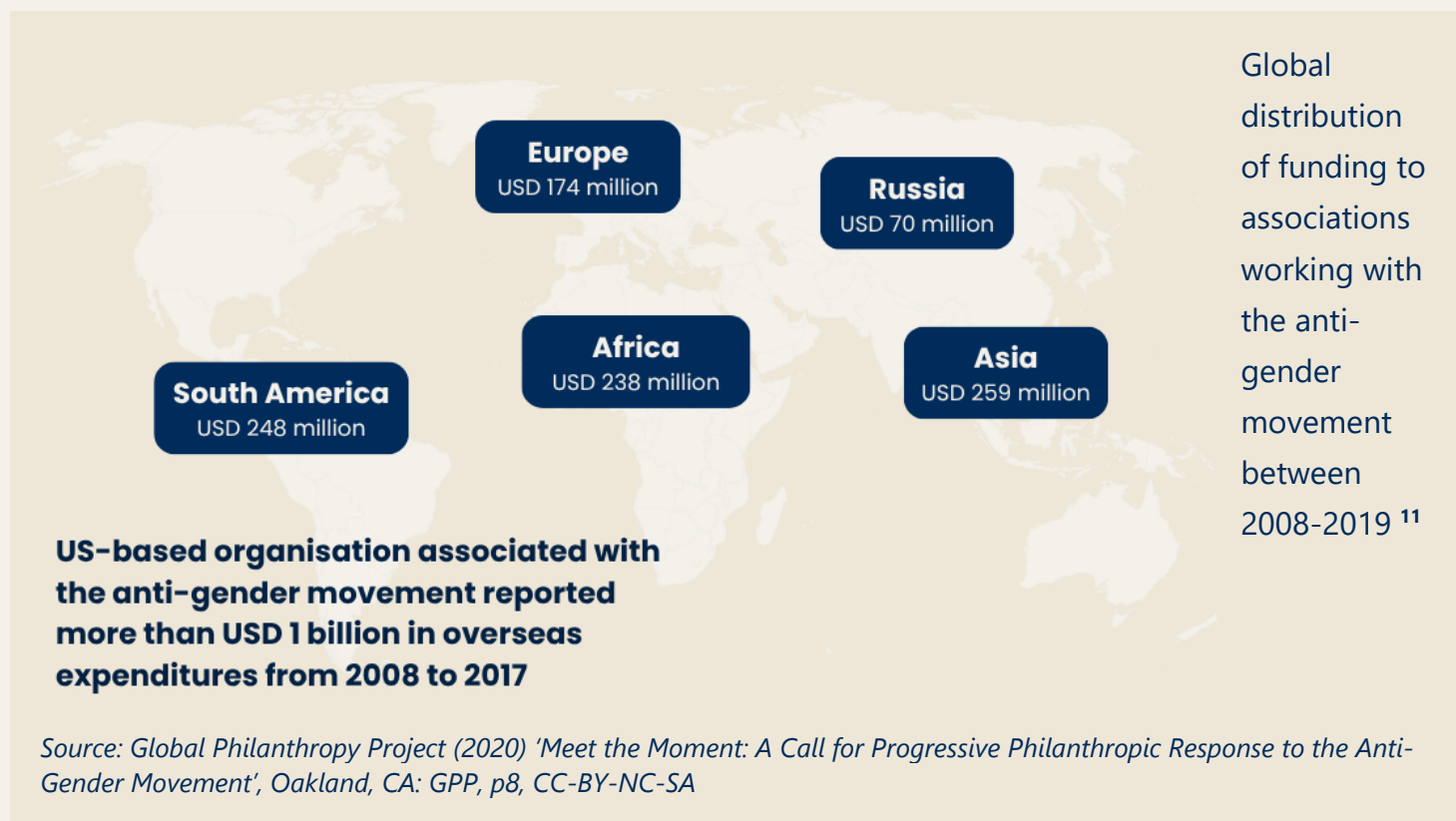
⁶ Scott, D. (2025, January 17). *Americans are ditching traditional health care for something cheaper - and riskier*. Vox

⁷ Nordengren, C. (2025, January 21). *Fighting poverty with faith*. Center for American Progress.

⁸ Dhaliwal, S., & Patel, P. (2017). Desecularisation and the 'faith agenda' in an era of austerity: Their impact on women's and girls' rights in the UK. *Gender & Development*, 25(1), 85–102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2017.1304713>

⁹ Global Philanthropy Project (2020) Meet the Moment: A Call for Progressive Philanthropic Response to the Anti-Gender Movement, Oakland: Global Philanthropy Project; House, C. (2022) Ibid.

¹⁰ Page 13 of House, C. (2022) Ibid.



While RWA groups have had vast global political influence over the past decades, and in more recent years have had increased global electoral success, studies on the policy impact of these groups have remained focused on the promotion of their 'primary' issues of immigration and immigrant integration.¹² However, the rise of RWA influence has left a strong chauvinistic imprint on national and international policy¹³ and the RWA raison d'être - nativism and authoritarianism - has been adapted to the area of women's rights (see box 1 for definitions).

RWA parties and movements have a tendency towards very strong ideological commitment to the family, in its most nativist and heteropatriarchal formation. That is one that prioritises the rigid gender norms of the nuclear family (one man, one woman and children), male dominance and heterosexual norms as the nation's smallest building block and the 'ultimate cell of society'.¹⁴

Paradoxically, as RWA parties' popularity has risen and they have entered into parliaments and governments, this is often in direct contradiction to the changing attitudes to women's rights. For example, Europe as a continent has undergone a more egalitarian shift towards gender

¹¹ Page 18 of VeneKlasen, L. (2024) *Anti-Gender Backlash: Where is Philanthropy?* Countering Backlash Working Paper 3, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.

¹² Ennser-Jedenastik, L. (2021). The impact of radical right parties on family benefits. *West European Politics*, 45(1), 154–176. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1936944>

¹³ Ennser-Jedenastik, L. (2021). The impact of radical right parties on family benefits. *West European Politics*, 45(1), 154–176. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1936944>

¹⁴ Harrison, S., & Bruter, M. (2011a). *Mapping Extreme Right Ideology*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230336834>

attitudes,¹⁵ whilst RWA political parties have made significant electoral gains in national and European parliaments. Therefore, the public have generally voted in contradiction to their beliefs concerning women's rights and family diversity. The positioning of anti-immigrant, anti-muslim and anti-trans rhetoric as protective of women's rights¹⁶ may go some way to explain this contradiction. There is a lack of literature on this issue and more research is needed to be able to explore this interesting phenomena.

¹⁵ Knight, C. R., & Brinton, M. C. (2017). One egalitarianism or several? Two decades of gender-role attitude change in Europe. *American Journal of Sociology*, 122(5), 1485–1532. <https://doi.org/10.1086/689814>

¹⁶ Meret, S., Siim, B. (2013). Gender, Populism and Politics of Belonging: Discourses of Right-Wing Populist Parties in Denmark, Norway and Austria. In: Siim, B., Mokre, M. (eds) *Negotiating Gender and Diversity in an Emergent European Public Sphere*. Gender and Politics Series. Palgrave Macmillan, London. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137291295_5

3. Gender as the “symbolic glue”¹⁷

The alliances formed between RWA movements and ultra-conservative religious movements have been successful at the sub-national, national, regional and international levels (see box 3 for an overview of international successes).

The phrase "anti-gender movement" is now commonly used to describe the transnational network of actors striving to maintain the cisheteropatriarchal¹⁸ hierarchy of sex and gender across social, political, economic, and cultural spheres.¹⁹ This is illustrated by Kováts and Põim’s (2015) metaphorical depiction of gender as the "symbolic glue," highlighting how "gender" becomes a catch-all term for everything anti-gender actors perceive as problematic with globalisation and liberalism.²⁰ It is important to note that the anti-gender movement does not identify itself using this terminology but instead adopts the term ‘pro-family.’ The strategic use of positive language, including the rhetoric of rights and liberalism, is a key factor in the movement’s success, allowing it to obscure its true objectives and present itself as aligned with progressive and mainstream values. This careful framing plays a central role in advancing the movement’s agenda.²¹

Anti-gender groups have adeptly co-opted UN frameworks and language, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to promote anti-rights agendas, presenting their views as mainstream. They strategically use “sustainable development” discourses to align with progressive narratives. There are two key mechanisms through which anti-gender agendas gain traction in development frameworks:

1. The framing of women’s rights and gender equality in global declarations like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and SDGs, as well as in social protection policies, which are repurposed to support heteronormative, anti-gender discourses.
2. The professionalisation of anti-gender advocacy, where anti-gender think tanks staffed by credentialed researchers produce polished outputs - such as peer-reviewed articles, webinars, and reports - backed by political support, making their narratives harder to contest.²²

¹⁷ Kováts, E., Poim, M. and Pető, A. (2015) *Gender as symbolic glue: The position and role of conservative and far-right parties in the anti-gender mobilisations in Europe*. Brussels: Foundation for European Progressive Studies.

¹⁸ A system that enforces traditional gender roles, privileges heterosexuality, and centers the dominance of cisgender men (those whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth) - across social, political, economic, and cultural spheres.

¹⁹ McEwen, H., & Narayanaswamy, L. (2023). *The international anti-gender movement understanding the rise of anti-gender discourses in the context of development, human rights and Social Protection* Haley McEwen and Lata Narayanaswamy. UNRISD.

²⁰ Kováts, E., Poim, M. and Pető, A. (2015) *Gender as symbolic glue: The position and role of conservative and far-right parties in the anti-gender mobilisations in Europe*. Brussels: Foundation for European Progressive Studies.

²¹ McEwen, H., & Narayanaswamy, L. (2023). *The international anti-gender movement understanding the rise of anti-gender discourses in the context of development, human rights and Social Protection* Haley McEwen and Lata Narayanaswamy. UNRISD.

²² McEwen, H., & Narayanaswamy, L. (2023). *The international anti-gender movement understanding the rise of anti-gender discourses in the context of development, human rights and Social Protection* Haley McEwen and Lata Narayanaswamy. UNRISD.

Anti-gender advocacy goes beyond traditional North-South divides, driven by transnational networks that shape influence across the Global South and international governance spaces. Key organisations such as the International Organisation for the Family (IOF), the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), Family Watch International, and CitizenGo have cultivated extensive global networks. Their activities span hosting high-profile international events, like the IOF's World Congress of Families, to spearheading campaigns against comprehensive sexuality education and expanding their footprint in Africa and Latin America.

These movements thrive on alliances between RWA actors in the Global North and ultra-conservative forces in the Global South. This internationalisation enables them to reframe rights-focused discourse, adapt resources to local contexts, and exert significant influence over global debates on gender and human rights. Their growing reach underscores the urgency for coordinated and context-specific responses within development frameworks.²³

Anti-gender movements effectively co-opt rights-based language and anti-colonial rhetoric to advance regressive agendas, particularly within UN policy spaces. While anti-gender actors narrowly define gender within cisgender binaries, post-colonial and intersectional feminist critiques challenge the Eurocentric and colonial roots of these constructs. The anti-gender movement have therefore co-opted post-colonial language for their own purposes. They position themselves as protectors of tradition, while ironically perpetuating colonial ideologies – leveraging the nuclear family model that was enforced during colonialism, to block progress on women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights.

Box 3: The success of the international anti-gender movement on reshaping SRHR discourse²⁴

The international anti-gender movement has achieved significant success in reshaping global discourse on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) by influencing the language of United Nations documents and resolutions.²⁵ From 2017 onwards, references to abortion were notably excluded from the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) outcome documents, and by 2018, comprehensive sexuality education was reframed to prioritise "families" while omitting references to "sexuality." Some States went further, rejecting any mention of SRHR entirely. This shift, driven by anti-gender advocacy, has severe public health consequences, particularly for women, LGBTQI+ people, and marginalised groups. With unsafe abortions accounting for approximately 45% of all induced abortions globally and contributing to 7.9% of maternal mortality, restrictive laws

²³ McEwen, H., & Narayanaswamy, L. (2023). *The international anti-gender movement understanding the rise of anti-gender discourses in the context of development, human rights and Social Protection* Haley McEwen and Lata Narayanaswamy. UNRISD.

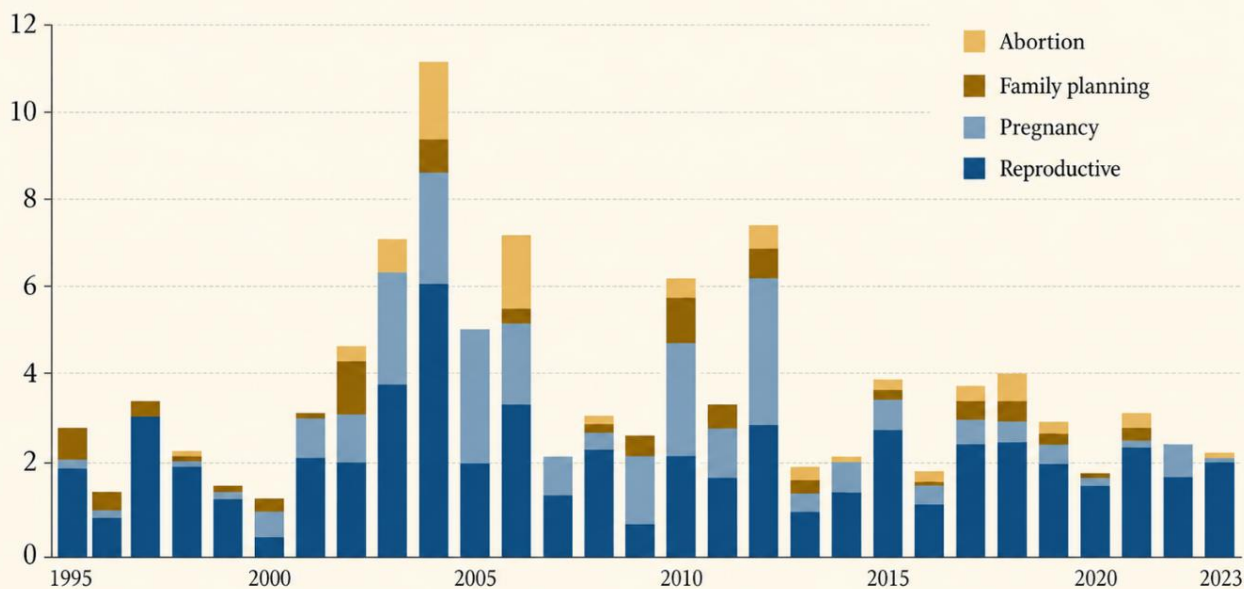
²⁴ This box is primarily informed by: Fransiska Schwebel; Michael Bayerlein; Pedro Alejandro Villarreal Lisárraga (2024) *The global struggle for sexual and reproductive health and rights*, *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)*.

²⁵ Gilby, L., Koivusalo, M., & Atkins, S. (2021). Global health without sexual and reproductive health and rights? analysis of United Nations documents and country statements, 2014–2019. *BMJ Global Health*, 6(3). <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2020-004659>

and the erosion of SRHR perpetuate life-threatening risks. As the graph below demonstrates, there was a noticeable decline in mentions of SRHR at the WHO Executive Board since around 2012. This highlights the critical need to counter anti-gender narratives that undermine global commitments to gender equality and health.

Mentions of SRHR at the WHO Executive Board

Share of paragraphs in meeting minutes with at least one keyword (in per cent)



Source: Fransiska Schwebel; Michael Bayerlein; Pedro Alejandro Villarreal Lisárraga (2024) *The global struggle for sexual and reproductive health and rights*, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP).

The anti-gender movement's professionalisation enables it to rebrand as neutral, academic entities, using the language of human rights and sustainability to legitimise regressive agendas. By framing the heteronormative family as key to national development and leveraging tools like policy briefs and UN consultative status, these groups effectively oppose reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, and LGBTQI+ rights while masking their ideological roots.²⁶

Anti-gender actors are undeniably influential and successful in sub-national, national, regional and international policy and political spheres. Although their reactionary policy positions are often driven by context, there are narratives which unify them and have similarities in the way in which they are effectively deployed from sub-national to global levels. Understanding these narratives and the way in which they are used will allow for a more effective response from women's right advocates.

²⁶ McEwen, H., & Narayanaswamy, L. (2023). *The international anti-gender movement understanding the rise of anti-gender discourses in the context of development, human rights and Social Protection* Haley McEwen and Lata Narayanaswamy. UNRISD.

4. The seven anti-gender ‘family-focused’ narratives which erode women’s rights

The below draws together seven narratives used by anti-gender actors which are detrimental to women’s rights. Although these narratives are presented here individually, they are often used concurrently.

Narrative 1: ‘Traditional’ family structures as natural and necessary

One of the most persistent narratives used to oppose women’s rights is the framing of traditional family structures as “natural” or divinely ordained. This narrative positions the heterosexual nuclear family as the cornerstone of societal stability, with men as breadwinners and women as caregivers;²⁷ reinforcing essentialist, rigid gender norms. The concept of the “natural family” positions cisheteropatriarchal norms and social arrangements as universal, apolitical, and ahistorical. Anti-gender advocates often deploy social scientific research to frame these views as neutral and rigorous.²⁸ Presenting the nuclear family as a key pillar in achieving sustainable development allows for anti-gender actors to legitimise their perspectives.²⁹

One example of an argument used to legitimise the promotion of the “traditional family” is the contentious “marriage premium” economic argument. The “marriage premium” argument claims heterosexual marriage drives economic growth, framing non-conformity, like same-sex relationships, as economically harmful. Reports use data to promote policies reinforcing traditional gender roles, particularly targeting women as caregivers. Though presented as academic, these arguments draw from multiple data sources to construct their evidence, perpetuate a gendered division of labour, undermining feminist efforts for gender equality and empowerment.

Discussing the “natural family” delegitimises alternative family arrangements and casts feminist policies as existential threats to societal order. Anti-gender discourse and policy papers often omit to describe the family in its diversity. Through this omission the intent is to exclude diverse family structures.

²⁷ Stroop, C. (n.d.). *A right-wing international?*. Political Research Associates. <https://politicalresearch.org/2016/02/16/russian-social-conservatism-the-u-s-based-wcf-the-global-culture-wars-in-historical-context>

²⁸ McEwen, H., & Narayanaswamy, L. (2023). *The international anti-gender movement understanding the rise of anti-gender discourses in the context of development, human rights and Social Protection* Haley McEwen and Lata Narayanaswamy. UNRISD.

²⁹ McEwen, H., & Narayanaswamy, L. (2023). *The international anti-gender movement understanding the rise of anti-gender discourses in the context of development, human rights and Social Protection* Haley McEwen and Lata Narayanaswamy. UNRISD.

A further reason why anti-gender actors centre the 'natural family' is the importance of this form of family with their narratives around nationalism. Anti-gender actors, particularly RWA actors, often make strong parallels between the nation and the family as "patriarchal and heteronormative institutions". Anti-rights actors often perceive any departure from the traditional norms of the patriarchal family as "a form of national threat or betrayal".³⁰ Staff from the Urgent Action Fund (UAF) in Asia have observed how they see a close connection to patriarchy and nation-building: "It's family values and tradition, and very tied to nationhood, with clear ties to authoritarian regimes, and impunity for men. The actors are different [in different places] but the playbook is the same".³¹ Similarly, in UAF staff in Africa observed that "resistance to women's, gender, and sexual rights is justified as a necessary defence of African traditional family values and self-determination against Western interference".³²

Narrative 2: Declining fertility rates

Anti-gender actors frequently invoke fears about declining fertility rates, portraying them as existential threats to national survival. Narratives around declining fertility rates, which are sometimes below the replacement level, are used by anti-gender actors to adopt stronger narratives on the family to oppose issues like abortion and same-sex relationships. These issues are framed as threats to family values and threats to the nation. For example, in Russia, declining fertility rates which are below the replacement level of 2.1 (1.6 in 2023 but was as low as 1.2 in 1998)³³ have led institutions like the Russian Orthodox Church to adopt stronger narratives on the family in opposition to issues such as abortion and same-sex relationships, framing them as existential threats to family values³⁴ and as 'a plot to smother Russia in its cradle'. Russian nationalist groups have worked closely with the church to successfully campaign for a reduction in funds for family planning programmes.³⁵

Narratives around declining fertility rates can also intersect with issues of nativism and xenophobia.³⁶ A key example is the 'Great Replacement Theory,' which is prominently featured in the American right-wing document 'Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise 2025' (commonly referred to as 'Project '25'). Popular among RWA groups, this theory alleges a deliberate effort to replace white populations with non-white immigrants, inciting fear and opposition to gender-equal policies, including abortion and other reproductive rights. Project

³⁰ Page 31 of AWID (2021) [Rights at Risk: Time for Action](#)

³¹ Page 14 of VeneKlasen, L. (2024) [Anti-Gender Backlash: Where is Philanthropy?](#) Countering Backlash Working Paper 3, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.

³² Page 14 of VeneKlasen, L. (2024) [Anti-Gender Backlash: Where is Philanthropy?](#) Countering Backlash Working Paper 3, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.

³³ Sofuoglo, M. (2023) '[Numbers don't lie: How Russia is battling a crippling demographic decline](#)', TRT World.

³⁴ DaVanzo, J. and Grammich, C.A. (date unknown) 'Improvements in Contraception are Reducing Historically High Abortion Rates in Russia', RAND Research Brief.

³⁵ DaVanzo, J. and Grammich, C.A. (date unknown) Ibid.

³⁶ Page 33 of AWID (2021) [Rights at Risk: Time for Action](#)

'25' celebrates the overturning of abortion rights and calls for further restrictions. It advocates for: collaborating with Congress to enact stronger 'protections for the unborn'; and limiting access to reproductive healthcare, and restrict certain contraceptives, including emergency contraception.³⁷ It should be noted here, that over the past year and a half, we have witnessed the implementation of Project '25. Meanwhile in Europe, narratives around 'family' align with a xenophobic, pro-birth agenda that seeks to "increase white European Christian populations," ostensibly to eliminate the "need" for migration to sustain European labour forces. This vision aims to secure a demographic advantage for white Christians over other religions, cultural groups, and secular liberal populations, while implicitly marginalising racialised communities.³⁸

Declining fertility rates have also been used as a means to oppose gender-sensitive policies such as paid parental leave, gender quotas, and equitable inheritance laws. While RWA parties in government often promote generous cash benefits like family allowances to boost birth rates, their support diminishes when these policies benefit groups deemed "non-native".³⁹ In some cases, marginalised groups are explicitly excluded from such incentives. For example, in Hungary, Roma women are excluded from the country's so-called "family-first" policies.⁴⁰

Narrative 3: Gender ideology

The term "gender ideology" is used to evoke fear and opposition to women's rights by claiming that it is an imposition that seeks to destroy 'traditional' values and the natural order of society. This rhetoric is used to mobilise opposition to policies that promote gender equality.⁴¹

Anti-gender and pro-family rhetoric have contributed to the restriction of women's rights across Europe. The right-wing authoritarian (RWA) movement portrays "gender ideologies" as threats to women, children, societal stability, and even men's rights. These movements frame men and women who support their heteropatriarchal vision of the family as the true victims, using the language of feminism and civil rights to bolster their narrative. They position themselves as oppressed by policies that, in their view, prioritise women's rights over all others, with heteropatriarchal nativism and family at the core of their ideology.

The reaction to so-called "gender ideology" can be understood as a backlash against progress in reducing harmful gender norms.⁴² This backlash has become a unifying force within anti-

³⁷ Dans, P., Groves, S., & Roberts, K. D. (2023). *Mandate for leadership: The conservative promise 2025*. The Heritage Foundation.

³⁸ Page 33 of AWID (2021) [Rights at Risk: Time for Action](#)

³⁹ Ennser-Jedenastik, L. (2021). The impact of radical right parties on family benefits. *West European Politics*, 45(1), 154–176. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1936944>

⁴⁰ Family First: Exclusionary social policy in Orban's Hungary. [illiberalism.org](https://www.illiberalism.org/family-first-exclusionary-social-policy-in-orbans-hungary/). (2024, October 16). <https://www.illiberalism.org/family-first-exclusionary-social-policy-in-orbans-hungary/> (it should be noted that although there has been a recent shift in political leadership in Hungary, this policy still exists)

⁴¹ Ennser-Jedenastik, L. (2021). The impact of radical right parties on family benefits. *West European Politics*, 45(1), 154–176. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2021.1936944>

⁴² Edström, J., Nazneen, S., Sardenberg, C., Sultan, M., Ahmed, A. I., Das, A., Chigateri, S., Otieno, P. E., Mwiine, A. A., Lewin, T., & Rahi, N. E. (n.d.). *IDS bulletin*. IDS Bulletin.

https://bulletin.ids.ac.uk/index.php/idsbo/issue/view/254?_gl=1%2Asnipy8%2A_gcl_au%2AMTczMjM0Nzc5MC4xNzZM2MjQzMzEx

gender movements. For example, RWA parties have aggressively criticised the European Union's gender mainstreaming strategy, with activists claiming that "gender ideology" is a tool of Western elites designed to destabilise the traditional family and disrupt the natural order of society.⁴³

In Brazil, former President Jair Bolsonaro's administration campaigned against "gender ideology," resulting in the removal of gender and sexuality education from national curricula. Similar rhetoric has driven campaigns across Eastern Europe, Africa, and Southeast Asia, further entrenching opposition to gender equality and inclusive education.

Narrative 4: Rescuing women - paternalistic opposition to rights

This narrative is used to oppose abortion and other reproductive rights by asserting that women need protection from a supposedly pro-abortion society, framing abortion as inherently traumatic. Groups advancing this narrative present themselves as defenders of women's rights, while simultaneously restricting women's autonomy and control over their own bodies. Anti-gender actors often co-opt feminist language, distorting ideas like self-determination to argue that women's true ambition lies in caring for their children.

Relatedly, feminist women and advocates of feminist policies are frequently depicted as "the other," portrayed as threats to women and the nation. This rhetoric ties anxieties about changing family structures to concerns about national identity and cultural preservation. For instance, in Poland, feminist women are portrayed as rejecting traditional femininity and motherhood, thus endangering the nation.⁴⁴

Narrative 5: Promoting the protection of women and children whilst simultaneously reinforcing harmful norms and advocating for regressive policy

Narratives claiming to protect women and children often mask regressive gender policies, reinforcing essentialist ideas about gender roles. These narratives restrict women's autonomy, confining them to traditional roles within the nuclear family as wives, mothers, and carers. For example, transphobic rhetoric frequently portrays trans women as threats to women and children, perpetuating fear and resistance to gender inclusivity. This sustains essentialist and exclusionary notions of "womanhood," often placing white cisgender women at the top of a

⁴³ Sinem Kourou, N. (2021). Sağ popülizm ve toplumsal Cinsiyet Karşıtı Hareketlerin Birlikteliğinde AKP Hükümetlerinin Aile Siyaseti ve popülist Siyasal Mobilisasyonu. *Feminist Tahayyul Akademik Arastirmalar Dergisi*, 2(2), 207–241. <https://doi.org/10.57193/feminta.2021.207>

⁴⁴ Margolis, H. (2023, March 28). "The breath of the government on my back." Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/02/06/breath-government-my-back/attacks-womens-rights-poland>

social hierarchy (evident in public debates around the legitimacy of cisgender female athletes from Zimbabwe and Algeria).⁴⁵

The recent debates over Gender Recognition Act (GRA) reform in Britain demonstrate how family concepts are mobilised in anti-gender discourse to resist progressive changes in gender identity recognition. Proposed reforms, designed to simplify transgender people's access to medical transition, were derailed by organised efforts from gender-critical actors. Their opposition hinged on claims that self-determined gender identity endangered the safety of women and girls in single-sex spaces, such as public bathrooms. This rhetoric positioned gender as a distraction from the "real" issues faced by women, perpetuating an essentialist notion of womanhood as inherently vulnerable and in need of protection.

Trans people's existence challenges essentialist narratives as well as the push for "traditional" family values championed by right-wing authoritarian (RWA) actors. This may explain why trans rights have garnered significant attention in recent years, despite transgender people constituting a very small percentage of the population. Trans rights were even addressed in the inaugural speech of U.S. President Trump in January 2025 along with a denouncement of 'gender ideology'. Trump declared: "As of today, it will henceforth be the official policy of the United States government that there are only two genders: male and female."⁴⁶

Such essentialist narratives have also gained traction through the rise of the "tradwife" movement - communities of RWA women advocating for traditional femininity and gender roles that emphasise women's roles as wives, mothers, and supporters of conservative ideologies.⁴⁷ The Vatican has also shifted its rhetoric, no longer framing women as inferior but instead praising their roles as mothers. This aligns with the Church's stance on the "difference-yet-complementarity" of men and women, which continues to reinforce traditional gender hierarchies under the guise of respect.⁴⁸

Narrative 6: Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) undermines parental authority

Opposition to CSE is often framed as undermining the moral duty of parents to educate children about sensitive issues such as relationships, sexuality, and sexual health. There is concern that the information provided in schools may conflict with religious or cultural values taught at home.

⁴⁵ Dias, J. (2024, August 3). *Imane Khelif is just the latest case of female athletes being questioned over their sex*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2024/08/02/nx-s1-5061548/imane-khelif-boxer-female-athletes-sex-tests>

⁴⁶ Trump to sign orders ending diversity programs, declare sex cannot be changed | reuters. (n.d.).

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-sign-orders-ending-diversity-programs-proclaiming-there-are-only-two-sexes-2025-01-20/>

⁴⁷ Sykes, S., & Hopner, V. (2024). Tradwives: Right-wing social media influencers. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 53(4), 453–487. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08912416241246273>

⁴⁸ Cossutta, C., & Habed, A. J. (2021). From Verona, with Love: "anti-gender" mobilisations and Transfeminist (re)actions. *Mobilisierungen Gegen Feminismus Und ,Gender'*, 139–154. <https://doi.org/10.3224/84742528.09>

Countries have raised concerns that including language about CSE in international resolutions undermines parents' moral duty to educate children about sensitive issues such as relationships, sexuality, and sexual health. Critics also fear that the information that children receive in schools may conflict with religious or cultural values taught at home. For example, during the disagreement over references to CSE in the draft resolution on population, education and sustainable development in April 2023, Nigeria's delegate expressed concern about the deletion of language regarding parents' responsibility and right to guide their children's religious and moral education.⁴⁹

Narrative 7: VAWG as a private, family issue

Another common narrative frames VAWG as a private matter to be resolved within families, rather than a systemic issue requiring state intervention. This delegitimises survivors' experiences and prioritises family unity over justice. For example, in 2023, Afrobarometer surveys with 54,436 people across 39 countries in Africa found that almost half (48%) of respondents thought that domestic violence should be a 'private matter' to be resolved within the family, rather than as a 'criminal matter' involving law enforcement.⁵⁰ These rigid norms about the family often result in the expectation that women and children should be submissive to male family members, and if they transgress these norms, they should face physical violence as a form of punishment or discipline. In countries where this narrative dominates, legal frameworks often discourage reporting VAWG. Mediation and reconciliation are favoured over punitive measures, leaving survivors without adequate support. Further, there is often pressure on survivors to stay silent to preserve family honour, perpetuating cycles of abuse as well as harmful social norms that sustain GBV focusing on protecting family honour or unity over women's safety.⁵¹ In some countries, a double standard exists whereby VAWG is simultaneously framed as a private matter for families, while at the same time being invoked to position migrant men as 'threats' to women's safety.⁵²

⁴⁹ UN (2023) [Disagreeing over References to CSE, Delegates Fail to Adopt Draft Resolution, as Commission on Population and Development Concludes Session.](#)

⁵⁰ Afrobarometer. News Release. Combating gender-based violence tops Africa's agenda for women's rights. 22 November 2023

⁵¹ Perrin, N., Marsh, M., Clough, A. *et al.* (2019) Social norms and beliefs about gender based violence scale: a measure for use with gender based violence prevention programs in low-resource and humanitarian settings. *Confl Health* 13, 6. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-019-0189-x>

⁵² Amnesty International (2026), [The racist weaponization of violence against women and girls: how to respond](#)

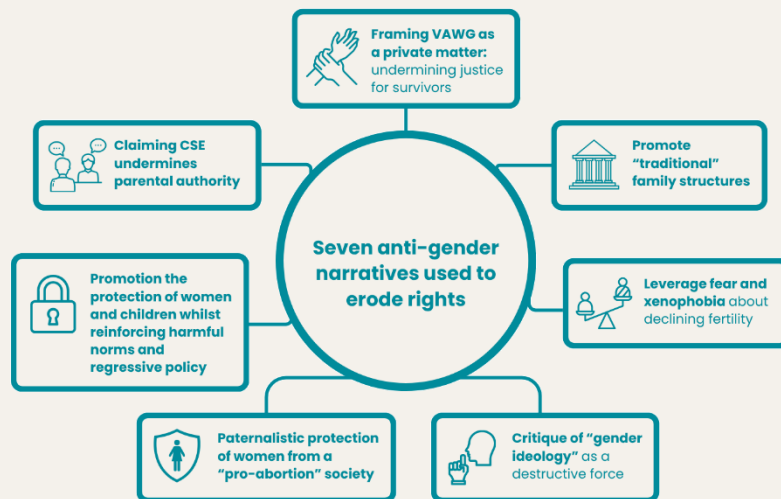


Figure 1: Seven anti-gender narratives

A deeper dive: the impact of the seven “family-focused” narratives: a focus on VAWG

The persistent use of "family-focused" narratives by the anti-gender movement continues to erode the gains made in addressing VAWG. These narratives, which elevate traditional family structures as natural and inviolable, reinforce patriarchal norms that situate women as caregivers and men as decision-makers. By intertwining family preservation with national and cultural identity, these actors position feminist movements, LGBTQ+ rights, and progressive gender policies as existential threats. Such rhetoric not only perpetuates the structural and cultural conditions that enable gender-based violence but also silences survivors by framing VAWG as a private, family matter (to maintain male privilege and authority). Survivors are discouraged from seeking justice, as reconciliation and mediation are prioritised over holding perpetrators accountable, undermining women’s safety in favour of maintaining family "unity." Strict adherence to traditional gender roles underpins victim-blaming attitudes and punitive views toward women seeking support following violence and within the anti-gender ideological framework, violence is reframed as an issue of morality, culture, and "protection" of the family, rather than a systemic issue of inequality and power.⁵³ To combat VAWG, it is critical to dismantle these harmful narratives and challenge the socio-political ideologies that sustain victim-blaming and resistance to transformative change, ensuring that women’s voices and autonomy are placed at the forefront of all efforts to achieve justice and equality.

Box 4: Bringing the narratives and strategies together - the F7 Declaration

⁵³ Riley, C. E., & Yamawaki, N. (2018). Who is helpful? examining the relationship between ambivalent sexism, right-wing authoritarianism, and intentions to help domestic violence victims. *Sage Open*, 8(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244018781899>

The Family 7 (F7) Italy 2024 Declaration by the Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe (FAFCE) utilises the narratives highlighted above. The declaration emphasises the importance of “strong and stable families, e.g., with married parents,” framing “traditional” family structures as essential for societal well-being. This framing implicitly delegitimises diverse family arrangements by portraying them as less valid or beneficial. It also raises alarm about declining fertility rates, referring to a “demographic winter” and advocating for a “demographic spring.” This narrative prioritises childbearing, often at the expense of women’s autonomy and professional aspirations. While not explicitly using the term “gender ideology,” the emphasis on traditional roles aligns with broader anti-gender movements that reject diverse understandings of family and gender.

The declaration also adopts a paternalistic tone in its call to end workplace discrimination against women and support motherhood, framing maternity and parenthood as “essential and positive contributions to society.” Whilst on the surface, the declaration is supportive of the three ‘R’s promoted within women’s economic justice narratives (i.e., recognition, reduce and redistribute), the approach taken within the declaration positions women’s primary value within the family context. Additionally, by advocating for policies that protect women and children under the guise of strengthening families, the declaration reinforces harmful gender norms that confine women to caregiving roles. The declaration responds to, and appears to suggest solutions to, the G7 Leaders objectives, therefore speaking the professional international policy and advocacy language and appearing to legitimise the declaration.

The declaration further addresses domestic violence, recognising its impact on women and children but framing it within the context of the family. By stating that “violence against women and children in the family merit special attention,” but minimises the need for systemic interventions by treating such issues as private family matters. Collectively, these narratives perpetuate traditional gender roles and family structures, undermining efforts to advance women’s rights and achieve gender equality.

This example underscores the insidious nature of the anti-rights movement. Many anti-rights actors have become highly skilled at advancing exclusionary or unequal agendas through language that resonates with widely held aspirations around family, care, protection, and social cohesion. Understanding these narrative strategies is critical for feminists, funders and civil society.

5. Towards a progressive family narrative

A progressive family narrative should be used directly to resist anti-gender arguments. It should not concede the language of family to those who use it to restrict rights.

Families should be places of care, safety, dignity, equality and freedom from violence. Family policy should protect people within real families, not an abstract ideal of “the family” that can be used to silence violence, restrict autonomy or exclude diverse forms of family life.

A progressive family narrative should make the claims below. Taken together, these claims offer a practical counter-narrative to anti-gender organising and a framing for resistance. Families are not protected by restricting rights. They are strengthened when every person within them can live with safety, dignity, equality and freedom.

1. Families are diverse and should be equally supported

Families exist in many forms, including nuclear, single-parent, multi-generational, extended, adoptive, foster, LGBTQI+, self-created and self-defined families. Diverse family and kinship structures have always existed, including those disrupted or erased by colonialism. Policy should not privilege one family model in ways that exclude or disadvantage others.

2. Equality strengthens families

Families are stronger when all members have equal rights, access to resources, decision-making power and freedom from violence. Shared responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work is central to family wellbeing and gender justice.

3. Safety must come before family unity

Violence, abuse and exploitation within families are not private matters. States have a duty to prevent violence, protect survivors, provide access to services and justice, and hold perpetrators accountable. Family unity, honour, culture or tradition must never be used to justify violence or silence survivors.

4. Bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive rights protect families

The right to make decisions about one’s body and family life is central to dignity, equality and autonomy. Access to family planning, maternal healthcare, safe abortion and wider sexual and reproductive health services must be available without coercion, discrimination or stigma.

5. Comprehensive sexuality education supports safety and respect

Comprehensive sexuality education helps children and young people understand rights, consent, respect, healthy relationships and bodily autonomy. It should be defended as part of health, safety and violence prevention.

6. Care must be recognised, reduced and redistributed

Women deliver the majority of unpaid care work globally. Family policy must recognise, reduce and redistribute unpaid care, and support care workers. Accessible childcare, flexible working arrangements, social protection and social norms change are central to building equal families.

7. Family policy must be connected across sectors

Families are shaped by health, education, housing, social protection, childcare, labour markets, justice systems and social norms. A rights-based approach to family policy must therefore be cross-sectoral, inclusive and grounded in the rights of people within families.

But of course progressive family-related policies do already exist and these can be used to counter resistance.

A detailed list of these is in Annex 1 and a summary is below.

Progressive international family policy language: a timeline

Key international frameworks showing that family and women's rights are not in opposition

What this timeline shows



International policy already supports a rights-based view of family: one that values family life while protecting equality, autonomy, consent, diversity and freedom from violence.



Figure 2: Progressive international family policy language timeline.

These frameworks are important because they show that family and women's rights are not in opposition. The family can be recognised as socially important while still requiring equality, consent, autonomy, freedom from violence and protection of rights within it.

6. Conclusion

This resource has argued that the family has become a central site through which anti-gender and anti-rights actors seek to contest, dilute and reverse progress on gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights, LGBTQI+ rights, comprehensive sexuality education, child rights and efforts to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls. The use of family-focused narratives is not incidental. It forms part of a wider and increasingly professionalised political strategy through which regressive actors seek to reshape policy discourse, influence international norms and mobilise public support for restrictive agendas.

The analysis demonstrates that anti-gender actors do not only oppose specific rights or policy commitments. They also seek to shift the conceptual terrain on which these debates take place. By presenting the family as under threat, they position rights of women, LGBTQI+ communities and context-specific 'othered'/marginalised communities, as external dangers to social stability, cultural identity, religion, nationhood and child wellbeing. This allows regressive positions to be framed as protective, democratic and rights-based, even where their practical effect is to restrict autonomy, narrow rights and reinforce unequal power relations within families and societies.

The seven family-focused narratives examined in this paper illustrate how this strategy operates across different policy areas with a shared, regressive aim. The framing of the "traditional" family as natural and necessary delegitimises diverse family forms and reinforces rigid gender roles. Narratives on declining fertility rates turn women's reproductive choices into matters of national survival and can intersect with racist, xenophobic and nativist agendas. The demonisation of "gender ideology" operates as a broad organising device, enabling opposition to rights to be presented as a defence of culture, religion and social order. Protection narratives, including those claiming to rescue women or defend women and children, often obscure the extent to which such approaches restrict autonomy and reinforce essentialist understandings of gender. Opposition to comprehensive sexuality education, for example, is framed through parental authority, while narratives that position violence against women and girls as a private family matter undermine survivor safety, accountability and state responsibility.

A key implication of this analysis is that these narratives should not be understood in isolation. They are mutually reinforcing and frequently deployed together. They connect anxieties about gender, sexuality, race, migration, fertility, religion, nationalism and social change. This interconnectedness is central to their effectiveness. It also helps explain why responses that remain confined within single issue areas can be insufficient to responding and resisting them. Anti-gender actors have developed narratives that link different struggles together. Rights-

based actors, funders and institutions therefore need responses that are similarly cross-sectoral, intersectional and politically coherent.

The paper has also shown that the family itself need not be conceded to regressive actors. International human rights frameworks already provide language that recognises the social importance of family life while also requiring equality, consent, autonomy, freedom from violence and protection of rights within families. The Beijing Platform for Action, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Maputo Protocol and more recent statements and resolutions on the diversity of families and family-oriented policies all demonstrate that family and women's rights are not inherently in opposition. Rather, they show that the family can be recognised as important precisely because the rights, safety and dignity of those within it matter.

A rights-based approach to family does not dismiss the importance of family, kinship, care, belonging or interdependence. Nor does it treat family as inherently harmful. Instead, it recognises that families can be sites of love, support, identity and care, while also acknowledging that they can be sites of violence, coercion, exclusion and inequality.

A progressive and rights-based family narrative must therefore hold these realities together. It should protect family life without protecting abuse. It should support care without reinforcing women's unpaid and unequal labour. It should recognise parental and community roles without denying children and young people access to information, safety and protection. It should value social belonging without excluding families that do not conform to a narrow heteronormative or patriarchal model.

For donors, multilaterals, governments and civil society, this has practical implications:

1. Anti-gender narratives need to be identified and analysed as political strategies, not simply as isolated instances of opposition or misinformation.
2. Responses need to move beyond technical rebuttal alone. Evidence remains essential, but evidence will not be sufficient if regressive actors are winning the narrative frame.
3. Investment is needed in longer-term, cross-movement narrative work that can connect women's rights, gender equality, SRHR, LGBTQI+ rights, child rights, education, violence prevention, democracy and civic space.

4. Investment in the broader ecosystem required for women's rights and feminist movements to thrive, including leadership development, coalition building, knowledge generation, and movement infrastructure in increasingly restrictive environments.
5. Investment in supporting the protection needs of activists, human rights defenders and organisations facing backlash.
6. Rights-based actors should make more deliberate use of existing international policy language on family diversity, equality within families, consent, autonomy and freedom from violence.

The central argument of this resource is therefore that family language must be contested. Anti-gender actors have been effective because they have understood the emotional, political and symbolic power of the family. Rights-based movements should take that power seriously. A progressive family narrative can affirm the importance of family while rejecting its use as a shield for discrimination, coercion, violence or exclusion.

Ultimately, the question is what kind of family politics will shape policy, funding and public discourse in the years ahead. If the family is framed narrowly as a site of hierarchy, control and exclusion, it will continue to be used to undermine rights. If it is framed as a site of equality, care, safety, dignity and freedom, it can become part of the response to anti-gender backlash rather than a tool through which that backlash advances. The family is therefore one of the most crucial sites of resistance for all progressive rights actors to take seriously.

7. Annex 1: Progressive international policy language

Various past international conventions and resolutions have introduced progressive language that acknowledge and support the diversity of family forms, as well as more progressive family structures and narratives, whilst protecting the rights of women.⁵⁴ More progressive narratives have often reframed the family as a site of equality and mutual respect, emphasising the benefits of women's rights for family wellbeing. Notable examples include:

- [Beijing Platform for Action](#) noted in 1995 that, "In different cultural, political and social systems, various forms of the family exist. The rights, capabilities and responsibilities of family members must be respected" and these various forms of family can arise with or without a formal and lawful marriage. It also observes that "Equal rights, opportunities and access to resources, equal sharing of responsibilities for the family by men and women, and a harmonious partnership between them are critical to their well-being and that of their families as well as to the consolidation of democracy".
- [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights \(Article 10\)](#) noted in 1966 that: "The widest possible protection and assistance should be accorded to the family, which is the natural and fundamental group unit of society, particularly for its establishment and while it is responsible for the care and education of dependent children. Marriage must be entered into with the free consent of the intending spouses." Special protections should ensure paid leave or social security for mothers around childbirth, while children and young people must be safeguarded from exploitation, harmful labour, and discrimination, with legal measures enforcing minimum employment age limits.
- In 2000, the [Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights \(CESCR\)'s concluding observations at the Fourth Periodic Report of Germany \(para 122\)](#) observed that "The forms of families have changed and will continue to change. Therefore we encounter very different family forms today. This is not surprising against the background of the economic, cultural and political changes, but rather a normal part of the continuous change of society in general". Further, individuals have "the same right to protection and assistance even if they do not succeed in living together as a family."
- [The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child \(UN CRC\)](#) observed in 2013 that "the family is the fundamental unit of society" and, under Article 5, the diversity of the family should be understood: "The term "family" must be interpreted in a broad sense to include biological, adoptive or foster parents or, where applicable, the members of the extended family or community as provided for by local custom" (para. 59).
- In 2015, a report by the [UN Working Group on the Issue of Discrimination against Women in Law and Practice](#) submitted to the Human Rights Council also states that the family exists

⁵⁴ UN Women (2019) [Families in a Changing World: Progress of the World Women 2019-2020](#). New York: UN Women.

in various forms. It notes: “The expression “diverse families” encompasses, for example, single-parent families; families headed by women; intergenerational families including, among others, grandparents; families headed by children, such as orphans or street children; families comprising lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons; extended families; self-created and self-defined families; families without children; families of divorced persons; polygamous families; and non-traditional families resulting from interreligious, intercommunity or inter-caste marriages. Self-created and self-defined families include, in particular, families formed in marginalised communities.” In the opening summary, it “redefines family by incorporating a gender perspective”. The Working Group also identified good practices in the report in respect of equality in the family and in cultural life, as required by Human Rights Council resolution 15/23.

- In 2021, 39 countries signed on to a [Joint Statement on the Diversity of Families](#), led by the U.S Mission to Geneva. This was an important statement and provides a suitable recent starting point for further joint statements to develop.
- In October 2023, the [Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council](#) focuses on the implementation of the objectives of the International Year of the Family and its follow-up processes in the promotion and protection of human right. It recognises the objectives of the International Year and its follow-up processes, especially those relating to family-oriented policies in the areas of poverty, work-family balance and intergenerational issues, with attention given to “achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, eliminating all forms of violence, in particular against women and girls, and supporting the overall quality of life of families, including those in vulnerable situations”. It also invites “States, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the treaty bodies, relevant special procedure mandate holders and other relevant international and regional human rights mechanisms, within their respective mandates and competence, to consider mainstreaming the promotion of family-oriented policies that promote and protect the human rights of all family members as a cross-cutting issue in national development plans and programmes”.
- The Maputo Protocol also offers important language. It recognises the family as the natural unit and basis of society while clearly requiring states to eliminate discrimination against women and protect the rights of women and children. It promotes women as equal partners in families, recognises women’s inequality within the family as a structural factor in wider inequality and violence, and includes strong language on women’s sexual and reproductive rights.