

Written by:

For Equipop:

Lucie Daniel, advocacy expert

Clara Dereudre, advocacy assistant

For the Fondation Jean-Jaurès:

Amandine Clavaud, Director of Studies, Director of the Observatoire Égalité femmes-hommes (Gender Equality Observatory)

Lola-Lou Zeller, Policy Officer

With thanks to Léa Lagesse for the South Korea case study.



Women's rights: fighting the backlash

Why talk about backlash in 2023?

In June 2022, with the overturning of the Roe vs. Wade ruling, 'backlash' made the front pages of the world's media. It described what the decision by the US Supreme Court represented: the calling into question of women's right to abortion. The term 'backlash', first coined by American journalist Susan Faludi¹, is commonly used to describe the violent opposition of conservative and masculinist movements to progress in women's rights. These movements act not only to thwart this progress, but also to roll back women's rights generally. Following the major UN international conferences of the 1990s, there has been growing and strong resistance to women's rights in multilateral fora, and in particular the right for women to have control over their own bodies. Today, women's rights and gender equality have become defining issues for and between different States, depending on each country's domestic politics. No State is safe from a conservative turnaround on women's rights. States long seen as forerunners on gender equality can find themselves joining the ranks of those who are most opposed.

Women's rights are not secondary or thematic issues, but inherently political. In addition to being overtly called into question in multilateral fora that are traditionally dedicated to them (such as the UN commission on the Status of Women), women's rights are also indirectly attacked in other international spaces, such as in the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Security Council, the European Court of Human Rights, etc. This is why we must act to ensure that women's rights, and feminist approaches more broadly, are mainstreamed into diplomatic efforts and all multilateral arena.

States which have committed to a "feminist foreign policy" have a particular role to play in not only countering attacks from anti-rights movements, but also bringing with them those states who are undecided, less vocal or less proactive on the issue. States are not, however, the only players in this struggle. Non-state actors also feature on today's international stage, in particular economic actors, who wield a significant influence over politics and policy.

In order to ensure women's rights and gender equality are firmly embedded into our societies, we must reach beyond diplomatic channels and harness all progressive movements with the power to bring about a wide-scale

Publishing Directors: Aurélie Gal-Régnyez for Equipop, Laurent Cohen and Jérémie Peltier for the Fondation Jean-Jaurès

Editorial Team: Aline Grange for the Fondation Jean-Jaurès and Louis Guinamard for Equipop

Graphic Design and open-source illustrations: figureslibres.cc

**EQUI
POP.
ORG**

Fondation
Jean Jaurès
ÉDITIONS

political and social transformation independent of changing governments or economic issues. Feminist organisations and movements play this role all over the world, by resisting challenges to women's rights or by helping to secure them, depending on the government in question. Supporting feminist organisations, financially and politically, is the most effective lever for achieving gender equality.

Equipop and La Fondation Jean Jaurès published the report "[Women's rights: fighting the backlash](#)"² with the aim to provide a political wake-up call against anti-rights movements. It is a call to action to help feminist

principles gain ground, in three stages: by breaking down and understanding conservative movements' strategies to violate women's rights (and human rights more generally); by analysing country case-studies of how conservative movements implement their agenda, in order to better fight back; and by formulating a series of recommendations for policy-makers to counter conservative movements and continue making progress on women's rights and gender equality on a national, European and international level. This document is a shorter version of the report, focusing on its recommendations.



Priority must be given to three main levers:

1 Increase financing to feminist organisations and movements

Significantly increase financing to feminist organisations and movements across the spectrum

The large number of feminist movements demonstrate the diversity and wealth of women's and girls' lived experiences, including the most marginalised groups. It is important to consider feminist groups as a whole, and to increase financing for all kinds of feminist organisations and women activists working to achieve gender equality. This also means more money for feminist funds. They are equipped with the necessary expertise and tools to finance feminist initiatives, including at a local level, and the capacity to disburse funding quickly – particularly in urgent situations (like, for example, the Urgent Action Fund, the Global Fund for Women, etc).

Financing collective action and transnational solidarity

Equally as important is the need to empower feminist women activists to become part of movements, join forces, and come together to fight for the cause. Bringing together local, national and international action and creating feminist solidarity through these links is what enables progress on women's rights. This means providing funding to enable actors to organise between structures on the international level, and thus supporting transnational feminist networks (such as AWID, Frida, FEMNET, IPPF, etc).

In addition, existing feminist funds (such as the FSOF in France, the Equality Fund in Canada, etc) must be made more sustainable through increased financing and improved operations towards greater accessibility and flexibility.

Remove the obstacles to enable feminist organisations to access financing

We need to remove obstacles which prevent feminist organisations from accessing financing, in particular by relaxing the rules under which financing is granted. It is estimated that only 0.4% of all gender-related aid

goes to feminist organisations³. This means that barely any of the aid which is specifically aimed at achieving equality actually goes to those who are the most involved, i.e. women activists for gender equality. It is therefore necessary to completely rethink the way in which development assistance is attributed and to create a culture of trust in feminist activists and their networks. They are the actors who are best placed to identify the most effective way of promoting the feminist agenda in their specific countries or local contexts, and the most legitimate to represent, and amplify, women's voices, as well as to bring about social change to achieve more equal societies. In line with this, in 2019, Women7 set out a series of operational recommendations⁴ for aid actors, instruments and agencies, encouraging them to:

- prioritise long-term financing to enable structural change;
- provide operational, rather than project-based, financing;
- make financing accessible for smaller organisations;
- avoid requirements for co-financing;
- limit the need for cashflow to disburse financing;
- simplify and reduce reporting requirements;
- make feminist movements exempt from rules which make their work unnecessarily complicated or even dangerous, such as the 'screening' of beneficiaries;
- put in place financing mechanisms capable of disbursing different funding pots/amounts;
- ensure development agencies include women from all backgrounds in project selection committees.

Increase financing for gender equality, for example through bilateral aid

OECD DAC figures show that aid for gender equality differs greatly from one country to another, but remain generally low.

2 Defend and protect feminist activists and networks

Implement the recommendations made by feminist networks and the international community to protect women human rights defenders

Strengthening specific protection for women activists and human rights defenders is a key part of responding to backlash. This support must be rooted in the principle of "do no harm". This means that governments must ensure that their foreign policy actions do not put activists at risk, firstly in the countries in which they work, but also elsewhere. Tools for this exist; it is time to put them into action. Feminist networks like AWID⁵ have provided a recommended approach, in line with the UN, whose Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders (2019)⁶ encourages stakeholders to:

- Publicly recognize the importance of the equal and

meaningful participation of women human rights defenders at every level and in every institution in society, devoting the necessary resources to achieve this aim;

- Ensure that women human rights defenders enjoy freedom of movement and have safe spaces and communication channels that enable them to meet and share ideas, experiences, resources, tactics and strategies regularly;
- Document and investigate all forms of risk, threats and attacks against women human rights defenders, ensuring that perpetrators - both State and non-State actors - are brought to justice and that these defenders have access to an effective remedy, including gender-responsive reparations;
- Recognize that security must be understood holistically and that it encompasses physical safety, digital security, environmental security, economic stability, the freedom to practice cultural and religious beliefs and the mental and emotional well-being of women defenders and their families and loved ones;
- Ensure that funding enables women defenders in their diverse circumstances to promote and protect human rights in a continuous, sustainable and effective manner.

Create the conditions for a genuine co-construction of States' foreign policy by systematically involving feminist activists and organisations

Feminist actors should be considered as strategic and key partners, and not just as partners to implement programmes. This requires a change in institutional practice: moving from a vertical approach of simply sharing information to a focused discussion on the strategic issues; creating spaces for regular exchange, allowing the necessary time for participants to consult other member organisations before and after each meeting, to benefit from a wide range of views; recognising the power dynamics which exist in governance bodies and taking compensatory measures (additional seats for civil society, more funding to finance the participation of voluntary or unpaid campaigners, etc).

3 Turn feminist goals into a diplomatic priority in national, European and global institutions

Women's rights have become a clear dividing line at the UN and cannot be considered as secondary, or sectorial issues. Women's rights are fundamental human rights and an issue of equality and democracy.

In addition to fora that are traditionally dedicated to women's rights, like the UN Commission for the Status of Women, conservative States and their allies are using other multilateral bodies, like the UN Security Council or the WHO, to block progress on gender equality. This is taking place in all diplomatic spaces. States who are committed to a feminist foreign policy therefore must play a multiple role: in strengthening national institutional frameworks; promoting feminist approaches in all multilateral fora; and in providing political and financial support for multilateral bodies promoting women's rights.

Strengthen national institutional frameworks for feminist foreign policies

- Adopt an institutional framework which sets out the guiding lines of feminist foreign policy, and align all sectoral strategies to this framework (such as defence, trade, health, etc);
- Provide training for political and administrative staff in ministries and ministers' offices on gender equality, feminist approaches and the fight against anti-rights movements, including the LGBTQIA+ anti-rights movements. This is particularly important for policy leads negotiating international texts on key issues (such as health, finance, education, culture, trade, defence, etc).
- Strengthen human and financial resources dedicated to promoting LGBTQIA+ rights.

Promote feminist approaches in all multilateral fora

- Stand up for women's rights and gender equality in all international fora, paying particular attention to the most controversial rights and especially sexual and reproductive rights;
- Lead pro-choice coalitions of States and actors, in particular through renewed momentum for the Generation Equality Forum;
- Strengthen multilateral and regulatory systems around human rights and gender equality (which requires consolidating technical expertise in secretariats and affirming the regulatory role of multilateral institutions and their set of shared values);
- Mainstream feminist approaches into multilateral organisations, drawing on the role of some States on certain Boards, such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, the Global Partnership for Education, etc;

- Take action for GAFA regulation against online sexism and disinformation on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and to moderate digital anti-rights and masculinist fora; strengthen support for feminist digital platforms and access to information on SRHR (online chat services to answer questions on abortion or accompany and advise victims of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV));
- Take action to enshrine the right to abortion in the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights;
- Promote the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and implement the recommendations of the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO);
- Strengthen the role of civil society in multilateral fora by insisting on governance models which include women's organisations and take into account the power dynamics in multilateral spaces; by allocating more seats to feminists while making sure they are listened to and heard; and by making sessions on gender compulsory;
- Provide funding for initiatives which document anti-rights movements in the multilateral system and analyse their strategies, their support networks, their financing, etc.

Provide political and financial support for multilateral bodies promoting women's rights

- Increase financial contributions from States to multilateral bodies promoting women's rights (such as UN Women, UNFPA, etc) and monitoring human rights (for example, the International Criminal Court);
- Participate fully in these multilateral bodies and spaces, strengthen teams on the ground, commit to and defend these spaces politically.

-
- 1 Susan Faludi, *Backlash. The Undeclared War Against American Women*, New York, Crown Publishing Group, 1991.
 - 2 <https://equipop.org/droits-des-femmes-combattre-le-backlash-recommandations-pour-la-politique-etrangere-de-la-france/>.
 - 3 *Where is the money for feminist organizing?* The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), 2021.
 - 4 *G7 Finance Ministers' Meeting. Women7*, July 2019
 - 5 *Our Rights to Safety: Women Human Rights Defenders' Holistic Approach to Protection*, AWID, 2014.
 - 6 *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders. A/HRC/40/60*, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019.

Equipop blends social and political action, project design, and technical and financial assistance to improve the health and rights of women and girls worldwide. Our priorities lie in contributing to trans-local collective action and providing flexible, long-term support to campaigners and organisations. Equipop champions feminist values and places the gender approach at the heart of its work.

equipop.org

France's leading political foundation, the Jean-Jaurès Foundation was recognized as being of 'public utility' since its creation in 1992. Independent, European and social-democratic, the Jean-Jaurès Foundation pursues the aim to formulate those ideas of tomorrow that benefit all, in order to directly impact public policy through analysis and proposals and help re-conceptualise social democracy around the world, in Europe, and in France.

jeanjaures.org