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Women's rights: fighting the backlash. What role for France?

Recommendations for
French Foreign Policy.

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Why talk about backlash in 2023?

In June 2022, with the overturning of the Roe vs. Wade ruling, ‘backlash’ made the front pages of France’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 Faludi, 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 country 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.

Emmanuel Macron must use his second term in office to implement a feminist foreign policy.

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 spaces.

Countries 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 countries who are undecided, less vocal or less proactive on the issue.** National governments 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 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.**

Emmanuel Macron must use his second term in office to implement a feminist foreign policy, in line with French discourse on strong multilateralism, ‘walking the talk’, and the Inclusive Development and Combating Global Inequalities programming law, which confirms France’s ‘feminist diplomacy’ and sets out ambitious financial objectives around it. Macron promised that women’s rights would be a central priority of his time as President. It is time to make that promise a political and budgetary reality, not only in France, but also internationally.

This report aims to provide a political wakeup 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 French policymakers to counter conservative movements and continue making progress on women's rights and gender equality on a national, European and international level.

Recommendations

Faced with this backlash, France, as a country committed to a feminist foreign policy, has a key role to play on the international scene.

To do so, the French government must prioritise three main levers:



Increase financing
to feminist organisations
and movements



Defend and protect
feminist activists and
networks



**Turn feminist goals into a
diplomatic priority** in
French, European and
global institutions

I.

**What do we
mean by
backlash?**



1

The origins of 'backlash': a term coined by Susan Faludi

To understand the concept of backlash, it is important to first grasp its origins. Initially confined to feminist spaces, the pertinence of 'backlash' has sadly meant that it is now a mainstream term. The idea originated with the book of the same name, written by American journalist Susan Faludi and published in 1991¹, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, for which Faludi received the Pulitzer prize.

Faludi borrowed the word from a 1950s film portraying a man accusing his wife of a murder he himself committed. The book describes the strategy put in place by American conservatives to collude against women's rights in the 1980s and 90s, particularly in the context of the 1973 landmark *Roe. vs Wade* ruling, which authorised abortion at federal level.

Susan Faludi reveals the many ways in which women's rights were called into question by the American right at the time. With the help of influential religious actors, in particular Evangelists, the 'new right', as Faludi labelled the movement, carried out a widescale cultural counterassault against feminism. The Republican party claimed that feminism was the source of all evils, from the collapse of the family unit to the destruction of the economy - and even the cause of women's own vulnerability. Their offensive was deployed through the media, cinema, literature and

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eventually public policies which reversed women's rights notably in terms of professional equality or access to abortion. This strategy arose in response to the women's liberation movement of the 1970s and 80s, a time when women were joining the job market in large numbers and acquiring increasing economic independence.

Today, the term 'backlash' has come to describe the reaction of conservative or right-wing movements to progress on women's rights (and more broadly, human rights). It also designates the strategy and tools used by conservative parties to threaten, attack and violate these rights.

2

One step forward, two steps back: the history of women's rights

The history of women's rights and women's movements internationally is one of alternating phases of progress and setbacks, whether in the fight for civil, political, economic or social rights, or the right for women to have control over their own bodies. In France, this can be seen with the French Revolution. At this time, women met in political clubs and undertook advocacy to obtain the right to vote². However, the repression which followed, known as 'the Reign of Terror', put paid to this political activity. The period of freedom of expression and political advocacy drew to a definitive close with the adoption of the French Civil Code. Adopted under Emperor Napoléon in 1804, the Civil Code reaffirmed the domination of men over women - especially husbands over wives: 'The husband owes protection to his wife; the wife obedience to her husband³.'

In France, women did not have the right to vote until 1944, or to open an individual bank account until 1965. Women did not have the right to divorce by mutual consent or to abortion until 1975. These rights were won by feminist movements, but only in the face of strong opposition within French society.

More recently, parity legislation adopted in June 2000 caused an outcry amongst politicians who argued that enshrining parity in law violated the principle of universal representation, i.e. that elected officials represent all citizens⁴. The law, they protested, actually further tied men and women to their sexual differences, and was completely 'pointless' as well as 'humiliating⁵'.

The 2017 #MeToo movement helped women all over the world to speak out on sexual and gender-based violence, as well as enabling a growing awareness on these issues - and gender equality more broadly. Consequently, we might have expected the #MeToo movement⁷ to provoke a deep-reaching transformation of our society, our gendered representations and our legal systems. Instead, what we seem to have seen is conservative push-back across the world on women's rights, and even a reversal of those rights, exacerbated by different political, economic and social crises, both structural and conjunctural, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Even if some elected officials considered the law to be relevant, others believed it was 'hypocritical' and 'poorly done'⁶.

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Events of the last few months are telling. The most striking example is the overturning of Roe vs. Wade by the US Supreme Court in

June 2022, reversing almost fifty years of the right to abortion for American women. This ruling is one of the consequences of Donald Trump's reactionary presidency, but it is also an illustration of a longer-term strategy to promote an anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQIA+ and anti-human rights political agenda overall.

Although the United States has been the main focus for media this year, the European Union has been home to more than its fair share of conservative backlash. Member States such as Poland and Hungary have tightened legislation - already highly restrictive - on abortion, and elsewhere, right-wing and far-right political parties have won elections in 2022, leading to further setbacks. In Italy, Giorgia Meloni, a well-known anti-rights campaigner, won the legislative elections. Sweden, often held up as a beacon on gender equality, has also suffered defeats, particularly the decision by the newly-elected right and far-right government to abandon the country's emblematic feminist diplomacy. This sends a worrying signal to the international community at a time when the mainstreaming of gender in foreign policy is still in its infancy.

France, on the other hand, is currently one of the most progressive countries on feminist foreign policy in Europe. Over the last decade or so, the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs has been increasingly active in defending women's rights as part of what has now become known as 'feminist diplomacy'.

Despite France's active defence of women's rights in international fora, however, there remains resistance domestically. This pushback is visible in the recent debate over whether to enshrine the right to abortion in the French constitution⁸ or over the question of sexual and gender-based violence in society. Many politicians have been able to stay in office even when accused of violence against women, demonstrating how far we still need to go to make progress on this issue.

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3 Women's control over their bodies and sexuality, a key target for the anti-rights movement

In her book *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellion*⁹, Gloria Steinem writes that 'opposing women's right to control our own bodies is always the first step in every authoritarian regime'. This is indeed the first rallying call of all conservative and anti-rights movements. It is hardly surprising that the right to abortion in particular has inspired some of the most far-reaching and impactful changes to our society, as well as some of the most virulent crackdowns.

In the 1970s, feminist movements adopted the slogan 'the personal is political' to force a public debate on the question of women's control over their own bodies and make progress on the right to contraception and abortion. Since the 1990s, following several major international conferences on women's rights and in particular the 1995 Beijing conference¹⁰ which mentions abortion as a public health issue, more than 50 countries have liberalised legislation on abortion rights. Recently these countries have included Ireland, Argentina, New Zealand, Colombia and Benin.

However, despite these changes, almost two-thirds of women still live in countries where access to abortion is heavily restricted¹¹. Only 72 countries authorise abortion, within time limits which vary from one country to another¹². Even in these countries, the application of laws is challenged by a lack of political will, such as the two-year delay between the passing of the law and the promulgation of an implementing decree in Benin, practitioners' conscientious objection in Italy, etc.

Beyond the debate on the right to abortion and women's control over their own bodies, anti-rights movements also oppose rights for individuals who do not fit into a heteronormative and cisgender model. Attacks against these individuals vary but are part of a continuum of sexual and institutional violence, such as the systematic assignation of women's bodies to their reproductive function, the refusal to acknowledge the identity of transgender people, or the criminalisation of homosexuality.



There is a strategic effort to undermine our sexual and reproductive health and rights, with women's bodies being a key battleground. ●

Olutimehin Adegbeye, "The war on African women is supported by foreign activists, with no regard for our lives", OpenDemocracy, 1st November, 2019.

4 Feminist organisations: the most effective lever to counter backlash and achieve gender equality

Throughout the world, feminist movements are at the frontline of efforts to counter backlash and bring about the necessary societal change to achieve gender equality and to end sexual and gender-based violence. Research has demonstrated the activism and impact of feminist movements for achieving women's rights. A literature review conducted by Mama Cash in 2020 concluded that 'women's rights and feminist movements matter significantly in securing and advancing women's rights across a wide range of issues, including violence against women; economic rights, including access to childcare, inheritance and land rights; reproductive rights; and, political representation¹³.' Mama Cash underlines the importance of other factors in influencing this progress, such as the political party in power or the relationship between state and religious actors, and emphasises that women's rights are never set in stone or irreversible.

Indeed, conjunctural factors such as political, economic or social crises often lead to a deterioration in women's rights and provide an opportunity for conservative governments to accelerate backsliding. Evidence for this can be found with the Covid-19 pandemic in Poland, Hungary or Slovakia. Taking advantage of large-scale lockdowns which prevented citizens from protesting, some conservative states declared that abortion was a 'non-essential medical act' and proposed new laws to restrict, or even deny, access to abortion¹⁴. In this context, Simone de Beauvoir's famous adage springs to mind. The author of *The Second Sex* is quoted as saying: 'Never forget that it only takes a political, economic or religious crisis for women's rights to be called into question. These rights can never be taken for granted. You must remain vigilant throughout your life¹⁵.'

Feminist movements have also helped to defend human rights and democracy more broadly. In Poland, in 2020, feminist protests for the right to abortion were a catalyser for protests defending the rule of law and an independent judiciary, as well as LGBTQIA+ rights¹⁶. More recently, Chilean feminists played a central role in protests over the new constitution, in what became known as the 2019 October Rebellion¹⁷. In the same way, the feminist revolt in Iran drove momentum for a national uprising calling for a regime change¹⁸.



The studies reviewed [in the Mama Cash report] demonstrate that women's rights movements and feminist mobilisation have a significant effect in securing women's rights, particularly in the domain of legal and policy change. There is significant academic literature to support the contention that "feminist activism works".

Feminist activism works! A review of select literature on the impact of feminist activism in achieving women's rights, Mama Cash, July 2020.



II. Analysing anti-rights movements in order to better fight back

1 **A disparate alliance of States, far-right groups, fundamentalist religious movements and wealthy conservative donors**

Anti-rights movements are an eclectic group, bringing together state and non-state actors from a mix of political, economic and religious backgrounds. These groups go by various different names, such as conservative, anti-gender, anti-feminist, or fundamentalist movements. But they can be grouped together under the heading of 'anti-rights' since their primary and common goal is to attack fundamental rights - such as women's right of control over their own bodies, or LGBTQIA+ rights - but also, and more broadly, to attack the foundations of freedom and democracy.

Particularly well-organised, interconnected and generously financed, anti-rights movements are the result of a disparate alliance of far-right political groups, fundamentalist religious movements, wealthy conservative or far-right donors, and states which are historically on opposite sides of the diplomatic chessboard. Highly vocal on the international scene, they systematically challenge UN conventions on women's and LGBTQIA+ rights. In this way it is not uncommon to see traditionally opposed countries joining forces when necessary to thwart women's rights and undo international conventions which encompass these rights. A powerful example is the Geneva Consensus Declaration, which calls for protection of the family and the sovereign right for states on abortion. Hidden by this language is a text which is in reality viscerally opposed to abortion. Signatories in 2020 included a range of countries such as the United States under Donald Trump (the US has since withdrawn from the Declaration under Biden), Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro, Russia, Egypt, Indonesia, Hungary, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Cameroon, Kenya and Pakistan. Paradoxically, Colombia and Benin, whose abortion laws have since evolved positively, also joined, demonstrating once again the complexity of the issue.

Within the anti-rights movement are actors such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and its 57 members, the World Congress of Families, the NGO Family Watch International, and the Holy See, which holds Permanent Observer status to the UN and therefore lends its voice and weight to the conservative and patriarchal anti-rights agenda¹⁹. Given the diversity, number and deliberate opacity of these different actors, it is difficult to have an exact understanding of how they come to work together. The information available does however suggest a global, complex and well-organised network.



This new alignment in foreign policy exposes the increased international influence of political-religious factions, revealing unexpected alliances between Catholic, evangelical and Islamic moralisms in the area of reproductive justice. These have one main goal: to diminish women's autonomy and agency to decide what they want for their own bodies.

Kristina Hinz, Aline Coutinho, Hanna Grześkiewicz, Ghadeer Ahmed, Alicja Flisak et Hadir Barbar, "Unholy alliance: the global crusade against reproductive justice", OpenDemocracy, 18 March 2021.

In Europe, anti-rights movements are coordinated by Agenda Europe²⁰, whose approach is analysed in the European Parliamentary Forum (EPF) report on sexual and reproductive rights, *Restoring the Natural Order: The religious extremists' vision to mobilise European societies against human rights on sexuality and reproduction*²¹. Agenda Europe brings together over 100 organisations from more than 30 countries. The movement is based on the idea of 'the natural order', which forms the basis of a value-driven fight against sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Members are made up of catholic and conservative activists. The method deployed by this coordination is revelatory of the extent to which anti-rights movements across the world align their actions and methods with, and therefore undermine, feminist organisation strategies, such as deciding on a course of action in response to feminist discourse, obtaining financing through foundations and governments, signing joint statements and declarations, etc.

The political agenda for anti-rights movements in Europe can be summarised thus as an attempt to 'change the legal and societal status quo in ways which stand in stark contrast to fundamental European rights²²'. Anti-rights movements seek to expand and further impose their reactionary vision in order to reverse sexual and reproductive rights. They also target LGBTQIA+ rights, and, in the same vein, the Istanbul Convention, the strongest legal instrument for women's rights in terms of sexual and gender-based violence and in particular domestic and intrafamilial violence. Ever since its adoption in 2011, the Istanbul Convention has been the object of unified opposition from several Member States – Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia – who, one by one, refused to ratify the convention on the grounds that it went against their traditional vision of the family. In 2021, Turkey withdrew from the convention. This follows Poland's announcement in 2020 that they would be leaving (although their withdrawal has not yet taken place). However, in May 2023, the European Parliament voted to join the convention, urging all its Member States to ratify it.

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2 Large-scale funding to enable anti-rights movements to influence political decisions

It is impossible to understand the identity of anti-rights movements without understanding how these movements are financed. Although the opaque and veiled nature of their funding makes it difficult to put an exact figure on how much they receive, billions of euros are likely to have been raised for anti-rights movements between 2009 and 2018²³. In 2020, openDemocracy published a report which estimated that USD \$280 million were spent between 2008 and 2017 across the world by 12 American Christian right-wing organisations²⁴ to finance anti-gender and anti-LGBTQIA+ campaigns. This figure only reflects funding to non-profit organisations, and does not include funds linked to religious actors, conservative philanthropists and other forms of private financing, as well as funds provided directly by states.

The EPF report notes that a large part of anti-rights movement financing in Europe is sourced through 'dark money' from the American Christian right, as well as from

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Russia²⁵. Anti-rights movements span the globe, forging close and transnational links between religious extremism, anti-gender organisations, and the far-right political parties. One example is the conservative pressure group CitizenGo, which publishes anti-rights petitions and which provides financing to far-right parties in Spain. According to the EPF report, the Spanish far-right political party Vox (influenced by Catholic extremism) was initially funded by a former Iranian terrorist group for its European electoral campaign in 2014²⁶.

Anti-rights NGOs and think tanks also receive funding from foundations, which are themselves financed by Christian right billionaires. These foundations are a channel for religious extremism and act as key 'donors'. According to the EPF, between 2009 and 2018, 7 major donors of the American Christian right contributed almost USD \$5 billion to anti-rights movements across the world²⁷. In France, an investigation by Mediapart alleged that the 'Manif pour tous' (the anti-gay marriage/adoption movement, which in March 2023 changed its name to 'Syndicat de la Famille' or 'Union for the Family') received financing from two anti-abortion catholic organisations, Fondation Lejeune et Alliance Vita²⁸ as well as from major business leaders²⁹. Similarly, in Poland, the Fundacja Lux Veritatis is alleged to have provided USD \$83 million between 2009-2018 to support religious and ultraconservative political activism³⁰.

In Hungary and in Turkey, the emergence of government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGO) has completed altered the nature of NGOs, turning them into puppets serving the government in power and mouthpieces of the anti-gender and anti-rights agenda. These NGOs receive public funding normally destined to feminist civil society organisations (CSO), who find themselves without any state funding.

When it comes to public funding, some governments knowingly support and finance anti-rights movements. This often takes the form of misleading women and complicating access to abortion, for example via 'crisis pregnancy centres' which attempt to convince women not to go through with their abortion. Between 2014-2018, the EPF estimates that the Spanish government provided €1.8 million to 5 openly anti-abortion organisations³¹. In Hungary and in Turkey, the emergence of government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGO) has completed altered the nature of NGOs, turning them into puppets serving the government in power and

mouthpieces of the anti-gender and anti-rights agenda. These NGOs receive public funding normally destined to feminist civil society organisations (CSO), who find themselves without any state funding³². In Hungary, it is alleged that the office of the Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, provided €2.53 million in grants between 2018-2020 to the Hungarian Center for Fundamental Rights, an organisation actively fighting against the Istanbul Convention alongside its sister organisation in Poland³³. Some governments also finance anti-gender diplomacy by hosting or supporting summits or international conferences organised by anti-rights movements, like the 'Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief' held in Poland in November 2020, which affirmed religious freedom over sexual and reproductive rights and LGBTQIA+ rights³⁴.

Anti-rights movements also use some public, national or European funding for political and ideological means. They sometimes transform into political parties in order to access this funding, as was the case with Civitas in France. This strategy is not just visible at national level. For example, the creation of the European Christian Political Movement (ECPM), which now has 5 MEPs, is able to influence European Union institutions. As a political party, the ECPM receives funding from the European Parliament. Between 2010-2018, it received €8.2 million, or 82% of party resources³⁵. Another example is a nation-wide anti-abortion campaign in Hungary, funded with €412,000 from the EU Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity (PROGRESS)³⁶. After being questioned by an MEP, the EU Fundamental Rights Commissioner Viviane Reding asserted that the campaign did not 'conform with the project proposal submitted by the Hungarian authorities' and called on Hungary to return the funds³⁷.

3 When anti-gender, anti-rights and anti-democratic agendas come together

Despite their very different composition, anti-rights movements come together around a common representation of society based on a sexist and heteronormative vision of 'family', the 'right' form of sexuality, and control over women's bodies.

To drive this agenda forward, anti-rights movements make false claims, twist the reasoning of feminist and rights-based organisations, and develop deceptive narratives. Three arguments in particular are commonly used:

- That 'gender ideology' disturbs the 'natural order' of the world, in particular the traditional vision of the heteronormative family³⁸;
- That the West is imposing its human rights and SRHR agenda on other countries through 'cultural imperialism and ideological colonialism', in particular in former colonial countries, as a form of western imperialism. CitizenGo Africa, for example, argues that since 'all African countries have pro-family and pro-life laws³⁹', any change to these laws are only a result of 'colonial' pressure in Western countries. This is despite the fact that 5 African countries already allow abortion without restrictions. Feminist networks challenge this rhetoric, such as the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) in their 2021 report *Rights at Risk, Time for Action*⁴⁰. Another example is found in training by the Christian fundamentalist organisation Family Watch International (FWI) to politicians, members of the Church and civil society leaders across Africa, aimed at preventing comprehensive sexuality education (CSE)⁴¹.
- That abortion is a crime⁴²: the linking of Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which stipulates the 'right to life', with language comparing abortion to 'pre-natal genocide'⁴³.

By attacking abortion, anti-rights movements directly attack women's right of control over their own bodies. There is a real determination to equate sexuality with procreation⁴⁴. The so-called 'family' values which anti-rights movements prone are firmly anchored in the heteronormative, cisgender patriarchy. Highly critical of gender studies, anti-rights movements create moral panic and stoke conspiracy theories with talk of a supposed 'gender theory' which goes against 'family' values and denies the 'different but complementary' roles of men and women, which they pledge to defend. In the same vein, the rights of transgender people are also attacked and violated by anti-rights movements who claim that they 'make women invisible'⁴⁵.

The issues taken up by anti-rights movements are international. They attack LGBTQIA+ rights, particularly same-sex marriage and the related questions of same-sex couple adoption and medically-assisted procreation which, they argue, go against the 'traditional values' they defend⁴⁶. They lobby against comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) which they claim is dangerous for children and risks their 'hyper-sexualization' and exposition to 'unnatural' issues⁴⁷. In this context it is hardly surprising that the *Manif pour tous*, having failed to prevent same-sex marriage, returned in full force in 2014 to demand the withdrawal of the 'ABCD of equality', a teaching program promoting equality between girls and boys due to be implemented in French schools. Their victory dealt a heavy and long-standing blow to sex education in schools in France, as demonstrated by the subsequent lacklustre implementation of the 2001 law (which stipulates that each pupil should receive at least three hours of sex education classes per year)⁴⁸. Similarly, the World Health Organization (WHO) faced attacks and pushback around the same time, following a report on the standards of sex education in Europe.

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Some feminists also identify a similar merging of anti-gender and climate-sceptic discourse⁴⁹, as defended by figures such as Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro whose conservative political ideas embrace sexism and climate-change denial. After taking office, Trump's first major acts were the reintroduction of the Global Gag Rule (which bans any organisation receiving American funding to be involved in any form of action supporting abortion rights) and the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, through which the United States had committed to reduce emissions and cooperate with other countries on climate-change adaptation. Even if these political leaders are no longer in office, a number of anti-rights activists continue to follow in their footsteps. The decisions taken by those leaders while in power also continue to have major consequences on women's and minority rights in their respective countries, which successive leaders have struggled to mitigate, notably the right to abortion. By claiming that anti-discrimination and equality laws are a danger to freedom of expression and democracy, anti-rights movements therefore position themselves as defenders of democracy and of individual freedom. In fact, they are the very ones who threaten these ideals.

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The meaning of words

In this political and diplomatic battle, words are of the utmost importance. Anti-rights movements manipulate and simplify complex concepts to create a narrative for their agenda. The most striking example is the way in which anti-rights movements define themselves as 'pro-life' and thereby promote their actions as positive, 'in defence of human life', compared to feminists, whom they claim are opposed to human life, and who commit crime through abortion. In sugar-coating their words, anti-rights movements can conceal the fact that anti-abortion action does the exact opposite, by putting millions of women's lives in danger across the world. This is why feminist movements choose to label anti-rights activists as 'anti-choice' and opposed to women's control over their own bodies.

In the same way, anti-rights movements across Europe often use the word 'gender' in its original English instead of translating it into their own language, to imply a debate imposed by foreign cultures⁵⁰ and by feminists and LGBTQIA+ activists. This technique was used in Bulgaria during the campaign against the signature of the Istanbul Convention.⁵¹

Manipulative rhetoric of this kind must be contested wherever it is encountered, whether in political, diplomatic, public spaces, or in the media. .

4 Using human rights instruments and narrative against women's rights

The strategy used by anti-rights movements with regards to European and international laws and protocols is deliberately ambiguous. Citing national sovereignty and the primacy of national over European laws, anti-rights activists are firmly opposed to any tool which promotes progress on women's or minority rights (for example the European Union Gender Equality or LGBTQI Strategies). But anti-rights movements are also quick to use these tools or spaces, particularly the European Parliament when it comes to the European Union, to attack progressive policies from the inside⁵².

Anti-rights movements also make use of participatory democracy tools such as petitions or referenda and available legal instruments to make their case. The European Citizens' Initiative⁵³ which enabled the creation of the European federation 'One of Us' is one example. Bringing together around forty anti-rights organisations across the whole of Europe, the federation was created as citizens' initiative which attempted to prevent the European Union from financing activity 'destroying human embryos⁵⁴' - a direct attack on SRHR. This citizens' initiative secured 1.8 million signatures and was painted as an initiative of the people. In actual fact, only a handful of influential institutions and figures drove the campaign, notably the Vatican and two well-known anti-rights MEPs. The European Commission was obliged to examine the petition from One of Us, but declined to follow up with legislative proposals⁵⁵. This is a regular occurrence and is known as 'astroturfing' or giving the impression that anti-rights movements are supported by grassroots mobilisation when in reality they are spearheaded by an influential minority who spread disinformation campaigns within religious communities⁵⁶. As another example, in Croatia, the launch of a petition led to a referendum on enshrining a definition of marriage in the constitution as 'the union between a man and a woman', and thereby enshrining, with the same phrase, an anti-gender agenda⁵⁷.

On a global scale, anti-rights movements take a coordinated approach to participation in international institutions and in the margins of major conferences. They seek to develop a joint strategy to deploy within the UN. From 1997, for example, the World Congress of Families (WCF) began organising conferences and events promoting 'traditional and natural' family values, in opposition to abortion and LGBTQIA+ rights⁵⁸. The last such congress to take place was in 2019, sponsored notably by CitizenGo and ProVita⁵⁹.

One space in which anti-rights movements are highly vocal about their agenda is the UN Commission for the Status of Women (CSW). This Commission brings together the whole of the international community through official delegations from Member States led by Ministers in charge of this portfolio, alongside international civil society in its plurality - both feminist and conservative organisations. Every year, the CSW meeting is a source of vivid debate. The texts adopted at the conclusion of the CSW meetings (the 'agreed conclusions') are systematically challenged and censored by anti-rights representatives, particularly in relation to abortion, sexuality education and LGBTQIA+ rights.

These battles have spilled over to spaces which are not solely dedicated to women's rights issues and also take place in a number of decision-making spaces such as at the WHO, the Council of Europe, the Human Rights Council, the African Union, etc. In all of these multilateral spaces, anti-rights movements are also beginning to influence the notion of 'civil society', as the Center for Feminist Foreign Policy points out in its 2022 report, *Disrupting the multilateral order? The impact of anti-gender actors on multilateral structures in Europe*⁶⁰. The term 'civil society' no longer simply refers to human rights organisations or those who defend marginalised groups or people who have traditionally been excluded from political power. It has come to encompass anti-rights movements, whose goal is entirely the

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opposite – restricting the interpretation of ‘human rights’ to the smallest and most conservative denominator possible, or indeed, through ‘backlash’, rolling back these rights. Not only have anti-rights movements been able to gain ECOSOC status, which allows them to exert a direct influence on Member State delegations, but with the help of conservative states, they also undertake pro-active lobbying to restrict access to these spaces by progressive civil society organisations. AWID, the feminist network, has documented several such instances, notably within the African Union where feminist and LGBTQIA+ organisations

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have had their observer status withdrawn for not fitting with so-called ‘fundamental African values’⁶¹. Anti-rights movements are also active lobbyists within regional rule-making bodies. This is the case for the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) as noted in the report from the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council (ESEC) Delegation for Women’s Rights and Equality, *Droits sexuels et reproductifs en Europe : entre menaces et progrès en 2019* [‘Sexual and

reproductive rights in Europe: threats and progress in 2019⁶²]. The ECHR does not currently recognise a uniform ‘right to abortion’ at the European level, given a lack of consensus on the issue among Council of Europe Member States. However, this does not mean that ECHR is not legally competent in this area; the ECHR could, for example, be a useful tool for ensuring effective implementation of the right to abortion when enacted in domestic law. And yet the ECHR could also be exploited by anti-rights movements. Article 2 of the European Convention of Human Rights establishes a ‘right to law’ which anti-rights activists use – and misconstrue – to support the argument that the ‘unborn child’ too, has a ‘right to life’⁶³. This interpretation is contested by a number of feminist legal experts⁶⁴.

The use of media and social media by anti-rights movements

Masculinist and anti-rights narrative resonate with certain media outlets, including in France. Simply by echoing the terminology used by these movements, such as ‘gender theory’ or ‘wokism’, the media helps to legitimise them, and discredit liberation or empowerment movements as a whole.

In particular, portrayal of sexual and gender-based violence often ignores women’s accounts and generally continues to perpetuate rape culture. Far from the change in perception which the #MeToo movement hoped to see, the media continues to describe domestic violence as ‘crimes of passion’ or to exonerate the perpetrators of violence. The substantial coverage given to men accused of violence against women helps to fuel this complicity. This has been the case recently in France, where several household names were accused of violence, such as former Minister Nicolas Hulot, former news anchor Patrick Poivre d’Arvor, or MP Adrien Quatennens. These men stand accused of different charges, but the defence mechanisms they put in place are always the same: to discredit women’s voices and turn the victim into the guilty party.

Highly active in the political arena and in the mass media, anti-rights movements have mastered the internet and social media to spread their messages and widen their audience. At ease with these digital tools, anti-rights movements deploy them nimbly to serve their anti-feminist agenda. Female researchers have examined the online strategies of these activists, who come together in a ‘manosphere’ or community of masculinist men, claiming to defend themselves against feminist ‘attacks’, and who lead a constant war against equality.⁶⁵ The phenomenon is such that, in March 2022, the US Secret Service identified ‘misogynistic extremism’ as a ‘specific threat⁶⁶’ of a new kind of violence against women.



III. Country case- studies

**International
illustrations
of backlash**

A United Nations report from September 2022 suggested it would take centuries to achieve gender equality. According to the World Economic Forum, the economic and health crisis has pushed back progress on gender parity by a generation. The measures which have been implemented restricting women's and LGBTQIA+ rights have created a difficult political context, in addition to structural and conjunctural challenges. This section of the report aims to provide a non-exhaustive overview of the situation through selected case studies from different regions across the world. The rollback we discover in these case studies takes place in very different contexts, but the tactics behind each situation of backlash are the same. This overview intends to alert public opinion and political authorities on the profound impact which conservative policies have on the lives of women and LGBTQIA+ people through threatening and violating their fundamental rights.



Afghanistan

The situation for women's rights in Afghanistan reveals a particular kind of backlash driven by religious extremist anti-rights movements. Even before the Taliban returned to power in 2021, Afghanistan was far from exemplary in terms of women's rights. However, the few rights which women had secured have been removed with the Taliban's return and their desire to universally limit women's participation, freedom and control over their own bodies. This began with the challenge to girls' right to education and the decision to stop girls attending school. A month after the Taliban took power, schools re-opened, but only for boys - supposedly because of a lack of female teachers (as co-education was no longer allowed)⁶⁷. A year later, girls still do not have any hope of returning to school. This increases their vulnerability to sexual violence or forced marriage, even as minors. Some families decide to find husbands for their daughters to avoid them being forced into marriage with Taliban fighters, or because of the economic crisis created by the war⁶⁸. Since 20 December 2022, all universities have now closed their doors to female students, as the Taliban have banned women from obtaining a university education, private or public, 'until new orders'⁶⁹.

Afghan women's political participation, as well as their active participation in society, have been reduced to almost nothing. The majority of women who worked have been forced to leave their jobs and stay at home. Women journalists have been favourite targets of Taliban repression given their links to activists⁷⁰. In September 2021, the Taliban also scrapped the Ministry for Women's Affairs, replacing it with the Ministry for Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, whose mandate was to ensure application of fundamental Islamic law⁷¹. Women who worked in the Ministry for Women's Affairs lost their jobs, and the Taliban did not appoint any women as Ministers in their new government⁷². Women are now entirely absent from politics, even in Parliament, where quota systems had enabled their participation before the Taliban took power⁷³.

The Ministry for Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice acts as a 'morality police' or vice-squad, publishing 'recommendations' concerning women's behaviour, dress, or movements⁷⁴. More and more arrests are taking place for 'moral corruption' in the aim of curtailing Afghan women's freedom of movement. Women can no longer go out in public, use public transport, or even be in a car without a male chaperone from their family⁷⁵. And though they are still allowed to make short journeys, they are obliged to wear a full-face veil - or risk being arrested, held in appalling conditions, and subjected to violence from the Taliban regime⁷⁶. Protests have been banned and any convening of women calling for their rights is quickly suppressed⁷⁷.

The consequences of the Taliban's control over Afghan women can be felt even in the humanitarian sector. On 24 December 2022, the Taliban banned women from working in national or international NGOs, based on 'serious complaints regarding the non-observance of the Islamic hijab'⁷⁸. This decision has led to several international NGOs to suspend their work in Afghanistan, such as CARE or the Norwegian Refugee Council.

Even before the Taliban took power in 2021, Afghan women did not have control over their own bodies. Abortion has always been illegal in Afghanistan, except if the mother's life is at risk⁷⁹. In January 2022, the Taliban published a ruling in the Balkh province banning women from consulting a male doctor. Ultimately this may mean that women are no longer able to access healthcare in the future, given that the next generation of female doctors will no longer be able to complete their medical studies.

Under the former government, Afghan women who were victims of domestic violence benefited from some protective measures. This is no longer the case, as the Taliban have locked down the legal system and made it impossible for victims to divorce or receive any form of protection⁸⁰.

The Taliban also carry out violent discrimination against minorities and LGBTQIA+ people, such as targeted attacks and sexual violence. Worse, this violence is sometimes perpetrated

by the victims' own families, who fear for their own security⁸¹. Even before 2021, the lives of LGBTQIA+ people were threatened by existing legislation. A law passed in 2018 criminalised same-sex sexual relations⁸². When questioned, one Taliban judge even considered that homosexuality should be punished by stoning or the death sentence⁸³.

It is evident therefore that Taliban's return to

power is a dramatic blow for women, girls and all LGBTQIA+ people. The regime's actions infringe upon their fundamental rights and have resulted in their exclusion from all aspects of society, and denial even of their very existence.

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Brazil

In 2018, the populist candidate Jair Bolsonaro was elected President of Brazil with 55% of the vote. Known to the general public for his sexist, homophobic, racist and generally illiberal positions, Bolsonaro's victory was due to his appeal as an anti-corruption outsider, ready to take back power from the Brazilian Workers' party. His election has resulted in a general rollback of women's rights in Brazil. Long before his election, Bolsonaro was openly misogynistic. In 2014, he declared 'I wouldn't rape you, because you don't deserve it' to left-wing MP and former Human Rights Minister, Maria do Rosário Nunes. Vehemently opposed to abortion, family planning or equal pay, Bolsonaro has fostered institutional violence against women in a country where the crimes committed against women are already endemic. In 2021, Brazil registered 1,319 femicide

and 56,098 cases of rape⁸⁴. According to one Brazilian NGO, an estimated 5 sexual assaults take place every hour in the country⁸⁵.

Bolsonaro, a former military officer, owes his 2018 victory to a well-off, mostly white and Evangelist electorate⁸⁶, who represent 30% of all voters. As such, this group wields power for electoral change. Hostile to progressive policies on gender equality, members of this group cast their votes in favour of religious morality and the protection of the traditional family model.

Bolsonaro's time in office has led to a genuine backlash against women's rights. The number of feminicides in Brazil has risen to the highest number since records began in 2017, and the number of rapes in the first six months of 2021 was higher by 8.3% than in the same period in 2020⁸⁷. In other words, in 2021, one woman was raped every ten minutes⁸⁸. Even if feminicides are driven by many different factors in a given society, we can assume that the increase in these crimes is also an indicator of the extent of male domination in Brazilian society and the prevalence of rape culture, which Bolsonaro and his government have undeniably fostered. However, women are unfortunately not the only victims. Already at the

top of the podium for LGBTQIA+ homicide rates (420 cases in 2018)⁸⁹, the number of assaults against LGBTQIA+ people in Brazil also rose after Bolsonaro's election⁹⁰. Black and Indigenous minorities, as well as political opponents (left-wing, environmental or human-rights activists) also live in fear and were frequently targeted in statements during Bolsonaro's term in office, which encouraged verbal or physical violence against these communities.

It was also during Bolsonaro's Presidency that Brazil joined the 34 signatories of the Geneva Consensus Declaration on 22 October 2020. Presented as an initiative to promote women's health and the family, in reality the Declaration is a statement against abortion in defence of traditional family values and the 'duty' to protect every unborn foetus⁹¹. Becoming a signatory to the Declaration enabled Brazil to reaffirm its sovereignty on abortion-related laws.

The Covid-19 pandemic also worsened women's quality of life in Brazil. Bolsonaro's disastrous handling of the pandemic pushed many Brazilian people into poverty, but women – and particularly Black women – suffered the worst. In 2021, 38% of Black women lived in poverty in Brazil, of whom 12.3% in extreme poverty⁹². Obtaining an abortion was particularly challenging during the pandemic. Criminalised under the Brazilian penal code and punishable by three

years in prison, abortion is authorised only in the event of rape or malformation of the foetus. An estimated 500,000-1 million Brazilian women have abortions every year, of which only 1,600 are legal. The pandemic made it impossible for women to access abortion in unauthorised clinics in Brazil, or abroad. Many women turned instead to dangerous or ineffective drugs on the black market. Access to legal abortion, too, became almost impossible given overrun hospitals⁹³. At

the same time, religious lobbies – in particular the 'defence of life and family' lobby made up of 218 MPs in the lower Chamber in the previous Parliament – were actively lobbying to outlaw abortion altogether. This position received endorsement from Bolsonaro, who was pictured brandishing a picture of Jesus Christ in April 2020 at an anti-abortion protest, and who denounced an abortion provided to an eleven-year-old girl as a result of rape, saying it was 'unacceptable to take the life of a helpless being'⁹⁴. The nomination of anti-abortion and pro-abstinence gynaecologist Raphael Camara Medeiros Parente at the head of the Ministry of Health Secretariat of Primary Health Care (SAPS) was additional proof, if needed, of the Brazilian government's anti-rights stance under Bolsonaro.

Bolsonaro lost the October 2022 presidential election. Hope now lies with his successor Lula to repair the damage done. And yet Lula, co-founder of the Workers' Party and a former President, is not a complete stranger to the anti-rights politics promoted by Bolsonaro. Despite talking about the need to legalise abortion in April 2022⁹⁵, Lula then changed his position to win over the Evangelist vote during the campaign, publishing an open letter a few days before the second round of the election stating that 'our manifesto commits to respecting life at all stages [...] I am personally against abortion'⁹⁶. Evidently, even if the President has changed, the battle for women's rights is not yet won. Brazilian feminist organisations will continue to have a crucial role to play in the coming years.

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Hungary

In Hungary, the backlash against women's rights stems from a convergence of anti-gender, anti-LGBTQIA+ and anti-democratic agendas. The political structure in Hungary is fundamentally patriarchal. One example is the lack of women in power. Hungary has the lowest rate of female parliamentarians in the European Union, with only 13.1% of women holding seats in 2021⁹⁷. Patriarchal societies, patriarchal laws...

Upon taking office, the Orbán government attacked a 2009 governmental decree on gender equality education for nursery school children. Articles on 'gender-sensitive education' were removed on the grounds that these were responsible for 'gender ideology'⁹⁸. Orbán then voted a new constitution in 2011, including article L/1⁹⁹, which states that Hungary shall protect 'the institution of marriage as the life-long union of a man and a woman [...] and the family as the basis of the nation's survival'. The patriarchal definition of the family and the role of women in society is therefore directly rooted in Hungary's constitution, which refuses any other possible conception of family unit.

Orbán's policies have sought to weaken feminist movements. The Council for Social Equality between Women and Men, the last remaining channel for official and unofficial relations between feminist organisations and the government, has been shut down¹⁰⁰. Feminist organisations, labelled as 'foreign agents' are considered as a threat to national identity. This fits neatly with anti-rights rhetoric which holds that gender equality is a product of a Western imperialist agenda.

In parallel, anti-gender and anti-rights groups are flourishing under the patronage of Orbán's government. This is visible through the crisis advisory centres for pregnant women which are part of the 'family protection service' also financed in part by private extremist religious movements. They spread disinformation about the risks of abortion and attempt to persuade women to keep their baby by offering alternative solutions, such as financial help or putting the baby up for adoption. [101] An anti-abortion publicity campaign led by these organisations was financed by €416,000 of government spending in 2011¹⁰². More recently, the World Family Congress, an event which began in the United States, was hosted by Hungary in Budapest in 2017¹⁰³. The Congress brings together conservative countries to defend a traditional vision of the family, in line with Hungary's own anti-LGBTQIA+, anti-gender and anti-abortion policies.

Anti-rights movements oppose abortion in the name of a traditional family model – made up of a working father and a stay-at-home mother. The 2011 constitution states that 'embryonic and foetal life shall be subject to protection from the moment of conception'¹⁰⁴. This signalled the beginning of increasing restrictions on abortion rights under Orbán's government. In September 2022, the Hungarian government added a requirement for pregnant women to listen to the baby's heartbeat¹⁰⁵, adding to their guilt. Women who wanted an abortion were already required to have two separate consultations with the family protection services a few days apart, in an attempt to dissuade them from going ahead with the procedure¹⁰⁶. Anti-democracy conservative rhetoric like Orbán's draw heavily on 'family rights' as opposed to women's rights. In application of the concept of family mainstreaming¹⁰⁷ in politics (as opposed to gender mainstreaming), the family takes priority over the individual and their rights. Hungary is also a signatory of the Geneva Consensus, which calls for the 'promotion of women's health and protection of the family' and which again categorises women's rights as inherent to their place within the family unit.

Orbán has also played on the link between an economic and moral crisis in Europe. The family – the traditional, Christian family – offers the solution to this crisis. The woman as a mother is at the heart of this ideology. Her responsibility is to stay at home and bring up her children, as the future of 'a strong Hungarian nation'¹⁰⁸.

Orbán's speeches, soaked in traditionalism, oppose the all-powerful male against the vulnerable female. In May 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, when women were particularly at risk of domestic violence, Hungary adopted a declaration rejecting the

ratification of the Istanbul Convention. According to the Hungarian government, the Convention prescribes 'dangerous gender ideologies' and 'supports illegal migration'¹⁰⁹, both of which are rigorously opposed by Orbán and his far-right administration.

In addition, LGBTQIA+ rights have suffered a blow from the traditional heteronormative family as enshrined in the constitution. But Orbán's government did not stop there. A law voted in June 2021 bans the dissemination of content deemed to 'promote a personal gender identity different from sex assigned at birth or the change of sex and homosexuality' to people under the age of 18 years¹¹⁰. Enacted under the guise of 'protection of minors' the law states that the portrayal of LGBTQIA+ identities are dangerous for young people. The law manages to combine an anti-gender, anti-women's rights and anti-LGBTQIA+ position all at once. Prior to this, in 2021, the Hungarian consumer protection authority requested that a children's book about LGBTQIA+ issues carried a warning of 'behaviour which does not correspond to roles traditionally attributed to men and women'¹¹¹.

In Hungary, therefore, women and LGBTQIA+ people have been under increasing attack ever since Viktor Orbán took power. This backsliding, in breach of European Union values, has been taking place for around a decade, despite the EU's attempts to oblige Hungary to respect the rule of law.

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The victory for the far-right party Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) and its alliance with right-wing parties in the parliamentary elections of 25 September 2022 represent a change of political course for Italy. The result is also a disaster for Italian women. The new Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, whose motto is 'God, family, fatherland', promotes a nationalist and ultra-traditionalist vision of the family and women's place in society. During the election campaign, Meloni declared, 'I am a woman, I am a mother, I am a Christian.' This phrase alone epitomises the pro-natalist stance of the far-right party and promotion of the 'stay at home mother' supposedly in line with the Christian principles Meloni claims to represent.

One of the immediate causes for concern is the right to abortion. Giorgia Meloni campaigned on the 'right not to have an abortion' and 'alternatives' to abortion, which Meloni considers as a 'defeat'¹¹². Opposed to a right to abortion, Meloni's far-right party suggests the creation of a 'fund to eliminate the economic and social causes which prevent women from continuing with their pregnancies', advancing a need for 'prevention' and to fight against a further drop in fertility rates (Italy has the lowest birth-rate in the European Union, at 1.27 births per woman). This pro-natalist policy is accompanied by other economic and social measures promised during Meloni's campaign, such as lowering of VAT on products and services for early childhood and the gradual introduction of family allowance and free nursery facilities¹¹³.

Fratelli d'Italia already has a track record of preventing access to abortion as a regional authority. When in power in the Piedmont region for example, financial assistance was offered to women to persuade them not to have an abortion, as well as to anti-choice organisations. Regional authorities in Marche refused to implement a national directive authorising women to undergo non-surgical (medical) abortion as outpatients until nine weeks of pregnancy. In Abruzzo, a vote took place on whether aborted fetuses should be buried in graves. The motion did not pass, but there is a danger that the idea is put to the vote again. In these regions, access to the so-called 'morning-after pill' is almost impossible, despite the fact that it is legal.

From these regional examples, it is obvious that the election of the far-right in government is a real threat to women's rights to have control over their own bodies. The appointment of Eugenia Roccella as Minister for Family, Birth Rate and Equal Opportunities is far from insignificant. Known for her anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQIA+ rights positions, Roccella has confirmed what Giorgia Meloni had previously stated: the government will not call into question the 1978 no.194 law, which authorises abortion until twelve weeks. However, she has insisted on the need to 'fully implement' this law, including providing alternatives to abortion. This is exactly the kind of strategy used by Italian anti-choice movements, who have gained access to family planning services to convince women not to undergo an abortion. Anti-choice movements can rely on support from certain parliamentarians, such as Senator Maurizio Gasparri from Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia party. Following Giorgia Meloni's election, Gasparri wasted no time in proposing a law challenging abortion by providing legal status to the foetus from conception. And yet access to abortion is *already* a challenge in Italy. 70% of doctors invoke a conscience clause, rising in some regions to 90% or even 100%, according to a report from the Italian Ministry of Health in 2021. The health crisis has also created significant obstacles with the closure of some family planning services during the pandemic¹¹⁴.

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Beyond the threat to access for both contraception and abortion, there are many other signs of backsliding. Giorgia Meloni refuses to be called 'Madame Council President' and insists on the masculine title of office, reinforcing the perception that women are incompatible with power. Meloni has also turned the clock back on political parity, with only 6 women in a government of 24 Ministers. It is not just semantics; decisions such as these symbolise Meloni's ideological conception of power and society and suggest a genuine risk of further curtailment of human rights, notably LGBTQIA+ and migrants' rights.



Poland

Ever since the Law and Justice (PiS) party took power in 2015, the Polish government has continually attempted to undermine the rule of law through state control of the judiciary, media censorship or prosecution of political dissidents. Women's rights are part and parcel of this pushback and have suffered tragic consequences from a number of ultraconservative and traditionalist policies.

Poland already had one of the strictest abortion laws in Europe before 2015. Access to abortion was legalised in 1956 but restricted with the fall of the Communist regime in 1993. From thereafter and until 2016, abortion was only permitted to safeguard the life or the health of the woman, in the case of rape or incest, or of severe and irreversible foetal illness. Since then, the right to abortion has been further limited. On 22 October 2020, the Polish Constitutional Court invalidated the article which authorised abortion in case of 'severe and irreversible foetal defect or incurable illness', the reason behind 96% of the 1,100 abortions carried out in Poland annually¹¹⁵. In the days following the ruling, tens of thousands of protesters took to the Warsaw streets to face down fifty or so police vans. Around a hundred Catholic fundamentalists also participated, playing the cries of newborn babies through loudspeakers to protesters¹¹⁶. Although the Polish parliament initially backtracked given the scale of the protests from civil society in the midst of the pandemic, the decision became part of a conservative political agenda which paid little heed to the views of the majority. Indeed, in

November 2020, 66% of Polish people said they supported legalising abortion until the twelfth week of pregnancy¹¹⁷.

Faced with this situation, feminist organisations have put processes in place to enable women to access abortion services. Abortion Without Borders is one such organisation, supporting women to access abortion at different stages of pregnancy, whether through medical abortion or by helping them access services abroad¹¹⁸. The organisation was contacted 17,000 times in the six months following the restriction on abortion access and helped 33,000 women obtain an abortion between January 2021-January 2022¹¹⁹. Since 2021, requests for help have exploded. An estimated 100,000 illegal abortions now take place every year in Poland¹²⁰.

These policies have deadly consequences for some women. Izabela Sajbor is one such victim. Refused an abortion at Pszczyna hospital in the south-west of Poland, she died in September 2021 from an infection. 6 other women are known to have lost their lives in this way in 2022, though as Kamila Ferenc, a lawyer for the Polish Foundation for Women and Family Planning (FEDERA) points out, 'these are only the cases we know about. There are certainly many more¹²¹.'

Access to contraception is also restricted. In 2020, the European Contraception Policy Atlas ranked Poland as the worst country in Europe for contraceptive access, with a score of 33.5%. This is made worse by the restrictive policies put in place by PiS. On 1 June 2017, the Polish Senate voted a law making it necessary for women to obtain a prescription to access emergency contraception. This has a catastrophic impact for adolescent girls, people living in remote or rural areas, and rape survivors, according to Amnesty International¹²².

Similar restrictions have been imposed on comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in schools. In October 2019, a draft law aiming to prohibit CSE was adopted at first reading by parliament. This law was presented in parliament as a way to 'fight against paedophilia'. Teaching or promoting CSE to minors under the age of 18 is punishable by up to three years' imprisonment. Ultra-catholic organisations and anti-choice NGOs claimed the law was justified since CSE 'promoted homosexuality, masturbation and other sexual activity, encouraged early sexual relations and was a source of addiction to pornography¹²³.' The law was condemned within the European Union. In a statement adopted with 471 votes in favour, 128 against, and 57 abstentions, MEPs signalled their concern over a possible criminalisation of CSE and underlined the importance of informing young people about sexuality, particularly to prevent violence.

In terms of the fight against sexual and gender-based violence, Poland has not yet withdrawn from the Istanbul Convention, but has threatened to do so. Ratified in 2015, before the PiS party took office, the Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro has described the Convention as a 'feminist creation aimed at justifying gay ideology¹²⁴'. On 17 March 2021, the first debate took place in the Diet (lower house of the Polish parliament) over the draft law 'Yes to the family, no to gender'. If the law is adopted, it is likely Poland will withdraw from the Istanbul Convention, joining the ranks of Erdogan's Turkey as European countries opposed to the Convention.

It is also important to highlight how the Polish government has pursued anti-LGBTQIA+ policies. In 2022, for the 3rd year running, Poland was ranked the European Union's most homophobic country in the ILGA Rainbow Europe index¹²⁵. A few months before the index was published, a citizens' legislative initiative gathering 140,000 signatures resulted in a debate in the Diet of a draft law banning Pride marches. There are also hundreds of 'LGBT-free zones' particularly in the East and South East of the country. Authorities in these zones sign 'anti-LGBTQIA+ ideology' resolutions and refuse access to any individual 'exhibiting' their homosexuality in public places¹²⁶.

Although the Polish parliament initially backtracked given the scale of the protests from civil society in the midst of the pandemic, the decision became part of a conservative political agenda which paid little heed to the views of the majority. Indeed, in November 2020, 66% of Polish people said they supported legalising abortion until the twelfth week of pregnancy.

These frequent attacks on women's rights and on the LGBTQIA+ community have caused indignation in several other EU Member States. On 15 July 2021, the European Commission started an infringement procedure against Poland for 'violation of core values of the European Union' following the creation of these 'anti-LGBT zones'. A few months later, on 3 September 2021, 5 Polish regional councils were called upon to revoke hostile policies toward the LGBTQIA+ community or risk no longer receiving EU cohesion funding. 4 of the 5 subsequently dropped their anti-LGBTQIA+ resolutions.

Ever since the PiS took power in Poland, the rule of law and an independent judiciary have faced multiple attacks. This has led to an increasing clash between the European Union with both Poland and its neighbour, Hungary, in an attempt to enforce the founding EU principles on the rule of law.



Vladimir Putin's twenty-three years at the head of the Russian Federation have been marked by an imperialist approach alongside nationalist and conservative policies. Women's rights, too, have suffered from Putin's ideological control and masculinist fanfare.

Challenging women's and LGBTQIA+ rights is an integral part of 'Putinism'. Anti-feminism goes hand in hand with the war which Putin is waging against 'western values' (including so-called 'gender ideology'), pitching them against traditional – and thus patriarchal – values¹²⁷. Putin's imperialism and expansionism are also directly linked to his war on women. Putin's conception of power and virility are frequently staged, as demonstrated by the notorious photos of the Russian President riding bare-chested through the taiga region. Putin regularly mocks his opponents by calling them women, a synonym to him of all that is weak¹²⁸.

The Feminist Anti-War Resistance is a group whose actions protest against the war in Ukraine. The group has been targeted by the Russian government ever since its creation¹²⁹. Even before the war in Ukraine, feminist activists were continually threatened with imprisonment and tracked by the FSB (Russian intelligence services)¹³⁰. Activists explain that Putin's leadership has normalised violence in Russia, including violence against women, which was decriminalised in 2017.

In Russia, one in five women are victims of domestic violence. This violence goes unpunished unless injuries require hospital treatment. Decriminalising domestic violence is part of a traditionalist and religious rationale promoting family values¹³¹. In this way, a woman who files a complaint against her husband is considered as putting her children in danger by breaking up the family unit¹³².

And yet there would seem to be little public support for the Russian President's anti-feminist agenda, notably in terms of pushback against sexual and gender-based violence. Despite Putin's increasingly violent attacks on feminism, 70% of people wanted to see domestic violence re-criminalised in December 2019¹³³.

In the last few years, the Russian Orthodox Church has been a key ally of the Russian authorities in the protection of traditional values and resistance to abortion (authorised until the twelfth week of pregnancy). Anti-rights movements argue that abortion should be banned because of a supposed demographic crisis in Russia¹³⁴. In August 2017, the 'For Life' movement, spearheaded by anti-abortion groups, claimed to have collected 1 million signatures for a petition to outlaw abortion¹³⁵. This rhetoric on demographic crises is not new; back in 2013, Putin fielded similar arguments in order to introduce a law banning 'abortion advertising'¹³⁶.

In 2013, in order to win support from citizens in favour of Russian traditional values, as well as from orthodox Christians, Putin also introduced a law prohibiting the use of 'homosexual propaganda' with young people¹³⁷. Russia has also taken up the mantle internationally, notably at the UN, as a champion of these values¹³⁸. Just like in Hungary, Putin's 2013 law states that young people must not be exposed to LGBTQIA+ issues, considered as dangerous 'Western

ways¹³⁹. The law sets out financial penalties for any individuals or NGOs taking part in this ‘propaganda’¹⁴⁰. In October 2022, Russian MPs voted for the ban to be extended to any content shared with adults which promotes a ‘denial of family values’ and ‘non-traditional sexual orientation’¹⁴¹. Even before the law was adopted, Russian authorities regularly refused to allow Pride marches, and LGBTQIA+ activists faced intimidation and arbitrary arrests¹⁴². Russia, a signatory of the Geneva Consensus, makes no secret internationally of its war against women. In 2020, the 20th anniversary of Resolution 1325, Russia attempted to bring a vote on an anti-gender resolution in the UN Security Council¹⁴³. As a country which regularly waters down women’s rights texts adopted in the United Nations General Assembly¹⁴⁴, Russia also refused to sign the Istanbul Convention to prevent violence against women in 2014. The war in Ukraine is another violent demonstration of Putin’s international strategy of virility. Russian forces who have invaded Ukraine stand accused of many accounts of sexual violence – accusations which have been verified by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine¹⁴⁵. During the 51st session of the UN Human Rights Council in September 2022, the international community denounced violations of women’s and girls’ rights by the Taliban in Afghanistan¹⁴⁶. Russia’s diplomats, however, refused to condemn the Taliban’s ban on girls going to school, claiming that the Taliban were unable to afford to put single-sex education in place because of financial sanctions imposed by the West¹⁴⁷. In this way, women’s rights have proved a useful tool for Russia’s geopolitical strategic manoeuvring against Western countries. Russia’s development aid strategy also makes regular reference to anti-rights rhetoric, notably to prop up dictatorships in Africa¹⁴⁸. The International Agency for Sovereign Development, Russia’s development agency, works to promote Russian ‘traditional values’ in Africa and¹⁴⁹ in 2019, the Russia-Africa summit proposed a possible partnership around these values¹⁵⁰. In this way, Vladimir Putin’s anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ vision of society has been embedded into national policies through a legal arsenal limiting women’s rights, notably in terms of the fight against sexual and gender-based violence, as well as through speeches reproducing the rhetoric of anti-rights movements and their vision of the family. Putin’s positioning on these issues has also driven Russia’s rejection of international texts in multilateral fora.

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Senegal has a good track record in adopting national, regional and international texts promoting and defending women's rights¹⁵¹. The enforcement of these texts within the country, however, is rather less systematic. Leading Senegalese feminists confirm that there has been a tangible rollback on rights, with knock-on effects on the feminist movement¹⁵². The United Nations Gender Inequality Index (GII) for Senegal was 0.532 in 2021, ranking it 131st out of 190 countries¹⁵³. This is notably due to poor implementation of laws¹⁵⁴. Senegal, like many other countries, has seen a rise in religious conservatism, reinforcing an existing deep-rooted traditionalism¹⁵⁵. The NGO Jamra embodies this kind of conservatism. A self-proclaimed champion of national Islamic values¹⁵⁶, Jamra seeks to position itself as a moral guiding light in Senegal¹⁵⁷. The organisation takes a stance on all kinds of issues, from labelling abortion as 'a method of infanticide'¹⁵⁸ or lobbying for censorship of series which 'attack' Islam¹⁵⁹.

In the same vein, Jamra accuses sexuality education in schools as 'an excuse to promote homosexuality'¹⁶⁰. In November 2020, the Education Minister, working in partnership with UNESCO, organised a workshop with teachers' unions to present a new program for sexual and reproductive education in schools. The unions criticised the program as an attempt to attack the country's values¹⁶¹. At the time, Jamra had made sure to call upon religious chiefs to denounce the project. Under pressure, President Macky Sall then denied there were any plans to make changes to the curriculum¹⁶².

At the time of adoption, the parity law was heavily criticised. Today there is increasing resistance to the legislation from people of faith, civil society or even politicians on the grounds that it stifles meritocracy. Neither does it seem particularly effective. Only 2.68% of local authorities are run by women in Senegal, representing 15 out of 559 local authorities in the country.

Conservatives are embedded into all decision-making levels. They make use of major policies to relay their attacks, notably around anti-LGBTQIA+ rights. In February 2022, for example, conservative groups mobilised alongside 11 MPs to request tougher restrictions on homosexuality¹⁶³. At the first parliamentary session for newly-elected MPs on 12 September 2022, the President of the majority parliamentary group in the National Assembly promised he would never vote for any law legalising homosexuality¹⁶⁴. During the presidential election campaign, Ousmane Sonko, leader of the opposition, promised a tougher law against homosexuality if elected,

in the name of religion and to 'save mankind'¹⁶⁵. In May 2022, President Macky Sall said the religious values of Idrissa Gana Gueye, a Senegalese player in the Paris Saint Germain football team, should be respected¹⁶⁶. Gueye caused an outcry in France by sitting out a match and refusing to wear a LGBTQIA+ rainbow-themed jersey alongside the other players¹⁶⁷.

Given this backlash, feminists are doing their best to mobilise, in particular through social media -which represents a real battleground for advocacy. For example, feminist movements have mobilised to call for the reform of the old-fashioned and sexist Family Code¹⁶⁸ and in 2020, helped to make rape punishable as a crime, rather than simply a criminal offence¹⁶⁹. Faced with a lack of response from politicians, feminist activists also work to raise awareness with the general public¹⁷⁰. In so doing, they brave moral and religious censorship to make women's voices heard, and advocate on issues such as combatting the normalisation of rape culture¹⁷¹, lobbying against impunity for rapists¹⁷², or calling for proper implementation of the parity law¹⁷³ introduced in 2010. The 2010 parity law requires electoral lists to be composed of alternate male and female candidates - failing which they are invalid¹⁷⁴. However, even if the law has enabled greater female participation in the National Assembly, the law is constantly called into question and the sanctions it stipulates are not enforced. During local elections on 23 January 2023, the National Observatory for Parity (ONP) found that some

locally elected (department and municipal) authorities did not comply with parity¹⁷⁵. On 19 April 2022, the Court of Appeal annulled the election of 60 municipal and department councils which did not comply with parity laws and gave them a month to re-organise the election¹⁷⁶. To date, this has not taken place.

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Senegal remains therefore confronted by influential religious conservatism and strong resistance to gender equality within society. Feminist organisations continue to mobilise to overcome these challenges.



South Korea

The #MeToo movement has resonated particularly strongly within the highly conservative Korean society. Against a backdrop of numerous cases of spycam sex crimes¹⁷⁹, regularly reported in the news¹⁸⁰, South Korean women took to the streets in their thousands to denounce systematic sexual violence. In 2020, digital sex crime targeting women was 7.5 times higher than in 2003¹⁸¹. In such a hyperconnected society, cyberstalking, fuelled by poisonous masculinism, is taking a heavy toll. South Korea already has the highest suicide rate among OECD Member States¹⁸² and, as the website The Korea Bizwire revealed, the rate of suicide attempts amongst young people – particularly young women – has increased by 32% in the last four years¹⁸³. Almost 90% of victims of violent crime are women. In January 2022, centre-left newspaper The Hankyoreh produced a special feature on the 'record 500 feminicides' which took place between January 2016 and November 2021¹⁸⁴.

In spite of small-scale achievements on gender equality and civil society action under former President Moon Jae-in (2017-2022), much remains to be done. In 2020 the gender pay gap stood at 32%, the biggest in the OECD; and in 2022, women made up only 20.9% of decision-making positions and 6.3% of board members for South Korea's largest companies. As of July 2022, only 18.6% of MPs and 7.4% of Ministers are women, a clear contrast to the previous government, composed of almost 30% women. The 2022 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index ranks South Korea 115th out of 146 countries in terms of 'economic participation and opportunity' for women¹⁸⁵.

Despite this evident inequality, anti-feminist and masculinist movements continue campaigning, and are even gaining ground in politics and economics. Highly active on social media, their successes include the withdrawal of supermarket advertisements they deem demeaning to men, the cancellation of feminist conferences at prestigious universities, or appearing at round-table discussions at the South Korean National Assembly. In September 2019, Moon Sung-ho, leader of the masculinist group Dang Dang We, told MPs that 'feminism is no longer about gender equality. It is gender discrimination and its manner is violent and hateful¹⁸⁶.' In May 2021, a study by marketing and research firm Hankook Research found that more than 77% of men in their twenties and more than 73% of men in their thirties were 'repulsed by feminists or feminism¹⁸⁷'. Believing themselves disadvantaged in the labour market because of obligatory military service, from which young women are currently exempt, around 75% of young men disapprove of government policies on gender equality such as quotas or programmes supporting women who have interrupted their professional activity through childbirth. This anti-feminist backlash led to the election of the current conservative President, Yoon Suk-yeol, whose People Power Party believes that structural sexism is a thing of the past. President Yoon, who has said that 'feminism' is to blame for the country's low birth-rates, has committed to abolish the Gender Equality Ministry, quotas in the public sector, and to give tougher defamation sentences for women.

Since 2018, use of the word 'backlash' has exploded in South Korean media. According to political commentator Ki-bong Han, 'feminist backlash has surged not because women have achieved full equality, but because equality has become more likely. It is a preventative strike to stop women in their tracks, long before they cross the finishing line'¹⁸⁸. For Professor of Sociology Shin Kyung-ah, 'the backlash phenomenon' could be worsened by a situation of

political polarisation and economic crisis. 'By encouraging longer working hours, the government runs the risk of making it even more difficult for women to come back to work after their maternity leave if they cannot juggle both work and childcare'¹⁸⁹.

The legalisation of abortion by the Constitutional Court since 1 January 2021 symbolises a victory for women in South Korea. However, despite the absolute majority wielded by President Moon during his mandate, the Democratic Party did not introduce legislation setting out a legal framework for the right to abortion. Complete legal uncertainty therefore continues over abortion rights, with little hope of clarity from the recently-elected People Power Party.

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Sweden

Sweden, and the Nordic countries in general, are often held up as a standard for public policy on gender equality. And with good reason. Many Nordic countries are ranked at the top of several international indexes. In the 2022 World Economic Forum Global Gender Index, Iceland, Finland, Norway and Sweden occupied 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 5th place respectively. In the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) Gender Equality Index, Nordic countries also outshine other EU Member States, arriving in 1st place (Sweden), 2nd place (Denmark) and 5th place (Finland). Women's participation in politics is another example of the region's lead over the rest of the world: out of a total of 195 countries worldwide, several of the 28 women heads of state or government hail from Nordic countries. Examples are Mette Frederiksen (Denmark), Sanna Marin (Finland), Katrin Jakobsdottir (Iceland) and Magdalena Andersson (Sweden), until she was forced to resign when right and far-right took power in Sweden's September 2022 legislative elections.

It is for a large part the cultural heritage of Nordic countries which enables them to be seen as champions for these issues, and at the forefront of progress on gender equality. Women in Nordic countries obtained the right to vote well before women elsewhere in Europe, as was the case in Finland (1906), Norway (1913), Iceland and Denmark (1915) and Sweden (1921). A long tradition of female participation in politics has enabled that trend to continue, facilitating women's accession to decision-making political roles and their ability to influence public policy-making on gender equality.

Despite this tradition of women's equality, Sweden, too, witnessed a strong public reaction to the #MeToo movement and the Weinstein affair in October 2017. On 8 November 2017, 703 actresses and comedians penned a tribune in the daily newspaper *Svenska Dadbladet* to denounce their experiences of rape or sexual assault. In the following weeks, over 70,000 Swedish women spoke out, from all walks of life, as women lawyers, engineers, chefs, doctors, journalists, police officers, musicians, archaeologists, and many more.

Even with this testimony from across Swedish society, women still faced strong resistance when calling out sexual violence, such as the dozen women who spoke out publicly about

their sexual assault and who were convicted for libel¹⁹⁰. The case of journalist Cissi Wallin illustrates how Swedish society – and in particular the legal system – refused to face facts. In October 2017, Wallin announced on Instagram that she had been raped by fellow journalist Fredrik Virtanen. Having filed a complaint in 2011, it was the first time that Wallin had spoken publicly about the assault. Following her post, other women came forward to accuse Virtanen. Virtanen, however, then took Wallin to court for libel. The Ombudsman sided with Virtanen and Wallin was ordered to pay a fine, before eventually being cleared of all charges at her appeal hearing. Despite this, the Justice Minister at the time – a woman herself – tried to stop Wallin from publishing the account of her rape. Cases like this one show how much the Swedish legal system remains influenced by sexist and misogynistic stereotypes. Indeed, fearful that such treatment would prevent further women from speaking out, feminist organisations organised ‘libel pots’ to support women sentenced to pay fines for libel after naming their attacker¹⁹¹.

In 2019, Amnesty International published a report highlighting the ‘Nordic paradox’ or the discrepancy between high levels of gender equality and yet a high prevalence of sexual assault, particularly rape, in these countries: an average of 30% of women in Denmark, Finland and Sweden are victims of intimate partner violence, compared to 22% on average in the rest of the European Union¹⁹². The report also criticised the widespread impunity for attackers and a legal system which harms victims of sexual and gender-based violence and reinforces a culture of silence and taboo. In Sweden, for example, it is estimated that only 5% of rapists are sentenced.

Sweden’s latest elections have also complicated matters. A month after the September 2022 legislative elections and the victory of the right-wing coalition, supported by the far-right, newly appointed Minister for Foreign Affairs Tobias Billström announced that Sweden would no longer pursue a feminist foreign policy, stating that ‘this label has not served a good purpose¹⁹³’.

As the first country in the world to adopt a feminist foreign policy in 2014, Sweden had been part of a small group of countries with France, Canada and Mexico, alongside others, fighting to defend women’s rights and human rights internationally and within international fora. The decision by the new government to end this policy is a serious setback for women’s rights globally but may unfortunately be only the first in a series for the new Swedish government, driven by an agenda focused on security and immigration.

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Tunisia

Tunisia has often been considered at the forefront of women's rights in the Arab world, even before the Jasmine revolution. The 1956 Code of Personal Status abolished polygamy and repudiation; domestic violence is considered a crime; article 46 of the 2014 constitution enshrines the principle of parity and the eradication of violence against women; and Tunisian women have equal rights in marriage, divorce and property. Having obtained suffrage in 1957 and political eligibility in 1959, women held 31% of seats after the October 2014 parliamentary elections, rising to 36% by the end of the parliamentary term¹⁹⁴. Tunisia was the first Arab and Muslim country to legalise abortion in 1973, before France, which followed suit in 1974. Tunisia was also the first African country to legalise medical abortion in 2000. The law adopted in 2017 combating violence and discrimination against women was also considered a historical milestone.

Despite this impressive portrait, a risk remains nevertheless for Tunisia to backtrack on women's rights, and notably on abortion. Even if the procedure was legalised in 1973 and remains - in theory - free of charge and accessible in the first trimester of pregnancy, the reality is very different, given shortages of medicine, medical practitioners who try to dissuade women from going ahead, or a drastic fall in the number of health clinics offering abortion services. In 2010, about 50 hospitals and 24 family planning centres were carrying out surgical abortions¹⁹⁵. Today, only two hospitals continue to offer abortion¹⁹⁶. In practice, therefore, Tunisian women are often prevented from accessing abortion within the time limit. In addition to this, there is a severe shortage of health personnel - with gynaecologists and midwives rarely replaced when they retire - as well as regional inequalities. A 2019 Health Map published by the Tunisian Ministry of Health shows a concentration of gynaecologists-obstetricians in the north and east of the country, with the southern and western regions suffering from an acute shortage in trained health staff¹⁹⁷. The principle of abortion being available free of charge can also be questioned, given the difficulties faced by women to obtain an abortion within the time limit at public hospitals. Those who can afford it turn instead to private health clinics, where the service is offered for 300-500 dinars. In reality,

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Feminist organisations are actively organising to prevent a reversal of women's rights and protect the progress achieved. In 2012, feminist activists helped to prevent the Islamic-conservative party Ennahda from changing the constitution to replace the notion of 'equality' between men and women with 'complementarity'. However, these efforts - and the substantial legal progress made - do not guarantee full equality in legislation. For example, even if the 12 July 1993 law removed the requirement for wives to obey their husbands, the latter still retained their status as 'head of the household' and article 23 of the Code of

Personal Status stipulates that the husband must 'provide for his wife and children'. The same article states that 'both spouses shall fulfil their conjugal duties in conformity with usage and custom'. Even if the article ostensibly applies to both spouses, it is evident that the notion of 'conjugal duties' rarely has the same significance for men as it does for women.

Retired law professor Kais Saied was elected as President of Tunisia in autumn 2019. Since then, many feminist organisations have had cause to raise concerns, particularly since Saied invoked emergency powers in July 2021. Elected on the back of an ‘anti-system’ vote, Saied promised to give power back to the people through a representative democracy and, in so doing, succeed where he considered the previous government had failed. However, the number of female parliamentarians fell from 36% during the 2014-2019 parliamentary term to 22% in the legislative elections of 2019. Yosra Frawes, President of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), says that this fall in women’s political participation is due to a lack of interest from political parties, particularly following the decline in influence of the Nidaa Tounes party, a former political force and champion of gender equality. Frawes also believes it is due to flaws in the parity law for elected assemblies, which was enshrined in the 2014 constitution until being replaced by a new text voted in September 2022. The new law requires candidates to collect at least 400 signatures from voters registered in their constituencies in order to stand, and to self-fund their electoral campaigns, for which they were previously entitled to use public funds. This change has had consequences for female candidates whose local support networks and funding are less well-developed than their male counterparts¹⁹⁸. Unsurprisingly, in the run-up to the 17 December 2022 legislative elections, only 214 women out of a total of 1,427 candidates submitted their application to stand in the election with the Tunisian electoral commission.

The new constitution adopted on 26 July 2022 also raises red flags. Article 5 provides for the State as the sole authority with the power to ‘achieve the purposes of Islam’. Article 55 opens the possibility to limit rights and freedom – including, potentially, women’s rights – for ‘the necessity of public security, national defence or public health’. However, the application of these ‘purposes of Islam’, now enshrined in article 5, remains to be defined. Such ambiguity rings alarm bells for human rights and women’s rights organisations, as Yosra Frawes underlines: ‘Kais Saied makes no mention of international conventions which protect human rights. He has replaced international law with *maqacid*¹⁹⁹, the purpose of Islam, because he doesn’t believe in individual rights, or gender equality.’

The situation is even more concerning given the President’s control of the justice system. In June 2022, Saied suspended female judge Kheira Ben Khelifa for ‘affront to decency’ accusing her of adultery. This led to a cyber-stalking campaign which ended in a trial and even an obligation for the judge to take a virginity test²⁰⁰. In Tunisia, adultery and affront to decency are punishable by five years’ and one year’s imprisonment respectively. The historian Dalenda Larguèche told French newspaper *Le Monde* that ‘here we are again, debating women’s bodies and taboos in society, in part because the Penal Code was not updated to reflect principles about individual freedom, even though these were guaranteed by the 2014 constitution.’ Given this political uncertainty in Tunisia, feminist organisations remain on alert.



The Istanbul Convention was adopted on 7 April 2011 by all Council of Europe Member States, except Russia and Azerbaijan. Turkey was the first country to ratify the text, proclaimed on home soil, on 14 March 2012. The Turkish government also actively promoted the Convention with other Council of Europe Member States. This was highly symbolic both in terms of the creation of a legal framework for victims of sexual and gender-based violence and for the promotion of gender equality. Fast forward almost ten years, however, and Turkey has instead withdrawn from the Istanbul Convention by presidential decree. To justify the withdrawal, enacted 1 July 2021, the Turkish government accused the text of ‘threatening traditional family structures’ and ‘normalising homosexuality²⁰¹’. The Turkish Council of State confirmed Turkey’s withdrawal from the Convention in July 2022²⁰². Turkey is not the first country to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention. The first countries to leave were Bulgaria (in 2018), Slovakia (in 2019) and Hungary and Poland (in 2020). Turkey’s withdrawal therefore reaffirms an established trend for some Council of Europe Member States and sends a

disastrous signal on the importance of women's rights, in particular to victims of domestic or sexual and gender-based violence. To understand Turkey's withdrawal, we must first grasp how Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has evolved over time. In 2002, the AKP won a majority in the legislative elections on a manifesto which promised reforms to improve women's everyday lives in Turkey. In 2004, the Turkish parliament proclaimed equality between women and men, and in 2005, a new Penal Code was adopted establishing greater individual freedom. These measures aimed to improve civil rights in Turkey and, in so doing, help fulfil the conditions for accession to the European Union. However, the wave of reforms – and progress on women's rights – came to an abrupt halt when talks for EU accession were suspended. Evidence for this can be found in the proliferation of sexual crimes such as rape or sexual assault, which increased by 30% between 2002-2009²⁰³. Instead of taking action to address the issue, the government openly hardened its position. As Prime Minister in 2012, for example, Erdoğan stated that he was 'a Prime Minister who considers abortion as murder. No one should have allowed this to happen. There is no difference between killing a baby in its mother's womb or after it is born²⁰⁴.' Erdoğan's position on this issue became clear shortly after taking power. Despite the fact that abortion is authorised until the tenth week of pregnancy, pressure by the government has resulted in an informal ban, with public hospitals and doctors refusing to provide abortion services. Only twenty or so doctors were still performing abortions in 2020, of which only one in Istanbul – a city with a population of 16 million. Women who cannot afford to pay for abortion services in private health clinics turn instead to clandestine abortion through drugs obtained on the black market. In so doing, they run the risk of multiple and even life-threatening health complications²⁰⁵. With regards to contraception, Erdoğan has called on Muslim families in Turkey to reject birth control in order to increase the number of their descendants²⁰⁶. Erdoğan's speeches convey the religious and conservative messaging of a regime which

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confines women to the home and encourages them to raise the birth rate. But the home, of course, can be a dangerous place for women, and Turkey is no exception. This is demonstrated by the number of feminicides in recent years (404 in 2018, 474 in 2019, 300 in 2020 and 423 in 2021²⁰⁷) even if AKP officials do not seem to set much store by these figures.

A report published in May 2022 by the NGO Human Rights Watch concluded that the

Turkish government was failing to protect victims of domestic violence²⁰⁸. Though courts and the police are issuing an increasing number of preventive orders (272, 870 in 2021, compared to 139,218 in 2016) as well as protective orders (10,401 in 2021 compared to 1,801 in 2016) against violent partners, there is no evaluation of these measures as public policies²⁰⁹ and many women refrain from filing a complaint. Some religious and anti-feminist groups have called for the repeal of the law preventing violence against women, adopted in 2012 to transpose the Istanbul Convention into Turkish law. To date, the law is still in effect, although not necessarily effective; feminist organisations have been campaigning for several years for its full implementation to prevent and punish feminicides²¹⁰.

The NGO platform 'We will stop femicide' (Kadın Cinayetlerini Durduracağız) established in 2010 is one such organisation, and a recent illustration of backlash in Turkey. The platform collects the names of femicide victims and shares them on social media to advocate for change. The platform also provides legal advice to women who are victims of violence and offers safe spaces for sharing and listening to testimony. Because of this work, legal proceedings were launched against the NGO for 'illegal and immoral activities²¹¹'. According to Leyla Süren, lawyer for the platform, the charges are mostly made up of screenshots of posts criticising Erdoğan, taken from female volunteers' social media accounts. The trial is expected to conclude in the autumn, with the next hearing being held in September 2023. Banning the 'We will stop femicide' platform would be a further assault on Turkish women's rights and freedom in a country which is increasingly being singled out for these attacks.



United States of America

In the United States, the Republican Party drives a conservative programme, supported by extremist Evangelists and Catholics who have substantial influence over public-policy making and in the funding of anti-rights movements. 80% of Evangelist Christians voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 elections²¹². In addition to this, Trump's anti-women's rights agenda between 2017-2021 continues to do severe damage, even after leaving office.

One of Trump's first acts following his election was to reinstate the Mexico City Policy, also known as the 'Global Gag Rule', first introduced by Ronald Reagan in 1985. Ever since then, the Global Gag Rule has been successively abolished and then reintroduced by Democrat and Republican administrations respectively. The policy prevents foreign (non-governmental) organisations who are recipients of US government funding for family planning (representing around USD \$600 million annually) from carrying out, providing services, advice or information on abortion, or advocacy for liberalisation of access to abortion in countries in which they work, even if these activities are financed by non-US government funds²¹³. Worse, Trump made the policy even more restrictive during his first year in office, extending it to any NGO receiving US funding for work on global health more broadly. Representing an amount of USD \$8.8 billion of funding annually, the restrictions had a direct impact on many more organisations as well as the women depending on them for abortion services, especially in countries without any state provision. Other healthcare provision was also affected, such as the fight against HIV and other infectious diseases.

After his election in 2021, Democrat President Joe Biden once more repealed the Global Gag Rule. But a win for a Republican administration at the next election could well reverse this decision, creating a highly uncertain situation for feminist organisations, many of which depend on the US for a large part of their resources. The United States remains the world's biggest donor for health funding²¹⁴.

Biden has also withdrawn the United States from the Geneva Consensus, for which the Declaration was co-drafted by the United States under Trump. Despite this, abortion remains vulnerable to attacks from a future Republican administration and a decision to re-join the Geneva Consensus.

There is even greater concern after the November 2022 midterm elections, where a narrow victory gave the Republican party a majority in Congress. This may prevent Biden from implementing progressive measures²¹⁵ such as the definitive repeal of the Global Gag Rule. In addition, Trump's nomination of three anti-abortion judges to the Supreme Court was instrumental in the Court's decision to overturn the *Roe vs. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood vs. Casey* rulings. This decision officially put an end to the right to abortion at federal level, delegating the possibility of legislation to each state²¹⁶. The State of Missouri was the first to move to officially prohibit abortion, followed by 11 others where 'trigger laws' banning abortion had already been prepared, ready to be implemented as soon as the federal law had been modified. According to the Guttmacher Institute, 26 federal states may eventually ban abortion. Only 23 states have explicitly confirmed that the right to abortion will be protected in state laws²¹⁷. This would result in half of all American women being denied access to abortion.

During his mandate, Trump continually introduced regulation which put women's lives in danger and opposed gender equality. He weakened many laws and regulations promoting gender equality and defending sexual and reproductive rights, including on health cover for contraception, gender pay parity, sexual and gender-based violence in schools, abortion (with the extension of the Global Gag Rule), or protection of LGBTQIA+ rights in healthcare²¹⁸. He also cut US funding to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the world's biggest family planning and SRHR funding organisation²¹⁹. Although Biden reversed this decision, the cut in resources left many women in distress during Trump's four years in office.

Representing an amount of USD \$8.8 billion of funding annually, the restrictions had a direct impact on many more organisations as well as the women depending on them for abortion services, especially in countries without any state provision. Other healthcare provision was also affected, such as the fight against HIV and other infectious diseases.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has called on the Biden administration to do more to protect LGBTQIA+ rights, under threat in many federal states across the country²²⁰. Measures remain in place which continue to discriminate against LGBTQIA+ people, notably a refusal to provide comprehensive sexuality education and information. Between June 2021 and June 2022, 1,648 books were banned related to themes such as abortion, racism, or SRHR. In reality, however, 41% of these books covered issues related to

LGBTQIA+²²¹. LGBTQIA+ rights are threatened in all public spaces. Laws have been passed, notably in South Carolina and Mississippi, with 'conscientious objection' clauses which act as a licence to discriminate against LGBTQIA+ people, who find themselves – entirely lawfully – refused access to services on these religious or moral grounds²²². In this way, the State of Texas voted the so-called 'Don't Say Gay' law in March 2022, which bans discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity in primary schools. Under the guise of giving more say to parents on their children's education and protecting them from subjects which are 'not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students²²³' the law contends that LGBTQIA+ questions are dangerous for children.

Donald Trump's time in office was catastrophic for women's rights both in the United States and internationally. The consequences of the overturning of *Roe vs. Wade* will be dramatic for American women. As the medical journal *The Lancet* noted in its editorial, 'women will die.' Joe Biden's presidency will be decisive in correcting the impacts of the Trump administration on women's and LGBTQIA+ rights, even if there appears to be little hope of reinstating the *Roe vs. Wade* ruling.

IV.

Recommendations for France's foreign policy



More than five years after #MeToo, opposition to women's rights continues to grow across the world. Over the last decade, France has been increasingly vocal in multilateral fora on gender equality. France now has a unique role to play internationally, particularly as part of a dozen or so other countries who have committed to implementing a feminist foreign policy.

This report has demonstrated how anti-rights movements use their organisation and structure to block progress, maintain the status quo or even reverse access to fundamental rights. In parallel, progressive movements are mobilising to counter these attacks and continue to enable progress on gender equality in international or national institutions, and especially through feminist civil society organisations. The Generation Equality Forum provided a way to bring together like-minded countries in coalitions on gender equality and together overcome blockages created by conservative states in multilateral fora. This kind of positive initiative creates new spaces for progressive dialogue and new alliances, even if the results are not always tangible or immediate.

We must now go further, both politically and financially. Anti-rights movements are building, connecting and strengthening their efforts globally. The influence of these networks has direct implications for France, and requires strong French mobilisation in response, both domestically and through foreign policy channels. It is essential to establish a presence at all levels - locally, nationally, internationally - and make progress across the board, notably by supporting civil society organisations and enabling the creation of transnational feminist alliances. It is also a question of coherence. A

country such as France cannot credibly claim to promote a feminist foreign policy without the investment, best practice on an institutional level, and domestic legislative progress that go with it. In essence, France must be at the forefront of international and UN efforts to defend these rights, which are under constant threat. Enshrining the right to abortion in the French constitution would be one way to both protect women's rights in

France and also send a strong message to the international community. In the same vein, France must ensure full implementation of the 2001 law, which makes it compulsory to provide at least three classes on sex education a year in primary, lower and upper-secondary schools²²⁴. France must also provide sufficient funding for the fight against sexual and gender-based violence (for more on this, see the call to action from the Fondation des femmes and French feminist organisation partners, 'Pour un plan d'urgence pour l'égalité !' [*An urgent action plan for equality!*²²⁵]).

With Macron's second term in office underway, it is time for France to enact a truly feminist foreign policy and align French political discourse on strong multilateralism with an equally robust defence of a global feminist agenda.

Implementing a genuine feminist foreign policy requires multiple political, financing and institutional change. This can only come from the highest level, and as such must be driven by the President and promoted by the whole of the government. Parliamentarians also have a duty to act, by monitoring the government's action and proactively proposing new ideas and proposals.

With Macron's second term in office underway, it is time for France to enact a truly feminist foreign policy and align French political discourse on strong multilateralism with an equally robust defence of a global feminist agenda.

Priority must be given to three main levers:

- 1 Increase financing to feminist organisations and movements**
- 2 Defend and protect feminist activists and networks**
- 3 Turn feminist goals into a diplomatic priority in French, European and global institutions**



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 demonstrates 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.).

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 organisations²²⁶. 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 recommendations²²⁷ 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

According to the latest available figures from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), around 4% of French official development assistance (ODA) goes to projects whose main objective is gender equality. The target set out in France’s Inclusive Development and Combating Global Inequalities programming law is to reach 20% by 2025.



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 AWID have provided a recommended approach²²⁸, in line with the UN, whose Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders (2019) 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 French 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 French, European and global institutions

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

In addition to fora where women's rights have traditionally been defended, 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. France 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 French institutional frameworks for feminist foreign policies

- **Make the forthcoming international strategy for gender equality the institutional framework for France 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).
- **Increase resources available to the new Ambassador for LGBT+ 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 France's role on certain Boards, such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, the WHO Academy, 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**, as was promised by Emmanuel Macron in 2022;

- **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 France's financial contributions 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.

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