



Briefing note

Feminist responses to ‘norm-spoiling’ at the United Nations

Rebecca Holmes
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Key messages

‘Norm-spoiling’ refers to an agenda that seeks to undermine the legitimacy of gender equality and women’s rights norms. Such activities are sustained by an increasingly professionalised network of actors disseminating anti-rights narratives within UN systems and changing human rights discourse.

Norm-spoiling in multilateral arenas, such as the United Nations, aims to undermine the international consensus on women’s rights. Anti-gender actors are gaining ground through diverse and unusual alliances that are increasingly well-organised and well-funded. Together, they are creating a dangerous movement that opposes the rights of women and LGBTQI+ people.

Despite this challenging environment, international feminist activists are working pro-actively in multilateral spaces to defend women’s rights, disrupt the expansion of anti-gender influence, and promote new and positive change.

Support for the feminist movement in its efforts to challenge norm-spoiling requires: increased and improved funding for feminist organisations to work at transnational levels; support for inclusive alliances and networks for collective action; investment in research, evidence and data to monitor norm-spoiling and identify successful counter strategies; greater convening and communication around the rights and norms for women and LGBTQI+ people; and support for strategic advocacy at the UN.

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About this publication

The content of this publication has been produced rapidly to provide early ideas and analysis on a given theme. Its purpose is to provide timely insights for policymakers, practitioners and activists into how backlash to feminism and women's rights is underway at the multi-lateral level.

About the author

Rebecca Holmes^{ID} is a Research Associate working with the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion programme.

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Acronyms

BPfA	Beijing Conference and Platform for Action
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
C-FAM	Center for Family and Human Rights
CSE	Comprehensive Sexuality Education
CSW	United Nations Commission on the Status of Women
DAWG	Discrimination Against Women and Girls (UN Working Group)
IOF	International Organization of the Family
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PFA	Platform for Action
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SRHR	Sexual and reproductive health and rights
UN	United Nations

1 Introduction

Threats to progress on gender equality, LGBTQI+ diversity and women's rights are gaining traction. Across the world and in global, national and local spaces, anti-rights actors are working collectively to undermine and restrict the rights of women and LGBTQI+ people. Attacks on gender equality and the rights of women and girls at the international level have been termed *norm-spoiling* – a phrase used to describe a process whereby actors directly challenge existing (and new or emerging) norms to weaken their influence (Sanders, 2018: 272). Examples of norm-spoiling tactics include influencing changes to language in United Nations (UN) documents on the rights for women and LGBTQI+ people, blocking inclusive development and gender equality policies and frameworks within multilateral governance arenas, and rolling back sexual and reproductive rights.

Emerging literature is documenting a multitude of actors and transnational networks that are driving norm-spoiling at the international level, aiming to understand their strategies and how they operate within a wider context of anti-democratic politics (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023; Edström et al., 2023; Sanders and Jenkins, 2022; Pazello, 2022; Washington et al., 2021; Lewin, 2021; Goetz, 2020; Corredor, 2019; Sanders, 2018). Backlash against gender equality and women's rights is not new, and even 'robust' international norms are subject to rejection, reformulation, contestation and resistance. They are also influenced by national and regional norms, organisational cultures and historical and institutional legacies (Acharya, 2004).

Sanders (2018) uses the term norm-spoiling to describe something more recent: strategic and transnational efforts to undermine the international women's rights agenda. These efforts can be seen in the acceleration of a well-coordinated, funded and organised transnational network that includes a diverse set of actors, all of them aiming to reverse the gains on women's rights, gender justice and gender equality. They also promote broader anti-rights policy agendas that undermine individual rights (or that prioritise the rights of certain groups over others) (Washington et al., 2021), such as limiting access to reproductive rights or criminalising homosexuality. These actors challenge the *legitimacy* of human rights, such as those achieved through the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), commitments made at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994 and the World Conference in Beijing in 1995, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). All these international agendas have supported important advances in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), women's economic justice and girls' equal access to education, as well as progress on tackling gender-based violence.

Processes that undermine the legitimacy of these norms, which have been developed into global frameworks, have dangerous repercussions for women's rights at international and national levels, and for the everyday lives of women and girls, and LGBTQI+ communities. This is seen most clearly in the regression of access to SRHR, the defunding of related services, and the reversal of

gender equality policies. They are also evident in the curtailing of LGBTQI+ freedoms through, for example, restricting access to sexual and reproductive health services, banning comprehensive sexuality education, and policies that exclude trans people from receiving basic healthcare or restrict legal recognition. Those most targeted and impacted are often the most marginalised in society, as the effects of norm-spoiling movements are closely tied to the broader political environment and a weakening of democratic norms. Increasingly authoritarian governments seek to constrain civic space, promote intolerance and create a hostile environment (Edström et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2023).

The aim of this ODI Briefing paper is to lay out current issues around how the international consensus on gender justice is being eroded at the UN. Based on a review of published and grey literature as well as internet searches, it synthesises existing knowledge on the current context of norm-spoiling and examines key moments around the ICPD, the Beijing Conference and Platform for Action (BPfA), the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), and the SDGs. The paper then illustrates some of the key strategies used by feminist movements to counter these efforts within multilateral institutions alongside the broader policy and political environment.

It is important to note several limitations. First, the paper does not have the space to go into historical or current divisions on certain issues within the feminist movement (for example around LGBTQI+ rights) although these are important to recognise as they influence how feminist movements prioritise their own actions to counter norm-spoiling. Second, it focuses on norm-spoiling at the international level, which recognises that strategies are also in place at national levels. And third, the section on feminist activities to counter norm-spoiling is not a comprehensive mapping of every women's rights movement working in this area. Given the limited documentation on the successes of women's rights movements in countering norm-spoiling at the multilateral level, Section 4 highlights a selection of actions taken by a few feminist organisations.

2 What is ‘norm-spoiling’?

2.1 Understanding the concept

Norms are shared and accepted standards of behaviour in society. Norms will always be contested, yet they often prevail because they have wide social acceptance by most people, and can be institutionalised through legal rights and policies. However, the extent to which international norms translate into national and local rights, policies and behaviours is subject to multiple factors, including how specific the actions or outcomes associated with the norm are, as well as the broader political economy in which they operate (Krook and True, 2012; Zwingel, 2020).

Feminists have been (and still are) fighting hard for norms related to gender equality and women’s rights, aiming to institutionalise gender-equal norms through legal rights and policies at local, national, regional and global levels. At the global level, these norms are embedded in legislations, conventions, resolutions and declarations, such as CEDAW, BPfA and the SDGs, and upheld through the UN system. Countries, in turn, develop national plans of action, programmes, laws and related policies to implement their commitments, often with the support of civil society organisations.

Rebecca Sanders coined the term ‘norm-spoiling’ to describe ‘the process through which actors directly challenge existing norms with the aim of weakening their influence’ (Sanders, 2018: 272). The term is now used to make visible the efforts of certain actors to attack the foundations upon which the international women’s rights agenda has been established: the BPfA and subsequent declarations, and the work of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) as the main global intergovernmental body dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. While norm-spoiling is not the only barrier to progress on international rights, and contestation is not always problematic, Sanders cautions that the strategies used in norm-spoiling may be ‘both easier to accomplish and more difficult to recognise than traditional forms of normative advocacy’ (2018: 272). Thus, they may be able to undermine women’s rights swiftly but without much notice by stakeholders not directly involved in these processes.

Challenges to the progress and embedding of norms that support gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights are nothing new, and the gains made in institutionalising norms on gender equality and rights have always been fragile, resisted and at risk of regression (Goetz, 2020; Datta, 2021; Khan et al., 2023). In recent years, these challenges have become increasingly understood as the anti-gender movement, ‘backlash’, a countermovement, or emerging forms of illiberalism (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023; Edström et al., 2023) (also see Box 1 for a definition of terms used in this paper).

There is a growing recognition, however, of a significant and heightened threat to reverse and dismantle hard-won progress on gender equality and women’s rights through a ‘systematic and organised’ opposition and transnational strategy. This aims to dismantle the norms upheld at the

global level through a sustained attack on multilateral processes (GADN, 2023; Sanders, 2018). Indeed, Sonia Correa, the Brazilian feminist activist sums this up in conversation with Murray (2022: 3250) by saying:

‘In my view, what we are witnessing is the continuation of a longstanding war against the legitimacy of human rights, now waged in entirely novel terms. While in the past conservatives abhorred human rights, now they are disputing their meanings.’

Box 1 A note on terms used in this briefing note

Norm-spoiling: ‘The process through which actors directly challenge existing norms with the aim of weakening their influence’ (Sanders, 2018: 272).

Norm-spoilers, anti-rights and anti-gender: We use these terms interchangeably to refer to actors that undermine and challenge the human rights and freedoms of women and LGBTQI+ people.

Pro-family: Anti-rights actors use this term to refer to themselves and, in their advocacy, to oppose reproductive and sexual rights. It promotes a ‘traditional’ or ‘natural’ view of a heteronormative and patriarchal family structure and is used to undermine gender equality, diversity and women’s rights in global human rights frameworks and other policy contexts (Lewin, 2021).

Norm-spoiling at the global level has significant repercussions at national and local levels. The effects of norm-spoiling include challenging, contesting and undermining *existing* gender equality rights as well as creating obstacles for the achievement of *future* transformative changes towards greater gender justice. In many countries, global commitments serve as an important framework for feminists at national levels, including their ability to hold their governments to account on the implementation of international laws and policies. In addition, when international norms are undermined or questioned, this not only delays their diffusion to national and local levels, it also creates opportunities for contestation, reversal and the establishment of entirely different global and national norm-setting altogether (Sanders, 2018; Waylen, 2007).

The recent rise of anti-rights political environments in many countries further amplifies the power of anti-gender actors (for example, in the United States during the recent tenure of President Trump, and Brazil’s former President Bolsonaro). This enabling environment for anti-rights narratives also increases ‘the likelihood that patriarchal visions of women’s status will become normative in international politics’ (Sanders, 2018: 273). As discussed later, anti-rights narratives now influence changes to language in UN documents, blocking inclusive development frameworks

within multilateral governance arenas, rolling back sexual and reproductive rights, reversing gender equality policies and curtailing LGBTQI+ freedoms (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023; Sanders, 2018).

2.2 Who is involved in norm-spoiling?

Certain actors have engaged in anti-gender movements for decades. A wide range of state and non-state actors have, historically, sought to undermine or erode advances in rights. These actors tend to be linked to religious fundamentalism, nationalism or ultra-nationalism, white supremacy, ultra-conservatism, authoritarianism, right-wing populism and other oppressive ideologies and movements (Datta, 2021; Flood et al., 2018). One notable feature of norm-spoiling is the extent to which diverse actors have come together in broad and unusual alliances through well-organised and well-funded coalitions and transnational networks to attack the women's international rights agenda (Graff et al., 2019; McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023; Bob, 2012). This diverse movement represents a 'determined coalition of stakeholders', including the Vatican, some governments, and faith-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as wealthy individuals (McEwen, 2020; Datta, 2021; Shameem, 2021).

“This movement has coalesced around ‘anti-gender ideology’, which blames gender equality, gender and sexuality diversity and sexual rights movements for negative economic and social change.”

It is no coincidence that the acceleration of norm-spoiling within multilateral spaces has happened alongside the rise of new illiberal and populist right-wing and anti-rights movements in various countries (Graff et al., 2019). This movement has coalesced around 'anti-gender ideology', which blames gender equality, gender and sexuality diversity and sexual rights movements for negative economic and social change. Its adherents argue that economic and national crises can be addressed through ending gender mainstreaming and LGBTQI+ rights (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023: 8; McEwen, 2020). This coalition of actors are united more by what they are against than what they are for, in opposition to what they believe is a radical feminist agenda, including reproductive rights, at the UN (see Box 2) (Sanders, 2018).

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Some of these organisations and networks have been created specifically to advocate as part of the global anti-gender movement at the UN and enact 'pro-family' ideals that promote 'traditional' or 'natural' family structures to undermine women's rights. Some state entities have also formed well-organised and funded coalitions such as the 'Group of Friends of the Family' formed by Belarus, Egypt and Qatar, which has pushed for the 'mainstreaming of the family' at the UN (Sanders, 2018: 279).

Box 2 Anti-gender actors involved in norm-spoiling

Key actors with anti-gender and norm-spoiling agendas include a variety of state and non-state actors (including from the private sector). The Vatican's Holy See (which has permanent UN observer status), states that were once part of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the United States have occasionally worked together to oppose progress on international women's rights. They have received varied support from multilateral regional organisations, such as the UN Africa Group, G77 or League of Arab States (Sanders, 2018; Cupać and Ebetürk, 2020).

Other actors and networks include several that were founded in the mid-to-late 1990s or earlier, such as United Families International (UFI) (est. 1978), the Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam) (est. 1997), the International Organization of the Family (IOF) (est. 1996), the World Congress of Families (WCF) (est. 1997), and Family Watch International (est. 2000), as well as more recently formed Family Policy Institute (est. 2007) and the UN Family Rights Caucus (est. 2008) (Ipas and Empower, 2023; McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023; OURS, 2022).

2.3 What strategies are used to undermine norms at the global level?

Norm-spoiling at the international level is driven by well-coordinated and well-funded strategies that are targeted specifically at, and aim to undermine, women's rights norms and women's rights principles found in UN treaties, resolutions, declarations and international policies (Sanders, 2018). Institutionalising norm change in the language of UN agreements or arguing for the omission of targets in international commitments requires widespread support from the international community, which may take time to achieve. Yet, even in the short-term, the strategic gains of norm-spoilers can be seen as 'laying the groundwork' for the promotion of new or alternative (anti-gender, anti-rights) norms by 'limiting the development and diffusion of the norms' targeted and creating the political space for competing norms (Sanders, 2018: 272).

Norm-spoilers deploy overt strategies (such as visible anti-gender protests at CSW and the use of media platforms to reach global audiences) or less visible tactics (such as lobbying the UN and state delegates) that are more difficult to counteract (Bob, 2012). Such strategies aim to weaken the enabling environment, curb media freedoms, and limit both civic space and the efforts of civil society to progress gender equality and women's rights. These tactics weaken and restrict the advancement of progressive policies on established rights and norms, while making positive change for gender equality in new areas less likely (GADN, 2023).

Multiple, well-funded, interconnected and professional strategies are employed at national and transnational levels, including lobbying, activist training and mobilisation, strategic litigation, and public awareness campaigns. These strategies have also been used, historically, by women's and human rights activists (Sanders, 2018). Cupać and Ebetürk (2020) also argue that it is not just that these strategies are being used in opposition by transnational anti-rights networks, but that the strategies of these networks are reshaping the way in which politics works within the UN system. Indeed, they warn that the UN's progressive bias is no longer a given, rather, that a 'fundamentally different social order' is on the cards that favours 'pro-family' values over women's rights (Cupać and Ebetürk, 2020: 711).



The next section discusses three overarching strategies that aim, specifically, to influence and undermine global gender equality norms and policy making within the UN system.

Well-coordinated transnational networks and significant funding flows

The first of these strategies relates to the foundation and expansion of the anti-gender movement through well-coordinated transnational networks and significant funding flows. A bedrock of financial networks facilitates a variety of organisational mechanisms to influence laws and policies at multilateral levels (McEwen, 2020; Datta, 2021; Shameem, 2021; Flood et al., 2018). As highlighted above, while the anti-rights networks are comprised of unlikely alliances, the strength of their coordination lies in their 'ideological underpinnings, political alliances and networks of financing' (Shameem, 2021: 10). These key actors have organised and secured extensive and diverse funding

to support an array of tactics across the Global North, Global South¹ and international governance arenas (see Box 3) (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023). This funding has also been used to professionalise the activities of their movement and ensure that seemingly intellectual credentials are associated with their anti-rights claims through, for example, the establishment of ‘think tanks’ (such as the Family Research Council) and the publication of peer-reviewed articles, which makes it increasingly difficult to counter their strategies (Shameem, 2021).

Box 3 Resourcing the anti-rights agenda

The large flow of resources to the anti-rights movement enables local to global actors to engage in visible and more hidden actions that influence policy (Shameem, 2021). Research shows that \$3.7 billion was spent globally on anti-gender movements between 2013 and 2017 (GPP, 2020: 13). The same study found that LGBTQI+ movements received only \$1.2 billion during the same timeframe, highlighting a significant disparity in the resources received by progressive civil society organisations (GPP, 2020). A decline in funding for these organisations has limited their ability to deliver services. It has also reduced their capacity to be physically present at international meetings and influence key policy moments in global or multilateral spaces where they have an important role in exerting visible or hidden power (Washington et al., 2021).

Changing the discourse and language around women’s rights

Another key strategy used by anti-gender and anti-rights groups is to target and change discourse around women’s rights to block the diffusion of gender equality norms. This is achieved through various strategies which often go together (see Box 4). Anti-gender actors will, for example, co-opt the language of human rights and development language and use it to argue for ‘natural rights, family rights and the right to life of the unborn’ to leverage these rights against the international women’s rights agenda (Sanders, 2018: 282). This type of ‘discourse capture’ is a key strategy to undermine and roll back progressive laws (e.g. abortion rights, or constitutional protections for LGBTQI+ people). It can operate at scale and is particularly concerning as it may also largely go unnoticed² because it uses the language of ‘rights’ and ‘freedom’ that is often associated with a progressive agenda (Lewin, 2021).

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- 1 The term ‘Global South’ is increasingly used to categorise many countries around the world. Often it is employed as a substitute for referring to nations that have been historically exploited through colonisation. Current international debates on the usefulness of this term question whether another generalising and binary framework (Global North-Global South) is productive for reconstituting and challenging global power relations.
 - 2 See Lewin (2021), who outlines four forms of discourse capture in practice – re-signifying, shifting, mimicking and twisting.

A similar approach is used to co-opt the language of ‘sustainability’ and ‘development’ to oppose women’s reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, and LGBTQI+ rights at UN international gatherings. For example, using ‘smart economics’ arguments to push a particular notion of the family and women’s role in advancing economic development objectives. These often familiar and ‘neutral’ terms are then used to argue that ‘sustainable development’ can only be achieved through the ‘essential role of women in the heteropatriarchal family on which the success of the nation-state, and thus development, depends’ (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023: 12). These messages are being widely disseminated through peer-reviewed articles, policy briefs, conferences and webinars.

“For example, using ‘smart economics’ arguments to push a particular notion of the family and women’s role in advancing economic development objectives. These often familiar and ‘neutral’ terms are then used to argue that ‘sustainable development’ can only be achieved through the ‘essential role of women in the heteropatriarchal family on which the success of the nation-state, and thus development, depends’.”

Another strategy is to suggest subtle changes to the language of gender, sex and sexuality in international policy spaces and documents (Goetz, 2015). Some strategies also seek to remove SRHR terminology and any reference to ‘gender’ from international agreements, UN treaties, declarations and outcome documents, effectively eroding the gains of gender justice activists (Washington et al., 2021; Sanders and Jenkins, 2022; Corredor, 2019; Sanders, 2018). These subtle changes and the appropriation of language need to be recognised by UN Member States allied with feminist goals and women’s rights movements, so they can be exposed as anti-gender backlash and countered with appropriate strategies (Lewin, 2021).

Furthermore, strategies also include advocacy for cultural relativism and *traditional values* and the appropriation of anti-colonial critiques of gender rights in narratives around international women’s rights principles (Sanders, 2018; Lewin, 2021; Shameem, 2021). Typically, these arguments posit that sexuality and gender-related rights are Western constructs that are not universally applicable, and that gender equality and LGBTQI+ policies are an imposition that violate national sovereignty and the right to the freedom of, for example, religious and cultural beliefs.

These arguments have gained traction within anti-rights movements, making it increasingly difficult for women’s rights activists to navigate such claims, which often reflect key challenges that have historically divided the feminist movement. As Sanders notes, ‘distinguishing coordinated norm-spoiling efforts from critical feminist concerns is needed to help women’s rights advocates better judge when to resist and when to reflect on criticism of the international women’s rights agenda’ (2019: 289). In other words, feminists need to clearly identify the differences between norm-spoiling arguments and constructive criticism within the feminist movement.

“Typically, these arguments posit that sexuality and gender-related rights are Western constructs that are not universally applicable, and that gender equality and LGBTQI+ polices are an imposition that violate national sovereignty and the right to the freedom of, for example, religious and cultural beliefs.”

Box 4 The objectives and strategies of anti-gender organisations

The **International Organization of the Family (IOF)** aims to promote ‘the natural family’ at a global level. IOF does this through four main activities:

- Convening major international public events through The World Congress of Families (WCF) to unite and equip stakeholders to affirm and defend the natural family as the only fundamental and sustainable unit of society.
- Publishing *The Natural Family: An International Journal of Research and Policy* (TNF), a quarterly academic journal that promotes the natural family as the fundamental group unit of society.
- Empowering leaders across the globe in line with Article 16 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that ‘Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family.’
- Developing young leaders through the Emerging Leaders Program (ELP) to promote marriage, and the natural family as the fundamental group unit of society.

The objectives of the **Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam)** are to monitor and affect the social policy debate at the UN and other international institutions.

C-Fam aims to achieve this by:

- Participating in every major UN social policy debate.
- Publishing and promoting scholarship through their Center for Policy Studies, Legal Studies and Government Relations, with publications arguing that the UN and other international institutions harm a true understanding of international law and, in the process, undermine the family.
- Regular interfacing with diplomats, policy makers, academics, activists, and office holders from around the world, including through the organisation of events and webinars.

Sources: IOF (n.d.); C-Fam (n.d.).

Professionalisation and dissemination of anti-rights narratives within UN systems

Significant investment has gone into creating and disseminating compelling and effective narratives. These have been key to gaining public and political support for the anti-gender agenda and making it difficult for the gender-equality movement to refute ideas that have become increasingly mainstream (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023; Lewin, 2021). Some of the ways in which anti-gender actors have professionalised their advocacy include the production of reports and peer reviewed papers and journals, and the hosting of webinars, conferences, workshops and roundtables (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023).

At the same time, anti-gender movements are trying to curtail academic freedoms for those researching issues related to LGBTQI+ rights and sexual orientation and gender identity/ expression (SOGIE) (McEwen, 2020). What makes this context more challenging is the rise of high-level political actors who support this anti-rights agenda. The narrative and messaging promoted by anti-rights actors are also aligned with the technocratic language of the UN, and many also have professional networks, including within the UN system. Several ‘pro-family’ organisations, for example,³ have mobilised a united position to undermine women’s rights in UN negotiations and to organise meetings at the UN to promote their agenda (Dip, 2023; Ipas and Empower, 2023).

Box 5 illustrates some of these strategies including the development of manuals to guide UN negotiation processes and ensure consistency in language, the removal of language from UN resolutions, the provision of training on international law to support conservative anti-LGBTQI+ positions, and the elimination of feminist civil society participants from national CSW delegations.

3 These organisations include the Family Policy Institute (South Africa), Institute for Family Policies International Federation/Instituto Política Familiar (Spain), Centre for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam) (US), Alliance Defending Freedom (US), World Youth Alliance, Doha International Family Institute (Qatar), Family Watch International (US), and others (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023).

Box 5 Norm-spoiling tactics in UN negotiations

Anti-rights organisations have targeted their campaigns and diplomatic lobbying at the UN, becoming well-organised, strategic and knowledgeable about how to undermine the women's rights agenda.

- The movement has developed a 90-page manual, the *Resource Guide to UN Consensus Language on the Family*, which provides guidance to actors on the UN negotiation process to ensure consistent language in promoting conservative positions in UN negotiations around issues related to families (Goetz, 2020). It lists over 80 topics that range across ages and topics, such as abortion, sexual orientation and disability (Family Watch International, 2013).
- The UN Family Rights Caucus works to 'protect and promote the natural family as the fundamental unit of society as called for in Article 16 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights'. The organisation works with other stakeholders and networks to remove language in UN resolutions and adopt new resolutions. For example, under their 'Major Victories' of UN initiatives, they list the rejection of 'sexuality education' from the World Health Assembly resolution in Geneva, 2021 (UN Family Rights Caucus, 2022).
- Other organisations provide training to support conservative anti-LGBTQI+ positions on international law, such as IOF and C-Fam (see Box 4). Transnational organisations like CitizenGo run campaigns at the UN's CSW and other events. CitizenGo includes over 18 million active citizens working collaboratively on online petitions and action alerts as a resource to 'defend and promote life, family and freedom'. Their petitions have requested negotiators at the CSW to remove paragraphs that recognise abortion as a right and push for 'comprehensive sexuality education' (CSE) and oppose the establishment of an International Safe Abortion Day at the UN (e.g. CitizenGo, 2023).
- Over the last decade, countries such as Egypt and Türkiye have begun to eliminate feminist civil society participants from their CSW delegations (Shameem, 2021; Goetz, 2020).

3 Why pay attention to norm-spoiling?

Women's rights activists and feminist movements at national and international levels have worked hard over decades to promote, protect and progress women's rights through international advocacy. Their well-coordinated initiatives have produced significant achievements on an international scale (GADN, 2023; Weldon et al., 2023). These achievements can be seen in the establishment of international conventions, commitments, resolutions, declarations and plans for action, and the embedding of women's rights in global institutions. They include, for example, CEDAW, the 1995 BPfA (the key global policy document on gender equality), the 23rd special session of the General Assembly held in 2000 (Beijing +5), the CSW (which monitors progress and gaps in the implementation of the BPfA), and international commitments such as the SDGs.

The affirmation of women's rights at the international level and in multiple UN treaties has resulted in high rates of national ratification, as well as commitment and rhetorical support from the international community (Sanders 2018). And while the international women's rights movement is not without its own internal debates and challenges, it does provide legitimacy for international women's rights at international and national levels.

It is this very legitimacy that norm-spoiling aims to undermine. This is a major problem, because any erosion of women's rights at the UN on international law and norms may weaken the ability of feminist and women's rights organisations to lobby and pressure their national governments into changing laws, to advance equality and to influence state policy and practice. While international gender norms are not the only factor influencing international treaty ratification and state behaviour, commitment and compliance, there is strong evidence that international rules do have an influence on states' calculations of their interests and identity (Risse et al., 2013).

In addition, international law and norms are important mechanisms that enable women's rights organisations to leverage international rules and demand that states meet their legal obligations (Womankind, 2020). Embedding women's rights in global institutions has also provided activists with a focus for their advocacy and for building a common cause. This was clearly seen at the UN World Conferences on Women between 1975 and 1995, for example, which galvanised opportunities to fund the feminist movement and resulted in gender policy machinery and institutions that transnational – and national – feminists can use to hold their governments to account (for instance, UN Women, created in 2010) (Goetz, 2020).

As such, it is because global institutions and processes are so important for feminist movements and women's rights that they are targeted by anti-gender actors (Goetz, 2020).

The following section highlights examples of progress and attempts at norm-spoiling in key international arenas: the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the 1995 Beijing World Conference, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the CSW.

The International Conference on Population and Development and Beijing World Conference

Significant achievements at the global level were made by feminists in the 1990s. In particular, the Cairo ICPD in 1994 and the Beijing World Conference on Women in 1995 resulted in important gains relating to more ‘expansive definitions of “gender”, “family” and the inclusion of SRHR’ (Corredor, 2019).

The ICPD produced a Platform for Action, signed by 179 countries. This is widely recognised as a landmark document because of its recognition of sexual and reproductive rights as central to tackling the challenges of population and human development.

The Beijing World Conference led to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) which is considered ‘the most progressive blueprint ever for advancing women’s rights’ (UN Women, 2015). The document, which is an agreement between UN Member States, covers numerous routes towards the goal of improving the lives of women and girls, such as poverty alleviation, access to education, reduction of violence and participation in decision-making (UN Women, 1995). It proposes specific policy initiatives to address the structural causes of discrimination and inequality across economic participation, supporting women’s autonomy in sexual and reproductive decisions, and changes in behaviours and attitudes towards women in politics and to men in unpaid care work (Goetz, 2020).

Much of the policy success of the BPfA can be attributed to the significant proliferation of transnational feminist advocacy networks from the mid-1970s, with feminist and LGBTQI+ advocates developing their support base, expanding their political networks and capitalising on broader shifting political opportunity structures (Corredor, 2019). They were able to do this because of the two years of preparatory funding provided by donor governments ahead of the Beijing conference, which allowed a wide range of women’s groups and networks to participate.⁴ These forms of investment gave feminist organisations the opportunity to professionalise and to network transnationally to amplify their impact at Beijing (Goetz, 2020). Importantly, this funding also supported intellectual work in the Global South to ensure that attention was paid to race and class differences, often overlooked by Western feminists (Tripp, 2006).

4 Over 30,000 participants attended the NGO Forum (the companion event, which was open to the public), in addition to the 10,000 official state delegates to the main conference.

These well-coordinated efforts also influenced other UN world conferences on the environment, human rights, and population. This helped to successfully secure UN recognition of women's rights as a human rights norm (Corredor, 2019).

As the two key international moments of Cairo and Beijing generated significant success for women's rights and LGBTQI+ movements, they also triggered more concerted and collaborative efforts to target feminist and LGBTQI+ advocates and achievements. While opponents to women's and LGBTQI+ rights had participated in previous UN conferences, they were not yet working with force or collective action to target these movements directly. In Cairo, however, Corredor (2019: 622-623) shows how the anti-gender movement sought to:

‘block the inclusion of women’s reproductive rights and policy language that would recognise that multiple forms of family exist across diverse cultural, political and social systems.’

This countermovement did have an impact on the final BPfA, and while it is still seen as an unprecedented global document on women's rights, the final document did not incorporate any new definitions of gender (rather, the word ‘gender’ was to be ‘interpreted and understood as it was in ordinary, generally accepted usage’ (United Nations, 1995: 218). In addition, all references to sexual orientation were removed from the platform in the final hours, effectively demonstrating the powerful influence of the anti-rights movement on UN policy processes (Wilson, 1996; Corredor, 2019).

“All references to sexual orientation were removed from the platform in the final hours, effectively demonstrating the powerful influence of the anti-rights movement on UN policy processes.”

There were further consequences, with the norm-spoiling efforts slowing the advancement of the international women's rights agenda. At both Cairo and Beijing (and their follow-up meetings), the Holy See and allied states and NGOs employed strategies to ensure that a disproportionate amount of time was devoted to debating abortion, and this delayed the discussions. Such tactics have forced women's rights activists to spend time defending existing positions, and also to question whether the use of forums at the UN can further their cause or undo progress in particular areas (Timothy, 2005).

Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals

After the success of Beijing, feminist transnational activism for women's basic rights spread out from UN-related activism and toward other arenas, such as the World Social Forum, or into regional, national, and local work. There were several reasons for this, including difficulties in connecting global development to domestic challenges, as well as a significant drop in financing for feminist mobilisation by official bilateral and multilateral aid donors after Beijing (Goetz, 2020).

At the same time, the new international focus on the MDGs in the late 1990s, which culminated in the MDG framework in 2000, was designed without consultation with transnational feminist groups. As a result, the MDGs were seen as reductive and narrow from a women's rights perspective in their failure to incorporate existing UN mandates for women's rights, including sexual and reproductive rights (Carant, 2017; Abelenda, 2014; Kabeer, 2015). Gender equality was only explicit in MDGs 3 and 5, measuring gender parity in education; the share of women in wage employment; the proportion of seats held by women in national legislatures; maternal mortality; and (since 2005) universal access to reproductive health care. Feminists called out the need for the international community to put resources and institutional mechanisms in place to achieve gender-based rights that cut across all the MDGs (Kabeer, 2015; Jones et al., 2008).

The successors to the MDGs, the SDGs, are generally seen as a major improvement from a women's rights perspective. The SDGs recognise the overarching and cross-cutting nature of gender by having a stand-alone goal on gender equality as well as gender-specific targets across the other goals. In addition, the development of the SDGs was more inclusive of civil society, and women's rights groups participated in the negotiation processes through the Women's Major Group (see Box 6) (Gabizon, 2016).

Yet the SDGs also became a contested area of focus for global-level pro-family advocacy and anti-gender advocates around 2015. Goetz (2020) reports that states could not agree on several targets, including encouraging men's involvement in domestic care work (SDG target 5.4), and state responsibilities to use social policy to mitigate the costs borne by women for childbearing and rearing, such as their displacement from career ladders and discontinued pension contributions (SDG target 1.3). In both areas, feminist activism was unable to overcome disagreement by states on their responsibility to change social norms, and therefore they are only asked to make efforts 'as nationally appropriate' (UNDP, 2019; Goetz, 2020: 162).

In relation to SRHR, the SDGs advocate 'universal access' to 'reproductive rights' – something that feminist activities fought hard to achieve during long and complex negotiations and despite fierce opposition (Sen et al., 2019; Sanders, 2018). There were objections, for example to key indicators on the 'Number of countries with laws and regulations that guarantee full and equal access to women and men aged 15 years and older to sexual and reproductive healthcare, information and education' (UN General Assembly, 2017 cited in Sanders, 2018: 286). The outcome, however, was a retreat to the 'decades-old language that had been agreed on at the Cairo conference on population and development' (SDG target 5.6) (Goetz, 2020: 162; Razavi, 2016). Additionally, because the SDGs do not have any references to LGBTQI+ people, the omission of LGBTQI+ rights is an entry-point by the anti-gender movement to deny LGBTQI+ rights as a norm within the wider human rights framework (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023; Denney, 2015).

Box 6 Engagement of the Women’s Major Group in the SDGs

The Women’s Major Group is one of nine groups that are official participants in the UN processes on sustainable development. Importantly, it is responsible for facilitating the active participation of women’s civil society in policy spaces provided by the UN – for example in High Level Political Forums (e.g. through participation, speaking, submission of proposals, access to documents, development of sessions). The Group is described as having a significant positive influence on the development of the SDGs and has been acknowledged as one of the most effective of the nine groups influencing the SDG negotiations (Sen et al., 2019).

The Commission on the Status of Women

The CSW is the principal global intergovernmental body that is dedicated exclusively to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. It was established in 1946 as a functional commission of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The CSW is a core instrument to promote women’s rights, document the reality of women’s lives and help define and uphold global standards on gender equality and the empowerment of women. This important mechanism is used by feminists to promote women’s rights and establish norms in multilateral agreements and declarations (see Box 7). The CSW initiated the four World Conferences discussed above. While it has long been targeted by the anti-gender campaigns, this has intensified in the past decade.

“Feminists report that anti-gender organising to dismantle human rights language, introduce discriminatory terms, and disrupt proceedings are now a consistent feature of the CSW.”

Feminists report that anti-gender organising to dismantle human rights language, introduce discriminatory terms, and disrupt proceedings are now a consistent feature of the CSW (GADN, 2023). This effectively closes a key space for women to advocate for their rights and for feminist movements to progress new global norms on reproductive autonomy or LGBTQI+ inclusion, so instead women’s rights activists must spend their time countering the push back against women’s human rights (Tolmay, 2013).



CitizenGo protest van on the streets of New York during CSW68. March 2024. Credit: Instagram / CitizenGo.

CSW 2012 (56th Session) was notable for the achievements of the anti-gender movement which prevented the production of agreed conclusions. This was because of a refusal to accept the notion of ‘comprehensive sexuality education’, citing a manufactured and false fear that this would promote promiscuity and homosexuality in adolescents (Goetz, 2020). Tactics similar to those employed in 2012 were also used in the CSW in March 2019 on social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and resulted in a near failure to reach an agreement (Goetz, 2020).

Box 7 Examples of feminist organisations advocating for women’s rights at the CSW

The UN Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls (DAWG) produces annual reports to the Human Rights Council that investigate discrimination against women and girls in different spheres and raises awareness of these issues with the international community. This work has been described as ‘critical to further issues of women’s human rights at the Council and beyond; a resolute and essential voice in this time of backlash’ (OURS, 2019).

Members of DAWG addressed the 63rd session of the CSW and participated in its interactive dialogue on the theme of ‘Accelerating implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action: exchange of best practices in preparation for the Beijing+25 review and appraisal’. The Working Group also organised a side event on the theme of ‘Current challenges and opportunities for women human rights defenders: how can the international community better support their work?’ and participated in several other events.

At CSW 67 in March 2023, CREA, a feminist international human rights organisation, co-hosted an NGO parallel event entitled ‘Feminists say “ENOUGH!”, Countering anti-gender forces and fostering collective resilience’. The event was accompanied by a letter affirming feminist principles that was drafted by a large group of progressive NGOs (CREA, 2023).

UN Women co-convened a roundtable discussion at CSW 68 in March 2024 with partners to discuss strategies for advancing gender equality amid concerns that democracy and gender equality are backsliding.

4 Feminist strategies to counter norm-spoiling

While international conventions and declarations continue to reflect the priorities of diverse global constituencies working to sustain international women's rights standards, norm-spoiling has weakened the international consensus on women's rights (Sanders, 2018) and feminist activists now face a very challenging and threatening environment. Despite this, women's rights and LGBTQI+ activists have been organising proactively and strategically to respond to norm-spoiling strategies and their effects (Goetz, 2020).

Figure 1 Strategies to counter norm-spoiling

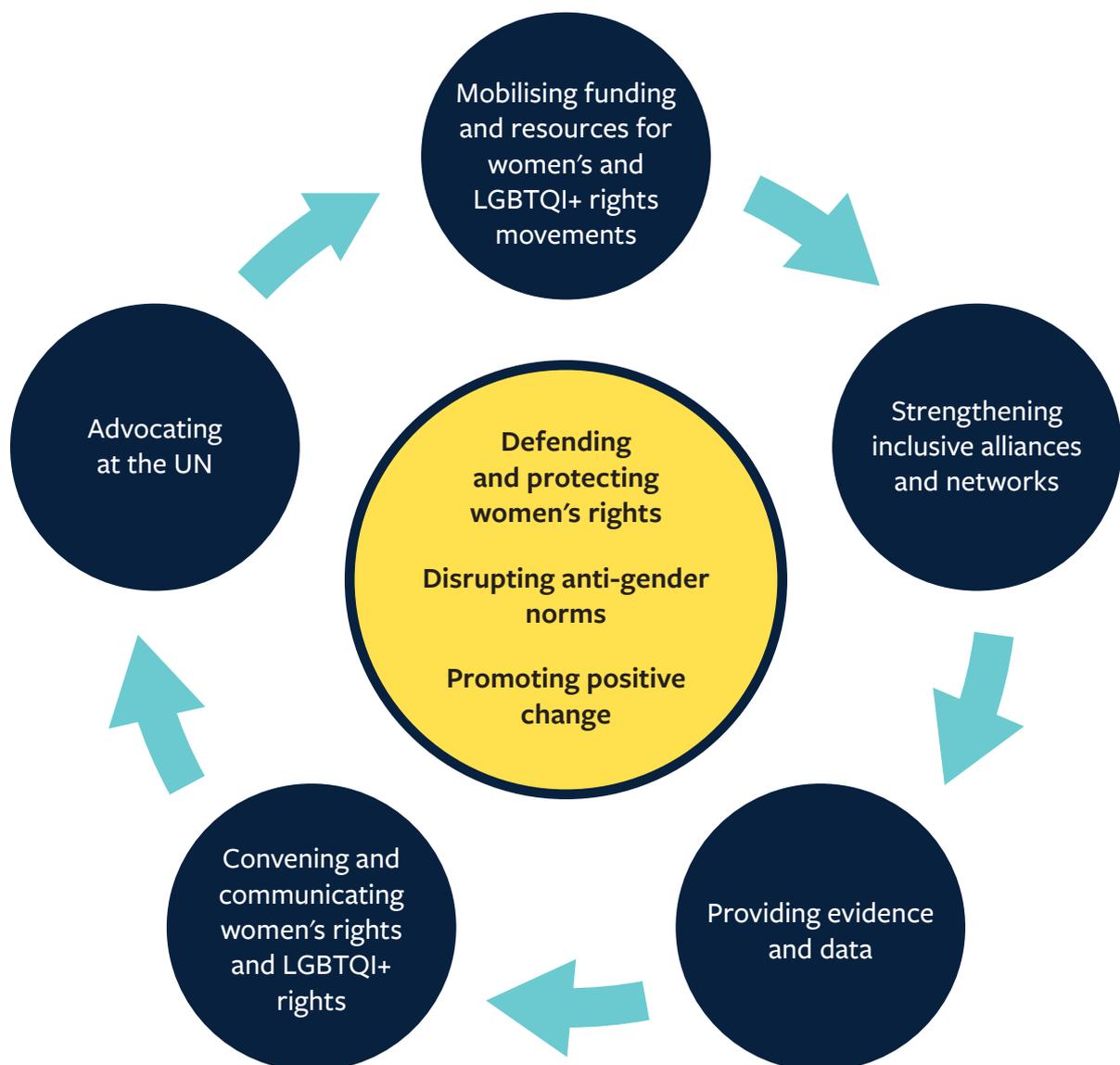


Figure 1 illustrates some of the strategies used by women's rights organisations to counter norm-spoiling at transnational levels and highlights some of the work carried out by a few organisations in these areas. These strategies aim to defend and protect women's rights positions, actively disrupt anti-gender norms, and promote new and progressive change. Some of the strategies explicitly engage with multilateral institutions and global policy processes, while others operate at transnational levels to counter anti-gender backlash and support positive norm change in the international environment. Many organisations and networks are working on multiple strategies at any one time.

Mobilising funding and resources

There are major disparities between funding for the anti-rights movement and funding for women's rights and LGBTQI+ organisations, which remain severely underfunded despite some resurgence in funding in recent years (GENDERNET, 2020). Between 2017 and 2019, new gender equality commitments were established by bilateral and multilateral donors (including from philanthropists, such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation) committing \$1 billion to support gender equality, particularly in the Global South (Staszewska et al., 2019). Still, this remains low compared to the funding received by anti-rights movements, and importantly, only a very small proportion of existing funding reaches feminist movements or supports the operational strengthening of women's rights organisations (Lever et al., 2020; Durán, 2015). From 2016-19, only 8% of private philanthropy for development targeted gender (OECD, 2021:14).

A large share of regular OECD bilateral official development assistance (ODA) for gender equality, for example, supports larger mainstream organisations, governments or stays within development agencies (GENDERNET, 2020:4). Feminist organisations such as Mama Cash, Women's Fund Asia, UN Women and the Global Philanthropy Project actively seek ways to increase funding and mobilise resources to counter the anti-rights movement directly and indirectly (see Box 8).

Box 8 Mama Cash mobilising for more and better funding to feminist movements

Mama Cash works actively to increase funding and mobilise resources to counter the anti-rights movement both directly and indirectly. The organisation makes grants, supports funding, produces news and publications, and collaborates with other actors. Mama Cash channels resources to feminist movements, and advocates to donors to provide more and better funding for women's, girls' and trans rights organisations that are defending and advancing their human rights. Mama Cash argues for increased funding to support an organisation's regular work and internal capacity building, and funds that are multi-year and flexible to allow for the achievement of an organisation's goals (Mama Cash, n.d.).

Strengthening inclusive alliances and networks

Mobilisation against norm-spoiling operates increasingly through transnational, intergenerational and intersectional networks. The variety of alliances and networks across local, national and transnational actors is key – as is their ability to work with powerful allies through individual champions in positions of power, key multilateral institutions, and allied countries. One critical element of these networks is, therefore, the way they work at both the local and global levels at the same time. For example, their lobbying at the global level (e.g. UN advocacy) needs to be embedded in communication with on-the-ground activists to give that lobbying legitimacy and credibility. Examples of such networks include organisations such as SheDecides (see Box 9), the African Women’s Development and Communications Network (FEMNET), the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), the Alliance for Feminist Movements, and Action Coalitions as part of the Generation Equality Forum.

Box 9 SheDecides: a collective action movement

The SheDecides movement is a global political collective that works to ensure bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights for all through collective action. The movement’s members include governments, civil society organisations, youth leaders, parliamentarians, activists, service providers, researchers, media, artists and donors. The movement brings together leading activists for bodily autonomy from Africa, Asia, the Arab Region, Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe and North America.

As well as collaborating with its own members, SheDecides partners with ally organisations. These include UN agencies, the Global Safe Abortion Dialogue, the Adolescent Girls Investment Plan and the Global Partnership Forum on Comprehensive Sexuality Education. In addition, its champions are SheDecides ambassadors who commit to advancing SheDecides objectives by shaping and informing areas for collaboration, and speaking out on abortion rights, comprehensive sexuality education and bodily autonomy for young people.

Source: SheDecides, 2022.

Providing evidence and data

An increasing body of research is documenting the roles, strategies and impacts of norm-spoiling at international levels. In addition, some actors are not just monitoring the specific actions of anti-rights actors, but also assessing the wider policy and political environment too. Women’s rights organisations are also documenting good practices to counter backlash, and re-framing and using creative ways to counter anti-rights narratives at national and global levels. These organisations

include: Open Democracy's 'Tracking the Backlash' project 50.50, which investigates anti-rights activities; the Observatory on the Universality of Rights (OURs) coordinated by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID); the UN Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls (DAWG), which produces annual reports to the Human Rights Council; the Gender and Development Network (GADN); and UN Women (Box 10).

Box 10 Role of the United Nations in countering the impact of anti-rights movements

United Nations agencies are collaborating and coordinating together to protect progress for gender equality in the face of anti-rights pushback. An interagency group, bringing together technical and communications focal points, aims to build a cohesive understanding of the impact of anti-rights actors on key aspects of work such as comprehensive sexuality education and broader sexual and reproductive health and rights. CSE focal points in the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have developed internal guiding documents to build support for CSE at various levels, while also documenting strategies that work in mitigating the negative impact of anti-rights actors. Together UNESCO and UNFPA co-convened a Global Partnership Forum on CSE which brought together activists and advocates to advance dialogue on CSE (UNESCO, 2022). Other agencies also collaborating in these efforts are UN Women, UNAIDS and WHO, with plans underway to involve UNDP and UNICEF.

UN Women is also documenting and disseminating good practices to counter pushback undertaken by women human rights defenders, youth, local government, public officials and other stakeholders as well as developing guidance to support UN Women country offices in pushing forward for gender equality (UN Women, 2023; 2024). In line with commitments within its Strategic Plan 2022 – 2025 to monitor the percentage of resolutions adopted by the General Assembly, Security Council and the Human Rights Council that integrate a gender perspective, UN Women's Geneva Office, for example, monitors gender language reversals in resolutions tabled at the Human Rights Council.

Convening and communicating the rights of women and LGBTQI+ people

Another key strategy is to expand the space for women's rights organisations to discuss, share and influence at global levels. This may be done by sharing resources, convening meetings and organising conferences to share knowledge across women's rights constituencies.

Creating spaces for constructive dialogue and to hear diverse views and positions is critical for finding common understandings and ways forward for collective feminist action (UN Women, 2024). Regular convenings of civil society organisations to share information, strategize approaches to push forward for gender justice and to support networked solidarity are important mechanisms to counter norm-spoiling efforts. Organisations working in this area include CREA, GADN, UN Women, and Women Deliver (Box 11).

Box 11 Women Deliver convenes and creates space for collective action

Women Deliver creates space for collective action through coalitions and convenes partners to connect, strategize and advocate for the advancement of gender equality and SRHR.

This coalition organises a large global conference every three years to convene thousands of stakeholders, advocates and activists from civil society, governments, the private sector and international agencies to share ideas and generate action on gender equality. These conferences provide an important convening and policy opportunity, and a mechanism to strategise on ways to translate international commitments into gender-transformative change following the Generation Equality Forum (GEF), the Global Education Summit, the UN General Assembly (UNGA), and the CSW.

Advocating at the United Nations

Feminist actors and networks are leading multiple advocacy and lobbying approaches, as well as deploying legal and practical strategies. As Goetz (2020: 167) notes, ‘transnational feminists are rebooting their UN advocacy’, which has involved shifts in focus and tactics. Despite the challenging environments at CSW and other UN policy spaces, these fora continue to be key for convening, advocacy, and the lobbying of governments by women’s rights activists, including contributing to the language of resolutions. This collaboration is an important pathway for the sharing of learning to make feminist actors more effective.

Activists have also had to revise their lobbying approaches. They have had to shift from a focus on lobbying formerly friendly states to make progress on substantive issues in UN negotiating documents, to focus on those who continue to be supportive – particularly those practicing feminist foreign policy (Ridge et al., 2019). Organisations working in this area include Women Human Rights Defenders, the UN Working Group DAWG, Musawah and Equality Now (see Box 12).

Box 12 Advocacy at the United Nations

Equality Now

Equality Now is an international network of lawyers, activists and supporters that uses regional and international human rights law to hold governments accountable to their commitments, including documenting and demonstrating the impacts of continued discrimination in the law since the Beijing Platform for Action. In 2022, Equality Now made 22 submissions to UN treaty bodies or Universal Periodic Review committees. At the time of writing, 13 submissions had resulted in over half of the recommendations being adopted by review committees during concluding sessions (Equality Now, 2022).

UN resolution on justice for survivors of sexual violence

The UN resolution on justice for survivors of sexual violence (Universal Survivor Bill of Rights) was adopted in September 2022. The resolution – the first on this topic – condemns all forms of sexual and gender-based violence; urges Member States to provide access to justice, reparations and assistance for victims and survivors; and calls on states to provide gender-responsive legal protection and health services, including sexual and reproductive healthcare.

The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) was one of the organisations involved in the first discussions on the importance of such a resolution for the final vote. IPPF worked closely with Member States on each draft of the text, supported the negotiations by providing rationales and data to support important elements in the text, and supported Member States to stand up to politically motivated hostile and conservative lobbying around amendments to the text to balance political considerations with needs. The resolution retains several key paragraphs and language, including on comprehensive sexual and reproductive healthcare, references to intimate partner violence, and the ‘multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination’ faced by women and girls.

Source: IPPF (2023: 12).

5 Conclusions and recommendations

This ODI Briefing note has sought to describe current issues related to norm-spoiling. It has shown how norm-spoiling – through an organised coalition of anti-rights actors – is eroding and undermining the hard-earned international consensus on women’s rights.

Significant resource flows to the anti-gender movement are being invested in well-coordinated networks. While these networks are made up of unusual alliances, they are strongly united in their opposition to progressive gender norms and women’s rights, and particularly to sexual and reproductive health rights. These networks have mobilised to change the discourse and language around women’s rights, and to reverse the development and diffusion of targeted norms – often co-opting the language of human rights and sustainable development. In addition, their increasingly professionalised discourse and narratives – through peer-reviewed papers and journals, webinars, conferences and workshops – lends rigour and influence to their arguments within the broader political and public environment, and UN systems.

Norm-spoilers have actively undermined and disrupted progress on the international women’s rights agenda, particularly in areas of LGBTQI+ rights and SRHR. They have challenged and changed language and, therefore, interpretations of women’s rights at critical international policy junctures – including the Beijing Platform for Action, the MDGs, the SDGs, and the CSW.

The international women’s rights movement is working actively to challenge norm-spoiling and its impact. Despite operating in a challenging environment of limited funding, shrinking civic spaces and broader hostile anti-rights political environments, feminist actors are mobilising in transnational networks. They are bringing together actors at local, national and global levels to defend women’s rights, to disrupt the expansion of anti-gender norms, and promote new and positive change.

Women’s rights and feminist organisations are researching and documenting the opposition and broader political and policy trends, as well as pushing positive counter narratives and sharing good practices to counter norm-spoiling. Feminist networks are convening and sharing knowledge within and among actors and amplifying positive feminist and LGBTQI+ narratives. They are also advocating and lobbying strategically for the rights of women and LGBTQI+ people during UN policy processes and events, developing core principles for mobilisation, and engaging in legal and practical strategies to defend women’s rights and promote new gender equality and women’s rights norms.

In this context, ODI suggests that donors, governments, allies and feminist organisations should focus on the five priority areas to counter norm-spoiling.

Amplify and communicate

Raise awareness of norm-spoiling efforts and strategies to counteract them

Feminist organisations should communicate and disseminate norm-spoiling efforts to external audiences and stakeholders, identifying and calling out when norm-spoiling language is being mainstreamed to curb the influence on professional and public discourse and opinion. They should also document and share within feminist networks their direct and indirect strategies to counter norm-spoiling in multilateral processes. The publication and dissemination of their findings among feminist networks is important to generate learning across sectors and areas of work.

Proactively invest resources to developing and building counter-narratives that can contest norm-spoiling language at the international level, including ways to respond to the co-optation of progressive discourses. Anti-gender narratives disguised in rights language means that alternatives are needed to reclaim terminologies that once supported the objectives of global women's movements. Communicating is a key component of consensus-building, and language can be wielded either to progress global debate on gender justice norms or reverse them.

Funding and resources

Increase and improve quality of funding to women's rights and LGBTQI+ organisations to enable them to operate at transnational levels

Gender equality work takes time to achieve (Harper et al., 2020; George and Harper, 2022), and feminist organisations need financial support to not only implement their activities (such as research and dissemination, lobbying, convening, etc.), but also to strengthen their core organisational structures (Tant and Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez, 2022).

Countering norm-spoiling at the international level also requires funding for local and national organisations and networks to convene, meet and strategise internationally. It is necessary, therefore, to adopt flexible funding models and shared expectations that enable organisations and coalitions to work towards a long-term goal in a sustained manner (Cookson et al., 2023; Mama Cash, n.d.).

Donors have a key role to play in allocating more and better funding and resources to feminist organisations, and to consider multi-donor, multi-year funding modalities (see Michalko and Tant, forthcoming). Feminist organisations continue to have a role in advocating for funding and influencing the donor community to invest in transnational feminist activism to tackle norm-spoiling in multilateral processes and systems.

Research, evidence and data

Strengthen evidence and data on norm-spoiling and what works from feminist strategies to counter anti-rights movements

It is crucial to continue to collect and analyse data on actors and processes at the international level to understand where, how and why anti-gender ideas are taking hold. This should include, for example, monitoring the activities of C-Fam and strategic litigation groups (such as the Alliance Defending Freedom) to identify and track where and how they are working to spoil gender equality and SRHR norms.

Data should be collected and analysed on norm-spoiling across other policy and multilateral governance arenas, such as the European Union, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the African Union, and the Organisation of American States. Trends should be examined to identify the linkages between norm-spoiling in national and international processes to understand how anti-rights actors work across these levels, and the successes (and challenges) of feminist organisations working to counter norm-spoiling at multilateral levels should be evaluated and documented.

Inclusive alliances and networks

Support coalition-building and the transnational activism of diverse women's rights organisations

It is important to create safe spaces for open dialogue that recognises and discusses differences within the women's rights movement. These discussions need to explore the potential trade-offs that feminist organisations should consider in their actions to counter norm-spoiling; how funding can be generated and allocated for women's rights organisations in a context of scarce and competing resources; and how to build strategic transnational alliances while drawing on the knowledge and advocacy of national and local movements.

Crafting a shared understanding and shared strategic agenda is important and can be achieved by bringing together cross-sectoral and diverse women's rights organisations to counteract norm-spoiling at the international level. This could include, for example, collaboration across national and international activists working on SRHR, CSE, LGBTQI+ rights, and HIV/AIDS to build alliances across areas of work, strengthen coalitions, and build shared strategies to be taken forward at transnational levels.

Advocacy at the UN

Continue to strengthen advocacy and lobbying in UN and other multilateral processes on the rights of women and LGBTQI+ people

Strategies to lobby and advocate in UN and multilateral arenas need to be context-specific, recognising that civic space is shrinking and increasing risks for reversals on gender equality norms during international policy processes. Transnational activists need to use information on successful feminist strategies, and to understand anti-rights strategies, if they are to develop advocacy and lobbying tactics to counter norm-spoiling at the UN. Recognising and calling out indirect or subtle norm-spoiling tactics is vital; along with monitoring actors and activities that challenge and undermine the legitimacy of international norms.

This means having flexible approaches to respond to the current international policy space. These approaches include identifying possible new allies and actors to support rights norms for women and LGBTQI+ people. It will require providing sustained engagement in substantive UN negotiating documents and processes (including to identify changes in language or opposition to progressive language) and supporting state parties to build counter-coalitions to resist the erosion of human rights frameworks (Khan et al., 2023).

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