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# Anti-Gender World Building: Reflections from CSW70

## Summary

*Anti-gender movements are well-funded, coordinated networks aiming to weaken civil and human rights, reinforce sex/gender hierarchies, and bring about an alternative international order. CSW70 confirmed that progressive actors possess significant understanding of their opponents' tactics and resources. This knowledge must be translated into coordinated action that is bold enough to match the scale of what we are facing: a world-building project that seeks to construct a global order founded on hierarchy, exclusion, and the institution of anti-democratic norms.*

## Introduction

The 70th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW70) took place at a moment of intensifying contestation over gender equality, women's rights, and LGBTIQ+ inclusion worldwide. It was consistently noted

that this year's gathering was notably smaller than in previous years, a contraction that reflects the broader shrinking of civil society space around gender equality and human rights. The collapse of official development assistance and funding, the outbreak of active armed conflict following US-Israeli strikes on Iran just days before CSW convened, and the sweeping US travel and immigration ban affecting nationals of nearly 40 countries meant that many advocates, scholars, and civil society representatives could not even reach New York.

These overlapping challenges were also points of discussion at side events and in the corridors of the UN.<sup>1</sup> There was a significant degree of recognition that actors opposed to gender justice are mounting coordinated campaigns, in multilateral arenas, national legislatures, and across digital and traditional media in ways that go far beyond episodic resistance.

During CSW, one of the most significant stories unfolding was the US delegation's forced proposal of a [draft resolution](#) defining »gender« strictly as binary (male and

<sup>1</sup> Observations are based on points raised during the side event, *Strategic Responses to Backlash against Gender Justice and Women's Rights*, convened by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development in partnership with UNAIDS, and the German, Finnish, and UK permanent missions to the United Nations in New York as well as general debates during CSW70.

female) based on biological sex within the Beijing Platform for Action. Ultimately, the Commission blocked the resolution, following a »motion of no action« tabled by Brussels on behalf of the European Union. The motion of no action was passed by a vote of 23 in favour to 3 against (United States, Chile, Pakistan), and 17 abstentions. While the resounding number of »no« votes may be a positive immediate outcome, some member state representatives (for instance, Italy and the Czech Republic) explained that their votes had been made on procedural rather than substantive grounds, while voicing support for the interpretation of »gender« proposed by the United States.

What this moment calls for is the ongoing documentation of what is being eroded by anti-gender actors, alongside analysis of what they are actively constructing. While anti-gender politics may often appear to be retrogressive projects seeking to take the world back to a pre-Civil Rights and pre-Human Rights era, their forward-looking ambitions to construct a world order in which hierarchy, exclusion, and inequality are normalized and unquestioned as the foundations of social and political life must be recognized.

In what follows, I present four questions for further discussion and reflection to explore what CSW70 revealed about our collective understanding of the political movements working to undermine gender justice and democracy, what further analysis is needed, and what concrete steps progressive actors can take to defend and advance gender equality and inclusion.

## 1. What Did CSW70 Reveal about What Progressive Actors Collectively Know about Anti-Gender Politics And Movements?

CSW70 demonstrated that, as a movement, we now have a substantially clearer understanding of the actors often described as »anti-gender« or »anti-rights«. Compared to even a decade ago, we understand far more about the [transnational](#) and [transcalar](#) organization, [funding streams](#), and [strategies](#) that ultra-conservative state and non-state actors are deploying to advance so-called »[pro-family](#)« agendas. These agendas seek to roll back gender equality, undermine LGBTIQ+ civil and human rights, and reverse advances in sexual and reproductive health, support, and education. There is further [evidence](#) showing that while [regional variations](#) exist in how anti-rights politics operate, significant networks and resources connect anti-gender efforts to undermine progressive social norms and national laws as well as international norms and the multilateral human rights system.

Researchers have also followed the money, tracking the sources of funding supporting the mobilization of anti-gender movements globally. [Recent](#) forensic audits reveal the staggering financial scale of this opposition. Between 2019-2023 alone, an estimated [1.18 billion US dollars](#) was mobilized from actors in the United States, Russia, and Europe, [surpassing](#) funding available to progressive

movements. These funds support an extensive range of activities, including online and offline campaigns, media production, lobbying, strategic litigation, grantmaking, convenings and conferences, training programmes and youth engagement initiatives.

This growing body of evidence has provided important insights into the transnationally coordinated anti-gender movement and how it is achieving its regressive aims. This research also shows the growing transnational alignment between contemporary anti-gender movements and established authoritarian regimes, forming strategic, even if sometimes temporary, alliances. Such alignments are evident in voting patterns against the inclusion of [sexual and reproductive health and rights language](#), references to [comprehensive sexuality education](#), the recognition of [sexual orientation and gender identity](#) in UN resolutions and frameworks, and the attempt by the US delegation to redefine »gender« in the Beijing Platform at CSW70.

In addition to showing the tactics, strategies, and resources that are used to mobilize anti-gender agendas, research is showing that this movement is not simply working to roll back rights. It is engaged in a world-building project, working to roll us *forward* into a new social and geopolitical reality; one in which hierarchy, exclusion, and inequality are reinscribed as the normative foundations of »civilization«. As [anti-gender narratives and discourses](#) reveal, anti-gender state and civil society actors are positioning the gender binary, hierarchy, and the patriarchal nuclear family model as being under threat, and themselves as the defenders of »tradition«, »women«, and »children«. These efforts are increasingly institutionalized, as demonstrated by the counter parallel event, the Conference on the State of Women and Family, which featured [events](#) that were jointly hosted and sponsored by the US Mission to the United Nations. Claiming to be »pro-family«, while actively discriminating against all forms of kinship and gender expression that do not comply with their restrictive definitions, anti-gender actors position their exclusionary agendas as being necessary for preserving cultural traditions, increasing fertility rates, promoting economic development, and protecting national sovereignty. These narrative strategies are sophisticated and diverse, deploying [religious freedom](#), [parental rights](#), [development](#), and [child protectionist framings](#) and, crucially, [co-opting human rights language](#) and [sovereignty](#) arguments to position their agendas as resistance to »Western imperialism«. Media studies and communications [experts](#) have further demonstrated that anti-gender actors rely significantly on the circulation of disinformation to generate support for their campaigns of intolerance, and have developed useful [strategies](#) for countering these tactics.

Together, existing research reveals that while anti-gender actors are explicitly targeting women, sexual minorities, and gender diverse people, these agendas and the actors driving them are connected to deeper efforts to destabilize and create distrust in democracy, weaken international

human rights instruments, and lay the normative foundations for autocratic and illiberal governance systems at national and global scales.

## 2. What Are the Constitutive Effects of Anti-Gender Politics?

Now that progressive actors have acquired substantial knowledge about what, how, and where anti-gender actors are working to roll back and block advances towards gender equality, we need to think further about the *constitutive* effects of anti-gender politics and to recognize these dynamics in our research and advocacy. While it is imperative that we monitor and resist anti-rights efforts to weaken norms and mechanisms that have supported human and civil rights agendas, it is equally important that we interrogate the programmes, systems, and imaginaries that pro-family actors are working to construct as their replacement. We must analyse these dynamics to understand more deeply what kind of world these actors are trying to build and the social, national, and geopolitical norms are they seeking to institutionalize.

At their core, anti-gender ideology and political agendas work to normalize hierarchy by persuading us that inequality and exclusion is not only natural, but desirable and necessary. In order to grasp the full implications of this world-building project, policymakers must recognize the colonial historical dynamics that have given rise to the present struggles over the definition of »gender«, »women«, »family«, and related concepts. Scholars such as [Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí](#) and [María Lugones](#) have demonstrated how the claim that only two genders exist in a natural hierarchy has deeply racialized and colonial histories. As these, and several other, scholars have shown, racial hierarchies were constructed through gendered logics that helped justify land theft, enslavement, and the dehumanization of Indigenous peoples. These gender logics were accompanied by systems of cultural erasure premised on the idea that European knowledge was superior and therefore the only legitimate basis for governing societies.

This history is being actively [reactivated and repurposed](#) by contemporary »pro-family« actors who, like their colonial predecessors, are seeking to bring about a particular geopolitical order that serves the interests of a few in relation to the global majority world. Recognizing these continuities is essential for any analysis that seeks to move beyond documenting individual instances of backlash toward understanding anti-gender politics as a constitutive project that is actively producing new norms, alliances, and governance frameworks, not merely resisting progressive ones.

Furthermore, this history reminds us that struggles over gender are also struggles over imagination and world-making. While we must address the immediate harms of anti-gender politics, we must also refuse to allow these actors, who have become adept at [co-opting](#) and [capturing](#) feminist and human rights language, to narrow the

horizons of what kinds of societies we are able to imagine and build.

## 3. Where Are Anti-Gender Politics Taking Us?

If we recognize the history from which contemporary anti-gender politics draws its concepts and arguments, we are better equipped to understand the world that anti-gender actors are working to build, and to recognize the social, cultural, geopolitical, and economic aims of the so-called »pro-family« movement, and to ask »What are these actors ultimately trying to achieve?« and »Why does it require such enormous financial investment to enforce that which is supposedly natural and universal?«. These questions should be considered alongside the ongoing efforts to monitor and investigate the regressive ambitions of anti-gender policy agendas.

Presentations at CSW70 indicated an awareness of three interconnected trajectories in anti-gender advocacy. First, anti-gender politics are actively weakening the systems and institutions that promote gender equality, human rights, and social justice, most visibly by hollowing out progressive civil society and diminishing the capacities of organizations working on the front lines. Second, anti-gender actors are not only attempting to weaken progressive institutions from the outside, but they are operating within and alongside them. The counter event, the Conference on the State of Women and Family (CSWF) exemplified this dynamic. Adjacent to the UN building, anti-gender actors staged a parallel institutional presence where they advanced rival anti-liberal norms such as »parental rights« and linked national sovereignty to the privileged status of the nuclear family model. Third, as the Outright International demonstration, [All Genders. All Bodies. All Rights](#), foregrounded, anti-rights actors are attempting to normalize intolerance, inequality, exclusion, silencing, and the intimidation of already marginalized groups, while simultaneously sowing distrust and weakening democratic and human rights institutions. The targeting of LGBTIQ+ communities and sexual and reproductive rights, as [analysts](#) have argued, has become a critical component of illiberal efforts to bring about an alternative illiberal international order.

While it is critically important that we continue mapping the evolving narratives and resources used to undermine rights and equality, these efforts must be accompanied by a willingness to sit with harder questions that cannot yet be fully answered. Whose interests are at stake in these agendas? What possibilities do anti-gender narratives open up, and what possibilities do they close down or render unthinkable? Bringing these questions into our advocacy and analysis, recognizing the intersecting power relations of gender, race, class, sexuality, and geopolitical position that are reinforced by »pro-family« actors, is itself a political act. Beyond multilateral fora, anti-gender actors are also working through bilateral diplomatic channels, an underexamined but critical arena. [Evidence](#) suggests that

they are actively training diplomats, seeking to influence ministries of foreign affairs, and are working to realign diplomatic relations along ideological lines.

Understanding where anti-gender politics are taking us therefore requires asking whose interests are served, what world is being constructed, and why the enforcement of what anti-gender actors claim is »natural« demands such extraordinary financial and political investment. The answer, this analysis suggests, is that what we are witnessing is an organized effort to build an alternative world order premised on hierarchy, exclusion, and the reversal of hard-won civil and human rights. Recognizing this should not be considered solely as an academic exercise, but the foundation for a political response equal to the scale of the challenge. Compounding this challenge is the fact that anti-gender actors increasingly frame their agendas in the language of democracy, freedom, and human rights protection. The [Political Network for Values](#), for instance, describes its mission as defending »life, family and freedom« and has issued a commitment to »restore the original meaning of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights«, positioning the rollback of gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights not as an attack on human rights but as their authentic defence. This appropriation of democratic language makes it all the more urgent that progressive actors develop clear and compelling arguments for why genuine democracy requires equality, inclusion, and bodily autonomy, not their elimination.

#### 4. What Are the Next Steps And Concrete Recommendations for Progressive Actors?

CSW70 made clear that there are important successes to build on. Cross-movement and cross-party alliances have proven effective in several contexts: in [Spain](#), in advancing gender equality legislation, in the [Philippines](#) at the city level, in defending LGBT communities, and in [South Africa](#), in reinforcing comprehensive sexuality education against anti-gender pressure. These examples remind us that the defence of gender justice requires determination at every level of governance, from the municipal to the multilateral, and that progressive actors can and do win when we organize strategically.

Drawing on the analysis above and the collective reflections at CSW70, I offer the following recommendations for progressive actors:

→ *Translate monitoring into power analysis:* Continued mapping of anti-gender actors, networks, and funding is essential but must be accompanied by deeper analytical work asking whose interests are served and what world these agendas are designed to produce. Empirical monitoring alone cannot tell us *why* these agendas are gaining ground or what they are ultimately trying to build. In practice, this means creating dedicated spaces, in research institutions, civil society organizations, and policy forums, where empirical findings are brought into

conversation with power analysis, decolonial frameworks, and political theory and investing in research collaborations that centre voices and frameworks from the Global South.

→ *Invest in cities and municipalities as sites of gender justice:* While much advocacy attention focuses on national governments and multilateral institutions, cities and municipalities represent an underutilized and often underestimated arena for defending and advancing gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights. As the Philippine city of Mandaluyong demonstrated in passing local anti-discrimination legislation, and as New York City's declaration of itself as a feminist city affirms, local governments are frequently closer to the communities most affected by anti-gender politics and more agile in responding to their needs. In a political moment when national governments in many contexts are retreating from gender equality commitments, cities and municipalities can serve as critical frontlines of resistance and innovation. Progressive actors should invest in building networks of gender-committed local governments, sharing strategies across contexts, and making the case that the municipal level is not a secondary arena but a vital one.

→ *Be alert to developments in bilateral diplomacy:* Progressive actors must pay greater attention to how anti-gender politics operate through bilateral diplomatic channels, including efforts to influence foreign ministries, reshape diplomatic practices, and realign inter-state relationships along ideological lines. Progressive actors, researchers, and advocates must bring the same sustained scrutiny to this arena that they have developed for multilateral spaces.

Beyond these analytical priorities, CSW70 reinforced several practical imperatives that remain urgently relevant. Cross-movement solidarity, linking feminist, LGBTIQ+, labour, environmental, anti-racist, and democratic governance movements is essential and must be cultivated with care and intentionality. Reclaiming and expanding narratives is equally critical, given that anti-gender actors have proven highly effective at co-opting feminist and human rights language. Progressive actors must respond by articulating affirmative visions of why equality, inclusion, and bodily autonomy are inseparable from democratic life itself and why anti-gender agendas are therefore not merely retrogressive social or cultural projects; they are anti-democratic ones. To make these and related strategies possible, there is a need for targeted investment in the resilience and capacity of progressive civil society organizations, most of which are operating under increasing legal and financial pressure, as a matter of democratic survival.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, anti-gender politics challenges us to do more than defend individual policies or rights frameworks. It confronts us with a world-building project of considerable ambition and resources, one that demands an equally imaginative and ambitious response. It calls on us to articulate the larger answers about why democracy matters, why equality, inclusion, and bodily autonomy are fundamental to our shared humanity, and why intersectional solidarity remains our most powerful response to those who seek to narrow the possibilities of freedom and justice.

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