CIVICUS

AGAINST THE WAVE

CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSES TO ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is from and for civil society, based on the voices and views of many CIVICUS members and stakeholders, and informed by the following sources:

- Interviews with 40 civil society activists, leaders, experts and other stakeholders, carried out between 2017 and 2019.

- A survey of CIVICUS members, with 903 valid responses from 115 countries in every global region, conducted in September 2019.

- 10 civil society dialogues involving over 400 civil society practitioners, convened in Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Malawi, Mexico, Nigeria, Tanzania and the USA by CIVICUS members and the CIVICUS secretariat between June and August 2019.

- A collaborative research project on non-state actors and civic space, drawing on over 150 hours of interviews with activists, undertaken by CIVICUS and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2019.

- CIVICUS Monitor posts published during 2018 and 2019.

- Media coverage of anti-rights issues published during 2018 and 2019.

All in all, the voices of people from over 50 countries in every global region are directly reflected in this report. All conclusions and recommendations drawn are however the views of the CIVICUS secretariat only and do not necessarily reflect the views of the individual contributors.

Cover photo by Inés M. Pousadela
Caption: March for abortion rights in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents key findings of research, carried out by CIVICUS, the global civil society alliance, and informed by CIVICUS members and stakeholders, on how civil society is being impacted upon and is responding to anti-rights groups.

Anti-rights groups – non-state groups that position themselves as part of civil society but attack fundamental and universal human rights – are on the rise. Excluded groups – including women, young people, LGBTQI people, people living with HIV/AIDS, religious minorities, Indigenous peoples, ethnic and racial minorities, migrants and refugees – are feeling the brunt of their attacks. Civil society that defends rights, particularly the rights of excluded groups, is being targeted.

Anti-rights groups have risen in prominence and are now a key part of the repression of civil society space – civic space – seen in most countries of the world. In some contexts, civil society reports that their main threat comes not from arms of the state but from anti-rights groups.

IMPACTS AND TACTICS

There are many different kinds of anti-rights groups. They include highly conservative groups that work to deny women's equality, sexual and reproductive rights and the rights of LGBTQI people; far-right nationalist and xenophobic groups that attack the rights of minorities and also attack groups that promote social justice and social cohesion; groups rooted in majority faiths that attack faith minorities and promote ethno-nationalism; and groups that are set up to attack the opponents of authoritarian

political leaders, including by suppressing civil society. While groups vary in composition and ideology and are represented in different strengths in different countries, the tactics they use are remarkably similar.

Participants in our research are clear that they have long had to contend with well-established anti-rights groups. But they are also clear that they are seeing many new anti-rights groups and that groups are achieving unprecedented levels of influence and impact. This current rise of anti-rights groups has come at least in part as a backlash to the success civil society has won in past decades, with the aim of rolling back the gains civil society has achieved. In many cases anti-rights groups have updated their tactics and image, have become adept at using new technologies and are demonstrably opportunistic, switching tactics and targets, attaching themselves to causes and latching onto media stories to promote themselves and stoke outrage as opportunities arise.

Anti-rights groups are now more confident, more visible and better resourced. They have grown in success through winning support from sections of the public, and they are doing so because their narratives are resonating with some people. They are shaping public narratives, including through disinformation and manipulation, and are sowing hatred and division. They are both helping to make and benefiting from a change in the political weather in many contexts, in which right-wing populism and narrow nationalism are on the rise.

Sometimes anti-rights groups are genuinely non-state groups and sometimes they are set up as the proxies of state interests, but often

they sit somewhere in between, tightly enmeshed with political parties and repressive states. Anti-rights groups are most effective when political leaders, parties and states pick up on and echo their narratives, and when anti-rights groups are able to connect with and amplify regressive discourse that comes from the top.

These often close connections between anti-rights groups and political power are one of the multiple forms of linkages that are enabling anti-rights groups to achieve influence. Anti-rights groups are networking with each other, linking across issues and forging common narratives and campaigns; faith-based groups and secular groups are putting aside differences to work with each other; and anti-rights groups are increasingly sharing strategies and resources internationally and working in international arenas, where they seek to reverse global human rights norms and prevent progressive international agreements.

Anti-rights groups pursue a range of common tactics that together make up the anti-rights playbook. These include the use of apparently legitimate channels, enabled by positioning themselves as part of civil society, including court actions, campaigning in elections, triggering referendums and participating in consultations; mobilising people in public space, including with the intent of disrupting or preventing civil society mobilisations; using and manipulating social media, including to promote narratives and recruit support, and to spread disinformation and conspiracy theories, promote hate speech and smear and harass civil society; and enabling and directly deploying physical violence. As foundations for these attacks they are borrowing and distorting the language of human rights; organising in opposition to what they characterise as 'gender ideology'; and mobilising highly conservative interpretations of faith identities and appeals to distorted notions of tradition and culture.

As a result, anti-rights groups are impacting directly on people's lives and on civic space. Their impacts are further increasing their confidence and visibility, encouraging them to push forward with ever more extreme views and positions.

ANTI−RIGHTS GROUPS VERSUS CIVIL SOCIETY

Anti-rights groups work by positioning themselves as part of civil society. Doing so enables many of their tactics. It helps them win visibility and recruit support, and grants access to domestic and international consultation processes. But it should be made clear that anti-rights groups fall outside the family of legitimate civil society in two fundamental respects.

First, they do not share civil society's ways of working. Civil society is a diverse sphere, but it is one with unwritten rules of engagement, in which we debate and dialogue openly and respectfully, listen to other points of view and negotiate consensus; it is also one in which we are committed to non-violence, even when we engage in civil disobedience. In contrast, anti-rights groups do not share our civil ways of working. They try to shut down or hijack debate. They are generally not open to persuasion or interested in genuine dialogue. They engage in violence directly or enable it by promoting hatred and division.

Second, civil society, as CIVICUS recognises it, is a sphere where we pursue diverse ends, but we all share a commitment to universal human rights, social justice and the improvement of our societies as a whole.

Even when we promote the rights of particular groups, such as members of an excluded group, we do so on the assumption that social justice and universal rights as a whole are advanced. We are motivated to act by humanitarian values of empathy and compassion. In contrast, anti-rights groups see rights as a zero-sum game: they want to advance the rights of their supporters or constituencies by taking rights away from other groups. They want to challenge the universality of human rights. They seek to deny civil society's fundamental rights – of association, peaceful assembly and expression – for those who stand in their way.

Understanding these key differences between anti-rights groups and genuine civil society helps point the way towards a response. We need to promote a new understanding of what civil society is and does, centred not around our structures and the narrow negatives often offered as definitions – as the non-state, non-profit sphere – but rather around our positives – as a broad family that stands for universal human rights, humanitarian values and social justice, and that is characterised by a civil way of working, opposed to hatred and violence, and believes in dialogue and compromise. In doing so, we can challenge the confusion between genuine civil society and anti-rights groups that helps anti-rights groups thrive.

Photo by Simona Granati-Corbis/Getty Images

A woman at the 2019 Pride parade in Rome, Italy, holds a sign that reads 'Sex, race, beliefs: beautiful because they are diverse'.

CIVIL SOCIETY FIGHTING BACK

Based on a new, confident and bold assertion of what civil society is and does, we can apply some common response tactics. As suggested by participants in our research, responses in the broad categories below can help civil society fight back against the range of anti-rights groups that we encounter. Key strategies include:

1. We can improve our **collective working** between different parts of civil society and diverse forms of civil society groups and movements to offer joined-up responses;

2. We can mobilise greater **transnational solidarity** to share common responses across different contexts;

3. We can develop better and more creative **communications** to respond to the impacts that anti-rights narratives are achieving;

4. We can build enhanced **connections with the public** and invest in greater bridge-building to reach and debate with people and bring them into our movements;

5. We can make **unusual connections** – with groups that are conservative in outlook but potentially open to working with us, with states concerned about the anti-rights tide and with political parties that share common ground;

6. We can **reclaim human rights language** from anti-rights obfuscation, including by making a new case for the value of universal human rights;

7. We can offer a new **fight against disinformation and hate speech**, including by more effective advocacy towards and collaboration with social media and tech giants;

8. We can gather more **mass mobilisations** to show our strength in numbers, recruit supporters and offer counter-protests to anti-rights mobilisations;

9. We can commit to greater **international-level engagement** to take on the growing actions of anti-rights groups in international institutions and advocate for universal human rights norms and democratic multilateral reform;

10. We can work to **expose anti-rights groups**, including their underlying ideologies and agendas, their contradictions and opportunism and their often murky funding sources, including in collaboration with investigative journalists.

Many of these strategies are already being tested and deployed successfully by civil society across a range of contexts. As civil society we are fighting back, defending the gains we have made in the past, standing up for excluded groups and proving our power. But the response needs resourcing, and the many civil society supporters concerned about the rise of anti-rights groups need to join us in the fightback. We need to work together to defend universal human rights, show that we are mainstream and push anti-rights groups back to the fringes where they belong.

SECTION 1: ANTI−RIGHTS GROUPS: WHAT THEY ARE AND WHY THEY MATTER

WHY FOCUS ON ANTI−RIGHTS GROUPS?

There has been much analysis of attacks on civil society and restrictions on civic space in recent years. Much of this has focused on states as the key sources of restrictions and attacks. However, numerous CIVICUS members and partners are increasingly reporting that they are seeing the influence and impacts of non-state groups and individuals who attack human rights. Many are saying that impacts of anti-rights groups on their work are now outweighing those that arise from state restriction.

The current rise and growing impacts of anti-rights groups – impacts that include the sowing of division and hatred, the denial of voice for excluded groups and the restriction of civic space – make them an essential topic for civil society research. These groups are making gains, and so must be taken seriously.

This report responds to this rising concern by seeking to understand what factors may be behind the current burgeoning of anti-rights groups, the key characteristics and ways of working of these groups, and their impacts on civil society. It highlights the civil society fightback and suggests further potential Civil society responses to anti-rights groups.

THE CURRENT RISE AND GROWING IMPACTS OF ANTI−RIGHTS GROUPS – IMPACTS THAT INCLUDE THE SOWING OF DIVISION AND HATRED, THE DENIAL OF VOICE FOR EXCLUDED GROUPS AND THE RESTRICTION OF CIVIC SPACE – MAKE THEM AN ESSENTIAL TOPIC FOR CIVIL SOCIETY RESEARCH.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ANTI−RIGHTS GROUPS?

There are many different forces that work to undermine fundamental human rights and restrict civil society. As documented by the CIVICUS Monitor, which tracks threats to civic space, these include arms of the state, political leaders, officials and parties, the private sector and other non-state actors of various kinds.

Our research has sought to define and focus on a distinct category of non-state actor with some specific common characteristics: we define an anti-rights group as a group of some kind – organised or less formal – that operates in civil society space but that actively works to restrict a particular human right or set of rights.

Other actors are often adjacent to anti-rights groups. These include extremist and far-right individuals who attack people and civil society whose views they oppose online and offline; communities with shared beliefs, such as leaders and follows of a particular faith, that are not necessarily formed into cohesive groups; violent insurgent and terrorist groups engaged in armed struggle; pro-government militias; organised crime groups that may target civil society when it opposes their criminal interests; business lobby groups, including fake grassroots groups established to support business interests at the cost of human rights (a practice known as astroturfing); state-controlled and state-co-opted media organisations; civil society groups that are ideologically closely aligned to a state or political party that are undermining human rights; and state-organised pseudo-civil society organisations (often referred to as government-organised non-governmental organisations, GONGOs) and other forms of fake, front and proxy civil society groups.

All of these actors are important and they are part of the same universe. Different types of entity are often connected, with unclear boundaries between them. Anti-rights groups often have close links with other repressive forces, notably states, political parties, politicians and faith leaders. Sometimes they act as the proxy of these forces, are created by them and have no real independence. Sometimes they have autonomy, but still work through close connections and alliances. Many contributors to our research talk about individuals – including politicians, faith leaders and anti-rights influencers on social media – and informal groups at the same time that they talk about anti-rights groups, as is reflected in some of the material below.

The distinct feature of anti-rights groups as compared to others is that they lay some claim to being part of civil society, and many would see them as such; this includes some but not all of our interviewees and survey respondents, as some of their direct quotations below suggest. This calls into question what the terminology of 'civil society' means. Our report seeks to draw a clear distinction between anti-rights groups and civil society, and suggests that part of the response should be to promote an understanding of civil society as something organised around common values – centred on universal human rights and social justice – and ways of working – based on willingness to debate, recognise dissent and negotiate. As a shorthand, this report therefore uses the terminology of anti-rights groups to describe groups that position themselves within civil society space and attack rights, and in contrast uses the terminology of civil society to characterise non-state groups that stand for universal human rights and progressive values.

WHERE AND ON WHAT ISSUES ARE ANTI−RIGHTS GROUPS MOST ACTIVE?

Anti-rights groups are not prominent in every country, and not everyone is affected equally by their rise. While our research points to particular concentrations in the Americas – both Latin America and North America – many Asian countries and Europe, there is evidence that anti-rights groups are active in every global region.

TRACKING ANTI−RIGHTS GROUPS' THREATS TO CIVIC SPACE

The CIVICUS Monitor tracks threats to civic space in every country of the world. In 2018 and 2019 it reported on attacks on and threats against civil society groups and activists from anti-rights groups and individuals across a diverse range of countries: Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Czechia, Estonia, Ghana, Greece, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Israel, Italy, Kenya, Maldives, Montenegro, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Spain, Sri Lanka, UK, USA and Venezuela. Anti-rights events reported by the CIVICUS Monitor include public mobilisations and protests – including disruptions of civil society events – disinformation and hate speech, verbal and physical threats and violence.

There are many different types of anti-rights groups and they work on a range of issues and attack a variety of targets. In each context the array is different. Some of the groups frequently identified in our research include:

● Groups, many of them faith-based, that attack women's rights, including abortion rights, and LGBTQI[1] rights, seen in every global region, with heavy presences in Africa and Latin America.

● Hard-right, ultra-nationalist, neo-fascist, neo-Nazi, white supremacist and Islamophobic groups that attack rights for ethnic and racial minorities, migrants and refugees, women and LGBTQI people, as well as left-wing political parties and groups, prominent in many European countries and the USA.

● Conservative faith-based groups and groups that promote ethno-

religious nationalism and patriarchal values that are rooted in dominant cultures and faith traditions, which attack the rights of women and minorities, seen particularly in Asia.

● State-aligned groups that promote elite interests and that are part of the widespread repression of civil society in authoritarian states.

As this suggests, the targets of anti-rights groups vary according to context, but some clear patterns emerge. While some anti-rights groups attack left-of-centre political beliefs or civil society in general, almost invariably anti-rights groups target the rights of excluded groups. The principal groups identified by our research are women, LGBTQI people, people with HIV/AIDS, religious minorities, ethnic and racial minorities, Indigenous peoples, migrants and refugees. In all contexts where these groups are attacked, the civil society that defends the rights of these groups is also attacked.

Anti-rights groups are disparate. The universe includes formal and less formal groups, some long-established groups and some new ones, bodies with large-scale membership and support bases and those in which only a handful of people are involved, and secular and faith-based groups. It includes networks and coalitions. International as well as domestic coalitions and networks are important, as are anti-rights influencers active on social media. This diverse anti-rights universe can present conceptual difficulty, but what stands out from our research is that anti-rights groups tend to share common tactics and are increasingly working together across issues, targets, organisation types and borders. This suggests that some common responses can be identified for adaptation in fighting back against a range of anti-rights groups.

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[1]Various formulations of this abbreviation were used by interviewees, survey respondents and dialogue participants. For this text, they have been standardised in the abbreviation LGBTQI, which may not necessarily have been the form used by the respondent.

People march for LGBTQI rights near the presidential palace in Manila, Philippines, during Pride Month in 2019.

SECTION 2: HOW ARE ANTI– RIGHTS GROUPS DISTINCT FROM CIVIL SOCIETY?

> WE DEBATE OPENLY, LISTEN TO OTHER POINTS OF VIEW AND RESPECT THE RIGHTS OF PEOPLE TO ASSERT OTHER VIEWPOINTS. WE TRY TO MAKE SURE THAT THE VOICES OF THOSE WHO MIGHT NOT NORMALLY BE HEARD ARE AIRED.

[2]Unless otherwise stated, all quotations cited in this report are edited extracts of interviews, survey responses or consultation reports. In all cases, the views are the respondents' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of their organisations.

Clear distinctions should be made between the civil society universe and the anti-rights universe. Anti-rights groups often position themselves as part of civil society, and many may see them as such. Superficially, they may appear to sit in the civil society family, because they often register under the same laws and regulations as civil society and, when formally organised, may have similar structures to civil society organisations (CSOs). But they differ from legitimate civil society in two profound ways. The first is to do with how they work and behave. The second lies in the goals they pursue.

Civil society is a diverse and wide-ranging arena. In this arena, we often disagree with each other. But civil society is a sphere of discourse as well as action. Debate within civil society is underpinned by implicit rules, which are not codified, but which we largely abide by. We debate openly, listen to other points of view and respect the rights of people to assert other viewpoints. We try to make sure that the voices of those who might not normally be heard are aired. We negotiate and try to arrive at a consensus that respects a diversity of views and a compromise that most people can broadly agree with. We continue to dialogue, revisit and adjust. We commit to working through non-violent means, even if there are times we engage in peaceful civil disobedience. This is the civil way of working.

Anti-rights groups do not share this way of working. They often have no real interest in debate, and certainly not in reasoned, respectful debate. Because they are organised on the basis of dogma, they are not open to letting themselves be persuaded. It is increasingly clear that for them, debate is not a process; it is a tactic, and one with toxic effects. Anti-rights groups do not exist to find the compromise or consensus. They exist to pursue their aims and close down dissenting voices. They often manipulate the truth and spread disinformation. Violence, fearmongering and intimidation are part of their repertoire. When they say they want to debate with civil society, they seek an opportunity to distract us, attack us and spread disinformation. When they seek a platform, it is to promote hatred and division.

Second, the diverse civil society arena is home to groups and people that pursue a wide range of aims and interests. Sometimes those interests are competing rather than convergent, and sometimes we seek to advance the interests of a particular group of people. But the civil society that is attacked by anti-rights groups and with which this report is concerned is one that CIVICUS believes is the great majority of civil society: a sphere in which we are all motivated by a commitment to uphold universal human rights, improve our societies and advance social justice. In this civil society family, even when we act to try to advance the rights of a particular group – such as an excluded group that has less access to rights – there is an assumption that doing so advances social justice and the rights of humanity as a whole.

Anti-rights groups are not part of this broad family. At best, they exist to advance the narrow interests of their followers or constituencies, but this is done at the expense of other groups. They see competing claims for rights as a zero-sum game: for their constituency to enjoy rights, some other group must be denied them. At worst, their primary function is to attack: they exist to attack the communities that stand in their way and the civil society associated with them.

Still, the distinction between anti-rights groups and the civil society family is not well understood by many, including the public and policy-makers, at both the national and international levels. This is a point expressed by Tizgowere Msiska of the Revolution Human Aid and Transparency Initiative in Malawi, who states:[2]

…people find it difficult to differentiate between our organisations and theirs.

Photo by Ines M. Pousadela

Demonstrators march in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on the eve of a decisive congressional vote on abortion rights in August 2018.

This confusion is in part deliberate: many anti-rights groups want to be perceived as part of civil society and muddy the waters about what civil society is and does, a tactic that calls into question the legitimacy of genuine civil society. Positioning themselves as part of civil society enables some of the tactics identified further below, including participation in domestic and international consultations, advocacy and lobbying and public mobilisations.

The rise of anti-rights groups therefore raises questions about what we understand civil society is and does. This is in part a struggle about who gets to claim the label of civil society, and what that label means. It suggests a need in response to develop and communicate a new and bold idea of what civil society stands for and how we work, centred on our humanitarian motivations, support for universal human rights and passion for social justice, and a commitment to working in ways that are inclusive and respectful.

SECTION 3: WHAT IS NEW ABOUT THE RISE OF ANTI−RIGHTS GROUPS?

Mieke Schuurman

Gordan Bosanac

Héctor Pujols

[3]For interviews, a link to the full interview is provided on first use. All interviews are available at *www.civicus.org/index.php/ media-center/news/interviews*

Our research has come in response to the growing concern of our members and partners about the increasing actions and impacts of anti-rights groups. It is important to identify and understand the key characteristics of the current wave.

ANTI−RIGHTS GROUPS ARE NOT ENTIRELY NEW

Anti-rights groups are on the rise, but they are not a new phenomenon. India's hardline Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which has defined the agenda and supplied the activist base of India's right-wing populist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, was founded as far back as 1925.

Several interviewees emphasised that they have long had to confront anti-rights groups. Mieke Schuurman of Eurochild, in the context of the child rights movement, observes:[3]

I believe these groups have always existed. They have always supported the family and the strength of the family, and gone against the rights of children, believing that parents can decide for children what to do and what not to do.

Croatian activist and analyst Gordan Bosanac observes the long history of anti-rights groups in Eastern Europe:

A colleague of mine says that these groups have been around for a long time. She's currently investigating the third generation of such groups and says they originated in the 1970s, when they first mobilised around neo-Nazi ideas and against women's rights.

Héctor Pujols of Chile's National Immigrant Coordination points to a history of such groups in his country stretching back at least as far as the dictatorship of the 1970s:

These groups were not new… These are groups linked to a long-existing far right, the kind of far right that never dies in any country. Although perhaps its presence declines at times, it always remains latent, waiting for the opportunity to resurface.

This sense of latency followed by regrowth is identified by several interviewees. For example, Uma Mishra-Newbery of Women's March Global says:

I don't think this is new. These groups have always been around, always in the background. But there is a massive resurgence of anti-rights groups underway

ANTI−RIGHTS GROUPS ARE GROWING IN STRENGTH, CONFIDENCE, VISIBILITY AND SUPPORT

What is compelling is the sense that anti-rights groups are reawakening, stretching their wings and becoming more powerful. Something may be coming to fruition that has been quietly building in the background for some time. Teresa Fernández Paredes of Women's Link shares this view:

…anti-rights groups have been busy building connections and expanding since the 1990s.

There is clear consensus that anti-rights groups have become more visible and confident. Sahar Moazami of OutRight Action International speaks about how such groups "have become emboldened," while María Angélica Peñas Defago of Argentina's National Research Council notes that anti-rights groups, particularly faith-based groups:

…have gained a prominence in the public space that they did not have 20 years ago.

This current burgeoning of anti-rights groups has come at least in part as a result of a change in their tactics, suggests Gordan Bosanac:

Uma Mishra-Newbery

Teresa Fernández Paredes

Sahar Moazami

María Angélica Peñas Defago

They used to be old fashioned, not very attractive to their potential audiences and not very savvy in the use of the instruments of direct democracy. From 2010 onwards they changed their strategies. The anti-rights movement underwent a rapid renewal, and its new leaders were very young, eloquent and aware of the potential of democratic instruments. In their public appearances, they started downplaying religion, moving from religious symbolism to contemporary, colourful and joyous visuals.

With new tactics and emphases, as detailed in the following section, many anti-rights groups have won public support and gained in visibility and confidence as a result. Gains by anti-rights groups are both demonstrating and increasing their sense of power. Success increases support and emboldens anti-rights groups to intensify their attacks. An international contagion effect can be observed, in which the successes of anti-rights groups in one context are emboldening those elsewhere.

Greater prominence is not only a result of changes in tactics. Anti-rights groups are both helping to make and benefiting from recent political shifts. In many countries sections of the public are embracing right-wing populism and nationalism, and populist and nationalist leaders are coming to power.

Past State of Civil Society Reports have set out how right-wing populist and nationalist politicians are connecting with the very real problems and fears many people have – about economic inequality and precariousness, insecurity, poor public services, the changes and shocks brought about by economic globalisation and lack of voice and disconnection from decision-making – and peddling flimsy and deceptively simple ideas about how to solve these problems. Martin Pairet of European Alternatives identifies the growth of anti-rights discourse as in part a response to people's feelings of not being listened to:

A lot of people feel their voices are not being heard and therefore feel powerless – they feel that no matter what they do, they won't be able to change things and they won't regain control over politics, which means they won't have a say over the decisions that affect their lives, and they won't control their futures.

…people are getting increasingly desperate for someone in decision-making positions to really understand their problems and their fears, which the system is not paying attention to and is not able to process. This is the point when nationalism, extremism and hate start to rise, and hate speech becomes appealing.

"…PEOPLE ARE GETTING INCREASINGLY DESPERATE FOR SOMEONE IN DECISION–MAKING POSITIONS TO REALLY UNDERSTAND THEIR PROBLEMS AND THEIR FEARS, WHICH THE SYSTEM IS NOT PAYING ATTENTION TO AND IS NOT ABLE TO PROCESS."
– MARTIN PAIRET

María Angélica Peñas Defago makes a connection between the global economic neoliberalism that has failed so many people, fuelling the anger and fear on which right-wing populism and nationalism thrive, and the power this has enabled some anti-rights groups to develop by positioning themselves as sources of alternatives. As states and conventional politicians have failed communities, anti-rights groups – faith-based in her example – are part of what has filled the gap, developing a support base as a result:

...to understand the phenomenon it is... key to understand the neoliberal context and its general effects that undermine living conditions. In the socio-political context of neoliberalism, as the state has withdrawn from its basic functions, many religious groups have gone on to perform tasks and provide services that should be provided by the state... In Latin America, the role of evangelical churches, for instance in the area of aid and treatment for addictions, is really impressive. Evangelical sectors are growing exponentially because they are assisting communities that are being forgotten by the state.

As people lose trust in institutions and lose faith in the current workings of democracy, understandable fears are being co-opted and manipulated by a new elite of political leaders. Anti-rights groups are political and often partisan, and are often part of the machinery by which right-wing populism and nationalism are being advanced. Right-wing populist politicians and anti-rights groups attack excluded groups and civil society, because populist narratives are based on such attacks and these targets must be subdued to enable the exercise of power; the notion of 'the people' that populism narrowly defines and appeals to sits entirely at odds with civil society's inclusive understanding of citizenship.

Anti-rights discourse and actions are becoming more normalised and mainstream, and political systems are shifting rightwards, as established mainstream parties echo anti-rights discourse in an attempt to maintain support. At the same time as normalising anti-rights groups, rightwards political shifts have politicised the work of civil society. Civil society that works on issues once considered to be relatively uncontroversial and non-political faces a changed political landscape, in which our work is opened up to attack.

Rightwards shifts have grown the confidence of anti-rights groups, as Gillian Kane of Ipas observes:

Following changes in political leadership in some countries, including the USA, they have become more vocal and more deeply involved.

> "FOLLOWING CHANGES IN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN SOME COUNTRIES, INCLUDING THE USA, ANTI–RIGHTS GROUPS HAVE BECOME MORE VOCAL AND MORE DEEPLY INVOLVED."
> – GILLIAN KANE

High-profile election victories – among them those of President Donald Trump in the USA, President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines and the UK's Brexit referendum in 2016, President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil in 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's landslide re-election win in India in 2019 and the League/Five Star Movement coalition that governed Italy from June 2018 to September 2019 – were game-changing moments for many anti-rights groups, who saw their side making major advances. Regressive leaders have come close to winning elections in several other countries too, as in Costa Rica, where anti-rights evangelical preacher and Bolsonaro copycat Fabricio Alvarado was defeated in a run-off election in April 2018, after a campaign aimed at distorting the democratic process through disinformation tactics.

Kaspars Zālītis of Mozaika in Latvia makes the point that such moments boost the confidence of anti-rights groups:

> …after the Brexit vote and the Trump victory, they are emboldened. The latest developments in Hungary and Poland are also proof to them that they may be closer to winning.

Anti-rights groups cannot be understood in isolation from an analysis of political power and political shifts. In responding to anti-rights groups, there is a need to understand the specific contexts – economic, social and cultural, as well as political – in which they exist. Strategies to counter their power need to be informed by, rooted in and respond to the dynamics of local contexts and power relations.

ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS ARE OFTEN CLOSELY CONNECTED TO POLITICAL POWER

The way that many anti-rights groups are emboldened by and active in right-wing populist and nationalist campaigns indicates that they are often deeply connected to political power. Part of what is new about the current wave of anti-rights groups is that they are often sheltered and enabled by states, and used by states. Many anti-rights groups position themselves as non-state actors but serve common agendas with prominent politicians, political parties and state structures.

In the worst cases, some states have effectively been co-opted by anti-rights groups, who have been able to weaken state institutions and circumvent constitutional safeguards to insert their leaders into key institutions. In such instances, as a result of co-option, anti-rights groups are able to drive divisive state agendas and attack civil society voices that oppose them.

"…AFTER THE BREXIT VOTE AND THE TRUMP VICTORY, ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS ARE EMBOLDENED. THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN HUNGARY AND POLAND ARE ALSO PROOF TO THEM THAT THEY MAY BE CLOSER TO WINNING."
- KASPARS ZĀLĪTIS

Photo by Stefano Montesi/Corbis via Getty Images

Protesters hold a gay clown poster of President Putin and a sign reading 'We exist' at a demonstration outside the Russian Embassy in Rome, Italy.

STATE SUPPORT FOR ANTI–RIGHTS GROUPS:
SPOTLIGHT ON MALAYSIA

In Malaysia, anti-rights groups are literally doing the state's work for them. Thilaga Sulathireh of Justice for Sisters relates how the state's reaction to a growing LGBTQI rights movement has been to develop a programme where LGBTQI people are seen as the objects of 'rehabilitation' in order to curb social harm, with active cooperation by anti-rights groups:

…we saw a shift in tactics by the government's Islamic Department, which has adopted a softer evangelical approach towards LGBTQI people. They saw that heavy prosecutions were giving the department a bad image, so there was a shift towards a softer approach, around promoting the 'rehabilitation' of LGBTQI people. There is a narrative that LGBTQI people need help in returning to the 'right path'.

We saw an increase in state-funded 'rehabilitation' activities in this decade, at the same time that Seksualiti Merdeka, which used to organise festivals, was banned in 2011. The government decided it needed to increase its response to this growing LGBTQI movement. This gave rise to more groups that promote and provide 'rehabilitation' or 'conversion therapy'. We have seen more anti-LGBTQI campaigns in universities and on social media. We have seen more concerted efforts overseen by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which sits under the Prime Minister's office,

and which launched a five-year action to plan to address the 'social ills' caused by LGBTQI behaviour. This brought together most ministries.

As Thilaga Sulathireh describes, a section of anti-rights groups are receiving state funding to offer 'rehabilitation' services:

All the groups attacking LGBTQI rights use evangelical language, similar to the right wing in Europe or the USA. They reject the universality of human rights, are nationalistic, oppose pluralism and diversity in many ways, prioritise a particular race or religion and support 'conversion therapy'. Some of the state-funded activities towards LGBTQI people are carried out by these groups.

We… believe some groups receive state funding for their participation in the government's anti-LGBTQI programme. When a colleague raised the issue of state-sponsored violence against LGBTQI people… this created a lot of protest from Islamic NGOs… who demanded an apology and retraction. The small organisations that are providing 'rehabilitation' services also mobilised in their support, making quite clear the connections between groups receiving state funding to provide services and Islamic NGOs advocating against LGBTQI rights.

A gay refugee from Uganda seeks to escape persecution in Kenya, where homosexuality also continues to be criminalised.

Photo by Kyodo News Stills via Getty Images

At the same time, some states are concerned about the rise of anti-rights groups, and other states sit somewhere between these two poles. Broadly, there are three main attitudes states can adopt towards anti-rights groups:

● States may be concerned about anti-rights groups, see them as a threat to their power and to society, and seek strategies – including alliances with civil society – to respond.

● States may passively tolerate anti-rights groups and do little to either hinder or enable them, either out of indifference or because they are reluctant to confront the power of anti-rights groups and their socially conservative support bases, upon which they may also rely for support.

● States may actively enable anti-rights groups, including by using them to recruit support for ruling parties and leaders, pursue shared

agendas and attack civil society, or be effectively co-opted by anti-rights groups.

Recent political shifts have moved some states from concern to passive tolerance, and some from passive tolerance to active enabling.

In some cases where states are actively repressing civil society, they have made anti-rights groups part of the machinery of attack, effectively delegating them to lead on particular attack tactics. In some cases, the most severe forms of attack, involving the mobilisation of hatred and violence, are devolved to anti-rights groups. When this happens, it may in part come as a response to growing international awareness about and criticism of the repression of civic space by states, and growing knowledge of the responses that can be offered to state repression. In this new evolution of civic space restriction, repressive states and anti-rights groups can have a symbiotic relationship, where different but complementary tactics are used by anti-rights groups and states. Anti-rights groups may be mobilised to attack CSOs that are critical of repressive states, and thereby clear the field for the further exercise of untrammelled state power; repressive states, through vilification and restrictive laws and regulations, can help prepare the ground for attacks by anti-rights groups. In conditions of heavily restricted civic space, it can be quite easy to spot anti-rights groups: they are often they groups that are relatively free to operate.

Not surprisingly, survey respondents in authoritarian states, states with highly restricted civic space and states that are experiencing civil conflict tend to identify anti-rights groups closely with the state, its leaders and security agencies, which are broadly attacking civil society because it is

seen as a check on state power. For instance, a survey respondent from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) reports that:

…anti-rights groups are most often certain authorities and some members of the armed groups, the militias…

While another respondent from the DRC states that:

…in our country, and especially in our region, it is primarily politicians who are part of anti-rights groups.

Survey respondents often highlight connections between anti-rights groups and state and political structures. According to Olutoke Dotun of Amplify Initiative for the Advancement of Community Development in Nigeria:

Anti-rights groups are usually sponsored by elements in government.

While Charles Mwangi of Six Knm self-help group in Kenya sees anti-rights groups as:

…generally government-sponsored groups with diverse interests attached… They are sponsored by politicians…

Both state-aligned groups and non-state-aligned groups can exist alongside each other, notes Colbert Gwain of A Common Future in Cameroon:

Anti-rights groups in Cameroon are either groups that have close links to government officials or individuals who simply form such groups to discredit the important work being done by civil society.

Participants in a consultation convened by CIVICUS in Nairobi, Kenya in July 2019 also identified that state agents are clearly using anti-rights groups as proxies to attack human rights; at the same time that the state is making it harder for legitimate CSOs to operate, including through registration and funding constraints, it is accused of making it easier for anti-rights groups to operate.

Alignment with political parties is a wide-ranging concern. India's RSS has worked over decades to cultivate a unified Hindu nationalist block of voters of sufficient strength to put the BJP in power. This is a successful political strategy that tightly embeds anti-rights groups in a political party that is now the dominant one, but which is explicitly an anti-rights strategy because it focuses in building Hindu nationalist unity around the vilification of the India's Muslim population and other minorities.

Sometimes political parties are the main anti-rights actors and sometimes political parties and anti-rights groups are working hand-in-hand. Sometimes anti-rights groups are founding their own single-issue parties, albeit mostly with little success so far, and sometimes they are infiltrating and influencing political parties. Gordan Bosanac spells out these connections:

…they work not only through CSOs but also political parties. In this way, they are also present in elections, and in some cases, they gain significant power. Such is the case of the far-right Polish Law and Justice Party, which fully integrated these groups into its activities. In other cases, they establish their own political

parties. This happened in Croatia, where the main fundamentalist CSO, In the Name of the Family, estab-lished a political party called Project Homeland…

And they are targeting mainstream conservative parties, and notably those that are members of the Euro-pean People's Party, the European Parliament's centre-right grouping. They are trying to move centre-right and conservative parties towards the far right. This is their crucial fight because it can take them to power.

In Latin America, according to Diana Cariboni, an Argentine journalist and writer based in Uruguay, faith-based anti-rights groups want to achieve political power, and are both infiltrating existing parties and starting new ones:

Pragmatism prevails, so the strategy depends a lot on context. In some cases, they create their own parties – religious, evangelical or ultra-conservative – by which they feel represented. In other cases, they prefer to insert their candidates into various party tickets. Currently in Argentina, for example, there are candidates of this sort in practically all parties, except for the most radical left. They are present in both the ruling party and the main opposition coalition. In addition, there is a recently formed small party, the NOS Front, founded on the explicit rejection of 'gender ideology' in the context of the legislative debate over legal abortion – but it didn't get many votes in the recent primaries… On the other hand, many candidates that are running on various lists will be successful, both at the federal and provincial levels.

The need this suggests in responding is to distinguish between states and parties that are concerned about anti-rights groups, which may be supportive of alliances with civil society; those that are passive enablers, which may be open to persuasion; and those that are active enablers, which will need to be the target of advocacy, campaigning and exposure as well as defensive strategies.

ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS ARE CONNECTING WITH EACH OTHER, INCLUDING INTERNATIONALLY

Anti-rights groups have become an anti-rights movement. Anti-rights groups are building alliances with each other at a level they did not do previously. They are connecting across issues at the national level and also working across borders, connecting internationally, even when it is in the service of strengthening their work to

"PRAGMATISM PREVAILS, SO THE STRATEGY DEPENDS A LOT ON CONTEXT. IN SOME CASES, ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS CREATE THEIR OWN PARTIES – RELIGIOUS, EVANGELICAL OR ULTRA-CONSERVATIVE – BY WHICH THEY FEEL REPRESENTED."
– DIANA CARIBONI

Eliana Cano

Giada Negri

promote nationalism, xenophobia and racism. Links are often opaque, but as anti-rights groups have grown in confidence and made visible gains, these connections have increasingly been brought into the open.

Eliana Cano of Catholics for the Right to Decide (CCD-Peru) outlines some of the connections between diverse anti-rights groups that have been formed in Peru:

The network of conservative organisations in Peru… includes the Office for Latin America of the Population Research Institute, based in Lima; the Peruvian headquarters of the Latin American Alliance for the Family, which promotes classic family formats and produces and disseminates school books; of course older organisations such as Opus Dei, which does local development and support work and is deeply embedded in educational spaces, as well as within the bureaucracy of the Church; and the Sodalicio de la Vida Cristiana, an organisation of lay people.

Teresa Fernández Paredes points to highly effective coalition-building, and the sharing this enables of common approaches for adaption in different places:

… there is one thing they do better than groups on the left: they are very effective in creating connections and coalitions among themselves; even when they work on different issues they are able to find common ground.

Due to the fact that Women's Link is based in three regions, we can clearly see that the same strategies are being used in different places. These groups are using coordinated strategies, they have lots of money and they enjoy global support.

As Gordan Bosanac describes it, while the groups are diverse, their opposition to rights unites them, including at the international level. The world conferences of the US-based World Congress of Families, an anti-abortion, anti-LGBTQI network, have become a key forum in which many anti-rights groups join forces:

They are a very heterogeneous set of groups and organisations. Their common denominator is what they fight against: liberal democracy. Neo-Nazi, anti-women, anti-LGBTQI and anti-migrant rights groups have different targets, but they share an agenda and collaborate towards that agenda. Many of these groups come together at the World Congress of Families, where you will find lots of hate speech against the

Members of the feminist movement Non Una di Meno ("Not one less") demonstrate outside the Italian Parliament against the World Congress of Families held in Verona, Italy.

LGBTQI community, against women and against migrants. They share the same philosophy.

To me, these groups are the exact reverse of the human rights movement, where some organisations focus on women's rights, others on LGBTQI rights, still others on migrants or indigenous peoples, or social, cultural, or environmental rights, but we all have a philosophy founded on a positive view of human rights. We are all part of the human rights movement. It is the exact opposite for them: they all share a negative view of human rights, they don't think they are universal, or they don't view all people as equally human. Either way, they mobilise against human rights.

The World Congress of Families is also identified as a key international meeting space by Giada Negri of the European Civic Forum:

…the World Congress of Families… gathered in March 2019 in Verona, Italy. It was a massive gathering of activists from around the world, united by their rejection of sexual and reproductive rights and their vocal hate for LGBTQI people. But in this case the opposition was also strong and brought activists from all across Europe.

María Angélica Peñas Defago further highlights both national-level convergence and the efficient sharing of narratives and messages across borders:

…in Argentina… all the main actors opposed to the progressive agenda, and specifically to the sexual and reproductive rights agenda, have tended to converge.

Within the framework of the reaction against progress achieved in sexual and reproductive rights, other actors are taking advantage to impose their own conservative agendas, for example around migration issues. There are some new actors at play, especially those joining from other fields – political, economic, religious – but many of the actors that are gaining greater visibility are the same as always, the difference being that they are now unifying agendas that used to run in parallel and in less coordinated ways.

…one of their most successful strategies has involved the use of coordinated messages and symbols. The 'Don't mess with my children' campaign, for example, has used the same phrases and

slogans, and even the same symbols and colours, not only throughout Latin America, but also well beyond. We have seen it in Eastern Europe, in Italy, in Spain.

Indeed, the 'don't mess with my children' slogan and its variants, an anti-rights narrative ostensibly concerned with the protection of children that spread from Peru around Latin America and beyond, recur time and again when respondents in different countries discuss anti-rights campaigns.

Eliana Cano further describes how international anti-rights are on the march and formally collaborating across Latin America:

…today a highly organic network has become visible, which has bases in various Latin American countries and its own publications, conferences and considerable economic resources. Its presence began to make itself felt strongly in 2005, when the Center for Family Promotion and Regulation of Birth (Ceprofarena) organised the Second International Pro-Life Congress… This congress produced a document known as the Lima Declaration, an expression of the agreement reached by conservative groups… Ceprofarena… maintains close links to Human Life International, a powerful international conservative organisation.

Often, these connections are with wealthy US-based anti-rights groups. Anti-LGBTQI sentiment in Uganda has long been fostered by US evangelical groups that have built strong connections and supported the development of local groups taking hardline faith positions, and Uganda is not alone: US evangelical groups have been enthusiastic proponents of anti-LGBTQI legislation in Kenya, Nigeria and Zimbabwe. Dumiso Gatsha of Success Capital Organisation in Botswana also identifies this international connection:

Regarding women's sexual and reproductive rights and LGBTQI rights, US right-wing organisations are exporting their ideas to other parts of the world, including Africa.

Kaspars Zālītis relates how similar skills and strategies are being imported from the USA in Latvia:

…new religious organisations with direct links with US evangelical groups are emerging. Some of their leaders have been trained in the USA and are quite good at influencing people… religious organisations and right-wing parties are increasingly organised and coordinated to fight against gender equality and LGBTQI rights at the European level…

Gordan Bosanac also observes these connections at play in Eastern Europe, pointing to:

…increasingly tight connections to US-based fundamentalist evangelical groups, which had a long experience in shaping policies both within and outside the USA.

There may be some hope in that historically, groups on the far-right have found it difficult to put aside differences and sustain alliances over the long term. In politics, attempts to form a united group of far-right populists and nationalists at the European Parliament level have, for example, often been talked up but have so far have come to little. At the same time, a historical tendency towards right-wing fragmentation is not something we should pin our hopes on. A concerted and robust civil society response is needed, including greater investigation of the role being played by US-based evangelical groups.

INTERNATIONALISING ANTI-RIGHTS LEADERSHIP:
THE IBERO-AMERICAN CONGRESS FOR LIFE AND FAMILY

Diana Cariboni defied a media ban to attend the 2018 meeting of the Ibero-American Congress for Life and Family, held in Uruguay. She saw an international forum at work in which anti-rights leaders active in politics and faith groups are connecting to increase their influence:

In 2018 I covered the conference of this regional group – actually an Ibero-American one, since it has members throughout Latin America and also in Spain. It is a large group that seeks to become a movement. It is one of many, because there are several others, which also overlap, since members of the Ibero-American Congress are also part of other movements, interact with each other within these movements and serve on the boards of various organisations. …

The most important actors that I managed to identify within this movement were, in the first place, a huge number of representatives of evangelical churches and, within evangelism, of neo-Pentecostalism, although there were Baptist churches and non-Pentecostal evangelical churches as well.

In addition to these churches, the Don't Mess with My Kids platform was also represented. This network… includes a series of evangelical Christian personalities. Some of them are church preachers and some are also political actors; for example, there are a large number of representatives with seats in the Peruvian Congress. In fact, legislators make up an important segment of the Ibero-American Congress. In many countries, there are congresspeople who are church pastors or members of religious congregations… These people are trying to coordinate a regional legislative movement. The Ibero-American Congress has been active in the legislative arena and has coordinated and issued statements on certain issues for some time now.

It was not the parishioners at large who gathered… but rather pastors, preachers, politicians, opinion leaders and influencers seeking to take advantage of the language and codes used by a large section of the population, and especially by young people, to communicate…

ANTI−RIGHTS GROUPS ARE ATTRACTING RESOURCES

Money matters. Where anti-rights groups are growing and becoming more successful, they are attracting increasing resources.

In some countries, including Hungary, Poland and Russia, states are changing the rules, making it easier for anti-rights groups to receive funding. State funding criteria have been reframed around the promotion of socially conservative agendas closely aligned to those of ruling parties. States can then claim that they are supporting civil society while funding groups that stand counter to civil society's ethos. In other countries, states are reducing funding for civil society, disadvantaging it compared to those anti-rights groups that enjoy stable funding due to their links with powerful faith institutions. The result is an uneven playing field. Such is the case in Mexico, as noted by participants in a consultation held in June 2019:

> *Right-wing CSOs have been and continue to be supported by religious groups, and in Mexico particularly by the Catholic Church. The new government policies that shut down support for CSOs do not affect anti-rights groups, as they continue to receive financial support from the church and conservative business groups, which have enough economic capacity to corrupt the authorities.*

Often the resourcing of anti-rights groups is opaque, but there is some evidence of international funding. In Latvia, highly conservative US evangelical groups are not only giving training; they are also a key source of funding for groups that work to deny abortion rights and LGBTQI rights, as a result of which, as Kaspars Zālītis outlines:

> *Religious organisations and right-wing parties… are getting a major influx of resources from the USA. They have way more resources than we do.*

Mieke Schuurman describes the international support networks and funding that enable anti-rights groups that attack child rights:

> *…there is… a lot of support from Russia, and from Belarus and Ukraine, and also partly from the USA. Funding is coming from these countries to support anti-child rights movements.*

In the USA, the source of much of the funding flowing towards anti-rights groups across the world, local hate

OFTEN THE RESOURCING OF ANTI−RIGHTS GROUPS IS OPAQUE, BUT THERE IS SOME EVIDENCE OF INTERNATIONAL FUNDING.

groups themselves receive abundant funding from conservative Christian grant-making organisations.

In Indonesia, T King Oey of Arus Pelangi indicates that an extremist Islamic organisation that is stoking a culture of fear among LGBTQI people has received "lots of funding" from Saudi Arabia. In Malaysia, Thilaga Sulathireh suggests that the panoply of groups that attack LGBTQI rights also receive foreign funding. In Eurasia, there is some evidence that anti-rights groups receive funding from Russia.

Groups repressing abortion rights across Latin America are also receiving private sector funding, notes Eliana Cano:

These groups have a lot of money that comes from the conservative business sector and have appropriated effective strategies and discourses.

Uma Mishra-Newbery connects the growing role and confidence of anti-rights groups that attack women's rights in international forms to their funding from conservative foundations, which also support the regressive Trump administration:

If we look at the funding of these groups, it is coming from very well-established family foundations that are deliberately working to undermine women's rights.

If we look at, say, the Heritage Foundation in a space such as the Commission on the Status of Women, speaking out against what they call gender ideology, what is their point there? Digging deeper, we find that the Heritage Foundation was funded by the Dick and Betsy DeVos Family Foundation. And Betsy DeVos is currently the

Trump administration's Secretary of Education… We need to go through all these layers to understand why these groups exist, how sophisticated they are and why they are so difficult to remove.

The often opaque funding of anti-rights groups comes alongside numerous attacks on the far more transparent funding that legitimate civil society receives, not least from Open Society Foundations, which is the subject of numerous vicious and anti-Semitic attacks. In these attacks civil society is consistently characterised as an agent of foreign powers, even though anti-rights groups often receive foreign funding. This is further proof that anti-rights groups do not seek to compete fairly. Greater investigation and exposure of the opaque funding of anti-rights groups is needed.

ANTI−RIGHTS GROUPS ARE MOBILISING IN BACKLASH AGAINST OUR PAST SUCCESSES

A sense also emerges among many of those consulted that what is happening is at least in part a backlash against our successes. This is perhaps most strongly seen by people working to advance women's and LGBTQI rights. Many anti-rights groups have arisen in reaction to rights gains and with the aim of reversing them, which is why in some contexts they are often described as 'counter-movements'.

Sahar Moazami relates this sense of backlash against some recent progress in LGBTQI rights:

Over the past years, a number of countries passed or began to implement laws that recognise diverse gender identities and expand the rights of transgender people, remove bans against

same-sex relations and recognise equal marriage rights to all people regardless of gender or sexual orientation. At the same time, and maybe in reaction to these gains, we are experiencing backlash. We are witnessing the rise of right-wing nationalism and anti-gender movements targeting gender equality and advocating for the exclusion of LGBTQI people and extreme restrictions on sexual and reproductive health and rights. This has led to a rise in queerphobic, and especially transphobic, rhetoric coming from political actors and, in some cases, attempts to roll back progress made to recognise the diversity of gender identities.

Gordan Bosanac observes the same in Eastern Europe:

The most recent turning point in Eastern Europe happened in the early 2010s. In many cases it has been a reaction against national policy debates on LGBTQI and reproductive rights.

…Internationally, anti-rights groups started taking shape in the mid-1990s in reaction to the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women, held in 1995 in Beijing. It was then that a consensus formed around women's rights as human rights, and when gender first came on the agenda. Religious groups felt defeated in Beijing. Many academics who studied this process concluded that it was then that the Catholic Church got angry because they lost a big battle… There were quite a few symbolic moments that made them angry and pushed them to fight more strongly against liberal ideas. In reaction against this, they modernised.

María Angélica Peñas Defago also emphasises the reactive nature of the anti-rights movement in her country, Argentina, and its neighbour

Photo by Stephen Lovekin/Getty Images

Then-UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon opens the 20th anniversary celebration of the 1995 World Conference On Women, a landmark advance in recognising women's rights.

Brazil, where President Bolsonaro's election win marked a victory for backlash:

...we have seen over time – and not only over the past year, when a bill allowing for the voluntary termination of pregnancies was being discussed in congress – reactions against the progress achieved in claiming rights by women and LGBTQI people… There has also been a renewed backlash against sex education in schools, a longstanding battle. Sex education was implemented through a 2006 law that is still being resisted.

I have monitored congresses of so-called 'pro-life' groups and analysed the actions they have undertaken in regional and global spaces, and particularly in the Organization of American States and the United Nations, and it is readily apparent that they are losing ground regarding family formats and the assignment of sexual roles, and they are aware of it. These groups are reacting to what they perceive as a setback. Their reaction is being coordinated not only around the thematic agenda of sexual and reproductive rights, but also around a wider nationalist, neoliberal – and, in some cases, fascist – political and economic agenda.

The Bolsonaro phenomenon is a good example of a reaction to a pluralistic agenda around sexual morality and sexual and reproductive rights. The advances of this pluralist agenda acted as a binding agent for a broader conservative political agenda.

In some contexts, it is possible to see the anti-rights backlash as a rearguard action, potentially a last gasp of those who have long enjoyed a degree of power on the basis of their membership of dominant groups, relatively easy access to rights and the fraying conservative social norms that support these. The rise of anti-rights groups, and the broader resurgence of right-wing populism and nationalism, is often essentially nostalgic and defensive in character, seeking to roll back progressive gains and assert the status of population groups that have historically experienced relative privilege, including on the basis of gender, sexual identity, ethnicity and faith. It is at least in part an attempt to reassert cultural superiority in reaction to cultural shifts. US-based investigative journalist and activist Chip Berlet identifies that anti-rights groups may be recruiting supporters from people angered at a relative loss of their privilege:

When the status quo that has folks like them near the top changes – because previously marginalised groups successfully claim rights for themselves – the privileged don't see this as the loss of unfair privileges, but as

"…WE HAVE SEEN OVER TIME – AND NOT ONLY OVER THE PAST YEAR, WHEN A BILL ALLOWING FOR THE VOLUNTARY TERMINATION OF PREGNANCIES WAS BEING DISCUSSED IN CONGRESS – REACTIONS AGAINST THE PROGRESS ACHIEVED IN CLAIMING RIGHTS BY WOMEN AND LGBTQI PEOPLE…"

– MARÍA ANGÉLICA PEÑAS DEFAGO

undermining the natural order, the traditional community or the nation itself. They talk about themselves as real 'producers' in the society being dragged down by lazy, sinful, or subversive 'parasites.'

Uma Mishra-Newbery also sees an essentially defensive reaction to challenges against engrained privilege:

Many of those who have held power for hundreds of years and benefited from patriarchy and white supremacy are going to try to defend what they see as their right to continue exercising that power. This includes governments as well as anti-rights non-state groups.

Eliana Cano suggests there is a demographic dynamic to the backlash, at least in the context of highly conservative faith groups, in which mostly older people are reacting to the highly visible recent social mobilisations in which young people have been prominent:

There is youth social mobilisation around many issues, and with their help many aspects of the sexual and reproductive rights agenda are permeating the public debate. I think this is causing ultra-conservative groups to despair, and that is why they are reacting with such anger, frustration and, I would even dare say, hate. That is, they react with attitudes that are nowhere close to mercy, kindness, humility, understanding and non-judgement.

Backlashes offer a reminder that civil society gains are never automatically permanent, and every success unless consolidated and built upon may be temporary and subject to reversal. They call upon us to sustain our efforts even after making advances, and to budget for backlash in any work we do that challenges political interests and social norms held by sections of the public.

ANTI–RIGHTS GROUPS ARE HAVING AN IMPACT

As is clear, all of this – new tactics, political momentum, connections with states and parties, coalition building and resources – is making a difference. Anti-rights groups are having an impact. That impact is often experienced by civil society in the form of costs and losses. Survey respondents identified a variety of negative impacts that anti-rights groups are having on their work and on civil society as a whole. Those most frequently cited are increased risk, fear, silence or the increased difficulty of raising sensitive issues, legitimacy challenges, regressive policy changes, the reversal of past gains and the introduction of further restrictions on activists and CSOs.

"WHEN THE STATUS QUO THAT HAS FOLKS LIKE THEM NEAR THE TOP CHANGES – BECAUSE PREVIOUSLY MARGINALISED GROUPS SUCCESSFULLY CLAIM RIGHTS FOR THEMSELVES – THE PRIVILEGED DON'T SEE THIS AS THE LOSS OF UNFAIR PRIVILEGES, BUT AS UNDERMINING THE NATURAL ORDER."

– CHIP BERLET

As numerous survey respondents point out, anti-rights ideas can change attitudes and public policies, which causes extensive and long-lasting harm to excluded groups. For example, as Abdi Noor Aden of Wamo Relief in Somalia reports, action by:

…groups against girls' right to education… reduced the enrolment of girls in schools.

A survey respondent in the Netherlands records that anti-rights groups have:

…closed rights-based reproductive health services and changed public discourse on rights issues.

Impacts are experienced on an individual level. The penetration of anti-rights perspectives into state and judicial bureaucracies results in blatant human rights violations with direct, identifiable victims, as in recent high-profile cases in which legal abortions were denied to young rape victims in Argentina. In the process, public officials repeatedly violated the victims' right to privacy and faith leaders rallied public opinion through a call to collectively 'guard' the foetus.

Civic space is impacted upon, and like all attacks on civic space, the impacts made by anti-rights groups can push us onto the defensive, and sometimes even force us to justify our existence, aims and ways of working. We may be forced to once again argue for points we had long thought had been settled. Smears and physical risks may cause us to tone down our advocacy and make people less inclined to take part in our work, and loss of legitimacy as a result of attacks can make it harder to deliver our work and attract allies and funding. Attacks can have an impact on the mental health of civil society staff, and cause us to do extra work, such as investing in security and responding to smears. All of this takes time, is not budgeted for by donors, and take our focus away from our core work. This is part of the aim of anti-rights groups: to soak up our energies and sap us of our abilities to pursue our missions.

Alessandra Nilo of GESTOS – HIV and AIDS, Communication and Gender in Brazil notes this subduing effect on the part of civil society working for the rights of people with HIV/AIDS:

In the past decades we were fighting to improve the work that we were doing, but now we are working toward maintaining the rights we have, to resist, to recover from losses, and this is a very different game.

> "IN THE PAST DECADES WE WERE FIGHTING TO IMPROVE THE WORK THAT WE WERE DOING, BUT NOW WE ARE WORKING TOWARD MAINTAINING THE RIGHTS WE HAVE"
> – ALESSANDRA NILO

LATIN AMERICAN BACKLASH ON ABORTION RIGHTS

Edurne Cárdenas

Steps forward can spark a defensive reaction, as can be seen in reactions against civil society attempts to advance abortion rights. In Argentina, a country with highly restrictive laws, recent attempts to legalise abortion have unleashed a backlash. Thanks to the efforts of a civil society coalition, the National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe and Free Abortion, for the first time in 2018 the country's congress discussed a proposal to legalise abortion. While the upper house defeated a proposal passed by the lower house, civil society continues to campaign, and aims to bring the initiative back to congress. But civil society's success, in pushing to prominence an issue long kept off the political agenda, sparked a negative, anti-rights reaction, as Edurne Cárdenas of the Centre for Legal and Social Studies in Argentina relates:

In 2018 abortion was discussed like never before, so silences and taboos broke. But the process also had a negative side effect: because the issue that was placed on the agenda was so divisive,

and mobilisation became so massive and acquired such centrality on the political scene, a strong reaction from the most conservative sectors ensued. These sectors gained a level of organisation and visibility that they did not have in the past.

Sara García Gross

Similarly, attempts to advance abortion rights in El Salvador, which due to the sustained efforts of highly conservative faith groups has one of the world's strictest anti-abortion policies, provoked a further intensification of anti-rights efforts, as Sara García Gross of the Citizens' Association for the Decriminalisation of Therapeutic, Ethical and Eugenic Abortion in El Salvador reports:

As a result of our research, monitoring and dissemination work… many people beyond women's rights organisations became aware of the situation and expressed their outrage about it. At the same time, as these changes in public opinion became more visible, fundamentalist groups also began to counter-attack with their own initiatives.

The impact of smears on CSOs – a key tactic discussed further below – is reported by a survey respondent from Mauritania:

These groups are dangerous for the work of civil society because their accusations are serious and, in uninformed communities, these accusations are believed, especially when they are made to indicate that CSOs are anti-patriotic or anti-national.

While a survey respondent from Nepal similarly records such impacts, noting that smear campaigns have:

…created a lot of negative images in public. Many bureaucrats and the general public become suspicious about CSOs' events and workshops. Public scrutiny has increased. To respond, we are being more transparent, informing people clearly about what we are working on. Still, it is very difficult to tackle the negative image.

Smears lead to threats, and threats cause fear, as a survey respondent from Burundi describes:

Many of our activists live in fear and are not free to perform their activities the way they should do it; we are struggling to mobilise people in our rallies as they fear to be considered as supporters of so called 'Western puppets and enemies of the country'…

A survey respondent from Pakistan also identifies the wide-ranging threats from anti-rights groups that seek to silence civil society:

Groups that target… women's rights activists and transgender rights activists… not only threaten individuals but also threaten their family members, including children. Anybody active in promoting human rights, religious minority rights and sexual minorities' rights often … receives messages meant to silence them, including letters sent at home, threatening calls and even physical abuse.

This same concern about safety is reported by a survey respondent from Belize, who notes that anti-rights groups have:

…made our work unsafe and have made it challenging for us to reach and mobilise the population we represent, LGBTQI youth.

Fear can cause some to leave civil society in order to protect themselves. A survey respondent from South Africa reports that groups that oppose migrants' rights:

…try by all means to silence us and intimidate us using social media or direct messages… As a result, some of our human rights educators have abandoned the work because they fear for their lives.

Photo by Guy Smallman/Getty Images

LGBTQI activists protest in London against the Sultan of Brunei, who ratified a law to make homosexuality punishable by stoning.

This same impact is noted by a survey respondent from Pakistan:

CSOs that have no wider networking with government line departments have quit their human rights work because of their and their families' safety.

When anti-rights groups see these defensive reactions, they may feel that, at least in part, they have achieved a victory. However, as the final section of this report indicates, civil society is mounting a formidable fightback.

LGBTQI CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE FRONTLINE

LGBTQI civil society is at the forefront of impacts. In Indonesia, T King Oey relates how attacks by anti-rights groups forced LGBTQI civil society onto the defensive:

This has had a huge effect on the whole community. People have become afraid. Since 2016 we have held hardly any public events. We have to keep things secret and do everything underground. We have also had to learn to take security measures. Many of our people became depressed and closed themselves away, stopped going out.

Survey respondents working for LGBTQI rights also frequently describe impacts on their work and the people they work for. Botswana saw a human rights breakthrough in May 2019 when its High Court ruled that the country's criminalisation of same-sex relations was unconstitutional; this came from a case supported by civil society that built on extensive activism, and was an undoubted landmark in a region where LGBTQI people are often forced to live in fear. But it has met with fierce resistance from anti-rights groups and sparked a backlash. Anna Mmolai-Chalmers of the Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals of Botswana (LEGABIBO) describes the impacts anti-rights groups are having in her country by shifting perceptions and changing the conversation:

The statements issued by the church have fuelled negative energy and attitudes and put LGBTQI persons at risk of being rejected by their families and homes. Where we sometimes feel we have managed to shift attitudes, people are being guilt-tripped with religious verses to reject the organisation. Religious standpoints also infringe on the rights of LGBTQI persons to access services. For example, when LGBTQI people go to health facilities and openly identify as such, service providers preach the Bible, pushing away service-seekers… Other CSOs are often reluctant to support our work because they fear rejection by the government or because they feel uncomfortable to be seen as supporting our work.

A young male LGBTQI activist from Cameroon points at a variety of impacts, from judicial and psychological harm to a reduction in access to health, education and other services, leading to very tangible consequences, such as increasing rates of HIV/AIDS infection:

…Stigma and discrimination based on sexual orientation severely limit LGBTQI people's access to HIV prevention and care services… leading to an increase in the HIV prevalence rate in this marginalised community, making it a pocket of infection… Violence and rights violations against LGBTQI people create trauma, identity crises, family and sociocultural fractures.

Kirimi Mwendia Evans of Victory Pride Center in Kenya outlines the influence that anti-rights groups have on perpetuating the criminalisation of same-sex relations and excluding LGBTQI people from discourse, reporting that they have:

…have made it difficult to register an LGBTQI organisation in Kenya; in fact, it was only last year that Kenya National Gay Commission was registered, after years of legal battles. They have influenced the current criminalisation of LGBTQI love. They have managed to win court cases that maintain the current status quo. They have opposed any attempt to discuss anything about gay rights on national stations; they say the media is recruiting their children.

Ugandan LGBTQI rights campaigners take part in the 2016 Pride celebration in London, UK.

SECTION 4: THE ANTI−RIGHTS PLAYBOOK: KEY TACTICS OF ANTI−RIGHTS GROUPS

Before we can respond, we need to understand the tactics of anti-rights groups. As is clear, such groups are diverse. But across all the responses received in our consultations, some clear patterns and tendencies in tactics emerge. Often anti-rights groups attack on several simultaneous fronts, using combinations of different tactics. Many of their tactics, as set out below, are consciously borrowed from the repertoire of civil society, a phenomenon Gordan Bosanac identifies:

> *Ironically, they learned by watching closely what progressive human rights CSOs had been doing: whatever they were doing successfully, they would just copy.*

A survey respondent from Kenya similarly identifies this borrowing of tactics:

> *Church groups campaigning against LGBTQI persons have adopted the playbook of civil society, holding symposia and other such large-scale mobilisations, discussion and planning events, messaging in hateful, fear-mongering and extremist ways… such as 'gays are taking over and there will be nothing left', and engaging policy-makers… They have reversed gains made in winning hearts and minds and toxified the environment for LGBTIQ public engagements.*

As well as borrowing our tactics they are seeking to claim our spaces. Several survey respondents identified infiltration of civil society spaces as a tactic used by anti-rights groups, which makes it difficult to spot them and enables them to disrupt civil society proceedings. A civil society activist from South Africa points to this:

> *Many do not readily identify them as anti-rights groups or individuals. The latter are perhaps scarier because they get into spaces… and speak their anti-rights messaging.*

SEVERAL SURVEY RESPONDENTS IDENTIFIED INFILTRATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY SPACES AS A TACTIC USED BY ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS, WHICH MAKES IT DIFFICULT TO SPOT THEM AND ENABLES THEM TO DISRUPT CIVIL SOCIETY PROCEEDINGS.

Anti-rights groups have studied our successful tactics and imitated them, to the extent that they can appear as an inverse or alternative civil society. Confusion about what civil society is and does is one benefit this borrowing of tactics brings them.

WHO THEY TARGET: ATTACKS ON THE MOST VULNERABLE AND EXCLUDED

Regardless of the tactics, minorities and excluded groups are the prime targets of anti-rights groups. Our research has identified that women, LGBTQI people, people with HIV/AIDS, religious minorities, ethnic and racial minorities, Indigenous peoples, migrants – and the civil society that defends their rights – are bearing the brunt of attacks.

The majority of survey respondents who identified attacks by anti-rights groups on specific sections of the population described attacks on sexual and reproductive rights, with two major targets: women and LGBTQI people. Mazi Jideofor Umeh of the Ugonma Foundation in Nigeria is one of many who describes attacks on women's rights, noting that anti-rights groups are:

…using violence and stopping women from attending women enlightenment programmes. They also fight our girl child education programmes.

A survey respondent from Ghana also reports this focus on attacking women's rights:

…One of their main issues is women's and girls' rights. They believe that women and girls are given too much priority… Their

firm affirmation that the gender disparity gap has already been closed so there is no need for any further affirmative action for women and girls has been a great down force to the work of civil society. These groups are mostly groups of young and old men, active on social media attacking any activity that promotes women's and girls' rights.

The extent of the attack on LGBTQI people is summarised by Kirimi Mwendia Evans in Kenya:

I have encountered anti-LGBTQI rights groups. A section of pastors calling themselves Kenya Evangelicals and sponsored by politicians have been leading the campaign against gay people. Their tactic is to normalise discrimination by opposing any attempt to decriminalise LGBTQI identities. They hire the best lawyers to counter our efforts to get our right to love. They lead mass demonstrations against LGBTQI people. They target anyone who raises their voice on LGBTQI rights. They even influence political appointments to the powerful Kenya film classification board, which polices any attempt by music artist or film artist to advocate for LGBTQI rights through arts and entertainment. They ban any video with a gay or a lesbian or a trans person. This group wants to make LGBTQI people look like they are enemies of the state.

Attacks can come on multiple excluded groups, on the basis of their difference from dominant population groups, as Martin Pairet outlines is the case in Europe:

In recent years, the normalisation of hate speech has contributed to the radicalisation of people and groups against those seen as 'the other': attacks against marginalised groups, including women, LGBTQI people, Roma people, migrants, refugees and minority faith communities, have spread on social media, and the hate narrative gradually translated into actual violence. That's why we've seen a rise in hate crimes.

…in Europe, it always starts with migrants and refugees, then extends to other marginalised groups. We saw this with Brexit in the UK: the referendum campaign was permeated with an anti-migrant discourse, but various groups of people who were not migrants or refugees became increasingly threatened by exclusionary narratives, which eventually targeted anyone who was different, looked different, or spoke differently.

This same targeting of multiple excluded groups is noted by Gordan Bosanac:

The vast majority of the organisations that mobilise against women's rights also reject LGBTQI people and migrants and refugees. They are all part of the same global movement that rejects liberal-democratic ideas, and they all mobilise against minorities or vulnerable groups.

Even when anti-rights groups use apparently legitimate and democratic methods to pursue their aims, their arguments fuel a climate of fear and hostility towards excluded groups. Even when they do not directly enact hatred and violence, they enable it by those who share their hostility and feel emboldened to attack. The promotion of sectional

interests at the expense of others and the mobilisation of fear and prejudice in the defence of those interests naturally leads to hatred. Sometimes appeals to fear and prejudice are concealed behind other messages, but often they are blatantly expressed. The attempt is to tap into social conservativism, cultural identifications and bias that may be deep-rooted but perhaps not previously articulated.

Attacks on excluded groups are not only ideological; they are also tactical. By attacking excluded groups, anti-rights groups weaken opponents and recruit and consolidate support from the core constituencies they seek to appeal to.

Photo by Carlos Tischler/Getty Images

People demonstrate outside the US Embassy in Mexico City to protest against President Trump's measures that target migrant families.

ANTI–RIGHTS GROUPS ARE USING LEGITIMATE CHANNELS

One of the challenges that anti-rights groups present is that they are able to use the same channels legitimately employed by CSOs. They lobby politicians and parliaments, work through the legal system to seek court judgments and campaign for and in referendums and elections. But even when they use these legitimate tools, anti-rights groups are closing down the opposition, sowing division and reducing the sphere for debate and advocacy for human rights.

Because anti-rights groups position themselves as parts of civil society, even states that are not active enablers of them may provide them with space by inviting them into official consultations. Additionally, anti-rights groups can go mainstream by seeking official endorsement, sometimes accompanied by state funding. In Argentina in 2018, an anti-abortion rights network, the National Network Accompanying Women with Vulnerable Pregnancies, submitted an agreement to the National Congress, which went on to be signed by the health and social development ministries, to the effect that the state would support their interventions with women going through 'unexpected pregnancies'. According to the agreement, the national government would help 'promote' the network, its free phone number and its activities. The agreement came in backlash against civil society's attempts to liberalise abortion laws.

Another tactic that uses legitimate channels sees anti-rights groups going to the courts and using litigation to reduce access to rights. Even if unsuccessful, these tactics absorb civil society energies, stoke fears and play to anti-rights narratives, as Gordan Bosanac describes:

People celebrate in May 2019 as Taiwan becomes the first Asian country to legalise same-sex marriage.

…they use litigation both to influence and change legislation and to stop human rights activists and journalists who are critical of their work. In order to silence them, they sue them for libel and 'hate speech against Christians'. Although these cases are generally dismissed, they help them position themselves as victims due to their religious beliefs.

María Angélica Peñas Defago describes how litigation is used in Latin America:

…Litigation against sexual and reproductive rights has been an important tool for more than three decades. In Argentina, these groups have litigated, among other things, against the

DANGERS WITH DIRECT DEMOCRACY

Referendums are a tool of direct democracy that can offer a means of encouraging people to participate in decision-making and resolving otherwise deadlocked issues. They have enabled civil society to make some notable advances, not least in Ireland's 2018 referendum, in which people overwhelmingly voted to overturn the country's draconian abortion ban following extensive civil society campaigning. But they can also offer a platform for anti-rights groups to foster polarisation and division. Gordan Bosanac outlines how anti-rights groups have used referendums in Eastern Europe:

Fundamentalists in Croatia made good use of citizen-initiated national referendums. In 2013, they voted down marriage equality, in large part thanks to voting laws that do not require a minimum voter turnout in national referendums, as a result of which a low turnout of roughly 38 per cent sufficed to enable constitutional change. In contrast, similar referendums in Romania and Slovakia failed thanks to the requirement of a minimum 50 per cent turnout.

…Voter turnout in all these referendums ranged from 20 per cent in Romania to 38 per cent in Croatia, which shows that fundamentalists do not enjoy majority support anywhere, but they are still cleverly using democratic mechanisms to advance their agenda.

Romania's October 2018 referendum focused on the question of whether to define marriage constitutionally as solely taking place between a man and a woman. It came on the initiative of a Conservative group, Coalition for the Family, and won the support of the government. In a country which has seen little serious debate about same-sex marriage, the referendum seemed more an opportunity to galvanise conservative support between a government bedevilled by mass protests over corruption. The proposal fell due to a low turnout, despite the government doing everything it could to enable the measure by lowering the turnout threshold and extending the voting period. But even though the initiative failed, it had a socially corrosive effect, as Giada Negri relates:

…anti-rights groups gathered thousands of signatures to call a referendum to try to ban same-sex marriage. They used the tools of participatory democracy to try to change the Constitution… Although a lot of resources were spent to promote it, this referendum failed. But in the process, anti-rights groups targeted LGBTQI people and activists and there was a rise in hate crime.

In Taiwan, a 2017 court ruling that the government should give same-sex couples the same rights as heterosexual couples resulted in the government legalising same-sex marriage in May 2019, making history as the first Asian country to do so. But conservative faith groups tried to build a roadblock against progress in November 2018, when they organised an advisory referendum that led to a public rejection of same-sex marriage, and of LGBTQI-inclusive education in schools; social division was fuelled and given a platform.

In Cuba in 2018, evangelical groups organised successfully to keep what would have been a groundbreaking recognition of marriage as gender neutral out of the country's 2019 constitutional referendum. In Jamaica, civil society advocacy to overturn the country's colonial-era criminalisation of same-sex relations has come up against the entrenched power of conservative faith groups, which the government defers to. Horace Levy of Jamaicans for Justice outlines how the government has fallen back on a proposed referendum as one possible way for it to deal with this dilemma, even though the airing of prejudice is a likely result:

Politicians are afraid of conservative religious people, so the government has proposed to submit the issue to a referendum. So the government is in fact listening to civil society, just not to the progressive side of it. Now, why would the majority go against itself, its own social norms and its own privilege?... this is not the kind of issue to be decided by a popular vote. It doesn't make any sense to ask the majority whether they would like to respect the rights of a minority they are oppressing.

In Uruguay, anti-rights groups have been successful in electing representatives to the country's congress and have attempted to trigger referendum processes in attempts to repeal progressive laws, including on abortion and trans rights, as covered further below. Although these have so far not proven successful, they have enabled anti-rights groups to develop a platform to promote their views and have absorbed the energy of civil society, forcing people to go over old ground. As Analía Bettoni of the Institute for Communication and Development puts it:

…their strategy forces civil society permanently to respond by providing more information and working to influence public opinion on issues that were already settled.

As indicated by the UK'S 2016 polarising and divisive Brexit referendum, in which the normal rules of political discourse broke down and disinformation appeared to play a decisive role, referendum campaign periods offer fertile territory for anti-rights groups. Colombia's 2016 referendum on the peace deal between the government and the country's main guerrilla force offers another example: the deal was narrowly rejected after a campaign that made the debate about many issues other than peace, including LGBTQI rights. Disinformation was poured out that a yes vote would mean, for example, that the government would promote homosexuality in schools.

The dangers of such mechanisms of democracy being vulnerable to misuse by anti-rights groups and leading to the intensification of prejudice and division seem ever present; more attention needs to be paid to the conditions in which referendums, and elections more generally, are held, and the rules applied should be those of respectful and inclusive debate, with space for civil society and minority voices.

administration of emergency contraception and to stop the implementation of protocols for non-punishable abortions.

…litigation is sometimes a quite silent affair and has possibly remained unnoticed by the wider civil society. Often, it all remained within the realm of the administration of justice and health services. This however did not prevent this strategy from having very strong effects, because judicial decisions regarding sexual and reproductive health tend to produce fears, doubts and paralysis among health providers, which are key agents for guaranteeing actual access to these rights.

Anti-rights groups also actively lobby decision-makers, and there seems to be a recent tendency as part of this to attack the funding bases of civil society. For example, in July 2019 a group of conservative faith-based organisations in Kenya submitted a petition to parliament

EXISTENTIAL THREATS FROM ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS

While seeking to position themselves as part of civil society, anti-rights groups may simultaneously try to deny the right of legitimate CSOs to exist. Peru offers an example of this. CDD-Peru is a feminist movement that argues for women's rights from a Catholic perspective. There are many different schools of thought within the Catholic faith, but a hardline Catholic organisation is seemingly unable to accept this and is actively seeking to have CCD-Peru's registration withdrawn. As with all such efforts to deregister CSOs, part of the effect is to drain energy and resources and distract them from focusing on their core work. Eliana Cano relates their experience:

...we were notified that the Santo Tomás Moro Legal Centre, which is a self-appointed representative of the Catholic Church, had brought a lawsuit against us... They decided to sue us in the civil courts because they want to make this a long, tedious, tiring process, one of permanent appeal. The whole thing can take up to three or four years. Basically, their strategy is to drain us of energy in the process.

They want us to cease to exist as a registered organisation, recognised by the National Superintendency of Public Registries. In other words, they want us to lose our legal status and not be able to continue operating in Peru. They argue that, by calling ourselves what we do, we are disrespecting the Catholic Church and

its parishioners. They say that... we are using the term 'Catholic', which represents an institution and a historical identity, in bad faith. They do not accept the interpretation we make of biblical texts on the basis of feminist theology in order to question dogma, imposed conscience and control of people in the name of God.

Similarly, Anna Mmolai-Chalmers describes a concerted attempt to deregister her organisation in backlash to its work advocating for LGBTQI rights:

We have been doing strategic litigation on criminalisation of same-sex-sexual conduct and have faced opposition and resistance from Evangelical church leaders. First, they attempted to [file an Amicus Curiae Brief] to oppose LEGABIBO's registration case. After we won at the High Court, they made public pronouncements to push for an appeal. The government appealed. We won the appeal, then they went further to lobby for the registrar of societies to disobey the court order. In our recent win on the decriminalisation case, the evangelical church wrote a statement that they will do whatever possible to ensure the government appeals. They have support and representation within parliament and at the Attorney General level. They use their contacts to push their agenda inside. They use government resources.

calling on the government to investigate the funding of LGBTQI organisations. They accused international donors, including HIVOS and Open Society Foundations, as financing an 'LGBTQI agenda' and promoting 'immoral work'; they were using the apparently legitimate tools at their disposal to smear civil society and also mimicking a common tactic of political leaders in accusing civil society of being at the behest at foreign funders. The move also offered another example of backlash, coming in response to a civil society legal action, albeit ultimately unsuccessful, to decriminalise same-sex relations, which raised the profile of the issue.

Sara García Gross also relates how anti-rights groups made calls through formal channels to call her organisation's funding into question:

...they demand that the Prosecutor's office launch an investigation against us, and urge the Legislative Assembly's International Relations Committee to ban us from receiving funding.

Similarly, Israeli anti-rights groups have been working hand in hand with their government to bring complaints against Palestinian CSOs, with the effect of banning them from using popular fundraising platforms in Europe and the USA. They have done so by accusing them of being terrorist groups, plugging into an ongoing state smear campaign against Palestinian CSOs.

Actions that use tactics such as legislation and participation in official consultative processes may attract less attention than other, more public, tactics described below, but they can be quietly very effective.

ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS ARE MOBILISING IN PUBLIC SPACE

Much more visibly, physical mobilisation in public space is a key tactic followed by many anti-rights groups. It is part of how they demonstrate their power, recruit supporters and shape media narratives. Gordan Bosanac identifies the role public mobilisations have played in developing the power of anti-rights groups:

They started organising mass mobilisations such as the anti-abortion Walk for Life marches, as well as small-scale street actions, such as praying against abortion outside hospitals or staging performances.

María Angélica Peñas Defago records the role of mass mobilisations in Argentina:

With regard to street actions, strong reactions by these groups were already recorded in the past, including demonstrations

Photo by Adrián Monroy/Medios y Media/Getty Images

A Gay Pride parade and concert was held on 29 June 2019 in Mexico City.

throughout the country, for instance against equal marriage, which was approved in Argentina in 2010. The same groups marched once again against the legalisation of abortion in 2018.

...recent times have seen them acting more intensely through the occupation of street space and the creation of partisan political alliances, the two key arenas for political struggle in contemporary democracies. These groups are trying to appropriate public space, showcasing themselves as the majority, and in this way they are gaining public visibility.

In Argentina, a very politically mobilised society, street mobilisation has been widely used by these groups, so it is nothing new. What is new is the massive character of their mobilisations.

There are many other examples. In the Dominican Republic in November 2018, thousands mobilised in a march organised by Catholic groups under the banner of 'One Step for My Family' to show their opposition to moves to decriminalise abortion. Reform proposals have been stuck at the level of the country's congress for years, but mobilisations earlier in 2018, organised by a broad-based civil society coalition to demand change, evidently brought a defensive response. In August 2019, the National Front for the Family held dozens of marches throughout Mexico in response to a Supreme Court decision ordering all public hospitals to practise abortions upon request for pregnancies resulting from rape, without requiring the victim to report the rape to justice authorities. Over 5,000 people marched in Belgium in December 2018 to protest against the government's support of the Global Compact for Migration, in a demonstration organised by far-right groups that saw

violent clashes with the police. Moldova in May 2018 saw protests in front of the country's parliament by a faith-based organisation, calling on the government to ban sex education, including education about same-sex relationships, in schools.

The Moldovan protest came in response to an earlier demonstration by LGBTQI groups, which hardline anti-rights forces tried to infiltrate and disrupt. Such tactics of disruption are seen elsewhere. In Canada in June and August 2019, pro-China groups mobilised to try to counter protests in solidarity with Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement, resulting in clashes and police intervention in Vancouver and the blocking of a solidarity march in Toronto. The police had to escort worshippers out of a church where a prayer meeting for Hong Kong was being held when the building was surrounded by pro-China protesters. These actions had a direct impact on people's rights to peaceful assembly. A survey respondent from Zimbabwe also reports the disruption of peaceful civil society meetings:

They join our advocacy meetings and sit in as 'ordinary' participants, and then heckle and disrupt presentations and the dissemination of messages that are against their ideology and make noise to make the advocacy meetings uncontrollable. They sing slogans to disrupt the meetings.

When the public events of civil society – notably LGBTQI pride events – are picketed and disrupted, a direct attack on people's civil and political rights is manifested. As ever, the suspicion that division and polarisation are not side effects of anti-rights mobilisations but objectives is hard to escape.

ANTI–RIGHTS GROUPS ARE USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO SHAPE NARRATIVES

Alongside physical mobilisations, anti-rights groups are making extensive use of media, particularly social media. Social media is crucial because it enables anti-rights groups to shape and reframe narratives and normalise regressive ideas. It is used to spread fear and outrage, trigger prejudice and push back the boundaries of what is considered permissible speech. It offers a platform for smear campaigns, online harassment and sharing of hate speech. Social media is also used to raise visibility and recruit support. Many anti-rights groups have consequently become adept users of social media.

Control of narratives is crucial to anti-rights groups, and the narratives they build are those of fear, insecurity and prejudice, as Gordan Bosanac observes:

…they use very simple language and play on people's fears and insecurities. They build their popularity upon prejudice and fears of others who are different. Fear seems to be an easy way to mobilise people, but people on the left don't want to use it because they feel that it is not fair to manipulate people. Anti-rights groups, on the other hand, don't have any problem with scaring people. When they first appeared in Croatia, these groups gained huge support because they stirred fear and then presented themselves as the protectors and saviours of people against the fictional monster that they had created.

More is now understood, following the Cambridge Analytica scandal and other such revelations, about how social media messages are carefully

Photo by Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

The Raging Grannies group demonstrates outside Facebook headquarters in California, USA in April 2018.

and precisely targeted, often in ways that are opaque and even illegal, to feed off and fuel prejudice. Anti-rights groups, and the broader far-right universe, have seized upon the still somewhat unregulated form of communication that social media offers. And as civil society, we must acknowledge that these forces have used social media in a way that is different to how we use it, and much more effective.

María Angélica Peñas Defago relates how social media has been a game-changer for anti-rights groups:

These groups are intensively using social media so that their strategies and symbols travel, are shared and ultimately reach

us repeatedly from various latitudes… These groups were already mobilising 30 years ago, or maybe even earlier, but there was no social media back then. The modes of communication and mobilisation have changed at the same time as the religious field has in the face of advances in sexual and reproductive rights.

Uma Mishra-Newbery also points to the increasingly skilled use of social media by anti-rights groups:

They have… become more sophisticated and are using information and communication technologies, as resistance movements always have, in order to organise and disseminate their views.

Kaspars Zālītis additionally points the finger at conventional media – which can include state-owned media closely controlled by ruling parties and private media owned by people close to far-right parties and groups – alongside social media:

…some media outlets are outright hostile towards LGBTQI groups, and one of them, a Russian outlet with a major agenda against the rights of women, migrants, refugees and LGBTQI people, is clearly leading a crusade against us.

Vilification of women's and LGBTQI rights groups is also increasingly taking place online. We are now constantly harassed on Facebook. At some point we realised these were not the usual people who used to attack us and we did some research to find out where the attacks were coming from, and found links to evangelical churches.

…we have evidence that a number of secret Facebook and WhatsApp chat groups have been created to follow our activities.

As the above example suggests, anti-rights groups are using social media to spread disinformation and conspiracy theories, smear opponents and foster hate speech. This emerged as a huge area of current concern across our consultations.

ANTI–RIGHTS GROUPS ARE SPREADING DISINFORMATION AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Disinformation – defined as deliberate misinformation – is a key means by which civil society and excluded groups are attacked. It is part of how narratives are reshaped and reframed, and how the space for genuine debate and consensus-seeking is shut down. Disinformation swamps legitimate and well-informed voices. It promotes a false equivalence between facts and boundless assertions, in which both could equally as well be true or false, leaving people free to believe anything without reference to facts. The sheer weight of the torrent of disinformation can make it impossible to find the truth: we can no longer hear the signal in the noise. As a sign of how disinformation works, the terminology of 'fake news' must now be used with care, as it has largely been co-opted by anti-rights forces and used as a weapon against the media and dissenting voices, such that many claims of 'fake news' are themselves now pieces of disinformation.

The far-right even has its own powerful channels of disinformation, such as Breitbart and Fox News, which have decisively erased the line between fact and opinion. This emergence of anti-rights media channels is noted by Gordan Bosanac:

…they not only get good coverage of their events on mainstream media but they also have their own media, mostly online news portals, in which they publish 'fake news' that defames their opponents, which they then disseminate on social media. They also host and cover conservative events that feature 'international experts' who are presented as the highest authorities on issues such as sexuality and children's rights.

Lynnette Micheni from PAWA254 in Kenya sets out how rapidly the tactic of disinformation has spread, and the challenges posed for civil society and young people in a country with recent experiences of political violence:

We first heard about 'fake news' a couple of years ago, and it was all happening far away, in the USA. But the trend has progressed very fast, and in the context of presidential elections in 2017 we suffered an epidemic of 'fake news'. It was all over social media, which is a major source of information for Kenyan citizens, and it distorted the political conversation, and maybe the outcomes of the elections as well. Young people, the group that most uses social media, were particularly misled by 'fake news' stories aimed at stirring conflict and dividing civil society.

The abundance of 'fake news' can be very disconcerting for young people who have little experience with interpreting data and are ill-equipped to tell the difference between legitimate and fake information. How do you sustain online movements while avoiding the infiltration of narratives based on 'fake news'?

Edurne Cárdenas, in the context of Argentina's abortion debate, describes how disinformation is aggressively promoted through social media, and can find a receptive and influential audience. One of its impacts is to force civil society energies into rebuttals and groundless debates:

…we were able to see first-hand the way so-called 'fake news' operates, particularly when they find an echo in influential voices outside social media, who disseminate them elsewhere. It so happened, for instance, that totally fake data found on social media were quoted by legislators during the congressional debate. In that area, there is a lot of work for us to do.

…the anti-rights movement is making us waste our time discussing things we thought were long settled. To top it all, what we get into is not even an honest discussion, since the statements they make and even the data they use do not withstand the slightest fact check. The result is not actual debate – that

> "WE FIRST HEARD ABOUT 'FAKE NEWS' A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, AND IT WAS ALL HAPPENING FAR AWAY, IN THE USA. BUT THE TREND HAS PROGRESSED VERY FAST, AND IN THE CONTEXT OF PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN 2017 WE SUFFERED AN EPIDEMIC OF 'FAKE NEWS'."
> – LYNNETTE MICHENI

THE POWER OF DISINFORMATION

As a tactic, disinformation aims to shape public opinion, but its impacts are not only felt at the aggregate level. Disinformation can be used to mislead individuals and divert them from accessing their rights. Disinformation campaigns are also often used to alarm parents, for example, by misrepresenting what children are being taught in school in sex education classes.

Some anti-abortion groups are known for their tactic of attracting pregnant women seeking abortion services online, misleading them so they book a consultation with what they believe is a sexual and reproductive rights centre, only to find themselves harassed by anti-abortion propagandists who exploit their vulnerabilities, impose unnecessary delays and pressure them to carry their pregnancies to term. One global network, US-based Heartbeat International, has approximately 2,700 affiliate centres in over 60 countries, which are specifically instructed on how to mine personal information from social media platforms, design websites with misleading content and manipulate vulnerable users. Women's freedom to choose is also curtailed through the dissemination of disinformation by other covert means, including through popular women's health and fertility apps funded by anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQI campaigners, aimed at sowing doubts about birth control and featuring unsubstantiated and misleading medical claims.

is, a genuine exchange of arguments and reasons. Still, we have no alternative but to respond.

Mieke Schuurman relates the role of disinformation, spread through social media, in attacking movements for children's rights and recruiting support for anti-rights groups, with one disinformation campaign having a decisive impact in Bulgaria:

…They use social media a lot, and use 'fake news' to be able to get their messages across, very much focusing on the cause of preserving the traditional family. Their messages are that child rights organisations are taking children away from their families…

The campaign in Bulgaria went so far that in the end the prime minister there decided to stop the draft of the new strategy for the child, which would have introduced for the first time a holistic approach for family policy… The anti-child rights movement strongly campaigned against the proposed new strategy as an 'unallowable intervention into the family', raising public support through propaganda and disinformation, and eventually the government gave in. In their campaign, they even used the logos of children's civil society and of the child helpline in Bulgaria, spreading disinformation on their work as 'paid from external sources in terms of selling Bulgarian children abroad'.

…It's very hard for our members to campaign against it, because apparently these anti-child rights movements get something like 187,000 supporters on Facebook. We can question whether these are real supporters or fake ones, but it has the effect of mobilising a lot of uncertainty and uproar against children's rights.

MA QUALI CICOGNE E CLESSIDRE! PARLIAMO DI WELFARE!

TAGLI ALLA SANITA' PUBBLICA CHE CI COSTANO LA VITA E POI INVENTIAMO IL FERTILITY DAY???

MA QUALE FERTILITY DAY? CI RIPRENDIAMO TUTTO, AFFINCHE' NESSUNA DI NOI VENGA PIU' COLPITA, UCCISA E PRIVATA DELLA LIBERTA' DI VIVERSI COME VUOLE IL PROPRIO CORPO E LA PROPRIA SESSUALITA'. NI UNA MENOS!

VERSO LA MANIFESTAZIONE NAZIONALE DEL 26 NOVEMBRE

NON UNA DI MENO

Demonstration against Fertility Day, an initiative by the Italian Health Ministry to encourage births.

Elections and referendums are naturally key hotspots for disinformation, as anti-rights forces seek to influence voters. Brandi Geurkink of the Mozilla Foundation outlines some of the disinformation tactics that flourished ahead of the May 2018 European parliamentary elections:

> *Before the European elections and following an independent investigation, Facebook took down 77 pages and 230 fake accounts from France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and the UK, which had been followed by an estimated 32 million people and generated 67 million interactions over the previous three months alone. These were mostly part of far-right disinformation networks… A UK-based disinformation network that was uncovered in March 2019 was dedicated to disseminating fake information on topics such as immigration, LGBTQI rights and religious beliefs.*

Aggressive disinformation tactics were used during Ireland's 2018 abortion referendum, as Linda Kavanagh of the Abortion Rights Campaign relates:

> *While some of it was about people's deeply held beliefs, there were also lies, exaggerations and a deliberate misuse of stats. Some really nasty stuff happened: a huge amount of graphic images were used and are still out there. I absolutely do not think that every 'no' voter is a terrible person – people have their beliefs and their struggles – but I do think the anti-choice campaign made it quite nasty.*

While these tactics did not prevent people voting in large numbers for reform in Ireland, it tested the energies and mental health

of campaigners. But one place where disinformation and the manipulation of prejudice did seem to make a difference was in that key victory for anti-rights forces, Brazil's 2018 election, as María Angélica Peñas Defago relates:

> *In Brazil, 'fake news' claiming that the Workers' Party promoted paedophilia and would try to 'convert' children into homosexuals or transsexuals mushroomed during the election campaign.*

A Brazilian survey respondent also pointed out the existence of:

> *… groups, such as Movimento Brasil Livre, that support the extreme right and act in the deep web for spreading 'fake news'. They use misleading data to undermine the efforts of well-reputed and trustful organisations when they disclose data that indicates the danger to minorities and other vulnerable groups.*

Disinformation campaigns frequently confront scientific consensus by manipulating and misusing scientific discourse and offering up pseudo-science. In Mexico, Juan Silverio Ramírez Urbina of Colectivo Seres sets out how anti-scientific disinformation is pushed out to stoke prejudice:

> *Some of their messages are: homosexuality can be 'cured', it is a psychological disorder; women are responsible for the sexual violence against them because of the ways they dress and behave; sex workers are sick people who have no rights.*

In Uruguay, disinformation was used in the attempt to call a referendum to repeal a groundbreaking 2018 law that recognised rights for trans people. The anti-rights campaign characterised the

Photo by Charles McQuillan/Getty Images

Two women look at written notes left on the Savita Halappanavar mural in Dublin, Ireland, as the results of the referendum on abortion laws are announced in May 2018.

law as handing out privileges and 'denying biology' and stated that it would enable children to change sex and be given hormones without parental permission. Once again, prejudice was presented as science. Diana Cariboni identifies that the Ibero-American Congress for Life and Family has:

> …created or seeks to create some sort of think tank, because they want to coat all of it with a scientific varnish, so doctors, lawyers

and biology and genetics experts take part in their conferences… They are putting together a pseudo-scientific discourse… despite the fact that scientific research indicates otherwise. Their objective is to put forward a discourse that is not viewed as belonging to the Middle Ages; that is why they… speak of science and the secular state, even if only as a very superficial varnish.

Thilaga Sulathireh similarly points to Islamic groups in Malaysia that claim to speak from a scientific perspective to deny rights:

> …Some of these are groups of doctors, lawyers and academics, and they make pseudo-scientific and legal arguments against LGBTQI rights.

While Eliana Cano describes how an anti-rights group is claiming scientific discourse to have an impact in Peru:

> …among its members are renowned physicians and senior state officials, including former health ministers. The organisation acts within numerous medical and health organisations, both public and private. These actors put conservative 'scientific' discourse at the service of abuses such as the denial of emergency oral contraception, an issue on which they successfully took on the Ministry of Health… Now they are campaigning to dismantle the therapeutic abortion protocol established during the 2011 to 2016 period.

The deliberate misuse and distortion of science by anti-rights groups has spread beyond questions of women's and LGBTQI rights, as can be seen in current anti-vaccination and anti-climate change discourse.

THE NEXT LEVEL: CONSPIRACY THEORIES ON THE RISE

Conspiracy theories are disinformation taken to another level. As Chip Berlet points out, they are not new, but the internet has enabled them to thrive:

Conspiracy theories have always been around. Conspiracy theories are improbable explanations alleging a vast conspiracy by evil powerful people and their cronies. Stories circulate that make allegations posing as facts. During moments of societal stress and political change it is often harder for folks to separate what is reality-based, what is political propaganda and what is pure fantasy.

The internet has been fertile ground for planting misinformation and conspiracy theories because it's a new medium, and all new forms of mass media go through a phase in which they are easily misinterpreted, and there are as yet not enough safeguards in place, so it's hard for folks to tell reliable and unreliable content apart. We live in a time in which too many people think stories are real if they are on the internet…

…We are still learning how to use the medium… it is really difficult for the average person to differentiate between what's a reliable piece of information and what's just a conspiracy theory recirculated by someone with no training or understanding of the subject they post on. Much worse is when sinister propaganda is spread for political gain.

Conspiracy theories are taking hold. According to a 2014 study, about half of the public in the USA endorsed at least one conspiracy theory, a proportion that by late 2018 had surpassed 60 per cent. A 2018 study also found that 60 per cent of people in the UK believe at least one conspiracy theory. Chip Berlet points to current distrust in established politics and political institutions that are opening up the space in which conspiracy theories thrive:

In an unhealthy and unstable society… people don't know what to believe, and may latch onto normally farfetched theories to explain why they feel so powerless. When social trust has been eroded and there is so much anger, increasingly less legitimacy is assigned to people who have actual knowledge. Instead, it is transferred to those who will name the evildoers…

…conspiracy theories are a reflection of a society that is under stress, and they cause people who would normally be ignored suddenly to have an audience to speak to because they appear to have the answer that everybody else is lacking. People are disoriented: they do not feel connected to a common narrative of a healthy nation. Folks feel that their society, 'our' society, is under attack by 'the others', whoever they might be. So, if someone comes and tells them the name of the group of 'others' who are destroying our idealised community or nation, then common sense will tell us to stop them.

Conspiracy theories can simultaneously enable both an attack on excluded groups and political elites, including the civil society that some may perceive as members of the elite, as Chip Berlet suggests:

Conspiracy theories, especially in the middle class, tend to identify a group of evil people down below on the socio-economic spectrum when defining who belongs and who doesn't belong to the nation… But the middle-class conspiracy theorists generally also blame a sector of the ruling elites who are portrayed as traitors.

It seems conspiracy theories will always be with us, but we live in an age where they have the power and ample technology to do great harm.

ANTI−RIGHTS GROUPS ARE MOBILISING SMEAR CAMPAIGNS, ONLINE HARASSMENT AND HATE SPEECH

Disinformation and conspiracy theories sit on the same spectrum as smears, online harassment and hate speech. Hate speech is deployed alongside disinformation and smears to suppress other voices, as Anna-Carin Hall of Kvinna till Kvinna in Sweden suggests:

Several alt-right media outlets are spreading 'fake news' about crime rates among immigrants. Alt-right groups are also making threats, spreading hatred and running smear campaigns in social media. This climate may very well lead to self-censorship among pro-immigration, feminist and LGBTQI groups.

Attacks are often based explicitly on people's membership of particular groups. Marek Tuszynski of Tactical Tech relates how online harassment can be based as much on a targeting of a person's identity as on how they act, and how women in particular are being targeted online:

…online harassment… may impact on their lives well beyond their political activities, as people tend to be bullied not only for what they do, but also for what or who they are.

Vulnerable minorities are precisely those groups that face greater risks online because of their gender, race, or sexual orientation. Women generally are more vulnerable to online harassment, and politically active women even more so. Women journalists, for instance, are subject to more online abuse than male journalists when speaking about controversial issues or voicing opinions. They are targeted because of their gender. This is also the case for CSOs

focused on women's rights, which are being targeted both offline and online, including through distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks, website hacks, leaks of personal information, fabricated news, direct threats and false reports against Facebook content leading to the suspension of their pages.

In one example of the gendered nature of attacks, Sara García Gross relates how campaigners for abortion rights in El Salvador have been subjected to smear campaigns from fundamentalist groups via social and conventional media:

In reaction to our work and that of other social organisations trying to shed light on the issue and make the injustice visible, fundamentalist groups have used defamation, stigmatisation and discrediting tactics against us. Not only do they call as apologists of crime, but they also publish statements in the most widely read newspapers in which they accuse us of committing crimes…

In the Kenya consultation, there was particular concern about people who could be characterised as anti-rights influencers: high-profile social media users and journalists who have built a brand around attacking rights and whose status gives them a platform to do so. Kenya's online space, which once seemed to promise to enable a greater diversity of expression, has instead become riven by division and polarisation. Thilaga Sulathireh similarly describes how social media is used by anti-rights influencers against LGBTQI people in Malaysia:

There are celebrity preachers who post social media videos encouraging people to troll LGBTQI people and those who post LGBTQI-related content. There are also individuals who make

homophobic comments and conservative student groups who organise against LGBTQI people.

In Kenya, a survey respondent describes how civil society is smeared as agents of foreign funders as a means of turning the public against civil society:

They have created a narrative that there are copious amounts of money flowing from 'the West' to 'promote gayism' in the country, and that activists are only doing this work because they are being paid to do so.

There are real-world consequences for these social media actions. Marek Tuszynski describes how physical violence can be enabled:

Digital attacks sometimes translate into physical violence, when actors emboldened by the hate speech promoted on online platforms end up posing serious threats not only to people's voices but also to their lives.

In India, social media is intimately connected to violence; mobile phone videos that document acts of violence against Muslims are shared and celebrated. In Sri Lanka, entirely false stories about Muslims spread by Sinhalese nationalist groups have led to lethal violence, and the government has done little to respond; more hatred and violence was stoked through social media following the April 2019 terrorist attacks.

The risks that online hate speech will enable violence are particularly acute in conflict or pre-conflict and post-conflict settings. Ethiopia's current processes of political reform have been warmly welcomed by civil society, with civic space opening up. But at the same time, divisive forces are exploiting their new-found freedom of expression to stoke ethnic conflict – with life-changing consequences for millions, as Yared Hailemariam of the Association for Human Rights in Ethiopia explains:

It is the elites and their activists who are using social media to spread hate speech instigating ethnic tension, violence and targeting of certain groups of people. They have followers, and when they call some kind of violent action you immediately see that there is a group on the ground that's ready to act and attack people.

In the last year and a half almost three million people were forced into internal displacement. Ethiopia is now in the 10 highest countries in the world for internal displacement. This has happened in the last year and a half because of ethnic conflicts. Hate speech is spreading easily and very quickly through phones and social media,

> "IT IS THE ELITES AND THEIR ACTIVISTS WHO ARE USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO SPREAD HATE SPEECH INSTIGATING ETHNIC TENSION, VIOLENCE AND TARGETING OF CERTAIN GROUPS OF PEOPLE."
> – YARED HAILEMARIAM

Demonstrators, mostly Rohingya people living in the USA, protest against the ongoing violence against Rohingya people in Myanmar.

Photo by Bilgin S. Sasmaz/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images
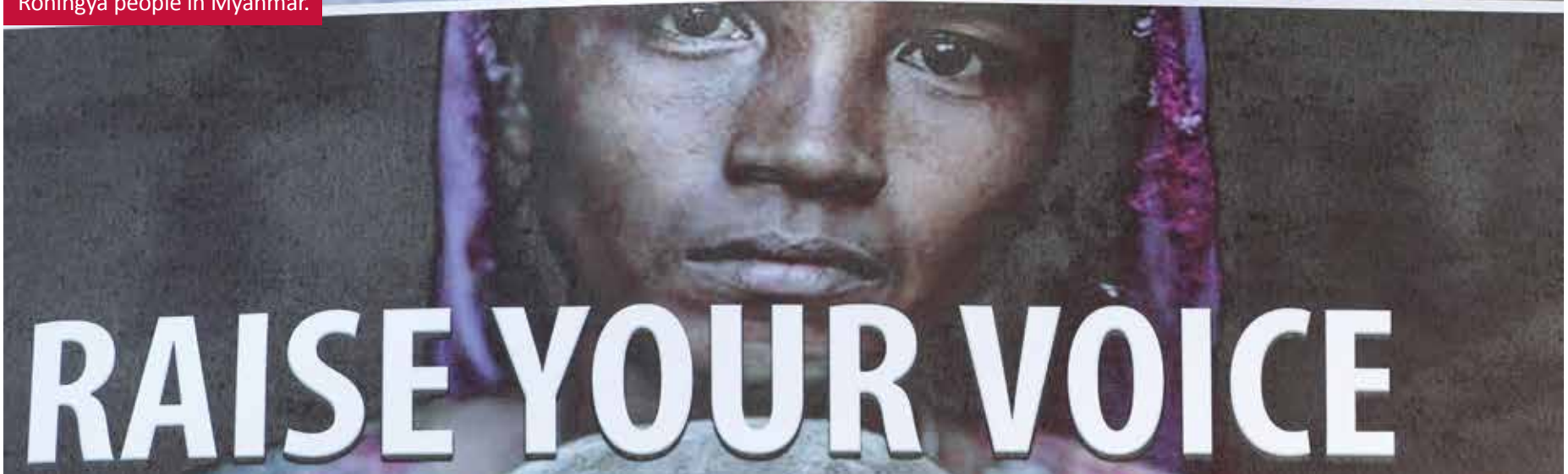
especially Facebook. Some of the calls for ethnic conflicts are coming from outside Ethiopia, including Europe and the USA.

Similarly, in Myanmar, Nay Lin Tun of the Center for Social Integrity describes how disinformation and hate speech were deliberately propagated by extremist forces, including anti-rights groups and influencers, helping to fuel the violent conflict of 2017 and conflicts since:

There was a lot of misinformation spread through social media, and this was viral. No one could know what was true or not. Positive stories and true information were far less viral than hate speech and misinformation.

In the major cities, hate speech and misinformation turned

a social conflict into a religious conflict between Buddhism and Islam. Extremist Buddhist monks turned this into a bigger conflict. Extremist groups spread disinformation and encouraged extremism, with the unofficial support of the military and political parties, in their own interests. People played political games in the big cities, but they had no connection to the villages in the conflict area. Those people were the most affected and they were living in fear, and live in fear now. There is a big challenge in controlling hate speech and misinformation on social media.

It is much harder for civil society voices promoting social cohesion and religious harmony to be heard compared to hate speech, but civil society is trying to do this.

SOCIAL MEDIA GIANTS PART OF THE PROBLEM

Social media giants should be called to account for not doing enough to prevent hate speech. Uma Mishra-Newbery points to some of their recent failings:

In many countries, Facebook is undermining democracy. In Myanmar, the genocide of the Rohingya people was incited on Facebook, and how long did it take Facebook to ban Myanmar's military? In New Zealand, the Christchurch shooter tried to spread footage of the shooting live on Facebook, and how long did it take for Facebook to take it down?

The challenge is that the ways social media is designed and monetised enable the easy spread of disinformation and hate speech, as Brandi Geurkink explains:

The most successful tech companies have grown the way they have because they have monetised our personal data. They cash in on our attention in the form of ad revenue. When you think about how we use platforms designed for viral advertising as our primary method of social and political discourse – and increasingly our consumption of news – you can start to see why disinformation thrives on platforms like Facebook and Google.

Another example of the 'attention economy' is YouTube, Google's video platform, which recommends videos to users automatically, often leading us down 'rabbit holes' of increasingly more extreme content in order to keep us hooked and watching. When content recommendation algorithms are designed to maximise attention to drive profit, they end up fuelling radical beliefs and often spreading misinformation.

The challenge is that fear and outrage are commercially lucrative, Brandi Geurkink goes on to describe:

… the business models of major technology platforms create the perfect storm for the manipulation of users. Disinformation and hate speech are content designed to appeal to emotions such as fear, anger and even humour. Combine this with the ability to target specific profiles of people in order to manipulate their ideas, and this becomes the perfect place for this sort of ideas to take hold. Once purveyors of disinformation have gained enough of a following, they can comfortably move offline and mobilise these newly-formed communities, which is something we're seeing more and more of…

…internet platforms are designed to amplify certain types of content that are created to appeal to deep emotions, because their aim is to keep you on the platform as long as possible and make you want to share that content with friends who will also be retained as long as possible on the platform. The higher the numbers of people online and the longer they stay, the higher the number of ads that will be delivered, and the higher the ad revenue will be. What will naturally happen once these platforms are up and running is that people will develop content with a political purpose, and the dynamics around this content will be exactly the same.

Some will say that users doing this are abusing internet platforms. I disagree: I think people doing this are using those platforms exactly how they were designed to be used, but for the purpose of spreading an extremist political discourse, and the fact that this is how platforms are supposed to work is indeed a big part of the problem.

The need, suggests Brandi Geurkink, is for a nuanced response that strikes a broadly acceptable balance between the freedom of expression and the prevention of abuse:

The challenge is to come up with ideas that improve the mechanisms to eliminate, on one hand, the likelihood of amplification of anti-rights ideas and hate speech, and on the other, the danger of censorship and discrimination against certain types of legitimate discourse.

The freedom of expression is important to anti-rights groups because of the premium they place on shifting narratives and discourse, and because it gives them cover for their attacks. Teresa Fernández Paredes notes the way anti-rights groups abuse the freedom of expression:

Paradoxically, in order to spread their message anti-rights groups are leaning on one of the left's favourite themes, the freedom of expression.

Anti-rights groups assert the freedom of expression as an absolute right, rather than as something that should be bounded by at least minimal constraints determined by consensus. Pushbacks against their tactics of disinformation, smears, online harassment and hate speech, or the refusal to give them a platform, are invariably positioned as outrageous restrictions of their freedom of expression. These tactics are always defended by anti-rights groups with reference to the primacy of their freedom of expression, even when that freedom is used to try to silence the freedom of expression of others.

Anti-rights groups will hide behind constitutional protections of the freedom of expression. In Spain, hardline Catholic group Hazte Oír (Make Yourself Heard) is campaigning hand in glove with far-right populist party Vox to repeal legislation against gender-based violence.

It has circulated disinformation that education authorities are engaged in 'sexual indoctrination' at school and consistently characterises its opponents as 'feminazis'. In 2019, after civil society brought complaints, a judge ruled that while their messages were repugnant, they were protected by the freedom of expression.

ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS ARE ENABLING AND MOBILISING PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

As the above examples sadly show, hate speech, and the stoking of prejudice through disinformation, can easily enable physical violence. Sometimes physical violence is part of a conscious strategy employed by anti-rights groups. The uses of violence by neo-fascist groups in several European countries are examples. In Malaysia, Thilaga Sulathireh identifies physical harassment and violence as one of a suite of tactics used by anti-rights groups:

There are… ethno-nationalist groups, with the purpose of protecting Muslims and ethnic Malays, that also engage in anti-LGBTQI activity… They engage more in reporting LGBTQI people to the police, and sometimes physical intimidation and violence. At the last women's march we saw some of these groups physically intimidating participants…

A memorial in New York, USA, honours the Latin American transgender people who have fled discrimination and violence in their countries only to end up murdered in the USA.

Sometimes states or ruling parties uses anti-rights groups as a proxy to enact violence. Thang Nguyen of Boat People SOS relates how in Vietnam, the one-party state instrumentalises non-state groups to mobilise violence as a supplement to its onslaught against religious minorities:

> The government is... using non-state actors against minority religions. In Nghe An Province, the authorities use organised mobs known as Red Flag Associations, which are supported and encouraged by local authorities to attack churches and beat up parishioners.

In Burundi, youth militias connected to the president are a key means by which the state uses violence to suppress dissent. In Bangladesh,

extremist student groups linked to the authoritarian ruling party mobilise violence against opponents, often with security force cooperation, as Aklima Ferdows reports:

> One of the main sources of attack are by the non-state actors linked to the ruling party, particularly its student and youth wing. Academic institutions such as universities are controlled by ruling party student activists. At protests, ruling party student groups work alongside law enforcement officers to attack people and harass them. This sometimes includes sexual harassment of women protesters.

Often it is others in the same universe – including lone wolf individuals and illegal extremist and terrorist groups – who seize on anti-rights narratives and, emboldened by them, pursue them to what they would see as their logical ends. Time and again, anti-rights narratives have resulted in lethal violence.

Human rights defender Heather Heyer was killed when a neo-Nazi supporter deliberately drove his car into a crowd of protesters in Charlottesville, USA, in August 2017. Heather had been part of a counter-protest against one of the largest white supremacist mobilisations in years, which was rife with hate speech. In January 2019, Paweł Adamowicz, Mayor of the city of Gdansk in Poland, was stabbed to death. Paweł was a liberal politician committed to LGBTQI and migrants' rights, and as a result had been subjected to vicious right-wing social media attacks in the run-up to his killing. His family pointed to the role of increasing public hate speech in fuelling a political climate permissive of violence.

In recent years a string of secular bloggers and activists have been killed in Bangladesh, evidently by Islamic extremist groups who are able to operate with impunity, and possibly with the complicity of state forces. The killings have fuelled self-censorship. In the Maldives, in April 2017, social media activist Yameen Rasheed was found stabbed to death outside his home. Rasheed had been a vocal critic of religious extremism. He had received multiple death threats before his murder, which he had reported to the police, but no action was taken. His murder, and the slow official investigation that followed, also created a chilling effect.

Beyond these headline examples, there are of course many other, less widely reported, stories of non-lethal violence against people in civil society and the media. Far-right pro-Brexit protesters in the UK have repeatedly gathered outside parliament and harassed and violently attacked journalists trying to cover debates; their violence is enabled by a persistent smearing of those who oppose Brexit as 'traitors'. In Greece in January 2019, five photojournalists were violently attacked or harassed by extremist movement members in an apparently targeted move while covering a protest. In response, the Union of Photojournalists of Greece called on the authorities to reconsider their rhetoric, expressing concern that prominent politicians were normalising fascist attacks. LGBTQI pride parades in Poland during 2019 passed mostly peacefully, but in some cases were marred by counter-protesters throwing eggs and, in one more serious attack in the city of Białystok, flash bombs, rocks and glass bottles. Many more examples could be offered, and all such cases demonstrate how when the discourse of prejudice, hatred and division is normalised, violent attacks result.

ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS ARE ORGANISING IN OPPOSITION TO 'GENDER IDEOLOGY'

As is clear, anti-rights groups prioritise the shaping and shifting of discourse and narratives. One of the key common discourses around which anti-rights groups organise and collaborate is their opposition to something they characterise as 'gender ideology'.

The core of this idea is that advances in the rights of women and sexual minorities have gone too far. Under the banner of rejecting 'gender ideology,' anti-rights groups "try to repeal hard-won rights," as Analía Bettoni expresses it in relation to the recent attempts to roll back abortion rights and trans rights in Uruguay.

From the anti-rights perspective, gender is an 'ideology' to be resisted rather than a reality to be accepted. In this worldview, only two genders exist, corresponding to the two biological sexes assigned at birth. Women and men are seen as playing distinct roles, in line with what is viewed as the 'natural order'. Gender roles are often defined by highly conservative faith readings. Equality between the sexes is neither desirable nor achievable, given that a woman's most important roles are reproduction and child rearing, duties that keep women anchored in the private sphere. The sanctity and integrity of the family is prioritised over the individual rights of its members, and the lives of 'unborn children' take priority over the wishes and choices of their carriers, which makes abortion a key red line.

Many anti-rights groups reject the terminology of 'gender' altogether, and consistently campaign against any gender-sensitive legislation or policy, including laws to combat gender-based violence, which they insist

on reframing as 'domestic violence' and belonging to the private rather than public sphere. They claim that so-called 'gender laws' discriminate against men. Diana Cariboni summarises the sentiments behind the attack on the terminology of gender:

Behind that word, gender, is the crucial issue of the recognition of identities and the search for equality: women's struggles to end discrimination and subordination, and the struggles of LGBTQI communities to enjoy the same rights and guarantees accorded to the rest of the population. They say that these struggles are unnecessary because our constitutions already state that we are all equal before the law, so why establish special laws or statutes for LGBTQI people? What they are overlooking is that LGBTQI people, and particularly people such as trans individuals, cannot effectively access those rights or even the conditions for a dignified existence. They insist on ignoring this, and instead argue that what LGBTQI people are striving for is for the state to fund their lifestyles.

As this suggests, the 'gender ideology' terminology is further deployed against the assertion of LGBTQI rights, and particularly trans rights. Only rigid, unchanging heterosexual orientations are deemed acceptable. Advances won through committed civil society advocacy, such as same-sex marriage and laws that recognise the identities of trans people, have been met with backlash and characterised as granting privileges to undeserving minorities rather than efforts to ensure that rights are truly universal. The recognition of same-sex marriage and the identities of trans people are red lines: marriage can only be between a man and a woman and trans people are positioned as imposters. A relatively innocent matter such as equal access to washrooms has become a fiercely contested flashpoint.

Photo by Ines M. Pousadela

A young woman holds a sign reading 'They want us mothers or dead' during a mobilisation for abortion rights in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

These two lines of attack – against women's rights and against LGBTQI rights – unite around the status of children. Abortions are positioned as an attack on the rights of the unborn. Gender equality is characterised as a recipe for children being raised without proper family structures. Children in education are positioned as needing protection from indoctrination that will dissolve established gender roles and sexual binaries. This is not to say that anti-rights groups support child rights, or the recognition set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child that as children grow they develop evolving capacities to express their own views; rather, anti-rights groups see children more as the property of their parents, and support what they characterise as the collective rights of families, always understood in traditional, heterosexual and patriarchal ways. Gillian Kane points to how anti-rights groups instrumentalise their apparent concern about children:

Of course there is no such thing as a gender ideology, and much less governments forcing children to learn inappropriate material. The wellbeing of children is being used as a cover to disable efforts to enforce rights and protections for girls, women and LGBTQI people.

It is important to be clear that the label of 'gender ideology' only comes from anti-rights groups and the broader far-right universe; it has no real meaning, does not relate to any project that civil society organises around and is not a label any of us working in civil society would recognise or attribute to ourselves.

Gabriela Mendoza Santiago of Otro Tiempo México offers a typical example, explaining how this label is being used by anti-rights groups in her country:

In Mexico, the National Front for the Family and the Don't Mess With My Kids movement have quite some influence. They focus on the promotion of the traditional family, with the aim of curbing the rights of the LGBTQI community and women. They seek to maintain what they view as 'natural,' to curb sex education in schools and maintain legislation consistent with their conservative thinking. They base their ideas on what they call 'gender ideology'; they argue that there is an attempt to impose a new world order to control people and 'homosexualise' the country and to benefit companies and organisations linked to abortion and human rights education. They have had an impact, since they have halted reforms to decriminalise abortion and to legalise equal marriage in several Mexican states, in addition to consolidating the ban on adoption for homosexual couples.

María Ysabel Cedano of DEMUS – Study for the Defense of Women's Rights in Peru points to the attempts being made to reverse rights through attacks on 'gender ideology':

…conservative sectors are currently trying… to eliminate the gender perspective from the school curriculum, including all allusions to sexual orientation and gender identity. They have done so by means of both street actions and lawsuits.

'Gender ideology' offers a convenient fiction against which a range of tactics can be mobilised against a variety of targets. Opposition to 'gender ideology' is the glue that binds different anti-rights groups together, as Edurne Cárdenas relates:

Anti-rights groups have indeed grown and are organised under a common umbrella, against what they call 'gender ideology'… We have seen that behind their 'no to abortion' they bring along a broader agenda that is linked to their rejection of so-called 'gender ideology', sexual education in schools, even vaccination, and who knows what else.

Teresa Fernández Paredes also notes that the notion of 'gender ideology' has provided a rallying point, and the term has now become normalised:

…all of them have coordinated to place the gender ideology theme on the table and raise it everywhere, as a result of which something that was not even a concept ended up as a global issue. They have managed to position this on the agenda.

The concept has spread and been heavily backed financially, as María Ysabel Cedano indicates:

For decades they have run a strong campaign against what they call 'gender ideology', not just in Peru but throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, and beyond. These are multimillion-dollar campaigns that maintain that 'gender ideology' attacks life, marriage and family. The funding they poured into the fear campaign against the peace accords in Colombia is a good example of this.

As this suggests, the terminology of 'gender ideology' bleeds into other debates. It connects with the deployment of disinformation and hate speech and efforts to distort elections and referendums. María Angélica Peñas Defago further recalls its deployment during the Colombian peace accord referendum:

During the campaign leading to the referendum in Colombia, the forces that rejected the agreement claimed that if 'yes' won, so-called 'gender ideology' would be imposed.

Gillian Kane records how the opposition to 'gender ideology' has been taken into international arenas:

…in international forums these groups express concern for the wellbeing of children, who they claim are being indoctrinated by permissive governments in the immoral principles of 'gender ideology'.

And goes on to describe:

…attacks against the Istanbul Convention, which is intended to combat violence against women. You would think this would be uncontroversial. Yet, there are right-wing groups like the Alliance

Defending Freedom objecting to the Convention, claiming that it takes away parental rights and that it promotes gender as a social construct, and not as a binary biological truth, as they see it.

This attack on the Istanbul Convention as part of the vilification of 'gender ideology' and reframing of gender-based violence reaches wide; it was also observed in Latvia, in an anti-rights discourse that brought together faith leaders, politicians and anti-rights groups, as Kaspars Zālītis relates:

Church leaders and many public officials oppose ratification of the Istanbul Convention because one of its non-discrimination clauses concerns sexual orientation and gender identity. The Catholic Archbishop is rallying against it and has gathered considerable support

Photo by Julia Reinhart/Getty Images
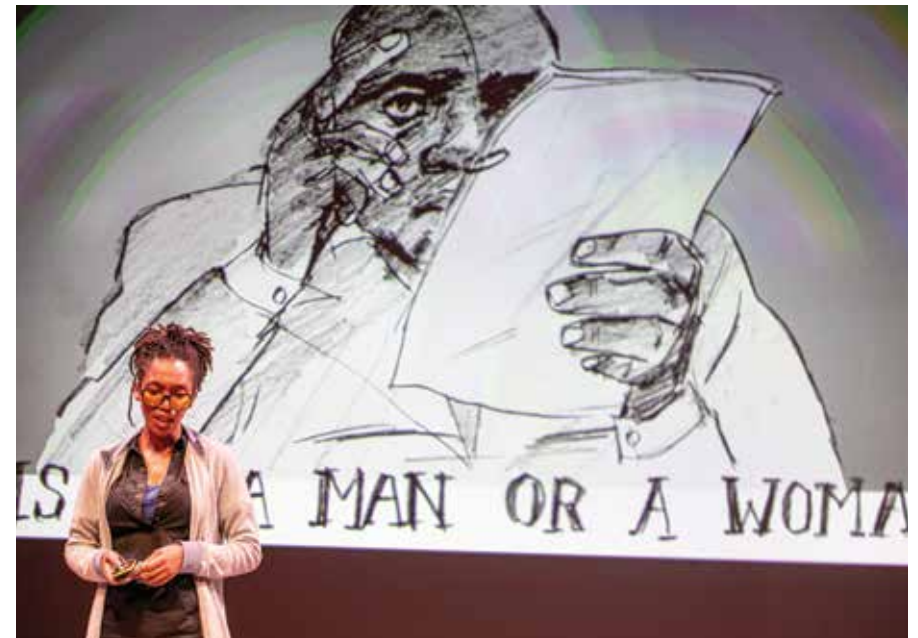
Kenyan activist Audrey Mbugua speaks about her life as a transgender woman at the 2019 Oslo Freedom Forum in Norway.

among political parties and parliamentarians. He has managed to convince them that ratification is part of the secret agenda of so-called 'genderists' – an expression that originated in Russia, a country with a very strong cultural influence in Latvia. Church officials, right-wing activists and politicians and anti-LGBTQI and anti-abortion groups depict the Convention as contrary to Latvian traditional values and as being aimed at over-sexualising and 'converting' children. These arguments are gaining ground among the public.

Any strategy to respond to anti-rights groups, and the attacks on women and LGBTQI people that they make, therefore needs to defeat the 'gender ideology' discourse.

ANTI–RIGHTS GROUPS ARE CO–OPTING AND TWISTING HUMAN RIGHTS LANGUAGE

The invention of 'gender ideology' as a rallying point connects to another common strategy around which anti-rights groups organise and collaborate, which is to dress up their concerns in human rights language. Again, they are borrowing from legitimate civil society and sowing confusion. Attacks on women's rights are often positioned as a defence of the rights of the family; the denial of abortion rights is commonly made as a defence of the rights of the unborn. Attacks on religious minorities are often presented as the assertion of the rights of majority faith groups, as are attacks on LGBTQI rights. Attacks on the rights of migrants and refugees are increasingly mounted as an assertion of the higher priority rights of native populations to livelihoods and public services. In multiple ways, the language of human rights is being co-opted and bent to serve the agendas of anti-rights groups that seek to reject universal human rights.

Martyna Bogaczyk of the Education for Democracy Foundation observes this tactic at work in Poland, noting that the landscape:

… includes a number of organisations that are waging a cultural war and deepening the divide. They are occupying spaces meant for civil society and they are even grabbing the human rights language for their own purposes, using it against the advancement of rights.

Teresa Fernández Paredes also reports this adoption of human rights discourse:

…they are… using the same discourse that has been successfully used by human rights groups. They talk about human rights and they position themselves as victims.

Eliana Cano describes how conservative faith-based groups in Peru that are attacking sexual and reproductive rights are increasingly adopting the language of rights instead of belief:

They no longer speak the language of the divine and the clerical because they know that it attracts fewer and fewer people; instead they have appropriated the discourse of democracy and human rights.

Sometimes, these views are sincerely held by anti-rights groups and their supporters, who genuinely believe, for example, that the rights of a foetus outrank the rights of a woman. But sometimes they are only a cover for the denial of rights. A survey respondent from India identified this subterfuge, pointing to:

…groups that pretend to work on women's empowerment, even on 'family rights', but are in fact against women claiming their own bodies… These groups are present at all levels, often pitting one rights-oriented group against another… In our work as grant-makers, we see them using professional grant writers, often using rights-friendly language to hide the work they would do with the resources.

Participants in the Mexico consultation also pointed to the denial of rights that lurks behind the language of rights, concluding that anti-rights groups:

…have appropriated human rights discourse and arguments… promoting activities totally contrary to human rights such as 'conversion therapies', the denial of sex education in schools and the revictimisation of women who have suffered some kind of violence.

While a survey respondent from Bolivia questions the 'pro-life' terminology anti-abortion groups adopt, noting that anti-rights groups:

…call themselves 'pro-life', but their sole objective is to reduce progress in sexual and reproductive rights and impose a logic of domination over women's bodies, against the full exercise of their right to choose. Their messages are full of 'positive' expressions that hide their true intentions.

Using the long-established language of rights can play as part of a disinformation strategy because it muddies the waters of public discourse and dilutes our language of rights. It also helps anti-rights groups obtain access to domestic and international dialogue spaces and, potentially, funding opportunities.

Photo by Sean Gallup/Getty Images

Protesters in Poznan, Poland demand church-state separation during a 2018 rally against a proposal to further restrict abortion.

The rights that are being promoted, however, are sectional rights. They stand at odds with civil society's commitment to universal human rights. Competing claims between rights are presented as a zero-sum game, in which any concessions on rights for communities that anti-rights groups target are seen as entailing a loss of rights for the people they claim to represent. In this worldview, rights cannot be universal because some people deserve rights more than others. Giada Negri emphasises this view of rights as a zero-sum game:

They promote a view of rights that creates competition between vulnerable groups or is exclusive of some groups on grounds of identity, culture or sexual orientation…

A survey respondent in South Africa reports having encountered the same belief:

In our work that seeks to protect migrants' and refugees' rights in South Africa, we have encountered various groups that feel we shouldn't be doing our work because they feel refugees and foreign nationals should not have rights.

While Martyna Bogaczyk further observes this sectional approach to rights as subject to negotiation in Poland:

Rights have become something that can be traded. Rather than being recognised as universal, they can be denied to 'them' if that means more benefits can be distributed among 'us'.

Sahar Moazami emphasises the duplicity of this discourse and makes a plea for the reassertion of the universality of human rights:

From our perspective, they are mobilising against the rights of certain people – but that is not the way they frame it. They are not explicit in using the human rights framework against certain categories of people. Rather they claim to be upholding principles around, say, the freedom of religion, the rights of children, or women's rights. They depict the situation as though the rights of some groups would necessarily be sacrificed when the rights of other groups are realised; but this is a false dichotomy. Human rights are universal as well as indivisible.

There is a need to acknowledge that sometimes there are difficult debates about competing claims for rights. There are sometimes disagreements between activists for women's rights and for trans rights, for example.

Anti-rights groups seize on these disagreements to promote the idea that different rights are incompatible and some rights must be denied. Uma Mishra-Newbery describes tensions between women's rights and trans rights, which have been presented as competing at the Commission on the Status of Women:

…you walk into the event and it's extremely transphobic, as they outrightly reject the concept of gender identity and insist on biological sex, therefore refusing to consider trans women as women. They claim to know better what it means to be a woman and what all women feel and need, and this brings them to condone violence against trans people and reject sexual and reproductive rights… Anti-rights groups accused us of promoting trans rights over women's rights.

Sahar Moazami flags current challenges within the feminist movement:

…there are some groups that are clearly hijacking feminist concepts and language, attaching them to new interpretations that are clearly forced, but there are also groups that actually consider themselves to be feminists and believe that trans individuals should be expelled from feminist spaces.

In complex circumstances when competing claims arise, what is needed is respectful dialogue and reasoning rather than the hateful arguments and prejudice anti-rights groups provoke. In civil society, we need to be careful not to become preoccupied with our own sectional campaigns and to continue to promote inclusive spaces where differences can be debate and consensus sought. We need to promote the universality of rights and work to retrieve and reclaim the language of genuine human rights.

ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS ARE APPEALING TO TRADITION, CULTURE AND FAITH IDENTITIES

As well as the misuse of human rights language and alongside the evocation of 'gender ideology', many anti-rights groups offer narratives that appeal to ideas of tradition and national culture, as well as faith identities. These are constructed around dominant group identities and understood as fixed and narrowly determined, rather than dynamic and inclusively defined.

These narratives may not always be coherent. For example, appeals to traditional culture are made to deny LGBTQI rights in countries where the prevention of rights rests on colonial-era laws. In some countries, the homophobia that it is claimed is socially ingrained has been carefully nurtured and sustained by outside evangelical and missionary engagement. But regardless of how rooted in reality they are, narratives around tradition, culture and faith resonate.

Numerous survey respondents pointed to the instrumentalisation of tradition, nationalism and dominant faith identities as a key anti-rights tactic. Often these elements are so closely intertwined as to be inseparable. A survey respondent from Ghana, for example, points out that anti-rights groups:

> …use traditional, cultural and religious norms as the basis for campaigning against LGBTQI rights… they normally target religious and traditional leaders who they say should protect us against any aberration of social norms.

Anti-rights groups tend to position themselves as moral guardians, defending traditional notions of morality that are under attack. As a survey respondent from the DRC puts it:

> …anti-rights groups ground their argument on morality, spiritual values and 'morals'.

A survey respondent from Armenia describes a situation in which appeals to tradition, family values, nationalism and racism are all mobilised against rights, and in contrast civil society is characterised as unpatriotic:

> In my context these groups are against women's and LGBTQI rights. Targets are those speaking and standing for their rights. Key messages go from 'You want to destroy our traditional Armenian families' and 'You will destroy the Armenian pure genes', up to 'Do not marry other nationalities'. They speak against civil society as a sector getting its funds from foreign donors, thus supporting foreigners to interfere in the development of the country.

This characterisation of civil society as inconsistent with narrowly defined notions of tradition, culture and national identity is one of the most common forms of attack on civil society, long made by states and increasingly echoed by anti-rights groups. The mobilisation of tradition is reported by a survey respondent from eSwatini/Swaziland, who reports that anti-rights groups are:

> …traditionalists, they claim to represent the true values of being Swazi…. Their tactics are based on politicising culture and traditional beliefs. They control the local level through traditional leaders. These leaders are in the communities where we work and

are gatekeeping for them. They view human rights as foreign, unSwazi concepts.

A survey respondent from Kenya has a similar experience of being attacked as an importer of foreign values:

I work with underprivileged girls in informal settlements assisting them to advocate for their access to sexual and reproductive health... An anti-rights group has conducted a smear campaign, terming our activities as 'Western' and against our culture and religion.

Many anti-rights groups are, as is clear from many of the above examples, rooted in highly conservative faith positions. A shared, hardline interpretation of a faith offers a rallying point around which anti-rights campaigns can be organised and disparate groups brought together. Faith positions are used both to attack other faith groups and their CSOs – typically the attacks are from groups based in a country's majority faith against minority faiths – and to attack secular civil society, notably in relation to women's and LGBTQI rights, which are identified with 'gender ideology'.

This is seen in different contexts with different faiths. Those consulted in diverse locations speak in astonishingly similar terms about fundamentalist strands of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam, among others. For example, Charles Emma Ofwono of Development Connection in Uganda reports that Christian fundamentalists:

...feel the Bible is the only code to be followed... they say things like having sex with another man is sin and should be punished by death, and abortion is murder and whoever does it will not go to heaven.

A participant in the Pride parade in El Salvador expresses the view that we should all try to be good persons rather than good followers of any religion.

Photo by Alex Peña/Getty Images

While a survey respondent from Pakistan refers to accusations by religious extremists against those considered to be:

…enemies of Islam… morally corrupting our children.

Faith-based anti-rights groups are directly preventing rights, as in Jordan, where Ahmad Awad of the Phenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies reports:

Several forms of anti-human rights groups have emerged… the first being some religious groups that oppose the realisation of civil rights that contravene Islamic law.

And faith positions are used to attack civil society, as in Senegal, where a survey respondent working on children's rights states that the main tactic of anti-rights groups is:

…denigrating civil society actors by accusing us of being anti-Islamists or working on behalf of lobbyists who promote values that are contrary to religion.

Kevin Mendez of Belize Youth Empowerment for Change describes how Christian anti-rights groups target LGBTQI events:

Anti-rights groups are mostly faith-based organisations advocating for the 'traditional family setting' and 'abstinence-only' education. Their leader has a radio station that is used to transmit their message and teachings. In addition, they have held protests outside of LGBTQI-related events with messages calling for our repentance, to turn to Jesus…

One of the advantages enjoyed by faith-based anti-rights groups from dominant faith communities is that they often have high-level influence. Conservative faith leaders and influencers frequently have strong connections with other powerful figures. Kaspars Zālītis describes the insider connections that hold back LGBTQI rights in Latvia:

The Catholic Church has a lot of influence, and it is taking the lead in fighting the LGBTQI community and pushing back against women's rights.

Church-state separation notwithstanding, the state has a religious advisory council, as does the City Council. It is not uncommon for the Catholic Archbishop to meet with the ruling coalition's leading party, and for the party's leader to then say that he has 'consulted' with the Catholic Church and has decided to vote in one way or another. You can see a direct link because all this happens in public… We, on the contrary, don't have access to leading politicians because they are not willing to risk their reputations by meeting us in public.

International connections and narratives are also important to faith-based anti-rights groups. While promoting narrow readings of national traditions and identities they also support each other internationally. Gordan Bosanac outlines how connections between Croatia and Poland became important, pointing to:

…the rise in nationally and internationally-connected fundamentalist CSOs, independent from the Church structure… the new groups had links with ultra-conservative Polish movements – Tradition, Family, Property and Ordo Iuris.

Narratives of religious intolerance can be shared across borders. Evan Jones of the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network offers a case study of how church groups mobilised prejudice against Muslim migrants in South Korea, and plugged into international currents of anti-migrant, anti-Muslim sentiment, in order to influence the state:

In South Korea in June 2018, 500 Yemenis arrived on Jeju Island. Almost immediately there was a huge outcry from the public, church groups – particularly conservative Christian groups – and the media. This fanned what was partly an anti-refugee sentiment but was more strongly an anti-Muslim sentiment that swept through the country and became conflated with refugee issues. It connected to the anti-migrant, anti-Muslim rhetoric that was coming out of Europe, and showed how these two have become intertwined. Within weeks of the story hitting the headlines a petition with more than a million signatures was sent to the president's office requesting that South Korea pull out of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Thankfully the government didn't go down this track but there have been high-level talks about how potentially South Korea could modify its domestic legislation for refugees and wind back some of its protection for refugees.

As well as this internationalisation of connections and narratives, there seem to be two other novel aspects about the current ways faith-based anti-rights groups are acting. The first, as part of the broader trend of collaboration between diverse anti-rights groups, is that faith-based anti-rights groups are increasingly making alliances with secular groups. Sahar Moazami observes this development:

…I think there is one change underway in terms of the kind of groups that promote anti-rights narratives. In the past it was clear that these were all religion-based organisations, but now we are seeing secular and non-secular groups coming together around the narrative of biology.

In this sense, secular anti-rights groups are patterning onto and amplifying long-running faith-based anti-rights narratives.

The second feature is one of division rather than connection: there seems to be greater polarisation between conservative faith groups and more progressive groups rooted within the same faith, as Eliana Cano's example from Peru, discussed above, suggests: in her context, highly conservative Catholic groups are contesting the right of more progressive groups to even call themselves 'Catholic' and argue from a faith position.

"WITHIN WEEKS OF THE STORY HITTING THE HEADLINES A PETITION WITH MORE THAN A MILLION SIGNATURES WAS SENT TO THE PRESIDENT'S OFFICE REQUESTING THAT SOUTH KOREA PULL OUT OF THE 1951 REFUGEE CONVENTION. THANKFULLY THE GOVERNMENT DIDN'T GO DOWN THIS TRACK…"
– EVAN JONES

In responding, it should be clear that faith per se is not the problem. Everyone should have the right to practise a faith, providing they do so in ways that do not impinge on the rights of others to practise their faiths, or follow no faith at all. Challenges to rights come when a majority faith identity in a particular context is privileged, and the rights of those who identify with that faith are given priority in ways that cut across the rights of others, and when hardline groups and faith leaders – who may not necessarily be representative of the views of the mainstream of believers but are strongly positioned to influence and amplify them – instrumentalise faith positions and mobilise faith followers against rights. Part of the response needed is to offer arguments from faith positions that support rights.

ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS ARE INCREASINGLY TARGETING THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA

As several of the above examples have shown, anti-rights groups, growing in confidence, visibility and connections, are increasingly prioritising engagement at the international level. When groups that assert narrow notions of national sovereignty and seek to reverse positive norms generated by international institutions engage at this level, it may initially appear to offer a contradiction, as Diana Cariboni discusses in the context of Latin American anti-rights groups:

These groups have a nationalist discourse identifying nation states and peoples as subject to foreign dictates that are considered to be evil – and are even seen as messages from the devil. Evil is embodied in a series of institutions that they describe as imperialistic: the United Nations (UN), the Organization

of American States (OAS), the inter-American human rights system, international financial organisations, the World Health Organization.

… what these groups do not see is that they themselves are actors in the international arena, even if only to weaken the scope of international law. They aim at the bodies that oversee treaties and conventions, such as the American Convention on Human Rights or the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. They say that these are just expert committees whose recommendations do not need to be taken into account by states when they contravene domestic laws.

Despite their critical view of international human rights institutions, or maybe because of it, anti-rights groups are increasingly occupying spaces within these forums. Numerous CSOs have long and legitimately engaged with UN institutions, including the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), working to use the international arena to hold states to the human rights commitments they have made in international agreements, report and seek redress for human rights violations and push for the development and propagation of human rights norms. International and regional institutions, including UN institutions, have to varying degrees created spaces into which some CSOs are invited and given some opportunity to contribute their views with the aim of influencing the decisions and positions of institutions. There have always been many challenges around these processes, including questions of who gets to access opportunities, how much access is granted compared to others, such as the private sector, and how real the influence is. But CSOs have worked hard to make the most

of opportunities and expand them where possible, and tried to work collectively with other CSOs to coordinate their efforts. Now anti-rights groups, as ever imitating civil society, are following suit.

Teresa Fernández Paredes identifies this growing phenomenon:

As they use the language of human rights, they have increasing legal representation, and they have begun to occupy spaces in strategic forums, where decisions are made, including the UN and the OAS.

The key gatekeeper for CSOs engaging with the UN system is the NGO Committee of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Past State of Civil Society Reports have tracked the obstructive role this committee can play in preventing CSOs that work on contested issues – such as LGBTQI and religious minority rights – receiving accreditation. States led by repressive leaders – including those newly headed by right-wing populists and nationalists – abuse their positions in blocking accreditation on political grounds. For example, India's government has blocked accreditation for the International Dalit Solidarity Network for over a decade. But at the same time, anti-rights groups may be allowed accreditation, and are then able to use the recognition this confers to position themselves as legitimate. Something has gone very wrong when legitimate supporters of the rights of excluded groups are blocked while a body such as the USA's National Rifle Association (NRA) – at a time when the UN is trying to defend the Arms Trade Treaty against the US government's withdrawal from signing – is considered an acceptable organisation to claim international-level space.

Uma Mishra-Newbery points to the challenge here:

...the UN still lets the NRA keep its ECOSOC status, and the NRA actively lobbies against any trade treaty regulating weapons – weapons that are killing people in the USA at an astonishing rate. The UN should understand that these groups exist to undermine democracy and human rights – but more than ever, the UN has become biased on this issue. At the same time there are grassroots organisations that are being denied accreditation in unprecedented numbers – and these are all organisations working on issues that powerful states don't want to see brought to the forefront.

Two Geneva-based UN officials, who were interviewed on condition of anonymity, describe the problems with the NGO Committee:

The NGO Committee is highly politicised. There are absolutely legitimate human rights CSOs that can be deemed to be touching on sensitive issues and will struggle to get ECOSOC status. It can take them four or five years, if not a lot more, to finally obtain it. At the same time, others claiming to be working on issues that look good on paper will get ECOSOC status immediately

They estimate that as many as 75 per cent of accredited organisations are not genuine CSOs. Not all of this staggering number are anti-rights groups, but they are a rising presence in this sphere, as the UN interviewees indicate:

Among those that we don't consider to be genuine civil society are various types of organisations, including typical GONGOs – for instance, organisations established by the government of

a particular country to criticise the human rights situation in a neighbouring country... they didn't use to be that many, and nobody listened to them except the countries concerned.

This changed with the growth of lobbies, which make up the next layer of fake CSOs. These are groups that put pressure in favour of a specific group or issue and use every possible opportunity to defend that particular theme or attack others. Some of these groups question the mere existence of the UNHRC, and the best way they have found against it is to try to undermine it from within...

And finally, there are the groups that are currently referred to as anti-rights groups, which have mushroomed in recent years. We cannot quantify them, we cannot even provide a date when they began appearing, but they are clearly present now.

Many of the anti-rights groups engaging in UN structures are attacking women's and LGBTQI rights, and many of them come from a faith perspective. At the international level, as at the national level, diverse anti-rights groups are finding common ground and working in a coordinated manner. The ways they work and the agendas they pursue within international institutions are also essentially the same as those they push at the domestic level; the international arena offers another sphere to block and attack civil society and propagate regressive discourse. Perhaps the only significant difference is that international-level anti-rights actions have tended to be conducted under a veneer of greater civility.

The UN interviewees describe how anti-rights groups pursue familiar anti-rights agendas under the guise of furthering rights:

Members of the Indigenous Peoples of America at the opening session of the 49th OAS General Assembly in Medellín, Colombia, 2019.

Anti-rights groups come to the UNHRC under the pretence of speaking about human rights, but the human rights they defend are perceived as such only by the extreme right. They tend to adopt names that sound pleasing or inoffensive and they may be difficult to identify as anti-rights groups at first. They may very well hold a side event that they claim is about 'empowering women' but is in fact targeted against LGBTQI people... when the UNHRC made a big move to adopt a resolution on sexual orientation and gender identity, immediately there were proposals of resolutions and side events organised in reaction to this, but the opposition was framed as the defence of the rights of the family.

Because anti-rights groups use the language of rights in the international arena, they pose genuine challenges for the bureaucracy of international institutions. As the UN interviewees point out, UN officials struggle to tell apart organisations that genuinely stand for rights from those that only claim to:

Work needs to be done to learn which organisations are serious and rights-oriented. We don't necessarily need to agree with what they say, but it is important to see whether they are genuinely struggling for rights.

Anti-rights groups do not tend to behave disruptively at the international level. They mostly tend to follow rules and procedures, and take advantage of the spaces that are available to them because they do so. The UN interviewees indicate the difficulties they face in trying to apply the normal rules of engagement when anti-rights groups are increasingly claiming space:

There are more and more anti-rights groups misusing the UNHRC, and if they have ECOSOC status and follow the rules, they are allowed to take the floor and hold side events. Unless there is explicit hate speech involved and it happens in the formal proceedings, they will have a space.

There is no control of what goes on during side events... it is not always easy to identify those where there will be anti-rights rhetoric.

... once they are granted ECOSOC status as organisations working on those issues, nothing obliges them to speak only about those matters; they can speak about anything they want. And more often

than not, they won't ever speak about the issue that they claimed to be working on to start with, but about something quite different, and there is nothing that anybody can do about it.

…sometimes they use very clever strategies – for instance, from time to time they align with the opposition leader of a totalitarian country, gaining the legitimacy they need so that next time they use it to attack the Council.

But even when they abide by the rules, the danger is that the quality of the space is declining, with time being tied up in anti-rights obfuscation and legitimate civil society voices being crowded out, hampering attempts at genuine dialogue, while side events can be spaces where extremism and hate speech flourish.

Many human rights organisations prioritise engagement in the UNHRC's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process, which gives civil society an opportunity for input in procedures that hold states to account on their human rights record. But this is another part of the international architecture where anti-rights groups are claiming space, as Thilaga Sulathireh reports from Malaysia:

…there are groups that call themselves Islamic NGOs, some of which come together under a coalition of Islamic NGOs that participate in the UPR process. These include groups that use more rights-oriented language, given that they engage in the UPR process, and particularly use the language of religious rights. They position what they call the 'rehabilitation' of LGBTQI people as consistent with these religious rights…

…If LGBTQI CSOs attend a government consultation on the UPR, they share the space with these… The UPR process – and UN processes more generally – offer a key site of contestation between these two camps. The second UPR cycle in 2013 was seen by critics as an attempt by civil society to push for the recognition of LGBTQI rights and destabilise the position of Islam in the Federal Constitution. There was a lot of pushback. And then in the third UPR cycle in 2018, these groups participated in the process and claimed space. Some of the recommendations of this group were included in the report compiled by the UNHRC.

…When the Government of Malaysia tried to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Rome Statue of the International Criminal Court, there was a lot of pushback from these groups and attempts to mobilise Muslim people against ratification. The government pulled out of ratifying…

Under the banner of protecting family rights, child rights opponents are also targeting the international system, working to influence the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which monitors the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as Ilaria Paolazzi of Child Rights Connect explains:

These movements are generally very well informed and aware of what is happening at the international level and of the functioning of the Committee and they never miss opportunities to attack.

In 2014, the FamilyPolicy.ru group issued a 97-page report… that aimed to delegitimise and dismantle the mandate of the Committee, calling into question its core functions by saying, for

COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN A KEY BATTLEGROUND

The annual Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) sessions offer a paradigmatic example of how anti-rights groups are distorting the international picture and blocking the efforts of legitimate civil society. Because 'gender ideology' is a core rallying point for anti-rights groups and because women's rights are contested with assertions of family rights, rights of the unborn and religious rights, the CSW has become a key arena for anti-rights groups. As a result, what was once a reasonably consensual space has become polarised. The CSW has become an arena where the rights of women are attacked, while trans people are simultaneously attacked under the guise of defending and empowering women. When this happens, the intention again is to deny the universality of rights and position rights as a zero-sum game in which some groups deserve rights more than others. Sahar Moazami describes such occurrences:

The CSW is a good example of a space that has undergone regression, particularly regarding the rights of LGBTQI people. What we saw during its latest session, in March 2019, was a very vocal and targeted attack against trans individuals. The anti-gender narrative was present in side events that were hosted by states and civil society groups both at the UN and outside the UN.

Regressive states are enabling these attacks. In President Trump's USA, for example, abortion rights and LGBTQI rights are under attack and the government's international aid no longer provides any support to organisations that promote family planning. So naturally the US government has been actively involving anti-rights groups in its official CSW delegations. Gillian Kane describes this happening in 2017:

…at the CSW, the US State Department appointed two extremists to represent it. One was an executive leader of a known LGBTQI-hate

group, and the other was from an organisation that has advocated for the repeal of legislation that prevents violence against women.

One increasingly influential anti-rights group at the international level is the Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam), a US-based hardline anti-abortion group. Formerly a fringe group whose use of hate speech left it isolated, it has become an inside favourite of the Trump administration, and has been part of official US CSW delegations. Its status with the US government has given it scope for international influence: a former diplomat reported how the negotiating points at a women's rights summit for both the US and Arab group delegations were effectively verbatim C-Fam scripts, and references to gender and sexual and reproductive health have been deleted from international agreements as a result. C-Fam has helped build an international coalition, Group of Friends of the Family, which brings together hardline socially conservative states, and has developed close connections with highly conservative Russian faith groups.

Uma Mishra-Newbery also offers an example of how states and anti-rights groups feed off each other's efforts to promote competition between rights at the CSW, pointing to a:

…panel organised by the Holy See at CSW. The Holy See is an active, very vocal state at the UN. We reported live on their event on Twitter, and you cannot imagine the way we were trolled online. Anti-rights groups accused us of promoting trans rights over women's rights.

Anti-rights groups now appear to be extending their attacks to UN diplomats who are seen as enabling women's or LGBTQI rights groups. During the 2019 CSW, the phone of negotiations facilitator Koki Muli Grignon was

swamped with text messages at a crucial time of negotiations. Messages, apparently generated from an anti-rights group's website, called on her to stand against abortion and same-sex families, and told her she was being watched. The messages had the effect of tying up time and energy at a critical stage, and pointed to a potential hardening of tactics.

At the same time, legitimate women's rights defenders from many global south countries have lost their opportunity to make their voices heard at the CSW because it has become impossible for them to get visas to travel to New York; they are being squeezed out at the same time that those who attack them are being given the official stamp of state approval.

example, that the observations and general comments it issues should only be of a general nature and not go into details. It also included a specific call on states to denounce the Convention… This was quite a direct and unprecedented attack.

…We are also always alerted about initiatives brought by anti-child rights movements on the protection of the family to the UNHRC, where there is always a danger around the corner…

The challenges are not limited to the UN system. At the regional level, the OAS has become a key battleground. This is partly because many Latin American states still severely limit access to abortion and have powerful conservative faith groups that oppose liberalisation, and partly because states where right-wing populist leaders have recently won power are enabling anti-rights groups to play a bigger role.

Gillian Kane points to the role being played at the OAS by a hardline US-based evangelical conservative group, Alliance for Defending Freedom (ADF). The group has gone global, seeking to entrench its religious beliefs into laws and push back against any rights that clash with its extremist interpretation of the Bible. In recent years the group and its allies have steadily become adept at using the levers available in the OAS, and have had a disruptive impact:

The 2013 General Assembly of the OAS, held in Guatemala, witnessed the first coordinated movement agitating against reproductive and LGBTQI rights. This was, not coincidentally, also the year when the OAS approved the Inter-American Convention against all forms of discrimination and intolerance, which included protections for LGBTQI people.

At the 2014 OAS General Assembly in Paraguay, these groups advanced further and instead of only being reactive, began proposing human rights resolutions in an attempt to create new policies that they claimed were rights-based, but were in fact an attempt to take rights away from specific groups. For instance, they proposed a 'family policy' that would protect life from conception, in order to prevent access to abortion.

From then on, their profile increased with each subsequent assembly, in the same measure that their civility declined. At the 2016 General Assembly in the Dominican Republic, they even harassed and intimidated trans women attending the event as they entered women's restrooms. As a result, the annual assembly of the OAS, the regional body responsible for promoting and protecting human rights and democracy in the western hemisphere, turned into a vulgar display of transphobic hate.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres speaks at the 2019 Commission on the Status of Women meeting.

The rise of anti-rights groups on the international stage is compounding longstanding and growing problems with international institutions, as described in previous State of Civil Society Reports. These include strategies by repressive states and leaders to constrain and weaken international institutions, including tactics of undermining, underfunding, blocking, vetoing and withdrawing, an increasing tilt of international institutions towards the private sector, and working practices that are characterised by hierarchy, bureaucracy and caution. Into an international system that is already stretched, under attack and under-resourced, and is trying to do more with less, anti-rights groups are posing a growing challenge that international institutions simply do not have the capacity to manage, causing them to become more cautious and conservative as a result. At the same time the danger is that if international institutions tighten their rules to exclude more anti-

rights groups, those rules will also likely be used by repressive states to restrict civil society participation. Advocacy for democratic multilateral reform is needed to counter the growing power of anti-rights groups.

ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS ARE AMPLIFYING THE VOICES OF AND BEING LEGITIMISED BY REPRESSIVE POLITICAL LEADERS

As discussed earlier, and in many of the examples given above, close and mutually supportive relationships can often be seen between political leaders and anti-rights groups. Both are able to amplify and legitimise narratives of division and exclusion. With many countries having tilted towards politics of right-wing populism and nationalism, there are many circumstances in which they are encouraging each other on.

The use of anti-rights discourse by political leaders effectively gives anti-rights groups permission to do and say even more extreme things. It acts as a multiplier for their efforts. Héctor Pujols sums up how this is happening in Chile:

These groups become stronger when their narrative emanates from the government… These groups come from various places, but they all find protection under the current government's institutional discourse, which blames everything on immigration… President Sebastián Piñera said that the increase in unemployment in Chile was caused by the arrival of migrants, even against his own Minister of Labour's denials. His former Minister of Health said that the increase in HIV/AIDS in Chile was the migrant population's fault. This institutional discourse, based on falsehoods, is taking root and is being taken advantage of by far-right groups.

Attacks on LGBTQI mobilisations in Poland, noted above, came alongside a ruling party tactic to step up its public vilification of LGBTQI people in an attempt to shore up its core support in the October 2019 election. Participants in the Kenya consultation further pointed to the promotion of hatred and exclusion by political elites, and the campaign of public vilification of civil society by political leaders that clearly gives encouragement to others to attack. Gillian Kane also identifies this trend:

…delegitimising attacks against CSOs open up the space for further attacks. They are a signal for anti-rights groups, which are increasingly emboldened as a result of what their governments are doing. When your government is literally saying 'we don't care about women's sexual and reproductive rights, we don't care about what women experience as a result of conflicts – conflicts that we finance', anti-rights groups hearing this know they are being given free rein to exist and act openly in these spaces. It's exactly the same with white supremacists, in the USA and in other countries around the world. These groups are emboldened by a public discourse that gives a green light for fascists, racists and white supremacists to step forward. And this is exactly what they are doing by entering civil society space.

In the context of European discourse around migration, an issue that provided a huge opportunity for anti-rights groups to mobilise and win support across a swathe of countries, it is increasingly hard to see a difference between the way that anti-rights groups talk about migrants and refugees and the way elected leaders do. There is a clear two-way dynamic of influence here: right-wing politicians make political capital out of the fears, amplified by anti-rights groups, that some sections of the public hold about migrants and refugees and win public profile and power as a result; discourse and policies against migrants and refugees that come from the top embolden and sanction the actions of anti-rights groups, encouraging them to ramp up their efforts. Both attack the civil society that works to support migrants and refugees. Giada Negri points to this entangled relationship:

Around certain issues, such as migration, these groups are increasingly present in the public sphere. As governments also pick up the topic and treat migration as a problem in much the same way, they legitimise anti-migrant groups to the same extent that they criminalise the civil society groups that work to provide support to migrants.

"AS GOVERNMENTS ALSO PICK UP THE TOPIC AND TREAT MIGRATION AS A PROBLEM IN MUCH THE SAME WAY, THEY LEGITIMISE ANTI–MIGRANT GROUPS TO THE SAME EXTENT THAT THEY CRIMINALISE THE CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS THAT WORK TO PROVIDE SUPPORT TO MIGRANTS."
– DARIELE SANTOS

A banner honouring Marielle Franco, a Brazilian LGBTQI human rights activist and councillor who was assassinated, is lifted during a protest against Jair Bolsonaro in Madrid, Spain.

In Brazil, Dariele Santos of Instituto Alinha sees hate speech being normalised, including against migrants, because of its high-level use by President Bolsonaro, who has praised the former dictatorship, endorsed well-known torturers and expressed approval for the use of torture against dissidents:

> Jair Bolsonaro represents the far right, and his discourse is extremely xenophobic. He places himself above the laws and above all democratic guarantees. His message to migrant workers is: 'be thankful for all the good things you have here, and if there is something you don't like, you'd better leave'. The fact that hate speech is coming from so high up is emboldening people who

always thought these things, but in the past would not say them and now feel it is legitimate to do so. In this sense, discrimination and hate speech are becoming normalised.

Sahar Moazami also highlights this central role of right-wing populist leaders in promoting anti-rights narratives that anti-rights groups feed upon:

> …clearly the anti-rights discourse is not coming from fringe right-wing CSOs or individuals anymore, but from heads of state, government officials and national media platforms, which give it not just airtime, but also credibility. As a result, anti-rights groups feel increasingly free to be more upfront and upright. I don't know if they are really increasing in popularity or if people who have always held these views are also emboldened by leaders of nations who are using the same rhetoric. Maybe these right-wing populist leaders just opened the door to something that was always there.

Tanzania's President John Magufuli has increasingly attacked civil society and one of his government's hardline policies has been to ban pregnant girls from school; anti-rights groups have taken encouragement from such actions, as Albane Gaudissart of the TATU Project relates:

> The Government of Tanzania has spoken against women's rights and access to education – banning pregnant young women from schools – and reproductive and sexual health – speaking against family planning. There is also existing gender-based violence in the community where we… work, and while trying to address these issues… the public statements… by the government give more grounds to perpetrators and anti-feminist arguments.

ERASED BOUNDARIES: SPOTLIGHT ON SERBIA

In some contexts, the lines between anti-rights groups, GONGOs and ruling parties are erased, as they are all clearly pursuing a shared agenda. In Serbia, there is growing political polarisation, and at the same time as the 2019 '1 in 5 Million' anti-government protests that have seen huge numbers of people take to the streets, there has been a burgeoning of groups closely connected to state structures. These groups are attacking and seeking to delegitimise and smear civil society and dispute criticisms made of the state, forming a clear part of the government's defensive reaction to protest pressure. In 2018, a new judges' and prosecutors' association was formed – even though there already was a civil society body in existence – linked to the ruling party. Incidents in 2019 have included the distribution of a video smearing the head of a CSO, a surge in the launch of websites linked to unknown groups that vilify CSOs and activists, and the mobilisation of state-aligned anti-rights groups to argue that a European Commission report critical of Serbia's lack of progress on civic space was the work of opposition politicians.

Many of these groups are hardline nationalist and neo-fascist in nature, and their rise as state-aligned anti-rights groups came alongside public shows of far-right force, such as attempts to close down a bakery after an employee was seen on social media making a pro-Albanian symbol, mobilisation of an intimidating public presence against people attending a civil society festival that aimed to build Serbian-Kosovan links and the interruption of an event in July 2019 commemorating the Srebrenica Genocide by people wearing nationalist symbols. There have also been violent attacks, including with metal bars and knives, against anti-fascist activists. Many of the trends covered in this report – close connections with repressive states and parties, the use of disinformation and hate speech, and public shows of force and violence – sadly came together to restrict civic space in Serbia in 2019.

As in the example of Bangladesh raised above, in India well-drilled extremist student groups that are religiously conservative, strongly nationalistic and aligned to the BJP and RSS are a key means by which dissenting voices are attacked. In just one example, prominent feminist Dalit scholar Sujatha Surepally has been accused by these groups of being a Maoist and an 'anti-national'. She has been the focus of protests at her university and has been smeared on social media in terms that are misogynistic and derogatory of her caste.

Even when states and political leaders are not directly responsible for

stoking the disinformation and hate speech that enable anti-rights groups to thrive, they may be complicit in more passive ways. They may not be doing enough to counter disinformation and hate speech, and may be giving mixed messages towards their enablers and promoters. There can be both political complicity and political failure, as Mieke Schuurman suggests:

> *...governments are not really doing anything against them. Civil society is not really being supported by governments. Governments are not making statements that support children's*

rights or human rights. Some of our members are saying this is really what's lacking now.

Giada Negri points to the failure of states to apply the laws they have to deal with anti-rights groups in the context of Europe:

European countries have legislation against these kinds of groups, but the authorities are failing to call them out, prosecute them and outlaw them, which confers some legitimacy on them.

With states in several European countries moving rightwards under the influence of right-wing populists and nationalists, they may be reluctant to apply laws to act against constituencies from which they seek to draw support and groups that either they politically agree with or do not wish to antagonise.

As the example of Indonesia (page 82) suggests, the police can be passive or active enablers of anti-rights groups. In Kyrgyzstan, an extremist group, Kyrk Choro, opposes women's and LGBTQI rights. In 2019, the group threatened a participant in the International Women's Day march, organised a protest against 'gay propaganda' and disrupted a May gathering of the 8/365 movement, which brings together feminist and LGBTQI groups and activists. At the May event, a substantial police presence stood and did nothing as the anti-rights group threw paint and eggs to disrupt the peaceful gathering. In the Kenya consultation as well, it was a source of civil society concern that rather than uphold rights, the police are often on the side of groups that attack rights.

MANY ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS ARE OPPORTUNISTIC

Anti-rights groups have achieved impact, won support and grown in prominence in part because many of them are nimble and opportunistic. They have imitated civil society and developed and deployed a suite of tactics. The use of human rights language to attack human rights and the invention of 'gender ideology' as an opponent are examples of opportunistic tactics. Accusations of opportunism may seem counterintuitive: anti-rights groups might be associated with a purist adherence to fixed ideological positions. Indeed, there are numerous single-issue groups that stick to their dogma. But at the same time, there are many groups that show considerable opportunism, both in the tactics they use and the issues they adopt.

"EUROPEAN COUNTRIES HAVE LEGISLATION AGAINST THESE KINDS OF GROUPS, BUT THE AUTHORITIES ARE FAILING TO CALL THEM OUT, PROSECUTE THEM AND OUTLAW THEM, WHICH CONFERS SOME LEGITIMACY ON THEM."
– GIADA NEGRI

TOP-DOWN PREJUDICE: SPOTLIGHT ON INDONESIA

Indonesia offers a sad example of how prejudice stoked from a high level can open the door for anti-rights groups to intensify their attacks. Indonesia's LGBTQI people and groups are facing renewed repression from conservative Islamic groups following an intervention by an education minister, as T King Oey relates:

…things got much worse in 2016, when all of a sudden there was this massive wave of attacks… The trigger was a pronouncement by the Minister of Research, Technology and Higher Education, Muhammad Nasir, that LGBTQI people should be banned from university campuses. Suddenly everyone joined in, saying that LGBTQI people should be banned from everywhere, that we should be criminalised.

These attacks came especially from hardline religious groups. These groups had always advocated for criminalisation, but suddenly they had momentum because of what the minister had said.

Attacks were spearheaded by a group called Islam Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, FPI). The consequence was that Arus Pelangi was forced to reverse its policy of promoting the everyday visibility of LGBTQI people; instead, people were forced back into the shadows:

From then on it was no longer possible to be visible as an organisation, and to some degree even as individuals.

In such circumstances, it should be the role of the security forces to enforce the rule of law and enable rights, but as T King Oey describes, the police have been at best passive, and at worst willing collaborators of anti-rights groups:

The attitude of the police has been ambivalent. They haven't stopped the FPI from attacking us. Rather they have said that for our safety it would be better if we disband. They always use this argument of safety. Since 2016 the police have also been proactive in outing and arresting people. People are arrested, paraded in front of the media and then released without charge.

However, in Indonesia, anti-rights groups may have overreached themselves by being seen to pose a potential threat to presidential power. President Jokowi's stance on rights has been ambivalent, seemingly offering a pro-rights message to international audiences but not at home, and allying himself for his 2019 re-election with a conservative cleric running mate who has made numerous anti-LGBTQI statements. But the president has recently taken action against anti-rights groups not because they threaten LGBTQI people, but because they potentially endanger his position. Even then, CSOs are in the difficult position of welcoming the move, while fearing that the same tools used to restrict anti-rights groups could also be applied against them, as T King Oey relates:

…this level of fundamentalism got to the point where it was threatening the position of President Jokowi. Only then did we see a concerted effort from the government to push back, and this process is still going on. The government has banned one of the

fundamentalist groups, an international Muslim network that calls for the establishment of the caliphate, on the grounds that it does not adhere to the national ideology, known as Pancasila.

A law the government recently passed on CSOs enabled it to do this. Human rights organisations criticised this law for being too loose and flexible. It could potentially enable the government to

ban any group. This is the first time it has been used. The same law could be used against any group. It's a double-edged sword.

The government is considering banning the FPI. The government is also saying that it is coming to realise how many campuses have been infiltrated by fundamentalist groups, but it's hard to know what's going on behind the scenes.

People advocate for love at the Pride parade held on 18 June 2017 in Kiev, Ukraine.

Photo by Vitaliy Holovin - Corbis/Corbis via Getty Images

There are groups that latch onto emerging issues and ramp them up, using them as ideological cover to stoke up hatred and win profile. They hop from issue to issue, finding whichever gives them most purchase, something that Héctor Pujols sees in Chile:

> *These are groups that defend the dictatorship but know that if they go out to the streets to shout 'Viva Pinochet' many people will reject them. So they find different themes that allow them to further their narrative. For instance, they took advantage of the salience of the rejection of so-called gender ideology and joined anti-abortion marches, and now they are working around the issue of immigration.*

Anti-rights groups and the wider right-wing populist and nationalist universe associated with them have become skilled at stoking fear and outrage from little when an opportunity presents itself. Botswana provides a recent example. Its 2019 decriminalisation ruling for same-sex relations came amidst some degree of homophobia and longstanding opposition from conservative faith groups. But the news presented an opportunity for conservative forces to promote themselves around an issue that was not previously considered politically significant. Dumiso Gatsha describes how outrage was stoked for political gain, and how anti-rights groups organised in opportunistic backlash:

> *...a new opposition populist party has used this issue as a populist tool... What changed after the High Court ruling, and lead to the state deciding to appeal, was that the new opposition party saw an opportunity to use the ruling to seek votes. They blamed the current president for singlehandedly decriminalising same-sex intercourse. Given the intolerance in public opinion, it was an*

opportunity to appeal to the majority. This turned into a political issue rather than one of rights, particularly because this new political party is backed by a former president. This was the first time ever in Botswana's living history that LGBTQI issues were used within an intentionally populist narrative.

> *...anti-human rights groups have been increasingly active, using LGBTQI rights as a populist tool, by taking advantage of the dynamics regarding 'immorality' that prevail among the public...*

This example shows how anti-rights groups can seize on a current issue and work in reaction to it, including when an issue has been raised in profile through civil society advocacy, and use this as an opportunity to recruit support in backlash. They may hijack opportunities to promote their agendas, even if these relate to issues that have long been considered as settled or off the table. In the context of Argentina's abortion debate, Edurne Cárdenas relates how opposition against moves to liberalise abortion rights rapidly offered a pretext to assert conservative faith-based education:

> *As these conservative voices emerged, the debate on abortion rights also brought back into the discussion some things that we thought were long settled and part of a basic, untouchable consensus. These sectors began to say out loud certain things that they wouldn't have dared say only a few years ago. Such was the case with the campaign 'Do not mess with my children', against the implementation of the law mandating comprehensive sex education, which called into question the role of the state in education.*

Of course, this opportunism opens anti-rights groups up to the critique that their aims are contradictory and their arguments lack logic; that they do not offer the ideological purity their followers may expect, and that they are short on principles and motivated by expediency. As Edurne Cárdenas goes on to point out, anti-rights groups are selective about the matters they consider to be the private business of citizens, and those on which they expect the state to intervene:

…conservative sectors exhibit their contradictions: they want the state to get inside your bed to criminalise your behaviour, but when it comes to education or vaccination, they want it not to interfere.

Further, opportunism and the increased international connections of many anti-rights groups leads them to import strategies from the anti-rights playbook that have been tried elsewhere. They may try to attempt to apply imported tactics and narratives in very different contexts. They will test these, and if one fails, try others until they find one that cuts through. Héctor Pujols saw this in action in Chile:

The narratives we have heard in Chile are an exact copy of those used by the extreme right in Spain, where the… far-right Vox party emerged almost a year ago. They are an exact copy, even though the Chilean reality is very different. In Spain, the claim that migrants take up all social support was very intense, and in Chile the same discourse was attempted, since it is an international tactic, but not surprisingly it had less of an impact because social support in Chile is very limited. So it is not always working for them; it is a matter of trial and error.

This opens up space for civil society response. Anti-rights groups and leaders can be accused of hypocrisy: when avowedly nativist and nationalist groups that position themselves as locally authentic defenders of narrow cultures and traditions are revealed to be reliant on foreign connections and funding, they can lose public support. Similarly when descendants of migrants mobilise to attack migrants' rights or when ostensible nationalists enrich themselves through their connections to globalised business, the potential exists for civil society to expose them as hypocrites with little interest in the things they claim to stand for.

As civil society, we should also be flexible in our tactics, and work to expose these contradictions when the opportunities arise.

"…CONSERVATIVE SECTORS EXHIBIT THEIR CONTRADICTIONS: THEY WANT THE STATE TO GET INSIDE YOUR BED TO CRIMINALISE YOUR BEHAVIOUR, BUT WHEN IT COMES TO EDUCATION OR VACCINATION, THEY WANT IT NOT TO INTERFERE."
– EDURNE CÁRDENAS

SECTION 5: THE CIVIL SOCIETY FIGHTBACK

As the above sections suggest, anti-rights groups – always with us, sometimes subdued, currently newly confident – have risen, and their impacts on civil society, and on the people we strive for, have been major. By working closely with states and political leaders, coordinating, honing their narratives, borrowing our tactics and taking advantage of opportunities as they arise, they have won support from sections of the public and have been a crucial part of the closing down of civic space seen in so many countries.

As acknowledged earlier, as civil society, we are often thrown onto the defensive and risk being subdued by anti-rights groups. But from across the many inputs into our research, it is clear that we are fighting back, and developing some powerful tools to respond. The first step has been to recognise that there is a problem and understand the nature of the forces that confront us. Now as civil society, in a variety of ways, we are asserting the value of shared compassion and empathy and a commitment to humanitarian values, universal human rights and social justice. We believe that these values will win, but we cannot take victory for granted. We know that we need to respond through multiple simultaneous means, including those set out below, and continue to develop our ways of listening, connecting, communicating and campaigning to reverse the tide.

AS CIVIL SOCIETY, IN A VARIETY OF WAYS, WE ARE ASSERTING THE VALUE OF SHARED COMPASSION AND EMPATHY AND A COMMITMENT TO HUMANITARIAN VALUES, UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE. .

RESOURCING OUR RESPONSE

But put simply, the responses to anti-rights groups identified below will only be effective if they are adequately resourced. From conversations with donors, UN agencies and others in the governmental and intergovernmental spheres, we know that many public officials are deeply concerned about the rise of anti-rights groups, even if their positions constrain them from speaking out on the record. But this concern needs to be matched with greater support for actions that counter anti-rights groups: for civil society initiatives to defend rights, connect with and mobilise the public and push back against disinformation and hate speech. This implies a need for some mindset changes about resources and how they should be used.

Dumiso Gatsha bemoans the narrow approaches to funding that make his work to stand up to those who repress LGBTQI rights in Botswana harder:

A lot of advocacy strategies and narratives are pre-determined and attached to funding. There is a lot of gatekeeping in terms of the narratives that are considered relevant and valid, and therefore granted access to funding and to policy-makers. The main narrative currently appears to be around public health, and it is very difficult for new organisations to establish new narratives and still gain access to funding. If you are not operating under the umbrella of a much larger body, it is difficult to scale up advocacy work. This structure of opportunities has a strong impact on how creative and collaborative civil society can be while remaining sustainable.

Mieke Schuurman also identifies resource challenges:

It's… a question of resources, because if you continually have to be on social media to respond or share your stories, it takes a lot of time and human resources to do that work and you need funding to do this, so that's also a big challenge… We really need to find foundations and organisations that are able to support us and fund our work.

In Eliana Cano's case, international support to fight the attempt by an anti-rights group to close her organisation down was not forthcoming; had they not been able to identify an important source of domestic support, the anti-rights group might have won already:

We… need to strengthen our resourcing, since we do not have funds to face a lawsuit of this magnitude. International funders do not necessarily provide support that can be used to develop

institutional defence plans. But at present, this is a profound need of human rights organisations. In our case, fortunately the Legal Defence Institute, which had already taken on similar cases affecting journalists, became interested and decided to sponsor the case as part of its institutional priorities. They consider that this is an 'ideological fight' and that questioning our name is a 'pretext' to make us disappear as influential actors. Theirs has been a gesture that we are infinitely thankful for.

Alessandra Nilo points to the fact that many of the worst attacks are happening in countries where international funding for civil society has declined, because their economies are considered to have reached a certain level of development. The implication is that anti-rights groups have been able to develop and extend their reach largely unchecked, because a country is considered by donors to have overcome its worst problems. But as is clear, anti-rights groups can hibernate, burst into life when the opportunity presents itself and take advantage of both a civil society that is struggling to sustain itself, and the economic inequality and corresponding social unrest that often comes with rapid economic development:

We need to reshape the entire conversation about international cooperation and decision-making in terms of the allocation of funds for communities and civil society. Decisions not to support countries because of their income levels are flawed. Brazil, for example, is defined as a middle-income country; as a result, over the past 10 years or so international cooperation agencies have withdrawn from Brazil. As a consequence of the low capacity to respond to right-wing fundamentalism, repressive forces have flourished.

...in order to keep our movement sustainable, we have to engage more deeply in global discussions about how to fund an independent civil society, one that does not rely upon states to raise funds and therefore remains independent of government decisions.

As civil society, we are beginning to understand that part of our response should be to tell positive stories, rather than simply state the negatives. But as Saleem Vaillancourt of Paint the Change observes, it is not always easy to find the resources that help us to do this either:

I think a lot of people have a great desire, appetite and thirst for encountering positive stories even if they address challenging issues, but it's not something you see being asked for in market terms, and in terms of what audience there is, and what funding you can get to do projects.

So it is a challenge to create the audience and explain our reasons for approaching our work as we do, and maintain these projects, because it's not something that is being asked for in a commercial sense. I don't necessarily mean commercial in terms of being driven by profit, but even non-profitable works need grants, and while there are grants that are tailored around work that tries to introduce positive narratives, it takes a lot of effort to identify them and to massage an idea into a format that would meet the requirements of a particular grant.

...there is a lack of a structure and approach that says: this organisation really wants to find positive stories because positive stories change the nature of a society's view of how to deal with challenging issues.

Core funding helps, but remains a rarity for most. The reshaping of the resourcing environment for civil society is a bigger question, but as part of that broader conversation, the resourcing of our response to anti-rights groups is something that urgently should be addressed. The development of alternative and more local forms of resourcing should be something that implicitly speaks to the fightback agenda set out below.

> **"IT IS A CHALLENGE TO CREATE THE AUDIENCE AND EXPLAIN OUR REASONS FOR APPROACHING OUR WORK AS WE DO, AND MAINTAIN THESE PROJECTS, BECAUSE IT'S NOT SOMETHING THAT IS BEING ASKED FOR IN A COMMERCIAL SENSE."**
> – SALEEM VAILLANCOURT

TAKING BACK THE INITIATIVE:
10 WAYS WE CAN RESPOND TO ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS

1. WE CAN GET BETTER AT WORKING COLLECTIVELY

Civil society has always been a collaborative sphere, and across our consultations, collective, collaborative and intersectional work is consistently identified as more necessary than ever. As a survey respondent from Zimbabwe puts it:

There is power in numbers when tackling controversial issues that concern the violation of women's and girls' rights. Using social media as a loner… has proved to be not effective and left a lot of civil society leaders at risk. When women and girls experienced all sorts of abuse in our country, we collectively did press conferences and submitted petitions as a collective in a bid to speak with one voice as well as ensure security of each other.

While another survey respondent from Zimbabwe summaries the benefits of collective action:

In coalitions you combine expertise, experience and resources.

Collaborative working is not easy. Often there are problems in putting aside organisational differences and stepping out of niches. Coalitions take resources and energies if they are to be sustained, and these are not always easily available. But the fact that anti-rights groups are increasingly working collectively should force us as civil society to offer a much more coordinated response.

Civil society may find it harder to work collectively than anti-rights groups do. In part this is because we are immersed in a culture of respectful debate of difference that does not preoccupy anti-rights groups. We are more sensitive to nuance and complexity. We may not have the same sense of a common enemy to unite against that they do. Teresa Fernández Paredes identifies such challenges around building unity compared to anti-rights groups:

…it is more difficult to do for groups located on the left, where there is more discussion around the issues and it is more difficult to coordinate and speak with one voice. That is why we still do not have a unique and conclusive response to the attacks we face in the name of gender ideology.

> "THERE IS POWER IN NUMBERS WHEN TACKLING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES THAT CONCERN THE VIOLATION OF WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' RIGHTS. USING SOCIAL MEDIA AS A LONER… HAS PROVED TO BE NOT EFFECTIVE AND LEFT A LOT OF CIVIL SOCIETY LEADERS AT RISK."
> – SURVEY RESPONDENT, ZIMBABWE

We may be preoccupied with pursuing our missions and trying to secure rights for our particular constituencies. We may also rely on funding that constrains us to working on a narrow range of issues. These may be factors behind the disappointment that Dumiso Gatsha experienced at the lack of response from some Botswanan civil society groups in defending LGBTQI rights:

...some civil society actors, including human rights groups, that we thought would be supportive, remained quite passive...

In response to these challenges, Uma Mishra-Newbery makes a call for us to move beyond the competition that can stymy collective response:

We have to work in a coordinated way, in coalitions. In the past, CSOs have tended to compete for funding – we need to really get better at sharing resources, being collaborative and bringing our strengths to the table.

Gillian Kane suggests we have something to learn from the ways that anti-rights groups work together, even across disparate aims and constituencies, because they have been able to collaborate around a central shared narrative. This suggests a corresponding need for civil society to find a common rallying point:

...being informed, sharing information and building coalitions is key. I would also recommend that progressive movements think broadly about their issues. Consider how groups like the ADF have managed to attack several rights, including abortion, LGBTQI and youth rights, using one frame, religion. We need to be equally broad, but anchored, I would argue, in secularism, science and human rights.

Photo by Ines M. Pousadela

A woman holds a sign that reads 'I fight for those who are not with us anymore' at the 2018 Women's Day demonstration in Montevideo, Uruguay.

This suggestion to find a core ideology and narrative around which we can unite is shared by María Angélica Peñas Defago:

...progressive civil society needs to ally with others who share its values of pluralism, freedom and equality. The pluralist, inclusive, non-essentialist and decolonial feminist agenda is a good basis on which to form alliances with multiple actors that were not attracted by feminism in the past, in order to take part in the struggle for meaning not only in the rhetorical field, but also in concrete reality.

Coalitions should be intersectional, bringing together campaigns for different rights. Jimena Freitas of Fundación Construir in Bolivia underlines the importance of:

…work in alliances and building coalitions not only with women's groups or organisations, but also with youth, salaried female workers and LGBTQI organisations.

Sahar Moazami also points to the need to find the points of intersection that enable collaborative working:

…we should focus on ensuring that all the work we do is truly collaborative and intersectional, and that we acknowledge each other and support one another in all of our diversity.

While Giada Negri makes a powerful case to connect rights in a joined-up response:

…all rights are connected – economic, political, social, cultural and environmental rights – so if one of them is taken away, the whole universality of rights shrinks as well. Civil society has

learned that we must react not just when those rights that we fight for are being threatened, or when it is political or civil rights that are under pressure, but every time any right is under threat…

Solidarity is key. Civil society mobilisation in support of threatened groups provides a lot of the psychological strength needed to keep going, and has also brought important, tangible successes.

A joined-up response has to make connections between formalised and less formal civil society and reach those not normally brought into collaborations. This was emphasised during the Mexico consultation:

Networks have been created including diverse progressive civil society groups, not just those working on sexual and reproductive rights but also religious associations that promote human rights. This has allowed for breaking boundaries, finding different approaches to common problems and solving or addressing situations in a much more inclusive and creative way.

Broader coalitions are particularly needed in contexts where the rise of anti-rights groups has put democracy at risk, as acknowledged by Pact for Democracy, the convener of a consultation in Brazil:

The central idea that emerged from this dialogue was the need to strengthen a broad civil society alliance for democracy, involving even unlikely actors who were once rivals of the progressive field, but who are aligned with the basic values, practices and principles of democratic coexistence.

Alessandra Nilo makes a call to create the kinds of spaces and opportunities where conversations can take place and coalitions can form:

...it is crucial to have cross-movement dialogues and open conversations, because this is where we can build resilience and solidarity and support each other. We need different sectors to come together to keep growing and not to be intimidated into silence by forces that are sometimes literally killing us. We cannot be isolated in our own agendas. We really need a global civil society movement that stands together for all rights.

Collaboration can only flourish around a set of shared values, and this opens up the question of whether it is time to be more clear about what civil society is – and what it is not. This is not to call for an inwardly focused or academic debate on definitions of civil society. But there may be a need for a new way of talking about civil society that makes it easy to establish and communicate that anti-rights groups are not part of the civil society family. If civil society is defined only by its negatives – as the sphere that is neither government nor the private sector, as the class of non-state actors that are non-profit – then anti-rights groups are conceptually part of civil society. But if civil society is defined as being about action around a set of shared values – where we believe in universal human rights, are motivated by compassion and humanitarian commitment, pursue social cohesion and justice, eschew hatred and violence – and by a way of working consistent with those values, focused on dialogue, reasoning and negotiation, then anti-rights groups clearly fall outside the tent. A conversation about how we reconceptualise and communicate what civil society is around a set of common values could therefore have real purpose.

2. WE CAN CONTINUE TO BUILD INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

Our collaborations should not stop at borders. Many of us in civil society are already strong international networkers, but we can do more. Part of our collective action must entail the greater mobilisation of international support amongst civil society, including financial support but also the pooling of campaigning and communication resources, international sharing of successful response tactics and joint advocacy. Combined, this is the practical mobilisation of international solidarity.

We can bring people together across borders to recognise the issues we have in common and develop shared capacities, suggests Martin Pairet:

...It is important to bring together activists and citizens from different countries, because it is quite hard for people to understand that these are not isolated phenomena that are happening in their communities, but rather that a lot of communities are experiencing the same, and there is a range of solutions that have been tried in various local contexts to tackle it. It's very important for these exchanges to continue, because we've seen it's working: we see organisations collaborating across borders and exchanging experiences in ways that they can adapt to tackle hate speech in their own contexts.

At a time when anti-rights groups are working to encourage a rejection of universal human rights, including by characterising them as culturally alien and colonially imposed, when narrow nationalist and xenophobic discourse is being promoted and CSOs are being vilified as agents of foreign powers for receiving funding from international sources, there is a need to be careful about how international solidarity is provided

AN INTERNATIONAL FIGHTBACK

One example of an international collaboration that has formed to fight back is the Vuka! Coalition. CSOs and movements have effectively documented the global crackdown on civic freedoms, including by increasingly tracking the work of anti-rights groups, but there remains a pressing need to increase solidarity across diverse parts of civil society and harmonise strategies to reclaim civic space. The Vuka! Coalition has emerged in response to the growing consensus that civil society needs greater coordination of efforts and can develop new forms of organising to respond to the closing of civic space.

and communicated. We must stand together internationally, but without playing to critiques that we are allies in a globalist conspiracy. T King Oey outlines the dilemmas that can be encountered:

In 2015, when the US Supreme Court legalised same-sex marriage, this created quite an uproar in Indonesia. Conservative groups always point to this and say that once they give in to one thing, this is what will happen… The global debate about same-sex marriage works both ways for us, because LGBTQI people in Indonesia have never suggested this – it seems too far away to even contemplate this, and we need to have our fundamental rights respected first – but at least it tells us we're not alone.

We have to be careful when considering outside assistance, because one of the arguments that fundamentalists always use is about foreign influences and attempts to make Indonesia a liberal country… So you have to be careful, but solidarity helps. It helps LGBTQI people here to know they are not alone and have not been abandoned.

Part of the response to these dilemmas, suggests Dumiso Gatsha, is to prioritise the development of locally rooted narratives that are less obviously embedded in the language of international human rights:

"THE GLOBAL DEBATE ABOUT SAME–SEX MARRIAGE WORKS BOTH WAYS FOR US, BECAUSE LGBTQI PEOPLE IN INDONESIA HAVE NEVER SUGGESTED THIS – IT SEEMS TOO FAR AWAY TO EVEN CONTEMPLATE THIS, AND WE NEED TO HAVE OUR FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS RESPECTED FIRST – BUT AT LEAST IT TELLS US WE'RE NOT ALONE."

– T KING OEY

...there is a need to strengthen the intellectual body of knowledge of LGBTQI communities and decolonise our institutions, because a lot of our conversations are in fact based on Western narratives. We also need to rethink the narratives used for campaigning. The narratives that have been used so far are based on the assumption that the human rights-based approach works, without any reflection on the need to adapt the language in a way that resonates with people and makes issues easier for people to digest.

In short, we need broad-based movements, domestically and internationally, that articulate struggles for rights in new ways that connect with people and are grounded in universal values of justice and fairness.

3. WE CAN COMMUNICATE BETTER

We need to communicate differently and better. We can connect to the public, recruit support and build mainstream and broad-based movements to respond to anti-rights groups if we can develop a compelling narrative and communicate it well. Anti-rights groups have proved that narratives matter, and we need to use social media at least as effectively as they do. René Rouwette of Kompass in the Netherlands points out that we can learn from our opponents:

We have some things to learn from the extreme right, who have managed to communicate a clear message through their own media, as well as through the mainstream media. It is important for us to take a position, and not appear as indifferent.

Pivotal to the gains of anti-rights groups has been their ability to craft simple and powerful messages that resonate emotionally with people, and to target these precisely. Uma Mishra-Newbery urges us to use

the tools available at least as well as they do:

We definitely need to be able to work together towards a common purpose the way they do, and use social media for progressive purposes as cleverly as they are using them to undermine human rights... As civil society, we know that if we don't actively use the tools that are being used by other groups and governments to undermine human rights, then we are failing.

Thilaga Sulathireh outlines how Malaysian CSOs, and LGBTQI groups in particular, are stepping up their communication efforts:

Now there are more civil society groups that are countering arguments against universal human rights online, and more

Photo by Win McNamee/Getty Images

The Handmaid's costume was used by women's rights activist to protest at US Judge Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court confirmation hearing in September 2018.

RESPONDING WITH CREATIVITY

Several survey respondents proposed that we try unorthodox approaches to counter the narrative power of anti-rights groups, including by using music and sport, and by making reference to popular culture. Women's rights groups around the world have creatively adopted the handmaid's costume popularised by The Handmaid's Tale TV adaptation, which portrays a world in which women have become stripped of rights and relegated to reproductive roles. Symbolic performance can be an effective form of communication, as seen in a recent example in which 28 women dragged 28 suitcases across Westminster Bridge, next to the UK's parliament, to protest against restrictive abortion laws in Northern Ireland, symbolising the 28 women who are forced to travel to the mainland to access abortion services every week.

We can also use mockery, satire and humour. Anti-rights groups tend to take themselves rather seriously, to the point of pomposity. Gordon Bosanac makes this point:

> It is… productive to use humour against them. They don't really know how to joke; sarcastic, humorous situations make them feel at a loss. This has the potential to raise suspicions among many people. But we need to be careful not to make victims out of them because they are experts in self-victimisation and would know how to use this against us.

Iranian-born political cartoonist Nik Kowsar identifies the value that humour can play:

> What is said with a cartoon is more difficult to erase than anything else: a good cartoon is even more valuable than a thousand words, because it stays in your mind for ages. A 'joke' is a serious matter: it goes directly to the point, it exposes the absurd. In a way, cartoonists can be the conscience, the moral compass of a society – it is not a matter of right and left, but a matter of right or wrong.

We should satirise anti-rights groups and encourage people to laugh at them whenever we can, because doing so undermines their demands to be taken seriously, and can help expose the shallowness and hypocrisy of their arguments.

> actions to communicate human rights messages in popular ways and in different languages. LGBTQI groups are working on communication strategies. We need this because we face overwhelming misinformation about LGBTQI people.

One of the challenges we face is that many of the anti-rights narratives that are cutting through are essentially messages of fear. It is much harder to offer messages of hope than of fear. We need to find ways of communicating empathy in the face of hatred, and reasserting the power of compassion and shared humanity. Our messages can be optimistic and make a positive case for rights; our habits of sharing bad news stories about human rights abuses and trying to name and shame institutions may not be connecting with some sections of the public, and anti-rights groups seem less vulnerable to naming and shaming strategies than states. Our language can also be simple and free of the clutter of jargon.

Giada Negri points to the need to celebrate positive stories:

> It is also really important that we start telling the stories of our victories… We need to celebrate our victories because they are

victories for everybody, and also because it boosts our confidence and gives us the strength to keep fighting.

For Alessandra Nilo too, it is at least partly about being able to demonstrate the important contribution of civil society: something that implies proving the value that civil society successes bring to people as a whole, and making the point that unlike the sectional gains anti-rights groups seek, the breakthroughs of civil society advance progress for everyone:

We are in a very delicate movement for democracy where social media and education play a crucial role. Communication is also a major issue for social movements. At this point in history we should be able to communicate better. What is our role? What is our success story in terms of supporting and strengthening democracy? Well, if you look at history, you will see that our role is essential and that most existing rights resulted from civil society demands and victories.

Kaspars Zālītis offers another example of an attempt to communicate rights in a different way, describing:

…a social media campaign ('I support freedom') in which public personalities publicly expressed their support for LGBTQI rights, and human rights more generally, and demanded that our government ensure that Baltic Pride could take place safely. We aimed to bring in people who are not typically seen as supporters of human rights and LGBTQI rights, and then amplify their voices as allies of the LGBTQI community. Ultimately, what we wanted to show is that the LGBTQI community and its supporters were a lot more numerous and diverse than the handful of activists and the few hundred people who normally show up to our events.

At the same time, Kaspars Zālītis points to the challenges that need to be overcome in resourcing and staging a joined-up communications response:

The one thing we have wanted to do for a long time is a long-term communications campaign – not the kind that individual CSOs put together on their own, but a broader one coordinated by various CSO leaders and activists who provide the substance and set the tone, and that is executed and managed by a professional communications team. The problem is that all CSOs live from project to project and are barely sustainable.

The response this suggests is to seek ways to pool communications resources to enable collaborative and creative communications efforts to reassert rights.

4. WE CAN CONNECT WITH THE PUBLIC BETTER, BUILD BRIDGES AND WIN PEOPLE OVER

The need is not only to communicate better, but to connect better. We need to make better connection with people's daily lives and struggles. We need to appeal to both the emotions and logic of the public; to win hearts and minds. We also need to build bridges with people who currently have some sympathy with anti-rights narratives but who may be open to persuasion. This means we need to reach the people we do not normally connect with. The anti-rights constituency is not static and there are many people who we can win over through clear and reasoned arguments. To do this we need to improve our ways of listening to people, hearing their concerns and reflecting these back to people in our work and language.

In the context of women's rights, María Angélica Peñas Defago suggests a need not to make abstract appeals, but to root our approaches in the reality of people's problems:

> *Popular feminism represents a return to the realm of the real, as it focuses on the implications of principles on people's daily lives. If we talk about abortion, for instance, we must focus on the consequences of the legality or illegality of this practice for the daily reality of pregnant women, families and communities.*

In politically polarised contexts, we may need to find new ways of connecting with the public that do not fall into or worsen political divisions. Dariele Santos describes how in the highly polarised context of Brazil, appeals to human rights may simply not be heard by many who have been convinced by anti-rights narratives. The challenge then becomes one of making appeals based on our common humanity:

> *Our strategy is to generate a discourse that creates empathy among public opinion rather than a confrontational discourse permanently criticising the president because this would create trouble with a broad sector of society that would immediately reject it as leftist. We are going through tough times: it is not advisable to announce that you fight for human rights because human rights are associated with the left rather than viewed as things that belong to everyone. That is why we find it more productive to focus on real people and their stories, to show the photo of a flesh-and-blood person and ask our audience, 'don't you think this woman is a hardworking person, who is struggling just like you, and who deserves better working conditions, who deserves to get ahead?'*

MAKING OURSELVES ACCOUNTABLE

Part of how we can engage better with the public and build a groundswell for rights is to improve the way we make ourselves accountable to people. We should demonstrate exemplary transparency and contrast this with the often opaque ways of working of anti-rights groups. We should make ourselves primarily accountable to the public rather than our donors. CSOs that have regular contact with their constituents will be better placed to fight off attacks such as smears and disinformation, because people will be less inclined to believe these.

CIVICUS, with Keystone Accountability, Accountable Now and the Institute for Communication and Development are conducting a two-year pilot, under the banner of Resilient Roots, to test whether civil society that is accountable to and engaged with its primary constituents is more resilient in responding to external shocks related to closing civic space. The Resilient Roots pilot is supporting 14 projects through co-designing initiatives that boost their primary constituency accountability and is providing financial and technical support and peer-learning exchanges so that pilot partners can learn from each another.

Mieke Schuurman also identifies the need to engage in terms that develop public empathy:

> *Anti-child rights movements are making up stories to convince the public that child rights are bad for children, and so we also need to*

share our stories about what we are doing and why child rights are important for children. Maybe in responding we need to use less the language of rights of children and talk more about the wellbeing of children and the need for children to grow up in safe families.

We need to garner public support for our causes and take people with us on a journey, recognising that others might have different levels of understanding and evolving sensitivity to certain rights. We may need to reassert that it is a legitimate role of civil society to be ahead of the general curve of public opinion. One of the ways in which we pursue rights and social justice is to promote ideas that may originally be unpopular, and engage with people to persuade them of the merits of our claim. The great strides made in LGBTQI rights in some countries, for example, have seen public attitudes towards same-sex relations turned around, thanks to the efforts of civil society. But this is a reminder that when we make gains, we still need to persuade people, not least because we know victories often bring anti-rights backlash. Dumiso Gatsha identifies this need in the context of Botswana's recent advance in LGBTQI rights:

> *Even if the High Court ruling survives the appeals and any other further legal challenges, a gap will remain. There have been some fragments of civic action aimed at educating people on LGBTQI issues. There is an urgent need to work on changing the hearts and minds of people.*

> *We need to move towards a community-led narrative. This is how we will get the best results in terms of transforming people's hearts and minds.*

While some survey respondents feel that it pointless to argue with anti-rights supporters and try to change minds, many others believe there is potential to engage and gradually shift someone's point of view. In the words of Gayflor Worzi of the Center for Inclusion and Empowerment in Liberia:

> *In dealing with anti-rights campaigners, you will have to consider their point of view on the issue, which can be based on political, religious, or cultural reasons. The process of engagement will have to be civil and respect their views.*

Several survey respondents point to the power of dialogue that bridges across difference. A respondent from Fiji affirms this approach:

"IN DEALING WITH ANTI–RIGHTS CAMPAIGNERS, YOU WILL HAVE TO CONSIDER THEIR POINT OF VIEW ON THE ISSUE, WHICH CAN BE BASED ON POLITICAL, RELIGIOUS, OR CULTURAL REASONS. THE PROCESS OF ENGAGEMENT WILL HAVE TO BE CIVIL AND RESPECT THEIR VIEWS."
– GAYFLOR WORZI

…we take a more passive approach and don't take them on strongly. Dialogue is important for us, and we aim to believe that there is hope in changing perceptions.

Kai Klandorf of the Network of Estonian Nonprofit Organizations also calls for a bridge-building approach:

…assigning blame towards each other only increases polarisation… Tactics that try to build bridges and reduce polarisation [are preferable]. We are currently organising talk clubs where people who would support anti-rights groups are expected to attend to hear both sides.

In the context of the migration debate, Avila Kilmurray of the Social Change Initiative in Northern Ireland points to the importance of expanding our reach and of:

…engaging in extensive communications work to reach the 'anxious middle', winning people who are not sure of where they stand, and not describing anybody outside of the progressive bubble of the convinced as racist.

Josaia Tokoni of the Fiji Council of Social Services further identifies the need for methods of engagement – on LGBTQI rights in this example – that enable us to understand the motivations of those who do not support our cause:

We employ non-confrontational methods such as creating awareness not directly on accepting LGBTQI people but rather on accepting every human being as they are and encouraging understanding between one another… What matters the most is understanding our audience and the root cause of their rejection.

A survey respondent from South Africa also makes a call to engage, warning that we must not:

…distance ourselves from people who may seem to be anti-rights… it is better to engage people, do continued and ongoing interventions to try to shift their position, showing them the evidence and facts. Naming and shaming does not push the human rights movement as a whole forward. These groups have always existed and although they are more obvious now, they always will. In my opinion, ignoring them will just further radicalise them through alienation.

The example of the Irish abortion referendum campaign may be relevant here: pro-choice civil society ran a positive campaign, which included extensive grassroots organising and community conversations outside major cities and the specific targeting of men as people who needed to be won over. Change was advanced by connecting with people, listening to them, and talking to them in a language they understood.

We need to find new and creative ways of connecting people and starting a human rights conversation with them. Saleem Vaillancourt describes work that sits at the interface of art, media and human rights. One of the methods he pursues is to use community murals, and related social media coverage, to kickstart community conversations about rights and collective solidarity that challenges exclusion and marginalisation. His work is about building human rights capabilities at the community level while avoiding conventional human rights language:

We are trying to do human rights work and social action work together. We see them as different sides of basically the same work. We want to reach audiences that perhaps haven't been

TO PLATFORM OR NOT TO PLATFORM?

Across those consulted, opinions diverge on the merits of taking part in public debate with anti-rights groups. Doing so can risk offering anti-rights groups a platform to spread disinformation and hate, and can be seen to legitimise them by giving them equivalence with genuine CSOs. Mieke Schuurman expresses the challenge members of her network face:

> *...They say we shouldn't engage with the extremists because we won't be able to convince them, but we should instead target the public who might not have an opinion or who might not know yet what they agree with because they need to have the right information and need to know the other stories about child rights.*

At the same time, we must surely try any opportunity to push back against the anti-rights wave and get our points across. The need this suggests is to join debates with eyes open and decide on whether to share platforms on an informed and case-by-case basis.

Edurne Cárdenas has pointed to the essential inauthenticity of the debates offered by anti-rights groups, which do not admit the possibility of real dialogue or compromise. Nonetheless, she concludes, as civil society we have to engage, but we also have to try to create the opportunity to reach beyond anti-rights groups to connect directly with the public:

> *The strength of the human rights movement is our use of creativity and the strategy of reason… when we engage in such 'debate', we do not really discuss with them or try to convince them, but we share our reasoning before an audience, in order to try and convince that audience. We take advantage of that simulation of a debate to make our point before public opinion. For this task, social media is key, although it has clearly been a double-edged sword… Leading the debate agenda is one of the challenges that our movements face. To do this, we need to always be a step ahead in the discussion. We should not 'debate' with the anti-rights groups but speak to larger audiences and engage in discussion with elected representatives…*

Kaspars Zālītis similarly suggests that some kind of public engagement with anti-rights groups can be a way of getting across a positive human rights message and encourage a focus on the reality rather than disinformation, but this demands discipline and dignity:

> *We focus on delivering a human rights message. We never blame the church or call anyone by name – we don't talk about them. We counter argument with argument, and fiction with facts. If they say that perverts will march, we state the fact that 70 per cent of those 'perverts' are straight people with children. Against arguments that 'naked people' will march, we simply say we don't know what Pride they are referring to because we have never had people marching naked in Latvia… Compromising and always staying within the confines of a positive message may be personally difficult for many activists, but that is what we are going for, no matter what we hear. We might explode afterwards, but while we meet we listen and stay calm.*

engaged in human rights discussions or social action before, through media and through education workshops. So our focus is not so much on informing policy-makers, but on trying to reach local communities through accessible media and artforms.

…people need to be orientated towards positive stories, towards sharing and finding them, and to seeing the world through the lens of positivity. This is not to deny there are negative things or pretend that everything is fine, but to say that we address a challenge or a difficulty not by more contention but by means of conciliation and friendliness.

Chip Berlet suggests that we need to start making connections from the ground up, by opening up community conversations:

People need to start talking to their neighbours about the things that are not going well and about how to fix them, because these problems can only be solved collectively. When doing activist training sessions, I tell people to go sit at a bus stop and talk to the first person who sits down next to them. If you can get up the courage to do that, then you certainly can talk to your neighbours and co-workers. Regular people need to start doing just that.

Martyna Bogaczyk similarly offers the examples of local dialogues to bridge across differences, dissipate disinformation and build trust:

Many organisations are working to bring dialogue back into local communities. The change that we need will not happen as a result of a more liberal and human-rights oriented political party winning the elections, but through a change in the political conversation. We

COUNTERING DIVISIONS THROUGH COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

For the past two years, civil society has been combining the use of many of these response tactics in the global annual campaign of SPEAK!. Almost 200 events in 60 countries in 2018 and 2019 have seen people take collective action to counter growing divisions in their communities through authentic dialogue to speak with those we don't normally. CIVICUS supports the global initiative through enablers and champions in almost 30 countries to strengthen networks and utilise SPEAK! resources on how to organise, implement and collect data, based on best practices and previous successful SPEAK! events. Although those involved work on diverse issues, including inter-religious marriage, anti-migration sentiments, access to sexual and reproductive rights and youth disenfranchisement, the common approach of SPEAK! brings civil society together to reach across to those that disagree with us. This approach has seen powerful results in bringing those who used to oppose civil society work into actions to begin finding collective solutions in their communities. Andy Katompa, 2019 SPEAK! Champion from DRC working on the rights of Twas people, reported that:

…the authorities supported us for the organisation of our event while they used to stop us sometimes and tortured us when we organised activities to defend some of our rights.

need to sit people on opposing sides at the same table and teach them how to hold a dialogue and discuss issues that are close to them. We are not trying to have them agree on everything; in fact, what we want is for people to understand that it would be impossible for all of us to agree on everything, and what we need to do instead is accept plurality and diversity. But we do want to hold a conversation aimed at achieving consensus on core values: those that make it possible to have a conversation in the first place.

Martin Pairet also affirms the value of starting dialogues, engaging young people in particular:

It is… key to invest in civic education and human rights education as much as possible. We do this through an online course on Countering Hate Speech in Europe, which is based on online dialogue maintained with our partners. The videos are open source and are available on our YouTube channel. We have a playlist called 'Countering Hate Speech', so they can be watched in sequence.

Through these activities, we try to reach out to a high number of young people. Dialogue among individuals and among communities is key because on social media there are fewer and fewer spaces where people can have a real conversation in a safe environment. And dialogue is quite effective for raising awareness and thinking strategies through collectively.

Similarly, Yared Hailemariam suggests that in contexts where anti-rights groups have been successful in sowing division, civil society can also respond by offering civic education that helps nurture responsible and active citizens:

Civil society could play a key role in overcoming divisions… Because civil society is neutral, the international community should focus on strengthening its capacity to play a key role in shaping the behaviour of new generations, who are vulnerable to being used by political elites. Civil society could give broad-based civic education to nurture good citizens who understand their responsibilities.

In situations such as these, civil society's inherent belief in the dignity and rights of all people offers a key strategic asset towards achieving social cohesion.

Another part of what we may need to do is to help the communities being attacked see themselves as the bearers of rights, suggests Martin Pairet:

Awareness of their right to equal treatment must be raised, first of all, among the people who are being targeted by hate speech. Even among European citizens, many people don't know exactly what their rights are. So it is important to share information among civil society and encourage civil society groups to share it further.

In summary, if we can coalesce around shared narratives, we need to reach out and bring as many people with us as possible. We need to show in doing so that we are the majority and the mainstream, and push anti-rights groups back to the fringes where they used to lurk.

5. WE CAN MAKE UNUSUAL CONNECTIONS

As part of building a coalition of response, we should try to split genuine but conservatively minded civil society groups away from anti-rights groups that will never be open to persuasion: to bring conservatively minded groups into our broad coalitions rather than anti-rights coalitions. This is difficult work that can only start with dialogue.

Both in connecting with the public and building dialogue with conservative groups, we need to acknowledge that faith identities matter profoundly to many people, and that many people have greater trust in faith leaders than in politicians, states and civil society.

Anti-rights groups are skilled at organising people around faith positions, based on narrow, selective and highly conservative interpretations of faith, but they do not have the sole claim on faith. If anti-rights groups act on the basis of a "misinterpretation of religious text," as Abiodun Rufus-Unegbu of Leadership Initiative for Youth Empowerment in Nigeria expresses it, this suggests that alternative and more progressive interpretations are available. By engaging with faith groups, we have an opportunity to promote more broad-based, inclusive readings of faith that offer more room for diversity, and to split faith-based groups that are open to reasoning away from fundamentalist groups that will never give ground.

María Angélica Peñas Defago identifies the potential to work within faith traditions and with faith organisations:

There are feminist and LGBTQI movements that work from the standpoint of religious pluralism, disputing the idea of the monopoly of faith, and these are very rich spaces of struggle and

Churches that welcome LGBTQI people, such as the Emmanuel Church in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, could be allies.

belonging. Religions, all of them, comprise plural, democratic and horizontal spaces, which many organisations take advantage of in their struggle for meaning.

Religion and faith are an important part of people's lives, and the feminist movement, or at least a good part of it, is now working within this reality.

Gordan Bosanac also suggests that we connect with faith followers, who can call for less fundamentalist interpretations of their faith:

The main role should be played by believers who refuse to accept the misuse of religion for extremist purposes. Believers are the most

authentic spokespeople against fundamentalism and their voices can be much stronger than the voices of mobilised secular people or political opposition. However, the lack of such groups at the local level, due to pressure from local religious authorities, can be a problem.

Gina Romero of the Latin American and Caribbean Network for Democracy describes one attempt to make such connections by the Religions, Beliefs and Spiritualities Coalition in Latin America:

We have worked to foster alliances and render visible the existence of religious actors that are more progressive and can challenge the language of more traditional and conservative groups. In terms of fostering alliances, I have seen two different approaches: one used by feminist groups that declare themselves at war with anti-rights groups, and... single out all the anti-rights organisations and actors; and the one that consists in trying to have a conversation with these actors. This is what we do: we work to create a scenario for dialogue and identify actors with whom dialogue is possible. I recommend this alternative. Speak with those who are different and render visible the invisible actors who can offer a counter-narrative.

Thilaga Sulathireh also points to some successes in recent attempts to engage with faith-based groups that block progress on LGBTQI rights:

In the last few years LGBTQI groups are also pushing back and being more organised. The coalition of human rights organisations that participated in the UPR process has also tried to engage with Islamic NGOs and tried to increase engagement by pro-human rights Islamic organisations. They had some

success in the UPR process in getting some groups to recognise the discrimination LGBTQI people face.

Charles Emma Ofwono describes his organisation's experiences of engaging with faith leaders:

...to understand their perceptions and what win/win situation we can work out...We worked with them to develop a pastoral letter which conforms to their kind of language, picks ideas and verses from scriptures and also covers our advocacy agenda, especially when it comes to access to services and vital information on sexuality education and HIV/AIDS testing services.

While Anna Mmolai-Chalmers proposes a range of responses are available for engaging with faith and faith leaders:

Partnering with global and regional religious bodies and ensuring that local religious leaders are affiliated to those to empower religious leaders with positive messages; targeting families and parents and empowering them on how to ensure that they protect themselves against persecution and blame for their children being gay; building LGBTQI support groups where they learn the tricks of using the Bible to defend their communities with verses that talk about love.

...queer religious leaders are great messengers of love and tolerance within communities. We have mobilised religious leaders with positive voices to speak messages of love and support. Our recent decriminalisation case is a good example of how the country can be inclusive, respect human rights but

remain committed to religious practices.

We also need to be careful, in responding to anti-rights actions and arguments that are grounded in faith, not to fuel prejudice against religions, a point powerfully made by Thilaga Sulathireh:

Because there's a religious dimension to this, and because Islamophobia is on the rise, we need… to be careful when talking about these issues not to encourage more Islamophobia. We need to have more conversations about how we address intersectional forms of oppression and also give spaces for Islamic groups to participate in processes that help address Islamophobia. This is something that as civil society we need to be sensitive to.

Besides faith, the unusual connections we can make can include those that attempt to convince and recruit supporters from other spheres – including media groups, the private sector and political parties. We can ask them to join initiatives to defend rights and resist pressures from anti-rights groups. Kaspars Zālītis relates one example of an engagement with political parties:

We are promoting public debate on these issues, presenting political parties with examples of the rights restrictions that LGBTQI people face on a daily basis and asking them to provide policy solutions to create a safe environment for LGBTQI people and other minorities. We will consider it a success if three or four political parties include LGBTQI issues or other diversity issues on their agenda.

Gordan Bosanac suggests there is a need to engage with moderate conservative political parties and bring them into broad-based coalitions, to enable them to resist being dragged rightwards by anti-rights groups:

It may seem counterintuitive, but it's very important to empower conservative parties across the globe so they stand their ground and resist far-right hijacking attempts. Progressives need to protect conservative parties from extremist attacks, or they will become vehicles for the far-right to get to power, and then it will be too late.

And of course we need to try to build alliances with states that may be concerned about the rise of anti-rights groups or be open to persuasion to acting on them. This includes states that are acknowledging their struggles with anti-rights groups and those passively tolerating them. We need to make the case that states can work together with civil society to push back against anti-rights groups, and that open and enabled civic space is a key part of the response, because it enables us to connect with the public and defeat anti-rights narratives.

Another unusual connection we can try to make is with law enforcement agencies, to try to make them recognise and act on hatred, suggests Martin Pairet:

The role of local authorities and state agencies such as the police is also key in ensuring the right to equal treatment and it does make a difference whether or not they act in the face of hate speech. So it is important for civil society to work with these actors so that they are able to recognise hate speech and act against it.

In summary, as civil society we need to improve our outreach and try a range of means to make connections and develop dialogues with local

> "THE FACT THAT SOME ANTI−RIGHTS GROUPS ARE USING A BOGUS FEMINIST RHETORIC IS NO REASON TO ABANDON FEMINISM, BUT RATHER THE OPPOSITE – WE NEED TO EMBODY THE VERSION OF FEMINISM THAT IS MOST INCLUSIVE… THAT IS TRUER TO ITS PRINCIPLES."
> – SAHAR MOAZAMI

and national-level groups that may be open to persuasion and where possible with states and their agencies. None of this is easy and it involves speaking to people with whom we may disagree, but we cannot afford to leave the field clear for anti-rights groups to win the argument.

6. WE CAN RECLAIM HUMAN RIGHTS LANGUAGE

But while we need to reach out, start conversations and find common ground, we should not lose sight of the human rights for which we stand. In some instances the language of human rights has been co-opted by anti-rights groups; we need to reclaim it. In seeking to connect with the public, we need to make a fresh case about why rights matter, why they must be universal and why respect for rights brings benefits to everyone.

María Angélica Peñas Defago offers one example of the contested terminology we need to challenge in advocating for abortion rights:

> The dispute over meaning is fundamental both on social media and offline, as can be seen around the 'pro-life' label that many anti-rights groups have appropriated. Women's and LGBTQI groups working at the grassroots level continually reference this label, by asking the question: how much is my life worth if I do not have access to a job, to the recognition of my identity, to the protection of my health – if the kind of life that is being offered to me is not a decent one? Progressive civil society must claim for itself the defence of life, understood as a dignified, fully human life.

In effect, this suggests the need for rebranding and reframing; the reclamation of the language of rights needs to be bold, imaginative and assertive, rather than defensive. Sahar Moazami suggests an approach along these lines:

> The fact that some anti-rights groups are using a bogus feminist rhetoric is no reason to abandon feminism, but rather the opposite – we need to embody the version of feminism that is most inclusive… that is truer to its principles. We cannot accept their claim that they speak for all of us. We need to reclaim feminism as our own space and reject the terms of the debate as they are presented to us.

Part of the reclamation of terminology should entail the reframing of the notion of 'family', given that anti-rights attacks are so often made with reference to its defence. If we can position ourselves as the champions

of a more diverse notion of the family and parenthood, then we have a powerful opportunity to win back space. Gabriela Mendoza Santiago relates one attempt to do so in Mexico:

Our organisation, Otro Tiempo México, has established networks that include diverse organisations, with various objectives but a single overarching purpose: the respect, promotion and defence of human rights. This has allowed for the formulation of arguments and the creation of a new language that takes up the language of other groups, including on the importance of the family, but does so by stating the importance of family diversity and family support for LGBTQI people, that is, of working with the family group from a plural perspective, demystifying prejudices and misconceptions about gender and opening up spaces where all voices are heard.

In responding boldly, there is the opportunity to put anti-rights groups back on the defensive and expose them as opportunistic and lacking in substance for their attempts to use the language of rights, as Eliana Cano indicates:

…we should not move from our positions, but rather show that the appropriation of the discourse of human rights and democracy by ultra-conservative groups is as superficial as disrespectful of democratic principles.

While reclaiming and reframing the language of rights, we also need to learn to speak the language of culture, tradition and faith for our own purposes: for example, by finding arguments in faith texts for expansive rights, by pointing to aspects of traditions that are inclusive and accepting of diversity, and by making clear the ongoing dynamism of culture. As part of any response, we need to develop a better way of arguing against cultural relativism in relation to rights and defusing the mendacious terminology of 'gender ideology'.

7. WE CAN FIGHT DISINFORMATION AND HATE SPEECH

Even if we build alliances, improve the way we communicate, connect better with the public and reclaim human rights language, we can still expect to face a barrage of disinformation, conspiracy theories, smears, online harassment and hate speech, particularly on social media, which we will need to fight against. We cannot simply ignore the problem.

Broad consensus emerges among those consulted that we need to make greater efforts to counter disinformation with accurate information. A survey respondent from the DRC, for example, points to the need to overcome disinformation about abortion rights:

There's for instance the Maputo Protocol, that… gives women the right to choose according to the spirit of medical ethics, in the context of pregnancy caused by rape or incest. Anti-rights groups rely on biblical verses and tell made-up stories to impose a yoke on women and destroy the awareness that empowers women to make decisions over their own bodies. Much still needs to be done to erase the false rumours and replace them with solid knowledge.

A survey respondent from Mauritania reports a similar need to take on the false rhetoric about civil society funding, suggesting a response that entails:

…explaining and showing that CSOs generally have limited means, while if they were foreign agents they would be rich… make our

work and activities public, including funds and their sources. What does not work is to keep quiet and believe that people know the truth and no explanations are necessary.

One way we can combat disinformation is to work with trusted public figures. In Argentina, it is quite common for doctors to fight back against disinformation from anti-abortion groups by sharing their testimonies with the media, as in a recent case in which a physician invited anti-abortion groups to see the reality of life in a hospital treating women who have had clandestine abortions. In the USA, high-profile doctors have repeatedly criticised the framing of six-week abortion bans, known as 'foetal heartbeat' bills, as medically inaccurate. Independent journalists are another group of key allies in fighting disinformation.

However, we cannot combat disinformation and other attacks enabled by the internet unless we have a new and urgent conversation with the social media and tech giants.

Heightened awareness of the role and responsibility of social media giants in sharing disinformation and hate speech, and in stoking division and attacks on rights by doing so, should lead to pressure on those companies to improve their act. Civil society should engage with and advocate towards social media companies to adopt higher standards on social media abuse, quickly and systematically take down posts that fall short of standards and become more transparent about how the data they routinely collect on users and the targeting advertising this enables are used to stoke hatred and division. Civil society should be consulted on the development, application and revision of standards.

There are examples of responsible behaviour that can be built upon.

These include a recent initiative to take a stand against vaccine denial, which involved Facebook and Instagram redirecting people searching for information on vaccines or using relevant hashtags to pages set up by public health bodies, in an attempt to steer them away from getting disinformation from other sources.

But these are not enough and more concerted and coordinated civil society action, working through broad coalitions, is needed. Marek Tuszynski suggests that we need to lead on this, because others are failing to do so:

We shouldn't expect these companies to solve the problems they have created. They are clearly incapable of addressing the problems they cause. One of these problems is online harassment and abuse of the rules. They have no capacity to clean the space of certain activities and if they try to do so, then they will censor any content that resembles something dangerous, even if it isn't, to not risk being accused of supporting radical views.

…When it comes to digital-based repression and the use of surveillance and data collection to impose restrictions, there is a striking lack of accountability. Tech platforms depend on government authorisation to operate, so online platforms and tech companies are slow to react, if they do at all, in the face of accusations of surveillance, hate speech, online harassment and attacks, especially when powerful governments or other political forces are involved.

These companies are not going to do the right thing if they are not encouraged to do so.

Avaaz uses a hundred cardboard cutouts of Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg to call attention to what the group says are hundreds of millions of fake accounts that are spreading disinformation on Facebook.

Photo by Zach Gibson/Getty Images

It is urgent that civil society leads on this and builds connections with social media companies. Otherwise the field will be left open for states to legislate without consultation against disinformation and hate speech, and we know that when that happens, those laws are often used to suppress civil society and legitimate expressions of dissent against political power. Recent years have seen a barrage of supposedly anti-fake news laws activated against civil society, as Brandi Geurkink observes:

Worryingly, we're seeing 'fake news laws' that use this problem as an excuse to limit freedom of speech and crack down on dissent,

particularly in countries where civic space is shrinking and press freedom lacking.

Social media deplatforming also works. Anti-rights influencers such as Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (who trades as Tommy Robinson) in the UK and Milo Yiannopoulos in the USA have, as a result of much civil society pressure, been banned from major social media platforms, and both have complained about their loss of both an audience and the income they used to generate through their high-profile outrage. As part of our response, we can therefore work to report and close down the accounts of anti-rights influencers. Kaspars Zālītis relates one such initiative:

…Mozaika has reported over 200 posts that are openly homophobic to social media administrators, and most of them have been taken down and their authors temporarily or permanently blocked…We take down hate comments and instruct the community to report any attacks that they experience on social media to us so we can work to take down the posts.

Another area of response should be to develop a new approach to factchecking. We need to ensure that the factchecking of our own work is impeccable, because otherwise this gives anti-rights groups an easy opportunity to claim we are spreading disinformation, and develop strategies to factcheck and rapidly rebut disinformation from anti-rights groups. Marek Tuszynski points to the need to work in this area:

…there is a need for new tactics and standards to enable civil society groups, activists, bloggers and journalists to react by verifying information and creating evidence based on solid information.

Advocacy for better factchecking is one of several crucial points Brandi Geurkink emphasises for engagement with tech giants:

Responsible reporting and factual information are crucial for people to make informed choices, including about who should govern them; that is why fighting misinformation with care for free speech is key. Among the things that can be done about misinformation it is worth mentioning the verification of advertisers, as well as improved monitoring tools to detect bots and check facts. These are things that if implemented correctly would have an impact on these issues, and not just during the time of elections.

But the critical place where platforms are currently failing to live up to their commitments is around transparency. There must be greater transparency into how people use platforms like Facebook and Google to pay for ads that are intended to manipulate political discourse. At the same time, we must ensure that these companies are open about how content monitoring happens on platforms and that there are redress policies in place for people whose content has been wrongfully removed or deleted.

Strategic alliances with media people, technology experts, social entrepreneurs and influencers with significant social media followings who are willing to stand up for rights will be needed to claim the internet and mass media as decisively a sphere for reasoned debate rather than the perpetuation of anti-rights narratives.

8. WE CAN MOBILISE MASS PUBLIC RESPONSES

One of the ways anti-rights groups act is by mobilising supporters in public spaces. But you can be sure that wherever there is a public demonstration, whether by a neo-Nazi or far-right group, a 'straight pride' march, or a protest in support of a right-wing populist leader, a counter-protest will be close by. For example, an anti-Islam march in Toronto, Canada in March 2019, organised by a far-right group in the wake of the Christchurch terrorist shootings, drew only around 30 protesters, who were heavily outnumbered by around 300 counter-protesters, who staged a sit in to prevent the group marching. Bulgaria in February 2019 saw a 'no to Nazis on Bulgarian streets' protest in response to a march the same day in remembrance of a prominent Nazi sympathiser. In the USA in June 2019 in Portland, Oregon, an anti-fascist protest mobilised to resist a white nationalist demonstration that turned violent. A 'straight pride' parade in September 2019 in the USA was utterly eclipsed by the scale of the counter-protest. We have become practised in publicly opposing, and often vastly outnumbering, these manifestations of anti-rights agendas.

Anna-Carin Hall notes how people are turning out en masse to stand for rights in Sweden:

Open racism and xenophobia are in no way tolerated by the vast majority of Swedes, and several local rallies have been staged against racism and the Neo-Nazi movement…

Mobilisation works. Gillian Kane outlines one example of how public mobilisations helped resist a further tightening of abortion rights in Poland, after a new law was proposed by a highly conservative

A NEW GENERATION MOBILISING

Many recent high-profile protests have seen new generations of people forging activist paths, and Eliana Cano places hope in a younger generation that is mobilising to resist hatred:

…this is not just us – new generations are mobilised and lots of people who are respectful of freedom and diversity and who uphold guarantees for rights are gaining ground. It is not just three or four old-time feminist organisations that are active in Lima; there are also the voices and faces of young people organised in universities, people in communities in various regions of Peru who think critically, do not accept dogmas, even react in a sarcastic tone to that type of discourse and perspective.

There may be a wider truth in this that points to some grounds for optimism. In some contexts the clearest predictors of beliefs and political behaviours are now age and education levels. In many contexts the broad demographic truth is that younger people are more progressive, internationalist and cosmopolitan in their outlook and more inclusive and accepting of diversity than older generations, offering a counterpoint to the anti-rights tide. In the countries where this is the case, it suggests some potential that can be nurtured. As young people grow into adulthood the onus is on us as civil society to work with them, help nurture and sustain progressive mindsets, offer participation pathways, enable young people to find the tools to combat hatred and division and make available the space in which they can become the leaders of an evolving civil society.

organisation, and won the support of church groups. The ruling party initially supported the proposal, but following large-scale protests, moved to distance itself from the initiative:

…it's not all doom and gloom. Women are responding forcefully. Poland provides an amazing example of women organising and effecting change. In late 2016 thousands of women and men crowded the major cities of Warsaw and Gdansk to join the 'Black Monday' march, to protest against a proposed law banning abortions. The full ban wasn't enacted, which was a huge victory.

Teresa Fernández Paredes makes the point that often mobilisations are reactive; we are good at reacting publicly and mobilising counter-protests when we are threatened. To some extent, action and reaction is always how discourse progresses; what is different is the current strength and force of the anti-rights backlash, which demands a sustained response at least equally as strong:

What we need are cases that cause people to mobilise, generate public debate and produce real social change. In that sense I see positive developments, like the #MeToo movement and the… Green Tide in Argentina. That is, we are seeing two opposing processes: on the one hand, anti-rights groups are growing; on the other, strong mobilisation around these issues is happening from the ground up and with a strong youth component. Such was the case with the Green Tide, which created unprecedented mobilisation while a proposal to legalise abortion was being discussed in the Argentine Congress. No doubt the two processes are very likely connected, and one is a consequence of the other.

These social movements are good reason for hope. In the face of attempts to cut back on acquired rights, there is a very active movement that says, look, this is an acquired right, you cannot take it away anymore. There is no going back: looking forward, you can only expand the rights framework, but you cannot diminish it.

The question then becomes one of how we can extend, capitalise upon and sustain this protest momentum, and learn from huge, imaginative and agenda-changing recent mobilisations, including the #MeToo movement, pride marches all over the world and the climate justice mobilisations.

Of course, we can always do more to support and enable mobilisations. If we are collaborating and communicating better, demonstrating our unique value as civil society as distinct from anti-rights groups and connecting with people's motivations better, then we can mobilise in even greater numbers and more forcefully. Uma Mishra-Newbery makes a call for greater levels of mobilisation:

We need people to get invested at the grassroots level. People cannot stay on the sidelines when their rights are being taken away. If your government is taking away your rights, you need to get involved before it's too late. If you live in a free and stable democracy you have a duty to use your voice and speak up on the human rights abuses happening around the world. This work needs all of us at the table.

NEW GUIDANCE FOR SUSTAINING PROTEST POWER

For more advice on strategies to help organise and – crucially – sustain protests, see CIVICUS's new Protest Resilience Toolkit, published in 2019.

9. WE CAN IMPROVE OUR ENGAGEMENT WITH INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

It is clear that the anti-rights battle is increasingly being waged at the international level, and so demands a heightened civil society response in international arenas.

International spaces, including those at the UN, are being heavily contested, but still offer potential for civil society to hold states to their human rights commitments and in doing so, to urge them to do more to respond to anti-rights groups. Opportunities will work best when different civil society groups are able to work together to undertake collective action and combine advocacy with campaigning. International collaboration and the mobilisation of international solidarity should go hand in hand with engagement in international arenas. There is a need as part of this to bring new voices into international spaces, and to encourage participation by diverse groups that are fighting back against the anti-rights tide domestically, something Thilaga Sulathireh argues for:

We need to make sure there is diverse representation in… international forums. We need to have global solidarity to push back on attacks on rights.

International bodies can offer valuable spaces for civil society response.

People protest against islamophobia near the Gare du Nord in Paris, France on 10 November 2019.

Ilaria Paolazzi offers an example of one successful constructive intervention on child rights at the international level that stopped anti-rights groups making a major gain:

> We did a lot of work in 2014 when the UNHRC adopted a resolution on the protection of the family… Many initiatives around this sought to introduce the idea that the family, understood as the nuclear family, has rights as a unit, without acknowledging the human rights of individual family members such as children, the different forms a family can take, and the responsibility of states to protect the rights of individuals and intervene, when appropriate. Child Rights Connect coordinated advocacy to offer states an alternative, more consensual angle, which was effective for finding constructive compromises during the negotiation of the resolution and also for reaffirming children's rights during the discussions on protection of the family.

UNHRC UPR processes may also offer space for us to step up our response. While the processes may be contested by anti-rights groups, some states at least appear to take UPR recommendations seriously. T King Oey, for example, reports that Indonesia's embattled LGBTQI community found some potential benefit resulting from UPR processes:

> At Indonesia's UPR session in 2017, many shadow reports pointed to the severe situation of LGBTQI people. There was quite a bit of criticism. The usual attitude of the Indonesian government is to cite social conservatism, but this time it was forced to acknowledge the need to take steps and it committed to hold a dialogue with the

LGBTQI community. This was a concession that came because of international pressure.

But if we are to engage in these spaces, we need to urge international institutions to manage them better. The recent burgeoning of anti-rights groups, including at the UNHRC, CSW and OAS, has in part caught international institutions out, but it has also been enabled by them. It has exposed international institutions as having rules and procedures that are not fit for purpose and that are open to manipulation by anti-rights groups and political leaders who share their views. This needs to form part of a larger campaign for democratic multilateral reform and the making of a new transnational case for human rights.

10. WE CAN EXPOSE ANTI–RIGHTS GROUPS

When we test anti-rights groups, we may provoke a reaction that shows their uglier side. Eliana Cano suggests that it takes little to provoke an aggressive reaction:

As happened recently with the 'Do not mess with my children' campaign… their discourse tends to become very aggressive every time they feel cornered. They seem to be desperate, because deep down they do nothing but react in the face of newly acquired rights.

Part of how we can reclaim space is therefore to expose the extremist, profoundly anti-rights nature of groups that claim to stand for particular rights, something Gordan Bosanac suggests:

The first thing would be to expose these groups, to tell people who they really are. We need to expose them for what they are – religious fundamentalists, neo-Nazis and so on – because

they are hiding their true faces. Depending on the local context, sometimes they are not even proud to admit that they are connected to the Church. Once these connections are exposed, many people become suspicious towards them.

In particular, anti-rights groups are often secretive about their funding sources, and this offers a vulnerability that can be exploited. More work needs to be done to expose the webs of connections, particularly international connections, on which anti-rights groups rely for support; doing so can undermine their claims of authentic connection with grassroots voices. Gordan Bosanac identifies this an area for action, suggesting we could:

…disclose all the dirty tracks of the money and hope that people will react…

Uma Mishra-Newbery also makes this call:

We have to look at the web of interests that keep these groups active within these spaces, because there are a lot of political and monetary interests keeping them at the UN and within the CSW space.

More research is currently being carried out on this subject, and particularly on the role played by US-based evangelical groups, their funding and international influence. Civil society could work in collaboration with investigative journalists to further this research agenda. We could also advocate towards financial institutions to bring more transparency in anti-rights funding flows.

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