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Global backlash against women's and girls' rights

Words & Deeds update



A just world for all women and girls

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Across all regions, women and girls continue to confront systematic and coordinated attacks on their hard-won rights.¹ These threats are materialising through the enactment of regressive laws, the manipulation of multilateral mechanisms to undermine gender equality, and heightened risks for those defending human rights. Further, there is a rise in misinformation and disinformation on women's rights and feminism that is intended to discredit progress and demands to be free from patriarchal systems, such as discriminatory laws. The opposition to feminist values and principles is not a fringe movement but is organised and strategic. The far-right and anti-gender equality movements are also well-funded, weakening the funding sources for the rights-based civil society simultaneously.²

The backlash is often driven by deep patriarchal roots manifested in nationalist, politically conservative, fundamentalist, cultural, or social norms that promote gender stereotypes, for example, men's and women's roles in the family, thereby restricting everyone's choices.

In Equality Now's report, *Words & Deeds: Holding Governments Accountable in the Beijing+30 Review Process* (March 2025), we document both existing and emerging legal threats that are reversing previous gains or stalling progress on women's and girls' rights. Civil society organisations face increasing pressure under repressive laws, such as in India and Kyrgyzstan. Anti-LGBTQ+ legislation has been enacted in countries such as Georgia and the United States, while government bodies responsible for advancing women's rights are being dismantled in South Korea and Argentina. Widespread attacks on women's rights continue in Afghanistan, the United States, and Iran, and new legislative proposals in Bolivia and Uruguay threaten to weaken protections against sexual violence.

[Read the full report here](#)

Here, we further highlight key global trends that pose growing threats, with examples of legal and policy developments that undermine gender equality. These harmful developments are from the regions where we work with local partners or in coalitions, and in most cases, these regions are experiencing the impact of the backlash to varying degrees. This *Words & Deeds Update* aims to support efforts to resist regressive changes and to inform the development of coordinated global and regional strategies to confront the backlash, particularly within international and multilateral forums.

International law and multilateralism under threat

Disguised and dressed in the language of 'sovereignty', UN member states have attempted to disregard or discredit international law and the work of the UN and its agencies. The multilateral world of global agreements that are critical for universal standards of human rights and their development is under serious pressure, mistrust, and is undergoing a time of austerity and defunding. The treaty body mechanism system is facing a serious financial crisis that is impacting its functioning. In 2025, treaty body reviews were postponed, and meetings were cancelled. For example:

- The 92nd CEDAW Committee session scheduled for October 2025 was cancelled "due to the current liquidity situation of the United Nations Secretariat and associated cash conservation measures."³
- The 100th CRC session scheduled for September 2025 was cancelled due to the UN liquidity crisis.⁴

The cancellations and delays diminish the access of civil society and rights-holders to these institutions. The system relies on member states' political will to cooperate towards common goals of peace, development, and human rights. All those goals are being undermined by member states or are being diluted, moving away from their intended framework, resulting in a growing lack of public trust in the institutions.

• United States of America: Withdrawal from international treaties⁵

The US has been the largest donor to the UN since its founding (contributing \$13 billion in 2023).⁶ The US has also taken steps to sanction judges and staff of the International Criminal Court.⁷ Further, the US is still not a signatory to the majority of the core International human rights treaties and has now, under the new presidential administration elected in 2024, withdrawn from key international agreements or withdrawn its funding.

Since 2025, it has withdrawn from

- The Human Rights Council, and has stated it will not participate in its Universal Periodic Review (UPR)
- World Health Organization
- The Paris Climate Agreement
- The 1951 Refugee Convention
- The US has also withdrawn critical funding from UNRWA and is scrutinising UNESCO.
- It has dismantled international trade rules in favour of reciprocal bilateral tariffs in contradiction to the WTO plans and standards.
- It has denounced the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (the SDGs)

Dismantling of State institutions and shrinking civil society space

- **El Salvador: new 'Foreign Agent Law'**

In May 2025, El Salvador passed a new law⁸ that imposes a 30% tax on donations to NGOs. It is weakening civil society and curtailing freedom of speech and expression through weakening funding and resources for NGOs. The law was passed in the context of worsening human rights conditions for human rights defenders who face detention and arrests without formal charges and criminalisation for their activities in exposing the government's violations.

- **Peru: Amendments that target civil society**

In April 2025, the Peruvian Congress passed amendments to the Law 27692⁹, which governs the Peruvian Agency for International Cooperation (APCI). The amendments restrict the use of funding for legal assistance, which impacts vulnerable groups, especially those without access to justice, such as Indigenous and rural populations. The amendments also increase administrative and reporting burdens to increase monitoring while weakening them.

- **Somalia: Renaming the Ministry of Women's Human Rights Development¹⁰**

In 2024, the Somali government changed the name from Ministry of Women and Human Rights Development to Ministry of Family and Human Rights Development and appointed a Military General as the new Minister. The removal of focus from women and the focus on 'family' indicates a shift where women's rights are not the priority but only seen in the context of family.

- **Senegal: Renaming the Ministry for Women, Family, and Child Protection**

The replacement of the Ministry for Women, Family, and Child Protection with the Ministry for Family and Solidarities is being considered a move to dilute the focus on women and move towards gendered roles of women in families.

- **Georgia: Restricting women's rights in government policies**

- In May 2024, the Parliament of Georgia abolished mandatory gender quotas in the Election Code, which had required parties to include women on their party lists for parliamentary and municipal elections to promote women's political participation.¹¹
- In March 2025, the Permanent Parliamentary Council for Gender Equality was abolished¹²
- On 2 April 2025, amendments were introduced in over a dozen laws to remove the terms "gender" and "gender identity" from all laws of Georgia.¹³

- **Tunisia: Restrictions on the legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of expression**

The Presidential Decree-Law 2022-54 titled "fighting offences related to information and communications system" enacted in September 2022 allows the Tunisian government to impose unlawful and arbitrary restrictions on the legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of expression. There have been prosecutions under Decree 54 against lawyers, journalists, political figures, and trade unionists, whether on the basis of this Decree or any other legal provision, reflecting a crackdown on political dissent.¹⁴

Emboldened opposition to women's and girls' rights: promoting child marriage and FGM

- **Nepal: A harmful bill that could lower the age of marriage to 16 years of age**

Currently, the Constitution of Nepal explicitly bans child marriage and guarantees protection against forced marriages. Importantly, the Muluki Civil Code 2074 sets the legal age of marriage at 20 years for both men and women. However, in 2025, following a Parliamentary Subcommittee proposal, the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs prepared a draft bill to amend the current law. The bill, in its current form¹⁵, introduces a gradation of marriages entered into below the age of 16 years and above. According to this bill, any marriage below the age of 16 years is null and void. The proposed bill is, in practical effect, allowing marriages to take place from the age of 16 years, which violates Nepal's international human rights commitments. The current proposal in the bill does not create coherence or a clear message of condemnation of all child marriages below the age of 18; rather, it creates confusing standards which legitimise and promote child marriages between the ages of 16-18. The proposed bill, if passed, could lead to a perception in the minds of the public that marriage in Nepal is now allowed from the age of 16 years. Lowering the marriage age, and practically permitting marriage from the age of 16 onwards, as the bill seeks to do, could risk reinforcing these harmful traditions, undermining the progress made toward gender equality and empowerment.

- **Sierra Leone: Government's public statement against addressing FGM/C in the new law protecting children**

Currently, female genital mutilation (FGM) is not explicitly prohibited under Sierra Leone's law. A new law, *the Child Rights Act, 2025*, was passed by Parliament and is awaiting Presidential Assent. This Act prohibits violence against children and aims to align national legislation with international standards. However, in a press statement issued in July 2025, the Government of Sierra Leone stated that the new law "neither criminalises FGM nor prescribes a fine... for individuals found guilty of circumcising girls under the age of eighteen (18)."

Once again, despite the advocacy and efforts of civil society organisations, the government has missed a critical opportunity and is acting as a barrier to ending FGM in the country through a comprehensive approach that includes prohibiting the harmful practice.

In July 2025, the Community Court of Justice, ECOWAS, found Sierra Leone violated its obligation to adopt legislative measures to prohibit and criminalise female genital mutilation in Sierra Leone in breach of Articles 2(1)(b), 4 and 5 of the Maputo Protocol and Article 21 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. It had also failed to investigate and prosecute cases of FGM. Importantly, the State submitted that the new law, when enacted, will criminalise FGM, but has since stepped away from that obligation.¹⁶

Rise of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation

Draconian colonial-era laws criminalising homosexuality and restricting gender-affirming care continue to be upheld in many countries, while new legislation is being introduced that further endangers the safety and lives of LGBTQ+ individuals. These attacks on LGBTQ+ rights are deeply interconnected with broader human rights violations, including the erosion of access to reproductive healthcare, freedom of expression, and protection from arbitrary arrest and detention. While the examples listed below illustrate this troubling trend, numerous other cases exist where governments are either reviving outdated laws or enacting new ones that target same-sex relationships and gender identity. These measures are often framed within so-called “family values” campaigns, which promote a narrow, conservative interpretation of family - typically one based on patriarchal authority, women being confined to gendered roles within the family, and exclusion of diverse identities.

- **Kenya: Family Protection Bill, 2023¹⁷**

The proposed bill prohibits homosexuality, same-sex marriages, gross ‘indecent’, ‘unnatural’ acts, and what it calls ‘aggravated homosexuality’, among other offences, and limits freedom of expression. It criminalises landlords, for example, for renting to organisations supporting LGBTQ+ rights and proposes cutting off funding for organisations that have related activities. This is despite the 2023 Supreme Court ruling that allowed LGBTQ+ advocacy organisations to register, which faced backlash in the country, and is now under threat.

- **Uganda: Constitutional Court upheld the 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act¹⁸**

In 2024, Uganda’s Constitutional Court upheld the validity of a law that criminalises same-sex relationships and held that it does not contravene the country’s constitution. The law makes the ‘promotion’ of homosexuality and the ‘conspiracy to engage in homosexuality’ criminal offences.

- **Ghana: Supreme Court dismisses appeal to declare anti-LGBTQ+ bill unconstitutional¹⁹**

The Human Sexual Rights and Family Values Bill, which was passed in 2024 but did not receive the president’s approval, was reintroduced in 2025. The Supreme Court did not block the bill, and this bill makes the punishment for same-sex relationships harsher than it already is.

- **United States of America: Conflation of FGM and gender-affirming care in the US**

In recent years, there have been attempts made by the government of the United States (US) to strategically conflate Gender Affirming Care (GAC) and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) with the purpose of marginalising and criminalising care providers and minors who may access GAC through the use of anti-FGM laws in the country. The political weaponisation of anti-FGM laws to harm individuals and communities is a pushback against the positive developments made in the US to ensure access to health care for all.

Specifically, in January 2025, the White House issued an Executive Order titled *Protecting Children from Chemical and Surgical Mutilation*, framing gender-affirming medical treatments for minors as “chemical and surgical mutilation,” equivalent to FGM.²⁰ This was followed by a directive from US Attorney General Pam Bondi, instructing the Department of Justice (DoJ) to investigate and prosecute providers of gender-affirming care under the Strengthening the Opposition to Female Genital Mutilation Act of 2020 (STOP FGM Act).²¹ Most recently, in May 2025, members of the US Congress introduced legislation to amend the STOP FGM Act, attempting to expand its scope to criminalise gender-affirming care under the guise of protecting children from FGM.²² If enacted, H.R. 3492 would impose federal criminal penalties on healthcare providers and others who facilitate gender-affirming care for minors, including prescribing hormone therapy or puberty blockers and performing any surgical intervention.

This legislation represents a systematic attack on the hard-won protections against practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) in the US, while simultaneously placing minors and their caregivers who seek to align physical traits with gender identity at serious physical and mental risk.

See Equality Now’s [policy brief on the problematic and erroneous conflation of FGM and Gender Affirming Care](#) and [joint statement which condemns the proposed bill](#)

Media, communications and propaganda against gender justice

Recent shifts in laws and government policies reflecting anti-gender and patriarchal backlash are often bolstered by powerful media and propaganda campaigns. These efforts are not isolated; rather, they are coordinated across various media outlets and are frequently supported, either directly or indirectly, by major tech companies and digital platforms. These platforms often fail to implement effective regulations to curb the spread of disinformation and misinformation. As a result, harmful narratives targeting gender justice movements are amplified, legitimising regressive policies and undermining progress toward equality.

A significant threat to the feminist values underpinning legal reform is the enduring and erroneous narrative that feminists have undermined the traditional family structure and are inherently antagonistic toward men, or that the government is discriminating against men by prioritising the well-being of women. Although such rhetoric has historically accompanied periods of feminist progress, it is now being amplified to an unprecedented extent through digital platforms, including podcasts and YouTube channels, which collectively reach global audiences in the billions. The algorithms that drive engagement on social media platforms are intentionally designed to prioritise provocative and polarising content, thereby facilitating the spread of misogynistic discourse and capitalising on widespread feelings of alienation and socio-economic hardship. While this phenomenon is shaped by complex underlying factors, the absence of meaningful intervention allows this form of propaganda to continue exerting harmful effects, not only on the mental and physical well-being of women and girls but also on that of men and boys.

- A survey by Vodafone revealed that 69% of 11 to 14-year-old boys in **the UK** have been exposed to misogynistic content online. Another UK study found that children “are being routinely and unwittingly exposed to sensational and harmful content that is negatively informing their world view,” with 59% of boys accessing manosphere content through innocent and unrelated searches, unintentionally fuelling online algorithms to show them more related content.
- In **Bolivia**, the Law to Guarantee Women a Life Free of Violence (Law 348)²³ is at risk from a bill submitted by a senator from the pro-government Movement Towards Socialism (MAS). Proposed reforms to Law 348 include requiring an alleged victim of sexual violence to give their testimony in a room with a one-way mirror, with an expert and prosecutor observing and then judging the truthfulness of the person's testimony. The case would also have to be corroborated by “other means of proof.” Senators speaking in support of the bill incorrectly claim the majority of sexual violence complaints are fabricated, and that Law 348 is “anti-men” and “divides families.”
- In **Uruguay**, representatives of the legislative branch introduced a bill in 2024 to amend the Law on Gender-Based Violence Against Women (Law 19.580)²⁴. Those advocating for the bill argue they want to avoid “false denunciations” and say the existing law undermines the principle of innocence until proven guilty and the right to due process. They claim there is too much reliance on the alleged victim's testimony, and precautionary measures involving legal actions or restrictions imposed on the alleged aggressor during the investigation and legal proceedings are excessively harsh. One of the bill's proposed amendments specifies: “Silence, lack of resistance, or the victim's prior or subsequent sexual history in a sexual assault case will be prudently analysed.” - directly contradicting internationally agreed-upon legal standards regarding consent in sexual violence cases.
- In **India**, there is a serious and severely harmful rise in men's rights activism, which purposefully overlooks and undermines structural and deeply pervasive violence against women and is organised to fuel gendered disinformation.²⁵

Harmful gender stereotypes

Propaganda to promote misleading campaigns that weaponise “family values”

- **The Geneva Consensus Declaration on Promoting Women's Health and Strengthening the Family**

Initiated by the United States in 2020, the Declaration is an anti-rights declaration with 39 signatories²⁶ as of July 2025, which the US rejoined in 2025.

The Declaration is an anti-abortion manifesto that contradicts human rights standards in international law and states that, “in no case should abortion be promoted as a method of family planning.” Further, it declares that there is no international right to abortion. It distorts the terminology of ‘family’ to mean a unit where motherhood and family are ‘natural’, and is determined to remove access to safe and accessible abortion for women and girls.

Although it has no enforcement mechanism, it has created a ‘Women's Optimal Health Framework’ to help States intervene and advocate for the regressive values in the health and education sector.²⁷ The agenda imposes motherhood as a part of “family unit” with a blatant disregard for the harmful impacts on the members of the family and society, especially women's well-being.

- **Kenya: Weakening Constitutional protections on the basis of ‘family values’**

The Linda Jamii (“Protect the Family”) Constitutional amendment Bill in Kenya (*initially Linda Uhai meaning Protect Life*) aims, among other things, to limit the applicability of international law; to add sanctity of life and family values to the chapter on constitutional values, and to replace the word abortion with the word ‘deliberate termination of pregnancy’ and further restrict the grounds under which abortion is permissible.²⁸ The bill repeats the language of the heteronormative family as the basic unit and emphasises that “this unit is protected by amending the clauses that threaten the family. With the proposed registration of NGOs advancing and propagating gay rights, we find ourselves on a slippery slope that will eventually lead to the radical alteration of what groups can be given the right to marry and how we should respond to them.”

- **Kenya and Uganda: Family protection plans that mandate arbitration for couples seeking divorce²⁹**

The “family protection” policies in Uganda and Kenya provide a framework that can be harmful in implementation, as they promote a strict meaning of a ‘family’ which is not inclusive of other formations of family structure. In Kenya, the policy is pushing for arbitration instead of granting divorce. In Uganda, there is a Marriage Bill proposal that seeks to, among others, criminalise cohabitation and grant more protections to men than women within marriages. Historically, this also pushes women into more gender stereotypical roles and dilutes their freedoms, as discussed elsewhere in the memo.

- **Kenya, Uganda and Nigeria: Threats to safe abortion guidelines³⁰**

There have been attempts to withdraw safe abortion guidelines in Kenya and Uganda, which were then overruled by the judiciary. However, the trend showcases the constant threat of backlash. In Lagos State, Nigeria, similar guidelines were suspended.

- **“Family values” Conferences that organise efforts to harm women's rights**

An alarming development is the rising profiles of anti-abortion actors through conferences and gatherings that disguise their intent behind language around ‘family values’, ‘women's health’ and ‘children's protection.’ For example, the second Pan-African Conference on Family Values, organised by the Africa Christian Professionals Forum, held in Nairobi, Kenya, and the Third African Regional Inter-Parliamentary Conference: Towards an African Charter on Family and Sovereignty in Uganda, are both examples of large-scale gatherings where the regressive and patriarchal agendas are organised and strategised openly and dangerously. The purpose is designed to weaken women's position within the family by promoting gender stereotypes or removing access to sexual and reproductive healthcare.

Call to Action

The backlash on women's rights isn't a new phenomenon. In the last few years, however, there has been a rise in coordinated and well-funded anti-rights agenda gaining prominence and platform through political support.³¹ The rights-based forces at the international, regional, and national levels, as well as the rights holders, all have an important role to play to strengthen the ground against the pushback.

Governments must:


1. Strengthen national laws and end any sex and gender-based discrimination in the law to lay the foundation against the backlash against the rights of women and girls.
2. Intervene in multi-lateral platforms and institutions to promote and defend a rights-based approach to negotiations, statements, agreements, and consensus-building.
3. Encourage and incentivise other governments to incorporate international human rights standards in their laws and policies.
4. Push back and guard against the weaponisation of language around 'family values' that is meant to weaken the hard-won rights of women and girls, and LGBTQ+ persons.
5. Provide material resources, and financial and political support to civil society organisations, feminist, human rights-based, and multistakeholder movements.
6. Protect freedom of expression and eliminate arbitrary restrictions or criminalization of human rights defenders, independent media, survivors and activists.
7. Meaningfully engage with vulnerable and excluded populations, human rights defenders, and civil society to understand and act on concrete concerns raised.
8. Expand and support the mandate of women and gender-focused ministries in the government.

Endnotes

- 1 A 30-year review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action finds that in 2024, one in four countries report backlash on women's rights. https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/SDG%205%20EGM%20Summary%20Report_0.pdf
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