

# ADDRESSING ANTI-WOMEN'S

rights groups, shrinking spaces, neoconservatism

## Lead

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The severe systemic crisis provoked by the global financial crisis in 2008 further deepened income inequality across the world and led to a rejection of social and political gains associated with neoliberalism. This has resulted in an increase of systematic attacks on human rights, in general, and women's and marginalized groups' rights in particular (1), by neo-conservative governments (with the crucial support of religious conservatism) and well resourced and globally well connected fundamentalist faith based organisations (2). In fact, they have reached UNECE governments and multilateral institutions, including the EU Institutions (3), jeopardizing the human rights, including those that focus on women's rights and norms that have been built in past decades. On the 9th of April 2019, a Global Civil Society Summit was held in Belgrade where the deteriorating conditions, the attacks on human rights defenders, women's rights and LGBTIQ+ activists were denounced (4). This patriarchal neoliberal fundamentalist (5) offensive is manifested in numerous initiatives led by both governments and private sector (6) which have been largely contested by feminist movements.



## Structural barriers and negative trends

Evidence (7) of **Shrinking Civic Space**: The accusations and judicial proceedings against activists and NGOs (ex. Helena Maleno by the Spanish State; the rescue NGO "Open Arms" by the Italian government) and the arrest of human rights defenders (ex. 10 HRDs in

Turkey), the creation of gag rules (ex. the Spanish “Gag Law” restricting freedom of expression) and the attacks against journalists (ex. Poland; Turkey; Ukraine; Russia) are just a few examples. In many countries, and in some international spaces, space created for independent civil society is being used and dominated by antigender, anti-equality and government organized NGOs (GONGOS).

**Attacks to equality and gender mainstreaming policies:** Sexual and reproductive rights are under attack in several countries (Poland; Hungary; Italy; Austria; Romania), including the reactivation of anti-abortion laws (Spain (8); the Global Gag Rule (9) passed by the Trump administration in 2017; and the One of Us Initiative advocating the EU institutions to prohibit funding SRR initiatives). Also, equality, “gender mainstreaming” and non-discriminatory policies, including GBV, and gendered educational curriculum (ex. Spain; Hungary, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Turkey) are challenged.

**Increase of hate crimes.** Exclusionary narratives such as the ‘fortress’ Europe, “gender ideology”, securitization policies (Preventing Violent Extremisms) criminalizing minorities such as romas and muslims, with serious effects on women and gender non-conforming people; and misogynistic/macho narratives are increasing xenophobia and result in homophobic/transphobic/anti-feminists attacks. There is a parallel increase in anti-semitic attacks and hate crimes (France, Germany, e.g.).

In the **political arena**, Trump’s arrival, Putin’s presence and other ultra-conservative political leaders (ex. UK; Spain; Austria; Hungary; Poland) have boosted fundamentalisms (economic/social/religious) (10).

**State capture** by transnational corporations and growing **militarization:** The lack of accountability, transparency and the use of national security concerns to legitimize ongoing human rights violations impact women’s rights in the region and create insecurity which foment populist discourses.

**Setbacks in the narratives:** In the process of radicalization, hate speech plays a central strategic role leading to an increase in racist, xenophobic, islamophobic and anti-LGBTIQ+ aggressions (11) as it is denounced by CSOs (“STOP Hate Crimes in Europe” Final Conference Statement, Madrid, 2012).

**Main progress and/or backlashes related to Beijing:** A lot has been achieved over the past decades and several legal cornerstones have been developed (ex. Irish referendum on abortion, 2018). However, we cannot take progress for granted. According to official reports gender parity may be shifting into reverse (WEF, 2017; EIGE reports on Beijing) and worrying setbacks are seen in some regions (12). The backlash and attacks against women’s rights are being largely contested in the streets by feminist movement and CSOs (13). Also, some political leaders have been vocal supporters of women’s rights (Canada demanded respect for reproductive rights; Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden and other countries stood up to the Global Gag Rule through She Decides Initiative; in the UK and France decisions to ban protests by anti-abortion groups in front of clinics and websites that publish false information were passed). The backlash is also challenged by faith based feminists

reinforcing a holistic approach to human rights which re-affirms that we must not allow the conservatives voices to define what religion is and what human rights are.



## Recommendations beyond Beijing+25

- Calling on governments to renew their women's rights and gender equality commitments (such as calling the EU to ratify the implementation of the Istanbul Convention), to reaffirm the **principle of non-regression** requiring that international norms which have already been adopted by States cannot be revised, and increasing accountability among international organizations and governments contributing to transparency, ensuring human and women's rights and reducing implementation gaps and impunity.
- **Aligning economic policies** with international human rights law, women's rights frameworks, and promoting rights of those traditionally marginalised (such as women of colour and with disabilities, LGTBQI+, HIV/AIDS women, migrants, other marginalized individuals from the global south).
- To **map and report 'gender-neutral' and anti-rights** organisations pushing for anti-democratic and anti-rights policies and narratives, developing strategies that hold them to account. Anti-rights groups purposefully erode the canon of established international human rights treaties and conventions, dismantle democratic structures, push for anti-humanistic values and even de-legitimise UN agencies and human rights bodies. While these movements use the language of liberation and human rights, they in fact promote restriction.
- Demanding states to control anti-rights groups as a matter of international human rights law; and mapping the origins of the funds/money/tax havens of those who finance anti-rights' groups, such as done by the Ours Platform.
- Calling on governments, UN agencies and other stakeholders to **suspend financial restriction** to the full implementation of women's rights (ex. sexual reproductive health and rights) and to increase funding for the women's movements and women's rights platforms, grassroots organisations and projects, especially grassroots women-led organisations focusing on advocacy on the pushback against the gender equality pushbacks.
- **Building alliances** with human rights actors, CSOs, institutions and other stakeholders to showcase that faith-based traditions are not a monolith.
- To **promote funding**, tools and training and capacity building to feminist groups to challenge the fundamentalists pushbacks.
- To challenge hate speeches in all its forms such as those against feminists, LGTBQI+, migrants, roma, minorities and women from marginalised backgrounds and **increase accountability** and transparency of all of those that are responsible for discriminatory practices that violate international human rights law.

## Useful resources

- (1) See the E.U. Fundamental Rights Agency report (2017): "[Challenges to women's human rights in the EU](#)"; and EU Parliament's resolution (2019) based in the report on "[Backlash in Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Rights](#)".
- (2) There is evidence about the large and global connections among the anti-rights movements as well as to the international harsh capitalist political economy and to other movements that are benefiting from it such as the climate change deniers. See for example Open Democracy, 27 March 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/revealed-trump-linked-us-christian-fundamentalists-pour-millions-of-dark-money-into-europe-boosting-the-far-right/>; Open Democracy, 27 March 2019, Revealed: dozens of European politicians linked to US 'incubator for extremism', <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/revealed-dozens-of-european-politicians-linked-to-us-incubator-for-extremism/>
- (3) On 19 March 2019, members of the European Parliament in collaboration with "One of Us" organised the "9th week for life" in the European Parliament.
- (4) [2019 Belgrade Call to Action](#)
- (5) Right-wing ideology is a package, of a conservative small state economy – which leads to household being the main area of delivering social services in the 'family' thus constraining women to the household economy more than in a more even centre-left or radical progressive version of the economy that provides a lot more care services and public services more generally.
- (6) Supporting religious private education, in detriment of public one, and sex-segregated schools; reducing public investment and privatizing the Health sector (Madrid, UK see [Privatization of healthcare in Europe](#)"), affecting to key services for women. Also, questioning gender equality policies, closing shelters for VAWG victims, allegations of "gender discrimination" against men, and attempts to dismantle Sexual and Reproductive Laws.
- (7) 58,7% of the 300 respondents of a survey conducted by Civil Society Europe and CIVICUS considered conditions are deteriorating for CSOs despite effective legal framework for civic freedoms in EU countries ([CIVICUS](#), 2016). See also the [CIVICUS Monitor](#)
- (8) The spanish conservative former minister of Justice, Gallardón, tried in 2013-2014 to restrict access to abortion.
- (9) It is an Executive Order for which U.S. funding is denied to health organizations that provide abortion services, counselling or referrals. This is accompanied by other policies such as the funding cut for UNFPA (Kemp-Kasten amendment).
- (10) In October 2017, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on cultural rights defined the concept and denounced the impacts of fundamentalist and extremism on women's rights on the [report A/72/155](#).
- (11) See [RAXEN REPORT Special 2018. Globalization of Intolerance](#).
- (12) The Andalusian case (Spain) is significant in that sense. After the elections held in December 2018, a far right wing political party (Vox) which openly opposes to current legislation on equality between women and men and GbV, denying even its existence, entered the Andalusian Parliament. An agreement was signed between

the 2 parties in government and Vox. It establishes a serious backlash in prevention and attention of VAWG, and contravening CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention, questioning gender mainstreaming policies and renaming GbV into intrafamiliar violence. It also supposes a reduction of the amount assigned to equality and EVAWG mechanisms.

- (13) i.e. Black Friday to protest the proposed ban on abortion in Poland (2017); May 8th feminist strikes in Spain (2018,2019), Demonstration November 7th (2016) in Madrid (Spain) against macho and sexual violence; and the latest Mee Too initiative.