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HOW DO WE CONTROL ALT-RIGHT DELETE?¹

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The rise of the far-right across countries has rightly commanded the necessary attention of global civil society, left-leaning political parties, progressive movements and philanthropy organisations. We have a right to be concerned: the people's agenda on the ground is far from being realised, the disadvantaged remain on the margins of development and progress, and far right forces seem bent on reversing gains and reconstituting narratives and frameworks of oppression and subjugation for women, young people and marginalised groups.

Asia has lessons to offer in this respect. We are the continent which has negotiated between freedoms and development gains; birthed the ideas of benevolent dictatorships and competing capitalisms; and where human rights NGOs from time immemorial have operated in contexts of 'closed, repressed, and obstructed' civic space. Yet civil society continues unabatedly in our quest for freedom and liberty in myriad ways.

Mingling the Past, Present and Future.

The far right, historically, rose as a response to anti-Marxism and anti-egalitarianism which socialism aspired to. Rising to prominence and power during Nazi Germany, far-right organisations also established transnational networking between groups across Europe which has expanded in current times. The far right has always been with us, and far-right politics have been intertwined with global politics from the early 1900s.² The tensions and contestations for power are not new in that regard.

Since 2015, the focus of global discourse on inequalities may have further spurred the far right and platformed their discourse. Left-leaning ideologies consider inequalities to be artificial and need the active role of the State to remove these inequalities. The right considers that inequalities are the natural state, and that the State should not interfere to 'fix' it. The far right takes it to the extremes of linking inequalities that occur to race, sex and gender, status, wealth, and able-bodiedness, as 'natural' advantages that need to be maintained. In this, the far right is also anti-feminist, as well as being anti-rights—as the human rights system and feminism work to establish equality. In this editorial—we will attempt to look at only the ways in which the far-right ideologies work on anti-feminism, anti-gender, and anti-women's human rights.

Cas Mudde³ iterates that we are currently in the fourth wave of the far right, politically active since the 2000s—a long timeline from conception to fruition, culminating in its most successful period to date and marked by its move into the mainstream. Mudde defines the far right as those who have the following characteristics: exclusionism (racism, xenophobia), hierarchism (leadership, authority, subordination, ranks of people), traditionalism (value systems of nation, religion, culture) which surface as unifying characteristics across borders. In addition to this, we think, the use of violence towards women, ethnic and religious minorities, gender and sexual minorities, immigrants and refugees - to restore the 'status quo'—should also be counted as the core of the far-right package.

Hungarian historian Andrea Peto urges us to view the anti-gender movement as not a form of classical anti-feminism, but that we regard it as a fundamentally new phenomenon launched to establish a new world order, facilitated and leveraged by the digital ecosystem, which inherently is embedded with illiberal, patriarchal, and capitalist power structures.⁴ The tech-fuelled far right poses challenges to democracy, human rights paradigms, and people's movements, at scale.

In Asia and the Pacific region, women's rights and feminism remain an anathema. Gender equality and women's rights—particularly access to education, health, work—have found greater acceptance amongst governments in the region as compared to equal rights within the family (as evinced by government reservations on article 16 of CEDAW) and in particular reproductive and sexual rights outside of the framework of marriage and family. On observation, gains with regards to divorce, custody of children, and anti-domestic violence measures are framed as "legal disadvantages" in the men's rights movements, rather than being seen as corrective measures for gender power imbalances within the family. Women's gains in education and employment, amidst shifting economies and global trends, are seen as displacing men from traditional structures and traditional roles. Sexuality, agency, and autonomy of women and girls over their bodies is relegated to the fringes—whether the issue is FGM/C, child marriage, or gender identity. In fact, women's primary roles in the family as mothers and caregivers continue to be asserted across national policies.

The New Narrative of Fertility Crisis.

In the West, the Great Replacement Theory drives the far-right narrative, whilst in Asia, the Great Fertility Crisis is being positioned as the key narrative. This is a powerful narrative—just as Ehrlich's Population Bomb was in the 1960s. The theory posits that populations are in decline, ageing societies are on the rise with the anticipated care burden, and that this needs to be reversed for economies to thrive and grow. In Asia, this particularly resonates with countries like Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and Singapore. China and India also, due to strict family-size policies, are seeing a rapidly ageing society. The proponents of the fertility crisis are also steeped in ethno-nationalist paradigms, and do not see migration, as a means to fix the issue of working-age populations.

Secondly, in many countries of Asia, women's low labour force participation—which also could help boost the working age population through addressing care burden, social protection mechanisms, gender equal family policies—is also not being adequately addressed. There is a demographic dividend—if governments chose to see it that way—in women who are not in the labour force. But this requires undoing the social framework of viewing women primarily as mothers and caregivers in our social structures. Even China is looking to reiterate these roles when faced with an ageing society.⁵ Having active and productive engagement of older citizens, and coming to terms, that we could build economies and societies around smaller populations are the other two considerations which are not given adequate attention. Rather, the single-minded focus is on encouraging women to have more children, to stay home to care for children in the early years, and extending that to other care roles, such as for the aged. This is regardless of the fact that even if this was to happen, population age structures would not reverse till about 60-80 years in the future.

The fertility crisis reinforces women's essential role as one based purely on reproduction and fertility maximisation; placed within the context of the heteronormative family; and to adopt the primary care role within that family. Maximisation of fertility entails early marriage, early pregnancy, multiple pregnancies (which have disastrous consequences for women's health)⁶—is evinced in Hungary's policies where young couples are incentivised to start families during or just after completing their studies, and young women are given tax exemptions to start families before the age of 30. Student loans of female students are forgiven when they give birth during their studies up till two years after obtaining their diplomas.⁷ Early child-bearing often entails many more pregnancies and births, especially in the absence of contraceptive and safe abortion services. Parental benefits—when extended to only the female parent—will curtail the female parent's ability to eventually move to the workforce. Whilst pragmatic Asian nations have invested in generous mandatory maternity leave, work-from-home legislation, strong support infrastructure in terms of health and education—Hungary's incentives may be a little overboard, especially since these have not produced the necessary results and have been critiqued as policies to transfer welfare benefits to wealthier citizens.⁸

On the one hand, techno-puritans such as Musk and Thiel also propagate these ideas of 'end of the human race', and see themselves as the 'progressives' on their digital platforms, and themselves have fathered many children with various women in adherence to these beliefs around 'breeding excellence.'⁹ On the other hand, traditionalist pro-natalist groups also hold up strict gender roles for women and men, stigmatise working women, and emphasise men's economic roles as breadwinner and head of the household and family. Within a paradigm

that prioritises biological essentialism, waging a "war on wokeness" is an essential strategy for putting an end to sexual and gender diversity. It doesn't end there. The anti-gender, far right is also against women in the workplace. In the EU, the far right has voted against equal pay for women, gender specific policies on the energy crisis, women's poverty, board representation, addressing/prioritising violence and harassment at work, and even trafficking.¹⁰ The scope of what is then understood as anti-gender widens considerably beyond pro-natalism, pro-SRHR and pro-sexual and gender diversity, and poses serious risks for gains made for the rights of women especially from marginalised communities.

The Great Replacement also manifests in Asia as a fear of minorities, immigrants and refugees. India, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Fiji have all exhibited discrimination against, violence on and expulsion of minorities.¹¹ Across the world minorities, immigrants, and refugees are framed as simultaneously taking away economic opportunities and feeding from the public teat which rightfully belongs to the original people of the land, without taking into account the economic activity of minorities and immigrants, boosting economic growth especially in key sectors like agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and services. This 'anti-woke' messaging of the far right in the West has been adopted and co-opted by ethno-nationalists across the region.¹²

The far-right utilises memory politics¹³—in some countries—to the extent of rewriting history books for schools, reframing events and sites of past injustices as a source of legitimacy, re-igniting 'threats' and 'losses.' Across the region, we can see memory politics, at the service of the far-right have been at play in a number of countries: India,

Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar, South Korea¹⁴ to name a few.

Native far-right groups are active in the region, as has been noted by academics and NGOs alike in the region. The Taliban in Afghanistan and the military junta in Myanmar are examples of the far right aiding or directly seizing power. In India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Indonesia, and Malaysia, far right groups combine ethno-nationalism and religious identity to fuel anti-feminist, anti-rights discourse. Securitisation measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic continue to be at play, and, in a number of Asian countries, increased militarisation has been noted: Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Laos and Pakistan in the wake of US-China tensions. All of this points to greater political and social illiberalism in the near future in the region.

New Possibilities. How then can we hope to address the pervasive far rightism? We will have to address some of the key concerns of the world at large and offer more current solutions than the old models which do not work. A response to a new multi-culturalism,¹⁵ a new economic model, a new multilateralism that reins in climate change and builds peace.

We would have to build an all-inclusive vision of societal change that moves the feminist agenda away from being tied to the neo-liberal economic framework (although this has been more the work of corporate feminists rather than movement feminists) simply because neo-liberal frameworks have failed to deliver development goods and benefits to citizens and have chipped away at the provision of social goods and social protection systems under continued (and continuing) austerity measures. In turn, the inordinate growth and wealth of the private sector and the billionaire class; the creation and crash of bubble economies in shorter spans (contributing to frequent

economic volatility); and the unchecked growth of the digital eco-system controlled entirely by the United States, have all been resulting failures of the neo-liberal economic framework. This calls on us to work then, in creative ways, to back up on calls of sovereignty of States and their peoples in being able to uphold the human rights of citizens whether by use of fiscal tools, or a shift to just transition.¹⁶ Some of this work was already being done in trade negotiations around access to medicines, during the HIV epidemic and COVID-19 pandemic; as well as negotiations around debt and climate, which we can draw on as a movement.

Part of an all-inclusive vision is the creation of a shared identity which can translate across borders and movements. In the past, freedom struggles from the colonial masters enabled a shared framework for liberation across movements, including from the women's and feminist movements. In this newer struggle for sovereignty, the women's and feminist movements need to be grounded in the struggles for food, land, the natural environment in very tangible ways and not in an extractive manner. This may mean we may have to interrogate identity politics as how this has played out in the last two years. In this elite capture of the discourse on identities—nation, religion, race, family, feminism, sexuality, gender, diversity—intersectionality has become a buzzword rather than social justice lens; identities have become flattened, monolithic categories without nuance.

The Global South has been further marginalised from the discourse whether on being able to assert rights to the basic necessities and or on being able to offer our worldviews, our multiple and diverse identities, and our strategies of being and becoming in a complex world. There is a need for us to reclaim these discourses and re-make them in our image. What new, inclusive shared identities will reflect our shared struggles better? Will inclusion

of class, local self-determination, justice frameworks serve us more strategically? How do we utilise the momentum from identity politics and build towards collective action on systemic change? After 50+ years, the national landscape has evolved with newer challenges and battles for movements. Governments and political parties which triumphed post-independence have become symbolic of the decay and corruption of society. Without the common enemy of the coloniser, defining nationhood and citizenship became the project of ethno-nationalists rather than of all citizens, especially in the face of globalisation. Women, young people, and marginalised groups have to be able to assert a stake in this project, especially as a bulwark to safeguard our rights against The Great Fertility Crisis. Whilst feminist movements have been vociferous in the anti-fascism struggle, we can move and reframe our thinking towards strengthening democracy and democratic institutions, and building new constituencies of voters, especially amongst young women.¹⁷

The multi-lateral system as we know it struggles for survival—this was apparent at UNGA80, where States from Africa and Asia were speaking up: for Palestine,¹⁸ for sustainable development, for global architectures on development and trade, and even for gender equality. The Hague Group was founded by governments of the Global South: Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, Honduras, Malaysia, Namibia, Senegal and South Africa.¹⁹ China has stepped up calls for a renewed multilateralism—on platforms like the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. China has stepped in to fund the WHO,²⁰ and also hosted an inter-governmental meeting on gender equality in October 2025, with UN Women, which was presided by President Xi.²¹ Malaysia hosted a meeting on the creation of a just and humane new world order, also presided by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim.²² South Africa is hosting the G20, with an aim of centring African

concerns and voices in the discussions of the bloc, with a focus on reparations and debt justice, and sustainable development issues such as disaster resilience, just energy transition, and mining of critical minerals.²³ In these meetings we can see that governments are seeking forms and processes of multilateral engagements as spaces to negotiate and come to agreements on global issues. Whether these will be centred around the United Nations or whether new platforms will be created to carry this out depends on the UN system being able to reinvent itself usefully in this new global scenario. But what it does signal to us is the appetite for multilateralism in the Global South; and that we as networks will have to work across nations and blocs more effectively, creating and holding space for feminist thinking and feminist politics at national and regional, and cross-regional levels.

Most importantly, focus in the last few years has been on the marginalisation of young men, but lesser attention has been made to how young women have become more progressive than any other demographic group. This is clearly our immediate constituency. However, our inability to delink ourselves from the perceived 'global' and 'elite' agendas, and to present a new vision for the future, risks making headway with our key constituency. Our movement must work concertedly on fully transferring our knowledge, insights, skills, with young women and help them set the agenda for their countries, their regions, their world—if we are aiming to ensure the pro-rights agenda dominates the future discourse in the long run.

In the last few months, ARROW has spent time talking to partners working at community and national levels, partners within governments, ministries, and agencies, as well as other development stakeholders. The blatant disregard of the American far right for health equity of citizens, and especially women's health,

is one of the issues that has galvanised both governments and CSOs to forge some common ground. In Asia, recent examples from Nepal and Cambodia show that the legalisation of abortion and provision of contraceptive services have significantly reduced maternal mortality. **There is no going back.** Young people's access to sexual and reproductive health information and services are critical in them exercising autonomy and agency over their lives in the context of climate change and economic volatility. **There is no going back.** Women and marginalised communities' rights over bodily integrity and a life free from violence must be affirmed and protected by human rights and laws at national level. In every forum, the message has been unequivocally clear: **We are not going back.**

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HOW WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS LEAD DEMANDS FOR DEMOCRACY IN THE FACE OF BACKLASH AND POLITICISED RELIGION

The global turn away from gender equality has come into sharp focus now that a new US government has been elected, riding on a wave of populism that combines white supremacist inclinations with resurgent retro-patriarchal beliefs and the attendant hyper-capitalist policies. Scholars understand this combination as inherent to the politics of backlash.¹ The anti-rights agenda has long been fuelled by Evangelical Christian organisations based in the US, but also by Russian oligarchs and the Russian President Vladimir Putin himself, who has made opposing LGBTQI+ rights a cornerstone of his ideology.²

Observers across the global majority recognise this rising authoritarianism and religiously-motivated contempt for gender equality and inclusion. In Asia, powerful men share this opposition to sexual and reproductive rights, women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights, and a more inclusive approach to gender. They may do so as part of a broader effort to deny their people the benefits of democracy. Why is this the case?

Political leaders weaponise traditional and religiously-informed views on gender norms in order to appeal to their constituents while, at the same time, eroding their democratic institutions and consolidating power through rising authoritarianism.³ As Turkish scholar Yesim Arat has argued, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has

instrumentalised the rollback of women's rights, thus appealing to a traditional and conservative voter base that has acquiesced to his suppression of political dissent.⁴ In just one instance of backlash to women's rights, he withdrew his country from its commitments under the Istanbul Convention to end violence against women and promote gender equality.⁵

We argued that women's movements are central to demands for democracy in their countries, often leading opposition to undemocratic governments, demanding open civic space, and building a grassroots culture of democracy.

In Pakistan, the populist leader Imran Khan who came to power with military support in 2018 soon exhibited both a disdain for feminism and women's rights, as 'western' inventions, promising to return the country to a pristine state of early Islamic community at Medina. His rhetoric, while purportedly anti-imperialist, revealed his disdain for democratic culture and institutions.⁶ Khan suppressed media freedoms and progressive movements, exhibiting overt sympathies for Islamist religious politics.^{7, 8}

The use of politicised religion, to justify both anti-gender policies and block democratic progress, is not new in

spotlight

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Asia. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan are just two examples of how the weaponisation of religion has been used historically to suppress progress on human rights alongside the consolidation of undemocratic political power. The political power in these countries is vested in the royal family, theocratic authority, hybrid military rule, and a de facto Taliban authority, respectively.^{9, 10, 11, 12} In India, the rise of *Hindutva*, a Hindu majoritarian political ideology currently invoked by the ruling *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), has distinct implications for Muslim women, as non-Hindus find themselves increasingly targeted by the government's exclusionary policies.^{13, 14}

At ODI Global, we recently published our research uncovering how feminist movements are navigating the current challenges to both gender equality and the rollback of democracy in global South contexts. Our report, "How women's movements lead demands for democracy in the face of backlash and politicised religion" is based on a review of evidence and interviews with activists from eight countries, including Iran, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Malaysia. We argued that women's movements are central to demands for democracy in their countries, often leading opposition to undemocratic governments, demanding open civic space, and building a grassroots culture of democracy.

Our research found that many contemporary feminist mobilisations in these countries deploy rights-based framings and rely on civic (and secular) institutions to defy the anti-gender politics crafted in religious terms and

resist the imposition of related laws in the name of upholding religion and culture.¹⁵ Iranian feminists, working with human rights activists inside the country and women in the diaspora, have led the global demand for recognition of gender apartheid as a crime against humanity. Women from Afghanistan have now joined this campaign. In both contexts, their arguments are based on the universality of human rights and supported by the United Nations.^{16, 17} These feminists also believe that only with a meaningful democratic transition will it be possible to actualise their vision of women's human rights.

It is possible that feminists will now have to contend with yet another wave of backlash, this time deeply destabilising because it emanates from governments in the US and Europe that are disengaging from their commitment to supporting human rights, gender equality and democracy in the developing world. Feminists across Asia will lose allies from western political and civil society organisations.

The political power of religious authority remains an entrenched oppositional force, impeding the goals of feminism not only in these countries, but even in others where the state is not theocratic. In Pakistan, the women's movement of the 1980s called for a secular democratic state in response to the military regime's programme of Islamisation. This was characterised by laws discriminatory to women and religious minorities, driven by religious political parties and with support from Saudi Arabia.¹⁸ Our research shows that this period left a devastating legacy. Young feminists

today struggle to articulate similar demands publicly, constrained by the heightened risk posed by religious militants, a shrinking civic space, and a weak democratic culture in which politicians fear to confront politicised religion meaningfully.

We found that in Malaysia, feminists belonging to the group Sisters in Islam have sought to tread an important middle ground, navigating between the political power of Islam and the secular state structure to advocate for legal equality. For daring to engage in feminist interpretation of doctrine, the state-run fatwa council issued an edict condemning them for their efforts, leading to years of court battles. To contend with growing backlash, including from an increasingly conservative public, SIS has adapted its strategies and widened its focus to include youth more broadly.

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CROSS-MOVEMENT LEARNINGS AS A FORM OF RESISTANCE

Exploring the Intersections. As fundamentalism, ultra-right governments and the closing of civic spaces continue to rise, movements and human rights defenders are coming together to respond to these systemic and systematic attacks on rights and justice.¹ However, feminists with disabilities are largely left out of the room. People with disabilities are trans, queer, Indigenous, women, girls, non-binary, young, old, and more. In the current geopolitical realities, it is people with disabilities, and especially those with multiple marginalisations, who are among the most impacted.² The systemic challenges those with disabilities face in being able to access fundamental human rights is further heightened when ultraconservative ideologies are pushed as laws, policies and the norm.³ As the article explores, there is a growing common narrative between State and non-State actors throttling human rights, and the laws, policies, practices and social structures that the disability movement(s) has been challenging—both aim to control bodies, curtail rights and curb dissent. For decades, feminists with disabilities, especially those who are multi-marginalised, have been responding to and collectivising against the attack on their autonomy, rights and personhood.

The article juxtaposes the tools being used by the oppressive ultra-conservative actors, which are deeply rooted in the ideologies of productivity and value to society,⁴ with the ableist narratives of disability. These narratives have led to laws, policies and practices which restrict and/or deny people with disabilities their fundamental rights. Through the years, in the face of these threats and attacks, the disability movement(s) has strategically

advocated for their rights in a world designed to curtail them. In this context, the article aims to foster the adoption of intersectional strategies and to encourage learning from both the decades of advocacy efforts by the disability movement(s) and the ways in which the feminist and other social movements have been responding to growing global realities. Learnings from the disability movement(s) show that historically and to this day, the tools and tactics used by fascist, ultra-conservative, far-right actors all aim to control bodies, curtail rights and curb dissent. In addition, criminalisation has been another popular tool used by ultra-conservative actors to restrict recognition and realisation of human rights.⁵ This includes criminalisation of gender, sexuality, identity, collectivisation, protest, and dissent to name a few. While there has been an extensive mapping of the anti-rights narrative by civil society, feminist and social movements, there are learnings from the disability movement(s) which have yet to be explored, particularly those related to autonomy. The disability movement might not have all the answers on how best to respond to this concerning world order, but there is space for learning. There is a lot to learn from the movement of persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, for example, on strategies to navigate the stripping of rights and being criminalised for existing.⁶ The existence of laws restricting their legal capacity, eugenics, and gross inaccessibility and discrimination persons with disabilities face in exercising inter alia their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) all highlight the ways in which they are stripped off their dignity and

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While there has been an extensive mapping of the anti-rights narrative by civil society, feminist and social movements, there are learnings from the disability movement(s) which have yet to be explored, particularly those related to autonomy. There is a lot to learn from the movement of persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, for example, on strategies to navigate the stripping of rights and being criminalised for existing.

criminalised for their identity. An effective example of building and strengthening collective strategies can be seen in the Nairobi Principles on Abortion, Prenatal Testing and Disability, which are a set of commitments that reaffirm bodily autonomy and strengthen SRHR, which followed the seminal statement by the CRPD and CEDAW Committees.⁷ Reproductive and disability rights activists came together to challenge the ways in which access to safe abortion and the foetal impairment exceptions have been used as tools by far-rights actors to curtail bodily autonomy.⁸

The minds and bodies of people with disabilities, especially women, girls and gender-diverse people, and especially those with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities and neurodivergence, are not only subjected to State and familial control, but are used as a weapon to strip

them of their personhood.⁹ Legal capacity laws have considered persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities as less than fully human, and therefore unfit to hold or exercise rights.¹⁰ These laws deny those with disabilities their bodily autonomy, the right to consent or refuse consent, to enter into contracts, to own or inherit property, to vote and more—effectively stripping them of their fundamental rights and recognition as a full person.¹¹ The institutionalisation of people with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, where they are imprisoned in State-funded institutions (or even within their families and homes), shackled and subjected to inhuman, degrading treatment and torture, still continue despite the CRPD. The disability movement has been strategically collectivising and addressing these systemic, State and non-State sponsored, family-initiated forms of criminalisation¹² and control, while challenging the patriarchal, ableist and capitalist structures built to devoid them of their rights. It is these very strategies which can be built on to respond to the current geopolitical climate.

It is important to recognise that ultra-right and fascist actors are pushing for capitalist, heteronormative and ableist structures. These structures have in fact been the everyday realities for those with disabilities for decades. It is these very structures which the disability movement(s) has been challenging. Notions of community care, wholeness, collective access, interdependence, solidarity—all central to disability justice—have evolved as a response to these structures.

Conclusion. There are multiple parallels which can be drawn between the tools for suppression used by fascist actors and the disability discourse being challenged by feminists with disabilities. There is a common narrative in the ways in which anti-right actors suppress rights, and the laws, policies, practices and societal attitudes which have deprived people with disabilities of their rights. Recognising that we are in the midst of a global crisis and the only way to respond to it is to do it together, we need to delve deeper into strategies and learnings from the disability movement(s) and build on them to counter the backlash and the pushback against rights and justice. It is important to recognise that ultra-right and fascist actors are pushing for capitalist, heteronormative and ableist structures. These structures have in fact been the everyday realities for those with disabilities for decades. It is these very structures which the disability movement(s) has been challenging.¹³ Notions of community care, wholeness, collective access, interdependence, solidarity—all central to disability justice¹⁴—have evolved as a response to these structures. In these grave times, when the urgency to protect our movements is more important than ever, we must come together to learn from each other and collectively respond to a world order intent on throttling our rights. We need to respond to the colonial practice of siloisation by shifting our activism lens to ways of working collectively.¹⁵

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PACIFIC CHURCHES AS AGENTS OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION:

Bridging Faith and Human Rights

The Pasifika worldview is deeply rooted in the integration of indigenous knowledge, practice, and Christian spirituality. This unique synthesis acknowledges that faith and culture are not separate but interwoven, influencing societal structures, governance, and daily life. Christianity has long been a dominant force in the Pacific, shaping cultural norms and social values. With its deep roots in conservative and Western patriarchal traditions, many Pacific churches have historically reinforced gender-based violence (GBV), discrimination, and rigid social hierarchies. However, in recent decades, these same churches have become key agents of social transformation, leveraging theological teachings alongside indigenous values to advocate for human rights, particularly gender equality.

The Role of the Church in Perpetuating Patriarchy and GBV. The deeply embedded patriarchal structures within Pacific societies have been both reinforced and justified through Christian teachings. Biblical interpretations that prioritise male leadership and female submission have led to systemic discrimination against women in religious, domestic, and societal spheres. Churches have often been complicit in upholding harmful cultural norms that tolerate or even normalise gender-based violence. Clergy and religious leaders have sometimes resisted conversations around gender justice, viewing them as external influences that threaten cultural and traditional values.

However, this narrative is shifting as Pacific churches increasingly recognise the spiritual and theological imperative to uphold human rights, including gender equality. Rather than being an institution that perpetuates injustice, the church is

now reclaiming its prophetic role as a catalyst for social change.

Shifting Towards Gender Justice: Theology as a Catalyst. A growing number of Pacific churches are embracing a theology that promotes gender justice. The Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC) has been at the forefront of this movement, integrating faith-based principles with human rights advocacy. Through Gender Equality Theology, the PCC and its partners are re-examining scripture to highlight the Christian mandate for justice, love, and equality. The Gender Equality Theology initiative, developed and piloted by Rev. Dr. Cliff and Rev. Siera Bird in partnership with Uniting World, aims to challenge patriarchal interpretations of the Bible and affirm women's leadership in religious and social spaces. Theological dialogues, educational resources, and clergy training programmes are helping churches reframe their understanding of gender relations, shifting from male dominance to mutual partnership.

The Commission on the Status of Women in Pacific Churches. A landmark development in this space has been the establishment of the Commission on the Status of Women in Pacific Churches. This commission, initially envisioned in 2019 and delayed due to COVID-19, is working towards assessing the role of women in religious leadership, addressing discriminatory practices, and fostering gender-inclusive policies within church institutions. It also aligns with the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), marking 30 years since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

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The commission provides a structured platform for theological reflection, policy recommendations, and advocacy efforts aimed at dismantling systemic barriers that prevent women from fully participating in religious life. It also serves as a space for women of faith to strategise and build networks that transcend ecclesiastical boundaries.

Gender Status Card Rollout: Measuring Progress. One of the significant tools developed to track progress in gender equality within church settings is the Gender Status Card. This initiative, championed by PCC's Just and Safe Pacific Communities of Women and Men programme, provides data-driven insights into the representation of women in leadership, participation in decision-making, and responses to GBV. By collecting and analysing gender-specific data, churches can identify gaps and develop targeted interventions to address inequalities.

The Gender Status Card serves as both an accountability mechanism and a tool for transformation. By publicly sharing these findings, churches are holding themselves responsible for implementing gender-sensitive policies and practices.

Regional Women Theologians and Feminist Dialogues. The rise of regional women theologians and feminist dialogues in the Pacific has further strengthened gender justice advocacy within churches. These dialogues, supported by PCC and its partners, are building stronger relationships among women inside and outside church structures for collaboration. Women theologians are reinterpreting biblical texts through the lens of justice and equality, offering new perspectives that challenge traditional patriarchal readings.

These dialogues are fostering collaboration among scholars, clergy, and grassroots activists, ensuring that theological discourse translates into real-world policy changes and community transformation. By amplifying the voices of women theologians, Pacific churches are nurturing a new generation of faith leaders committed to gender justice.

Break the Silence Sunday: A Call to Action. A powerful initiative in the fight against GBV within church communities is Break the Silence Sunday, an annual event dedicated to addressing gender-based violence from the pulpit. On this day, churches across the Pacific deliver sermons, hold discussions, and conduct awareness activities aimed at challenging the culture of silence surrounding GBV.

Break the Silence Sunday underscores the moral and spiritual responsibility of the church to condemn violence, support

survivors, and advocate for systemic change. It reinforces the idea that addressing GBV is not just a social issue but a theological imperative that aligns with the core Christian values of love, justice, and human dignity.

The Future of Pacific Churches in Human Rights Advocacy. While the work of social transformation within Pacific churches continues to progress, it is also beginning to engage in broader social inclusion. The processes of engagement must not only focus on Christianity or religious frameworks but also take into account indigenous tradition, practice, and knowledge. The communal-oriented nature of Pacific societies and the ongoing quest for decolonisation and self-determination must also be central to this dialogue.

The movement towards gender justice and broader social inclusion must critically examine Western epistemologies,

including individualism, which challenge a purely rights-based approach. Instead, faith-based advocacy in the Pacific should be informed by both theological insights and indigenous philosophies that emphasise collective well-being and relationality.

By expanding their focus to include gender justice, child protection, and ecological stewardship, Pacific churches are redefining their role as moral and ethical leaders. As part of this transformation, the PCC has integrated its gender justice work into a broader Safe Churches Ministry, which incorporates gender equality, child protection, and faith-based human rights advocacy.

Through sustained theological reflection, policy reform, and grassroots activism, Pacific churches are transforming from institutions that once upheld patriarchal structures to powerful agents of justice, equity, and peace in the region.

WAR ON CHOICE: *Tracking the Anti-Abortion Movement in India*

Introduction. On August 10, 2024, hundreds of demonstrators marched through Thrissur, Kerala,¹ carrying banners that read “Equal Rights for the Unborn”, “Choose Life”, and “Abortion Kills the Innocent”, accompanied by visuals of fetuses. Among them, young participants held placards declaring “My Generation Rejects Abortion”. A key feature of the demonstration was a live tableaux depicting an abortion procedure that featured actors in surgical gear around a body, extracting a bloodied plastic doll from it.² Images of the procession, which passed in front of the National Health Mission office, were shared widely on social media.

This event marked the third National March for Life, an annual mobilisation

supported by various anti-abortion groups. Since 2022,³ the march has been held in New Delhi (2022), Pune (2023), and Thrissur (2024),⁴ with growing participation each year, attracting schoolchildren, young adults, and even gynaecologists. Social media posts from participants show young people dancing in reels mouthing, “We are a pro-life generation”.

These are signs of a growing, organised opposition to abortion rights in India. Once a fragmented discourse, it has evolved into a public-facing movement challenging access to abortion. Despite being one of the first countries to legalise abortion through the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act in 1971, reproductive rights in India remain restricted and

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frequently violated. Structural barriers and pervasive social stigma continue to

limit access, disproportionately affecting marginalised individuals. The rise of anti-choice messaging and mobilisation, emboldened by support from global anti-abortion groups and the global conservative backlash against reproductive autonomy and women's rights threatens abortion rights⁵ in India.

Unveiling resistance: CommonHealth's anti-choice study in India. To assess whether the rise of anti-abortion narratives is reflective of a strategic and coordinated effort warranting closer scrutiny and

counter-action, CommonHealth conducted a media scoping study from September to December 2023. The study aimed to profile entities spreading anti-reproductive autonomy content and identify key players, emerging narratives, tactics and public engagement strategies and understand how these efforts shape public opinion and influence abortion policy.

1. Key Players: The study identified eight key entities opposing abortion rights and access for various reasons. Four are registered NGOs: Life for All (Tamil Nadu), Saved Pearl Foundation (Maharashtra), Janpragati (Uttar Pradesh), and Rescue (Karnataka). The remaining four are faith-based groups, three with Christian and one with Hindu affiliations. Catholic organisations, including Eva Pro-Life Movement, Jesus Youth Pro-Life, a ministry of the international Catholic movement Jesus Youth and Youth United for Christ (YU4C), actively promote anti-abortion messaging across India. Sant Asharamji Ashram, a Gujarat-based Hindu spiritual group, opposes abortion through its women's wing, Mahila Utthan Mandal, framing it as antithetical to Hindu culture. All these entities explicitly oppose abortion, and some (Life for All, YU4C, and Eva Pro-Life) collaborate with US-based anti-abortion organisations such as ProLife Global, Life Equip Global, and Human Life International, amplifying global anti-choice influence.

2. Emerging Narratives: The anti-choice discourse centres around three central themes: the convergence of anti-abortion and broader anti-choice ideologies, prioritisation of foetal rights, and use of moral and constitutional arguments. Opposition to abortion is deeply embedded within a broader anti-choice movement that condemns sexual and reproductive choices, including same-sex relationships, pre-marital and casual sex, and the use of contraception, while promoting traditional values such as abstinence and marriage.

A central argument is foetal rights, asserting that life begins at conception, making the foetus a legal human entity. This narrative challenges the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act, claiming it violates the constitutional rights of the “unborn human”, framing it as a legal and ethical transgression.

3. Tactical Approaches. These anti-choice entities use concerning tactics to legitimise their arguments, manipulate public perception, and cultivate trust.

3.1 Use of foetal imagery and personhood rhetoric: Graphic images of fetuses/aborted fetuses, real or simulated, are paired with emotionally charged language, such as “murder” and calling the foetus a “baby.” This tactic aims to emphasise the foetus’s humanity and portray abortion as inhumane. For instance, Instagram posts by JY Pro-Life Ministry and Eva Pro-Life highlight foetal features such as facial structures, brain development, and blood types to assert that embryos, even at early stages, deserve protection.

3.2 Co-option of rights-based language: Anti-abortion groups, including JY Pro-Life and Eva Pro-life, frame their stance using rights-based language. They argue that abortion violates foetal rights and incorporate disability rights rhetoric, claiming all lives, regardless of disability, are valuable and worthy of protection. This strategy seeks to broaden their appeal by aligning with the disability rights movement.

3.3 Dissemination of disinformation: Another dangerous and insidious strategy used is the spread of disinformation. They misrepresent scientific information on foetal development, psychological effects of abortions, and alleged health risks to create a facade of scientific legitimacy and claim their arguments as evidence-based. For instance, Mahila Utthan Mandal’s website claims abortion increases breast cancer risk, reduces fertility, and causes disabilities in future children, using medical professionals to lend credibility to these falsehoods.

3.4 Distortion of abortion data:

These entities distort research to exaggerate abortion risks. For example, they misrepresented the 2015 study ‘The Incidence of Abortion and Unintended Pregnancy in India’ to reinforce their narrative. In a 2019 article, The Hindu, a prominent national newspaper, quoted the founder of ‘Life For All’ claiming, “...As per a study published in the Lancet Medical Journal ... 15.6 million abortions occurred in 2015, a major reason being sex-selective abortions which we are fighting to end”.⁶ While the abortion figure was accurate, the link to sex selection was misleading and unsupported by the study. This strategic misinterpretation diverts attention from issues such as access to safe and legal abortion services and promotes false claims of widespread sex-selective abortions.

3.5 Appropriation of a pro-women stance: Some entities, particularly those opposing sex-selective abortions, co-opt feminist rhetoric to support their cause. By invoking terms like “Save the Girl Child” with emotionally charged language and imagery, they frame limiting abortion rights as a way to combat gender-based discrimination, undermining abortion access while pretending to support women’s rights.

3.6 Glorification of motherhood: Positive storytelling is strategically employed to glorify motherhood, framing carrying an unplanned pregnancy to term or despite a foetal disability diagnosis as a morally superior choice. Video testimonials from couples who continued their pregnancies highlight themes of gratitude and childbirth as a rewarding decision. Organisations such as Janpragati and Saved Pearl Foundation, which provide crisis pregnancy support, claim that they empower women by providing resources to continue pregnancies, steering them away from abortion under the guise of support and presenting it as a supportive alternative.

3.7 Usage of religious texts as moral foundations:

Faith-based organisations use sacred texts from the Bible and Hindu scriptures citing verses such as Jeremiah 1:5 (“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you”) and Parashara Smriti 4:20 (“Abortion incurs a sin twice that of killing a Brahmana and has no atonement”) to underscore the sanctity of life from conception and to condemn abortion as “killing” or “murder.” These texts are commonly referenced in their messaging.

4. Public Engagement Strategies.

A wide range of public engagement strategies are employed, including crisis helplines, educational outreach, social media campaigns, mass mobilisation efforts, and direct peer interactions.

4.1 Crisis helplines: Four entities run free helplines that aim to support women with unplanned pregnancies, but they exclusively promote adoption or parenting as viable alternatives to abortion. Some helplines spread disinformation about abortion risks, while Life for All’s ‘Pregnancy Helpline India’ even offers medically unproven ‘abortion pill reversal’ services. These helplines also connect callers to Crisis Pregnancy Centres, which offer counselling, accommodation, medical assistance, and life skills training.

4.2 Educational outreach: Anti-abortion groups focus on educational initiatives such as seminars, workshops, and courses in schools and colleges, often presenting their messages under the guise of generating awareness. These programmes use emotional tactics such as “pro-life exhibitions” with silicone foetus models. Life For All claims to have reached over 130,000 participants, while Rescue’s campaign engaged 186,000 students. Life For All also offers certification programmes in counselling that cover foetal development, adoption and “sexual integrity” to shape young people’s perspectives on reproductive rights.

4.3 Symbolic protests and online activism: Every year on August 10th, social media platforms such as Instagram are used to mark the anniversary of the

MTP Act as a “Black Day”. YU4C’s Digital Blackout Campaign encouraged people to set a black poster as their WhatsApp display picture to protest the Act’s 50th anniversary. Such campaigns leverage social media, especially WhatsApp, to amplify their messages and create an illusion of widespread opposition to abortion.

4.4 Mass mobilisation and youth engagement: Anti-abortion groups engage in mass mobilisation through silent marches and rallies, timed on significant occasions such as National Girl Child Day, the anniversary of the MTP Act and International Human Rights Day. CHARIS India, supported by Pro-Life Global, organises the annual “March for Life” to campaign for repealing the MTP Act, drawing diverse crowds, including young people, children, activists, gynaecologists, lawyers/judges and other professionals. To reach youth, they use shareable content such as memes and reels on platforms like Instagram, where young people both consume and amplify anti-abortion content, contributing to the movement’s digital footprint and ensuring the continuation of the anti-abortion movement into the future.

A Common Playbook - An Opportunity to Fight Back.

The evidence is clear that anti-choice entities are systematically working to erode access to safe abortion and undermine reproductive justice in India, risking an increase in unsafe abortions and adverse outcomes for those seeing abortion. At this critical juncture, it is imperative to examine the global anti-choice movement and contextualise it within the broader abortion rights discourse. Identifying transnational parallels and distinctions can provide key insights for developing effective counter-strategies.

Evidence points to a transnational “common playbook” used by anti-choice groups with similar narratives and strategies across countries. For instance, foetus-centric rhetoric emphasising “life

from conception” is seen both in India and the USA (Georgia House Bill 481 (HB 481) in 2019).⁷ The use of science-based arguments with rights-based claims and ‘pro-women’ narratives is popular among anti-abortion activists in the UK,⁸ while faith-based organisations play a pivotal role in shaping restrictive reproductive health policies in Africa.⁹ Weaponisation of medical misinformation and crisis pregnancy centres to deter abortion is seen in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁰

As we navigate this complex landscape of evolving anti-abortion activism, there is an urgent need for context-specific interventions, counter-strategies, and initiatives to safeguard reproductive autonomy and combat the pervasive stigmatisation of abortion.

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WHY DEBUNKING PATRIARCHY IS EASY

Queuing for a coffee in the airport coffee shop was not something enjoyable for me. Yet, it unsettled me even more to see a man ask his female partner to order his coffee while he sat comfortably, watching something from the phone. I was perplexed to realise that I was away from my home city, a place where I can watch domestic violence occur at any time, from sunrise to sunset. However, even though the airport is designed as a modern place, plus global as it is in an international setting, these gender roles still persist.

I then promised myself to withhold judgment and proceeded to “put myself in her shoes.” In a society that prioritises heteronormativity, it takes courage and practice to constantly debunk ideas, and it is nearly impossible when you are a lone wolf.

A lot of my friends decided to marry because they were in their late twenties or to fulfil their parents wishes, just as they have done for their own parents. They will

get pregnant soon after. A single child is not enough, so they are encouraged to have another, and make their first born as a sibling. Meanwhile, the grandparents will always interrupt to give some notable advice in their golden era, advising them to become successful parents like they were. To cut a long story short, they are just doing what their parents did and repeating the cycle. Tradition is not easy to quit, it perpetuates itself and gathers more supporters along the way.

In 2022, some of my girlfriends in the social movement were repeating a statement from a male senior activist.

He exclaimed loudly, “Don’t let our women have contraception, because our people are becoming extinct! You women, bear a lot of children for the future generations!” He said that on the stage, in front of the audience.

They asked me to validate their anger.

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“That’s not right isn’t it? Why would he ask women to stop using contraception? Has he even had a child?”

It was terrifying because the stage was set for a customary community congress and a lot of people from church institutions were present as well. The event itself gave the statement huge power, as they had called out contraception as a product of modern technologies which will ruin the original culture. This narrative was further amplified by the church, which capitalised on biblical teachings about being ‘fruitful and multiplying.’

In the West Papuan social context, the customary community and several church institutions focus on spiritual care and have crucial roles to lead movements to challenge colonisation by the Indonesian government. Their authority is believed and respected by the people, even in the rural areas, and they accept any mansplaining statements or patriarchal actions.

FEMINIST-ING ALONGSIDE ANTI-RIGHTS MOVEMENTS

Buenas yan háfa adai, my name is Calen Michel Meno and I am a Deputy Director for the non-profit organisation called Famalao’an (Women) Rights. Famalao’an Rights is a Reproductive Justice initiative focused on addressing the need for accessible reproductive health care in Guam. Our organisation strives to ensure every person in Guam, regardless of their religious beliefs, can access affordable and timely reproductive healthcare options while having those decisions honored and supported by our island community. The organisation was created in response to the case of an 11-year-old girl in Guam who was impregnated by her assaulter and

there were no active providers available to provide abortion services. This case was the driving force behind the development of Famalao’an Rights as a means to give back to the community of Guam by providing resources to access abortions, advocating for the protection of reproductive choice, and conducting educational outreaches on sexual reproductive health.

In Guam, obtaining an abortion is legal but the last physician who provided medical abortions retired in 2018.¹ The island has gone without a provider for nearly seven years since his retirement. However, the

absence of an abortion provider does not mean the need for abortions has ceased.

Despite the ongoing efforts across the nation to take away a person’s right to choice, our small grassroots organisation remains steadfast in assisting those in Guam seeking either information about abortions or to have an abortion.

Due to the lack of an abortion provider on the island, the only option for an abortion is via the abortion pill. While this is better than a total ban on abortions, the time frame to take the abortion pill is only up to 11 weeks of the pregnancy.² This is a

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minimal window since most people may not realise they are pregnant until around six to eight weeks of their pregnancy. In Guam, some laws require a pregnant individual to be provided in-person counselling by a licensed professional and they must have the abortion within the first 13 weeks of the pregnancy. The abortion pill is only viable for up to 11 weeks of pregnancy. By the time a person realises they are pregnant, they will then be racing against the clock to obtain the abortion pill before it is too late. Per the Women's Reproductive Health Information Act of 2012, a pregnant person is required to be provided in-person counselling by a "qualified person" before an abortion. A "qualified person" is defined as "an agent of a physician who is a psychologist, licensed social worker, licensed professional counselor, registered nurse, or physician."³ To ensure that there is access to safe abortions for the residents of Guam, Famalao'an Rights provides free in-person counselling via a licensed social worker to pregnant individuals seeking abortion care services.

Our organisation has been providing this free counselling service for the informed consent requirement since November 2023. To date, we have counseled 75 individuals and they were then referred for further assistance to the Queens Clinic in Hawaii to be prescribed the abortion pill.

The information above is only part of the struggle to obtain an abortion in Guam. While it is already difficult to seek an abortion, the current Attorney General of Guam has made it his mission to remove the permanent injunction placed on a 1990 Guam law⁴ that would have been a total abortion ban on the island. While the elected position of Attorney General in Guam does not align with any specific political party, Attorney General Doug Moylan has shown to be more in tune with the Republican party and he shares the view that abortions should be illegal. In his effort to overturn the permanent injunction that was placed on P.L. 20-134, Moylan went to the federal court to request for the ban to be lifted; he argued that there is no

longer a federal constitutional decision to enforce the ban. Fortunately for the people of Guam who support the right to choice, Governor Lourdes Leon Guerrero and many others opposed Moylan's request and ultimately the federal district court in Guam refused to reinstate the ban.⁵

While the Attorney General sought to overturn the permanent injunction, efforts to establish a law similar to the Texas Heartbeat Act were introduced in the 36th Guam Legislature. The irony in this is that I used to work for the senator who introduced this similar legislation, known as the "Guam Heartbeat Act of 2022".⁶ The bill was nearly verbatim to the Texas Heartbeat Act. After a contentious legislative session, the bill passed in the legislature with eight "AYES" out of the 15 senators who voted. Ultimately, Governor Leon Guerrero vetoed the bill and the Heartbeat Act failed to garner enough votes to override the Governor's veto.⁷

The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 has only further emboldened the pro-life community in Guam in their efforts to achieve a total abortion ban. It is no secret that Guam's community is largely Catholic. I grew up in the Catholic church, but I do not subscribe to the pro-life movement. I believe it is everyone's right to seek and obtain an abortion just as it is anyone's right to keep a pregnancy. Growing up in the island and attending the public school system, I vividly recall being so perplexed by the Archdiocese of Guam requiring those private schools within their system to have the students attend their "Walk for Life" protests in which pro-life members and their children would stand across the old women's clinic where abortions used to be performed.

Despite there not being any abortion provider in Guam, the pro-life community continues to protest against any form of abortion, including minors and victims of rape.

At present, the people of Guam retain their right to choice but access to safe medical abortions remains inaccessible, leaving

only the abortion pill as the means to end an unwanted pregnancy. I am extremely worried about this right being taken away since the United States Supreme Court overruled *Roe v. Wade*. It is only a matter of time until another senator chooses to introduce legislation to either fully ban or enact more restrictions on abortion. As a cis-gendered woman born in 1999, I grew up with the right to choose. I was not alive during the long and strenuous fight for *Roe v. Wade* that the pro-choice movement fought so hard for and I fear that I am unprepared to live in this age where my rights are being taken away, but I remain committed to protecting a person's right to choice. We at Famalao'an Rights will continue our work to provide in-person counselling, share resources, and educate the island community on reproductive health.

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MOVING BEYOND A VIOLENCE-BASED LENS TO CSE: *Centring Desires and Curiosities of Young People*

Over the last five years, child rights activists, feminists, women's rights activists and legal practitioners have increasingly expressed caution regarding the punitive nature of the central legislation to address child sexual abuse in India, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POCSO). When it comes to the autonomy of young people, three of the primary concerns relating to the implementation of this law are its application to cases of consensual sexual activity amongst young people, a chilling effect on the ability of healthcare providers, teachers, counsellors and mentors to discuss themes of sex, sexuality and consent with young people and whether a punishment-centric perspective of justice is meaningful and sufficient for young people who have faced sexual abuse. Activists and child rights experts have advocated for a more nuanced and comprehensive approach of protection of rights of children, adolescents and young people, in line with their evolving capacities as described by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹ By critically engaging with the categorisation of any person below the age of 18 years as a 'child' and refusing to collapse the distinctions among the lived experiences, socio-political and economic circumstances, maturity, autonomy and competencies of young people, there is scope to productively engage with young people's diverse questions, experiences and vulnerabilities related to gender expression, gender identity and sexuality.

The mandatory reporting clause (Section 19) read with Section 21 of POCSO imposes a criminal penalty on anyone

who fails to report to the police in case they have apprehension that an offence is likely to be committed or has knowledge that an offence has been committed. While its broad purview intends to counter the stigma against conversations on child sexual abuse, especially within families or communities and to encourage swift interventions to protect those vulnerable to abuse, the chilling effect of this provision has impacted the ability of those engaging with young people to have open, safe, and non-judgemental conversations around their desires, concerns, questions and fears relating to gender and sexuality. Despite this, it would be incorrect to say that comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is illegal or criminalised. Government initiatives and non-government organisations have initiated programmes that aim to impart knowledge and skills regarding well-being, bodily autonomy, gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health and rights to young people, within their schools and outside, in an inclusive and rights-affirming manner.

In August 2024, the Supreme Court in ***In Re: Right To Privacy of Adolescents*** ([2024] 8 S.C.R. 575) clarified that there is no category of 'older adolescents' and that even if a sexual act occurs within a romantic relationship, it will face criminal consequences under POCSO. This decision did not address the concerns raised by academicians, legal experts and even High Court judges about the use of the criminal legal system to prosecute young people engaging in sexual activity of their own volition, especially in cases where the relationship faced disapproval from family and community members of the alleged victim.

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In September 2024, the Supreme Court of India made several important recommendations and observations regarding CSE. In ***Just Rights for Children Alliance and Ors. v. Harish and Ors.*** ([2024] 10 SCR 154), the Court expressed concern at the widespread misconceptions around CSE, by community actors, parents and even State Governments, which has limited the scope of expanding such programmes. The Court explicitly recommended that the Government implement CSE programmes as they are essential for young people to learn the importance of consent, reduce sexual crimes and improve sexual health outcomes.

While these recommendations are a positive development for those working with young people, the context they emerged is crucial for those seeking to engage with CSE in a way that is not only rights-affirming, but also inclusive of non-normative and diverse gender expressions and sexualities.

In this case, the Court expanded the criminalisation of child pornography to include even the viewing and storage of such materials in private. Under POSCO, a young person cannot legally consent to the production, transmission, viewing and storage of 'sexually explicit' material. All sexually explicit material involving persons under the age of 18 years is considered exploitation and abuse, regardless of whether the young person involved feels violated or harmed. The Court's recommendations were made in the broader discourse of violent and risky sexual behaviours and the need to protect young people from such harms.

We are once again confronted with the complexity of discussing young people's desires, experimentation, and acts. Judicial interpretations of the law, enforcement

directives and societal perceptions have no room to accommodate the view that young people may engage in a range of sexual activities willingly. By negating the possibility of addressing the multiplicity of ways in which young people engage with their sexualities, we also diminish spaces and opportunities for them to share their fears, confusion, experiences of harm and violence and from seeking advice

and support for the fear of compulsory engagement with the criminal legal system.

When the narratives accompanying discourse on CSE are centred around criminality, violence and protectionism, we miss out on discussing pleasure, curiosities and desires that may not be in line with what is considered an acceptable gendered and sexual behaviour for a

young person. Unless we acknowledge that young people understand and express their bodily autonomy in unique ways that do not mimic the boundaries of criminal law, we limit the potential of engagements with CSE from a feminist, sexuality-affirming and non-punitive lens that may be more productive and conducive to addressing gender-based violence.

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DRIVERS OF RISKY MIGRATION FOR WOMEN IN BANGLADESH

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According to the official data of the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), more than 100,000 women from Bangladesh migrated to Gulf countries between 1991 and 2015. The most recent trend shows that Bangladeshi women are also migrating to Mauritius and Malaysia.¹ In Bangladesh, female migration is primarily concentrated in specific occupations such as domestic work, employment in garment factories and nursing. While migrating for work offers economic opportunities, it also exposes these women to the risk of trafficking, forced labour, and exploitation due to the lack of regulation, financial literacy, and legal protections.² The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported that two-thirds of Bangladeshi women migrant workers experienced abuse, ranging from restriction of mobility to physical and sexual abuse.³ 60% reported being victims of physical abuse and torture.⁴ The absence of legal protections and oversight in migration processes increases the risk of trafficking.⁵ Evidence shows that most of these migrant workers use unregulated private recruiting agencies and brokers.⁶ Informal networks are also popular where middlemen often promise well-paying jobs abroad but later subject women to contract violations, wage theft, and abusive working conditions.

Primary Drivers of Risky Migration for Women in Bangladesh

Economic Drivers: High unemployment rates and low wages in the domestic market compel many women to seek better economic opportunities abroad.⁷ Despite the expansion of certain industries such as the ready-made garment (RMG) sector, the labour market in Bangladesh remains largely male-dominated, which limits women's access to formal employment. ILO reports that women in Bangladesh are often considered lesser or inferior participants in the labour market, owing to traditional societal views that the primary role of women is to fulfill reproductive and domestic functions, rather than fully participate in paid work. Occupational segregation is a major factor contributing to the gender pay gap in Bangladesh, pushing women into lower-paying sectors and jobs.⁸ RMG factories in Bangladesh exhibit gender pay gaps ranging from 22 to 30% for base wages, with women earning significantly less than their male counterparts.⁹ This wage disparity and limited career opportunities lead to strong incentives for migration. Many women seek overseas jobs to achieve financial independence and support their families. However, these jobs often come with exploitative

conditions, making them vulnerable to abuse.

Social and Gender-Based Drivers:

While economic factors are the primary motivators, social and gender-based factors also influence women's migration decisions, often leading them to pursue unsafe migration channels. Women's migration in Bangladesh is shaped by specific contexts of patriarchy, where their mobility and work-seeking behaviors are socially mediated.¹⁰ Traditional gender norms discourage women's economic independence, forcing many to rely on male family members for financial security. Migration, therefore, becomes an appealing alternative for women seeking financial autonomy and greater decision-making power. However, the lack of safe migration pathways increases their vulnerability to exploitation by unregulated recruiters and traffickers.¹¹ Early and forced marriages remain prevalent in Bangladesh, particularly in rural areas. According to UN Women, many women migrate to escape these forced marriages or the cycle of domestic violence. Women fleeing early or forced marriages often adopt unsafe channels for migration, making them susceptible to deception and trafficking. Cultural narratives around women's migration

often position them as dutiful daughters, sisters, or wives, responsible for ensuring their family's financial stability. This pressure leads many women to accept high-risk jobs abroad. Women also often face social stigma upon returning home, particularly if they have experienced sexual abuse or exploitation abroad. Survivors of trafficking or forced labour struggle to reintegrate into their communities due to shame, social ostracisation, or rejection by their families.¹² This lack of support can lead to re-migration through unsafe channels, perpetuating cycles of vulnerability.

Legal and Policy Gaps. While legal frameworks exist to protect migrant women from exploitation and abuse, corruption and lack of accountability within recruitment agencies and labour migration organisations undermine protections. The Overseas Employment and Migrants Act (2013) and the National Migration Policy (2016) aimed to regulate recruitment and protect migrant workers.

However, enforcement mechanisms remain weak, and many migrant women continue to face unsafe migration pathways, deceptive recruitment practices, and inadequate legal recourse in cases of exploitation.¹³ Many women, especially from rural areas, are unaware of their legal rights and available protections under migration laws which makes them more vulnerable as they are less likely to seek help or report abuse.¹⁴

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MIGRATION AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN MYANMAR

Myanmar's ongoing political turmoil, affected by climate change such as the 2024 floods, and a deepening humanitarian crisis, have deeply affected the lives of women, particularly in relation to migration patterns, the erosion of women's rights, and growing social inequities. The country's military coup in February 2021 has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and further limited access to essential services, increasing displacement, and pushing many women to the brink of economic hardship.

Impact of the Military Coup on Women's Rights and Migration. One of the most immediate impacts of the military takeover was the intensification of gender-based inequalities. Women, who have long borne the brunt of household responsibilities,

are now confronting even more severe challenges. As of recent reports, 40 per cent of women who have seen a rise in caregiving duties say this has severely affected their ability to earn a livelihood. Nearly one-third of these women have been forced to stop paid work altogether to care for children and elderly family members, a trend that is contributing to an increasing gender gap in economic participation.¹

The compounded economic pressures have been especially severe for women in rural areas, where access to jobs and social protection systems remains minimal. With factories closed and transportation systems compromised due to military checkpoints, many women are now left without a steady source of income. The erosion of

Myanmar's health care system, alongside rising violence and restrictions, further undermines the well-being of women, particularly during pregnancy and childbirth. In 2021, reports indicated that nearly 11% of pregnant or breastfeeding women could not access necessary health services due to security concerns and infrastructure collapse.²

The Migration Crisis: The Gendered Dimensions. Myanmar has seen a significant surge in migration due to the worsening conflict, economic instability, and lack of safety. Between December 2021 and June 2023, over 10 million people, or 18.5% of the population, migrated. Of these, over six million were individuals aged 15 and older. While both men and women

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have migrated, a higher proportion of men have left for work in Myanmar and abroad.³ However, the migration trend reflects broader structural issues in the country, including the limited opportunities for women and escalating violence.

Women face additional challenges, including being at greater risk of exploitation and discrimination when migrating, especially in border areas. Research reveals that women migrants often earn less than men, face more significant barriers to employment, and are more vulnerable to gender-based violence. For instance, many women migrating for economic reasons are drawn into informal, low-paid jobs that fail to provide any form of social security.

Moreover, the role of remittances has become increasingly important. Approximately 16% of households in Myanmar received remittances in 2023, primarily from relatives who had migrated abroad or to other states within Myanmar.⁴ These remittances are often essential for food security, particularly for rural households. However, the increasing reliance on remittances highlights the economic precarity that many families face in the current political climate.

Women in Military Service and Forced Conscription. In an unexpected development, Myanmar's military junta has begun to conscript women for military service. This marks a dramatic shift in the country's military policies, which previously excluded women from compulsory service. As the junta faces increasing pressure from armed resistance and desertions within its ranks, women are now being forced to join military units, often under duress. However, since mid-January 2024, the junta has begun compiling lists of eligible women, particularly those aged 18 to 27.

Under a law enacted in 2010 but enforced more aggressively since the coup, men aged 18-35 and single women aged 18-27 are now eligible for conscription. Many women, particularly students, have found

themselves added to military recruitment lists, despite the law's provision that married women are exempt. There are reports of unmarried women without children being forced into service, contradicting official exemptions.

In response to this new wave of conscription, many young women have attempted to flee the country. Long lines at embassies, overcrowded visa application centers, and dangerous attempts to cross borders highlight the desperation and fear many feel under the junta's regime. The government has been unable to provide meaningful legal recourse, and many young people fear being forced into military service to support a regime that they oppose.

Sexual Violence in Conflict Zones.

According to the Women's League of Burma (WLB), between February 2021 and June 2024, nearly 500 cases of sexual assault against women were documented. This includes horrific accounts of gang rapes by military personnel and instances where women were killed after being sexually assaulted.⁵ These cases, while horrific in number, are thought to represent only a fraction of the true scale of violence, with some estimates suggesting the actual figures could be double those reported.

The violence has not only been confined to the battlefield but has also been used as a tool of terror against women in non-combat areas. In regions like Sagaing, incidents of rape, torture, and intimidation have become commonplace, with the military increasingly targeting women. Women who are arrested for participating in protests or dissent against the coup also face sexual violence during detention, further compounding the trauma faced by these individuals.

Health, Safety, and Gender-Based

Violence. In addition to the economic and military pressures, the healthcare system in Myanmar has become a casualty of the ongoing conflict. The junta's assault on healthcare providers, especially those engaged in civil disobedience, has resulted in the killing, detention, and torture of

medical staff, while many continue to treat patients clandestinely. Another significant area where women are facing challenges is in accessing health services. As of 2021, half of all women in Myanmar reported that accessing health services had become more difficult. This issue is particularly pronounced for women living in conflict zones and those in the 31 to 39-year-old age bracket. Among pregnant women and those breastfeeding, access to essential health services has been even more constrained, with 11 per cent of them unable to receive adequate care.

Myanmar's penal code also lacks specific protection for victims of domestic violence, and while rape is criminalised, marital rape is not. Despite years of discussion, the Prevention of Violence Against Women (PoVAW) Bill remains under consideration, leaving many women without legal recourse for domestic violence. This lack of legal protection and the general erosion of rule of law have left women vulnerable to increased violence, exploitation, and social marginalisation.

Women's voices have been sidelined during the transition to democracy, hindering the development of policies and institutions that could address their needs. This exclusion is one of the reasons why Myanmar has struggled to create sustainable institutional reforms, despite years of efforts at peacebuilding and democratisation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Women in Myanmar are facing unprecedented challenges amid ongoing political and economic instability. The country's fragile legal framework, compounded by the military junta's assault on civil society and increasing conscription of women, has left many women vulnerable to exploitation, violence, and poverty. As migration becomes a central coping strategy, it is essential to address the gendered impacts of these trends. Supportive policies, legal reforms, and targeted humanitarian interventions are necessary to protect women's rights and ensure their well-being in this difficult time.

Key recommendations include:**1. Access to Legal and Social Support:**

Strengthen programmes to provide legal aid, financial resources, and counselling services to women who have migrated or been displaced.

2. Enhance Health Service Access:

Work to restore health services, with a focus on ensuring women's access to reproductive health care and support services for survivors of gender-based violence.

3. Humanitarian Assistance: Expand emergency support to internally displaced women, ensuring they have access to shelter, food, and medical care.

4. Monitor Migration Trends: Establish systems to track migration patterns and ensure that migrant women are informed about their rights and protected from exploitation.

5. Gender-Sensitive Approaches in Peacebuilding: Ensure that women are included in all peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts and that

their specific needs and experiences are integrated into the political transition process.

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- 5 RFA news, November 2024, Nearly 500 cases of sexual assault against women in Myanmar's conflict.

BEYOND THE LAW: *Examining the Impacts of Indonesia's Revised Criminal Code on Human Rights*

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Introduction. Indonesia's Revised Criminal Code (RKUHP), set to take effect in January 2026, has sparked concern—especially Article 411, which criminalises premarital sex with penalties of up to one year in prison.¹ This threatens privacy and deepens gender and sexual inequalities, disproportionately impacting women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and youth.² This article critiques Article 411 through a human rights and public health lens, contributing to regional discourse on bodily autonomy and patriarchal legal systems.

Key Issues and Health Impacts.

The RKUHP reflects a broader shift toward religious conservatism and moral regulation, with Article 411 criminalising consensual premarital sex. This provision undermines sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), fuelling stigma and fear that discourages access to contraception, STI testing, and counselling—especially among youth, women, and marginalised groups.^{3, 4} The World Health Organization notes that such criminalisation promotes shame and fear of legal consequences, deterring individuals from seeking essential care.

By framing sexual health needs as a moral failure rather than human rights, these laws reinforce exclusion and deepen inequality. Rather than protecting public health, they create hostile environments where rights are denied and health outcomes suffer.

This backlash against SRHR mirrors global trends, where anti-rights actors, often aligned with political and religious agendas, advance restrictive norms that disproportionately harm women and gender-diverse people.⁵ The RKUHP exemplifies this shift, using conservative morality to assert control over personal autonomy.

Policy Development and Stakeholders.

The RKUHP replaces Indonesia's colonial-era KUHP, aiming to reflect national values. However, Article 411 introduces criminalisation absent in the earlier code, contradicting commitments to gender equality and non-discrimination. Though the drafting process included deliberations and public hearings, civil society criticised it for limited transparency and marginalisation of vulnerable voices.²

Key Actors Included:

- **Government:** The Ministry of Law and Human Rights and the Indonesian legislature (DPR) led the drafting and approval.
- **Civil Society:** Advocates raised concerns over rights, privacy, and SRHR. Religious Groups: Conservative actors strongly influenced morality-based articles.

Public protests in 2019 by youth, women's groups, LGBTQ+ communities and civil societies reflected widespread dissent.⁶

Policy Assessment.

Legal reviews raise concern over Article 411's broad scope. It criminalises all sexual activity outside marriage and expands complainants to include parents and children. This opens room for misuse, especially against disapproved relationships.^{2, 5} Rural and Indigenous couples with unregistered marriages, and LGBTQ+ individuals whose unions lack legal recognition, face increased risk.

Legal scholars and civil society^{2, 7, 8} have warned of excessive intrusion into privacy and selective enforcement, particularly

where moral policing is common. These patterns raise alarms over growing surveillance and shrinking civic space.

Key Concerns Include:

- **Human Rights:** Violates privacy and non-discrimination guarantees in national law and treaties like the ICCPR.⁹
- **Social Impact:** Fuels stigma and enables familial conflict through complaint mechanisms. It creates a climate where community members may report others not out of justice, but to enforce moral or religious conformity.
- **Public Health:** Discourages access to SRHR services, increasing risks of STIs and unsafe abortions.^{3, 4} Fear of criminal sanctions may further reduce health-seeking behavior, especially among youth.
- **Global Context:** Aligns with regional conservatism and threatens progress on Rights.⁵

Recommendations.

- **Legal Reform:** Remove or revise discriminatory provisions. Strengthen collaboration between human rights and SRHR advocates.
- **Education:** Expand community-based sexuality education to reduce stigma.¹⁰
- **Monitoring:** Establish oversight systems to track rights violations under RKUHP.
- **Inclusive Dialogue:** Ensure reforms involve youth, women, LGBTQ+ groups, and health professionals.

Conclusion. While seeking to modernise law, Article 411 endangers rights to privacy, equality, and health. Its selective enforcement risks deepening inequality. Collective action is needed to ensure laws respect dignity and protect sexual and reproductive rights. By fostering dialogue and regional solidarity, Indonesia can build a future that respects and upholds the dignity and rights of its people.

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REIMAGINING FEMINIST-CENTRED CARE; SAFETY FOR DEFENDERS

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This is a collective call for us to reflect and act, 'How can we reimagine protection, care and well-being for defenders?'

*The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders reaffirms rights that are essential for Women Human Rights Defenders, including freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of association, the right to access funding and the right to develop and discuss new ideas in the area of human rights.*¹

The 4.3 billion people residing within Asia-Pacific are often at the receiving end of grave violations of nature and human rights.² The ever-looming climate emergency, the situation in Myanmar and Afghanistan, the challenges faced by the indigenous people in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea, the grassroots movements for diversity, social justice and equality across the region and the list continues—it is the defenders who are standing and holding the line, safeguarding and protecting the rights and lives of the most vulnerable—by supporting and caring, calling out and pushing back against capitalist and extractivist systems.

"As human rights defenders go, so goes the world. They are the leading agents of progress; their own freedom predicts a wider freedom. This fact isn't lost on dictators and other repressive forces, which go to great lengths to persecute defenders".³

The rise of the far right and anti-rights movements across the globe has made freedom of peaceful assembly even more challenging, often life threatening for first line responders and human rights defenders. They face heightened security risks, surveillance, harassment, and even assassination. The National Security Law in Hong Kong⁴ and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) in

India, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) in Pakistan, are among many other similar measures in countries across Asia-Pacific. They highlight how criminalisation and legal repression are being used to silence dissent. The research from Indonesia and Myanmar brings to light harrowing examples of surveillance, digital harassment and direct violence against human rights defenders.^{5, 6} The freedom to speak up, organise or mobilise is often met with extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances, as witnessed in the Philippines, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan.^{7, 8} The complex socio-cultural and security environment in the Asia-Pacific contributes to the rise of anti-human and anti-gender rights actors.

At this juncture, we must understand that the intersectionality of gender, caste, religion, ethnicity or socio-economic status increases the vulnerabilities for defenders and first line responders. Gender justice advocates and women human rights defenders face even greater risks. The authoritarian and democratic governments target defenders representing women and girls, LGBTQ+ individuals, and indigenous communities, usually under the garb of religion, national security and cultural relativism. The defenders, often challenging the traditional notions of family and gender roles in the society, advocating for accountability and decentralisation of power, fighting censorship on reproductive and sexual rights, among other movements, are seen as a threat.

Women and girls who act to promote or protect human rights and people of all genders who defend the human rights of women or work to advance rights related to gender equality are collectively known as “women human rights defenders” (WHRDs)

They are particularly vulnerable to sexual gender-based violence (SGBV),

both online and offline, including sexual harassment, threats of rape and physical violence from state and non-state actors—SGBV is often used as a tool to silence and threaten women human rights defenders. The defenders carry the challenges and trauma of their movements and communities, all while battling the lack of resources, the scarcity of services, and their own diminishing mental health. They are overburdened, their work unrecognised, their emotional and physical well-being compromised. The weight of their responsibilities is immense, and the mental toll is heavy. Many experience the suffocating effects of gender-based violence, family expectations, and societal pressure, all while trying to sustain themselves in environments that offer them little support.⁹

“1 in 10 women human rights defenders has experienced sexual harassment or sexual abuse due to their activism.”¹⁰

The defenders carry the challenges and trauma of their movements and communities, all while battling the lack of resources, the scarcity of services, and their own diminishing mental health. They are overburdened, their work unrecognised, their emotional and physical well-being compromised.

In times such as these we must collectively acknowledge in letter and action that, “Solidarity is our strongest weapon”. As defenders of the land, life and human dignity, they continue to hold the line at the grassroots, regional and global levels. They continue to risk their lives and raise their voices against anti-gender movements, authoritarian and democratic governments, patriarchal

religious structures, community leaders, nationalists and alt-rights. Hong Kong’s feminist resistance movement,¹¹ Pakistan’s Baloch Yakjehti Committee,¹² India’s grassroots reproductive justice movement,¹³ the Pacific Island indigenous women’s rights movement¹⁴ and many others have been standing on the shoulders of their defenders. Their fearless dedication, despite countless threats to their dignity and life, has been the force behind the safeguarding of our future and freedom—building a world that is fair, equitable, just and **feminist**. Yet we fail to ask the defenders and the first line responders, how are they able to carry on with their activism? How secure and safe do they feel? How can we support them?

The resilience of defenders, although continuing to inspire movements for justice, equality and inclusivity, doesn’t come without a very heavy toll. “Hundreds are killed every year; since 2015 more than 1300 have been killed in 64 countries”.¹⁵ The aforementioned reaffirms our collective responsibility to strengthen legal protections, forge greater international solidarity, resource funding to support their movements and increase pressure on repressive as well as democratic governments to ensure the safety, well-being and effectiveness of WHRDs in the region.

We have lost countless and we might lose more. Hence we must **reimagine protection, care and well-being for defenders** so we can continue to hold the line. Today we mourn, tomorrow we stand up and fight back.

“To ask WEHRDs to care for themselves is not a selfish act; it is a revolutionary one. Their well-being is essential for the survival of entire communities.”⁹

Hope, solidarity and *behenchara* (an Urdu word, translated into English as sisterhood).

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resources

RESOURCES FROM THE ARROW SRHR KNOWLEDGE SHARING CENTRE

ARROW's SRHR Knowledge Sharing Centre (ASK-us) hosts a special collection of resources on gender, women's rights, and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) to make critical information on these topics accessible to all. ASK-us is also available online at <http://www.srhr-ask-us.org/>.

ARTICLES AND BOOKS

Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID). *Rights at Risk: Time for Action (2021 Trends Report)*. AWID, 2021. https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/RightsAtRisk_TimeForAction_OURsTrendsReport2021.pdf.

This report maps the rising anti-rights trends globally, documenting the resurgence of authoritarian, anti-gender, and religious fundamentalist movements undermining feminist, LGBTQI+, and human rights activism. It calls for

collective feminist resistance and transnational solidarity to counter shrinking civic space and protect movements for justice and equality.

Htun, Mala, and Jennifer Piscopo. *Democratic Backsliding and the Backlash Against Women's Rights: Understanding the Current Challenges for Feminist Politics*. UN Women Discussion Paper, 2020. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/06/discussion-paper-democratic-backsliding-and-the-backlash-against-womens-rights>.

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Looking for a particular resource material?

ASK-us



This paper examines how democratic erosion fosters backlash against women's rights by empowering populist and authoritarian actors hostile to gender equality. It explores feminist strategies for defending democracy, institutions, and inclusive governance amid this global regression.

Tallberg, Jonas, and Theresa

Squatrito. “The Backlash Against Civil Society Participation in International Organizations: The Case of Human Rights Complaints Mechanisms.” *British Journal of Political Science* (2021): 1–22. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/british-journal-of-political-science/article/backlash-against-civil-society-participation-in-international-organizations-the-case-of-human-rights-complaints-mechanisms/E25541C1044E4238E5F34BE80528EF0B>.

The article analyses resistance from states toward civil society participation in global human rights mechanisms. It identifies backlash as part of a broader contestation of multilateralism and explores how institutional design can either enable or constrain civil society influence.

The Prevention Collaborative.

Resistance and Backlash to Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls. Synthesis Review 7, 2024. https://prevention-collaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Synthesis-Review-7-resistance-and-backlash_v2_compressed.pdf.

This synthesis reviews forms of resistance and backlash faced in initiatives to prevent violence against women and girls (VAWG). It categorises backlash dynamics and recommends adaptive feminist strategies for programme implementers and policymakers to sustain progress in gender equality.

Human Rights Watch. *The Global Backlash Against Women’s Rights.* HRW News Feature, March 7, 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/07/global-backlash-against-womens-rights>.

This piece documents the rise of regressive movements targeting gender equality, reproductive rights, and LGBTQI+ protections. HRW underscores

the need for renewed activism and accountability as governments and right-wing groups coordinate attacks on women’s rights worldwide.

ALIGN Platform. *Facing the Backlash: What Is Fuelling Anti-Feminist and Anti-Democratic Forces?* ALIGN Framing Paper, 2024. <https://www.alignplatform.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/align-framingpaper-backlash-mar24-es.pdf>.

The paper explores the structural and ideological drivers of anti-feminist backlash, linking them to broader anti-democratic movements. It outlines strategies for feminist, youth, and rights-based organisations to strengthen coalitions and reclaim narratives around equality and justice.

Equal Rights Coalition. *Research on and Responses to Contemporary Anti-Gender Movements: Briefing Note.* ERC Conference Material, 2022. <https://equalrightscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Anti-Gender-Background-Paper-ERC-Conference-Material-EN.pdf>.

This briefing note synthesises emerging research on anti-gender movements and outlines state and civil society responses. It highlights coordinated transnational strategies that weaponise “gender ideology” to undermine LGBTQI+ and reproductive rights agendas.

True, Jacqui, and Sara Davies.

“Resistance and Backlash to Gender Equality.” *International Affairs* 96(6) (2020): 1339–1354. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345238929_Resistance_and_backlash_to_gender_equality.

This article conceptualises resistance and backlash as reactions to feminist gains and analyses how these forces shape international norms on gender equality. It emphasises the importance of resilience,

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strategic framing, and coalition-building in feminist responses.

McVeigh, Rory, and David Sikkink.

“Conservative and Right-Wing Movements.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 35 (2009): 343–360. <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/10.1146/annurev.soc.012809.102602>.

This review traces the evolution of conservative movements in the U.S. and beyond, focusing on their opposition to feminist, civil rights, and secular ideals. It situates anti-gender backlash within broader sociopolitical efforts to restore traditional hierarchies.

Kuhar, Roman, and David Paternotte,

eds. *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality.* Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017. <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781786600012/Anti-Gender-Campaigns-in-Europe-Mobilizing-Against-Equality>.

This edited volume analyses the rise of anti-gender campaigns across Europe as a coordinated transnational movement. It dissects narratives framing “gender ideology” as a threat to family and national identity, revealing links between religious, far-right, and populist actors.

Alami, Meriem. “The Global Rise of Anti-Gender Movements and Feminist Resistance Strategies: A Critical Analysis.” *ResearchGate*, 2024. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/388522474_The_Global_Rise_of_Anti-Gender_Movements_and_Feminist_Resistance_Strategies_A_Critical_Analysis.

This paper provides a critical review of global anti-gender mobilisation, examining its political, cultural, and economic dimensions. It also maps feminist resistance strategies emphasising solidarity, communication, and policy engagement across regions.

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Mendes, Kaitlynn, Kumarini Silva, and Jasmin L. Waring, eds. *Global Perspectives on Anti-Feminism: Far-Right and Religious Attacks on Equality and Diversity*. Edinburgh University Press, 2022. <https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-global-perspectives-on-anti-feminism.html>.

This collection interrogates anti-feminist and anti-gender movements across continents, situating them within rising authoritarianism and nationalist discourse. The essays highlight how digital media and conservative ideologies amplify backlash against gender equality.

Harvard Law School. “Conservative Backlash Threatens Global Gender Justice Efforts.” *Harvard Law Today*, 2023. <https://hls.harvard.edu/today/conservative-backlash-threatens-global-gender-justice-efforts/>.

This article summarises a Harvard panel discussion on the global resurgence of conservative forces threatening gender justice. Experts highlight the need to defend multilateral frameworks and integrate intersectional feminist responses to sustain human rights advances.

Council of Europe. *Recognizing and Addressing the Erosion of Human Rights and Democracy in Europe: A Way Forward*. Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2023. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/recognizing-and-addressing-the-erosion-of-human-rights-and-democracy-in-europe-a-way-forward>.

This report details democratic backsliding and attacks on human rights institutions across Europe. It urges member states to reinforce accountability, protect civic freedoms, and resist populist narratives undermining equality and justice.

Ging, Debbie. “Conceptualising Backlash: (UK) Men’s Rights Groups, Anti-Feminism and Postfeminism.” *The Sociological Review* 67(4) (2019): 800–815. https://repository.lincoln.ac.uk/articles/journal_contribution/Conceptualising_Backlash_UK_men_s_rights_groups_anti-feminism_and_postfeminism/24343531.

This article examines the evolution of men’s rights activism in the UK, positioning it within broader postfeminist discourse. Ging identifies how online and offline communities construct anti-feminist narratives that reassert patriarchal norms.

Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *Global Rollback of Women’s Rights Puts SDGs at Risk*. Government of Norway, 2024. <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/global-rollback-of-womens-rights-puts-sdgs-at-risk/id3114558/>.

This statement warns that the global regression in women’s rights endangers progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It highlights the need for multilateral cooperation and feminist diplomacy to defend international gender equality commitments.

Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW). *ARROW for Change – The Right to Choose*. ARROW, 2022. <https://arrow.org.my/publication/afc-the-right-to-choose/>.

This issue explores barriers to safe abortion and reproductive autonomy across Asia-Pacific. It highlights policy gaps, stigma, and anti-rights interference, advocating for stronger regional accountability for reproductive justice.

Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW). *Affirming Rights, Accelerating Progress and Amplifying Action: Monitoring SDG5 in Asia-Pacific*. ARROW, 2022. <https://arrow.org.my/publication/affirming-rights-accelerating-progress-and-amplifying-action-monitoring-sdg5-in-asia-pacific/>.

The publication reviews the progress and gaps in achieving SDG5 on gender equality. It analyses structural inequalities, the influence of anti-gender movements, and emphasizes feminist approaches to data and accountability.

Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW). *Inclusive Families: Realising Gender Equality, SRHR and Human Rights*. ARROW, 2021. <https://arrow.org.my/publication/inclusive-families-realising-gender-equality-srhr-human-rights/>.

This edition focuses on reimagining family structures as inclusive spaces supporting SRHR and gender justice. It challenges heteronormative and patriarchal definitions of family perpetuated by conservative actors.

Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW). *Right to Sexuality: Intersections with Education, Employment, Law and Citizenship*. ARROW, 2021. <https://arrow.org.my/publication/right-sexuality-intersections-education-employment-law-citizenship/>.

This publication investigates how sexuality rights intersect with broader social, legal, and economic systems. It argues for integrating sexuality education and equality principles into governance and policy discourse.

Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW). *Affirming Rights, Accelerating Progress and Amplifying Action: Monitoring SDG3 in Asia-Pacific*. ARROW, 2023. <https://arrow.org.my/publication/affirming-rights-accelerating-progress-and-amplifying-action-monitoring-sdg3-in-asia-pacific/>.

Focusing on health (SDG3), this report highlights disparities in access to sexual and reproductive health services. It examines how anti-rights forces and restrictive laws impede universal health coverage and bodily autonomy.

Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW). *ARROW for Change: The Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression*. ARROW, 2023. <https://arrow.org.my/publication/arrow-for-change-the-right-to-freedom-of-speech-and-expression/>.

This issue examines how freedom of expression underpins SRHR advocacy and feminist organising. It documents restrictions, censorship, and online harassment targeting women human rights defenders in Asia-Pacific.

Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW). *ARROW for Change – Reproductive Justice: Recalibrating the SRHR Agenda*. ARROW, 2024. <https://arrow.org.my/publication/arrow-for-change-reproductive-justice-recalibrating-the-srhr-agenda/>.

The publication reframes SRHR through a reproductive justice lens, emphasizing intersectionality, power, and structural inequities. It critiques anti-rights pushback and promotes inclusive advocacy grounded in autonomy and social justice.

DEFINITIONS

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Politicised Religion. “Politicised Religion or Politicisation of religion refers to its instrumentalisation, the use of religion as a means of shaping and reinforcing narrow concepts of national identity, tapping into feelings of religious belonging for the purposes of strengthening political loyalty”.¹

Anti-Gender Movement. “Transnational constellation of actors working to preserve the heteropatriarchal sex and gender power hierarchy in all areas of social, political, economic, and cultural life.”²

Gender Apartheid. “The economic and social sexual discrimination against individuals because of their gender or sex. It is a system enforced by using either physical or legal practices to relegate individuals to subordinate positions.”³

Neo-Liberal. “Neo-liberal or Neoliberalism refers to an economic theory that favours free markets and minimal government intervention in the economy. It is generally associated with policies of economic liberalisation, including privatisation, deregulation, globalisation, free trade, austerity and reductions in government spending in order to increase the role of the private sector in the economy and society.”⁴

Ableism. “Belief system that underlies the negative attitudes, stereotypes and stigma that devalue persons with disabilities on the basis of their actual or perceived impairments. Ableism considers persons with disabilities as being less worthy of respect and consideration, less able to contribute and participate, and of less inherent value than others.”⁵

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Intersectionality. “A way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power. It recognises that people’s lives are shaped by their identities, relationships and social factors. These combine to create intersecting forms of privilege and oppression depending on a person’s context and existing power structures such as patriarchy, ableism, colonialism, imperialism, homophobia and racism.”⁶

Gender Equality. “Refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women, men, girls and boys. Equality does not imply sameness but that the rights of women and men will not depend on the gender they were born with. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of all genders are taken into consideration, recognising the diversity of different groups. Gender equality is not a women’s issue but should concern and fully engage all genders while recognising that neither all men nor all women are a homogenous group.”⁷

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TOOL OR TERROR? ON OVERVIEW OF THE DIGITALISATION LANDSCAPE

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The current landscape of digitalisation is mainly marked by artificial intelligence (AI), online content platforms, and social networking. However, it also plays a role in a larger social context, from activism to bridging gaps in social services and public goods, going beyond productivity and entertainment tools. This presents both opportunities and challenges, as its proven potential raises questions about security, privacy, and accessibility for impacted communities and vulnerable populations.

Reshaping Civic Spaces. Social media plays a role in civic spaces and social movements. In 2016, US-based fact-tank Pew Research Institute reported that “Social media users with high levels of political engagement take an active approach to curating the content they consume and the users they are connected to.” Pre-pandemic, social media had been a powerful tool to mobilise people during the Arab Spring in 2011, the pro-democracy Umbrella movement in Hong Kong in 2014, and the Extinction rebellion in 2018 in the UK.

The COVID-19 lockdown didn’t stop the people’s power,¹ as it was harnessed through the use of the internet and social media. In 2020, youth and students from the Philippines were able to maximise social media to mobilise hundreds to protest the “anti-terrorism law,” which the sector deemed could be used against legal and democratic movements.² Instagram helped launch the #BlackLivesMatter online campaign³ while global climate strikes were held simultaneously throughout 2020, both offline and online, mobilising thousands of people, young and old.⁴

The Digital Divide. The COVID-19 pandemic magnified and multiplied internet usage on a global scale, with an estimated 466 million people who went online for the first time in 2020.⁵ Internet traffic from February to April 2020 grew by 40% with common usage of video streaming, gaming, and social media usage.⁶

While the rise in internet usage in 2020 may indicate that internet access was accessible, reality says otherwise. A digital divide is being experienced, especially in less developed countries; the majority of unconnected people are based in South Asia and Africa.⁷

The United Nations defined the “digital divide” in 2021 as “the gap between those who have access to and use ICTs, including internet connectivity, internet-enabled devices, and digital literacy skills, and those who do not.”

As of 2021, 46% of the world’s population still does not have access to broadband connectivity,⁸ while there are 64 million fewer women connected online than men.⁹ In the Asia-Pacific region, it estimated that 54% of women have internet access compared to 59% of men as of 2022.¹⁰ During the 78th session of the General Assembly Second Committee (Economic and Financial) in October 2023, it was underscored that the digital gap between developed and developing countries is “widening rather than closing.”¹¹

The Era of Digitalisation. The large potential of digitalisation as a tool to access social welfare, public goods, and civic spaces has been noted by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres in 2021,¹² who called to “... usher in a new era of universal social protection, health coverage, education, skills, decent work, and housing, as well as universal access to the Internet by 2030 as a basic human right.”

But with a massive digital divide, how can developing countries respond to the challenges of digitalisation when, according to the World Bank, a 75 per cent increase in internet access could create 140 million jobs?⁹

An international framework should be laid down to address and close the digital divide to ensure that the digitalisation era serves the sustainable development goals and that no one is truly left behind.

The Global Digital Compact: *The UN aims to “establish an inclusive global framework essential for multi-stakeholder action required to overcome digital, data, and innovation divides” through the Global Digital Compact. It is founded on the principles of “connect, respect, and protect,” aligning with the UN’s efforts to promote equality, uphold human rights, and safeguard vulnerable populations in the digital era.*

Introduced in 2021 in the Common Agenda¹² report by the UN Secretary General, it contains a proposal for all stakeholders to build commitments and was among the key agendas at the Summit of the Future in 2024, with 143 UN member states voting in favour.

Meanwhile, trade agreements and economic frameworks are parallel issues to digitalisation as the global influx of goods is boosted through the digital economy.

*The **Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)** is the largest free trade agreement, covering 30% of the world's GDP, and is specifically designed for the Asia-Pacific region with provisions pertaining to digitalisation. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) defines RCEP as an "agreement to broaden and deepen ASEAN's engagement...to establish a modern, comprehensive, high-quality, and mutually beneficial economic partnership that will facilitate the expansion of regional trade and investment and contribute to global economic growth and development."*

*The RCEP has two provisions relevant to digitalisation: **Chapter 11: intellectual property** and **Chapter 12: electronic commerce**. The former essentially involves copyright provisions, access to knowledge and innovation, and traditional knowledge, while the latter essentially involves "cross-border transfer of information by electronic means," by which parties to the agreement are allowed to establish their own regulatory requirements.*

However, these provisions have been met with criticism as the "impact of TRIPS-Plus on Digital IP Protection would restrict the ability to produce generic medicines and enforce higher IP standards"¹³ that will double the already staggering prices of medicine and healthcare in the region. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) even called this provision a "threat" to access to medicines.¹³ Civil society groups dubbed the agreement due to its anti-farmer and anti-worker provisions as "excessive corporate power at the expense of people's rights."¹⁴ Despite

pushback, the agreement came into force on January 1, 2022, for 10 member countries, while some parties are still in the process of ratification at the local level.

*Meanwhile, the **Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF)** is an economic framework with trade, supply chains, clean energy, and a fair economy as its four key pillars. The larger economies of Southeast Asia, including Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Japan, South Korea, and India, make up the majority of IPEF.*

The IPEF's trade pillar's provisions is digital economy that aims to "advance inclusive digital trade." However, this pillar faced challenges as countries could not reach an agreement due to conflicting priorities in relation to labour standards. and discussions have been paused as of November 2023.¹⁵ Critiques of the IPEF raise red flags over the secrecy of negotiations and dubious digital trade provisions that may impact workers, especially algorithm-based hiring, workplace management, and surveillance, particularly in the gig economy.¹⁶

Digitalisation is indeed a sign of a constantly changing modern world, but the more pressing question is who holds the power and what purpose it serves. It presents both threats and opportunities: one presents a tool for public goods and civic spaces, and the other presents a tool to perpetuate inequality.

While there is an ongoing effort, there is still no strong, people-centred, overarching framework to standardise the provision, access, and use of the internet. Such a framework can guard against the possibility of profit-oriented digitalisation at the expense of vulnerable populations and the global south. In this absence, a global, people-centred digitalisation framework should be pushed forward by movements and civil society alike to truly close the digital divide.

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INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS IN TERMS OF FAMILY LAW

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Introduction: What does the Global and Regional Demography Reflect?

The family is the basic unit of society and the oldest institution in the world. While it is difficult to estimate the total number of families or households globally due to their ever-changing nature especially in the rapidly evolving modern world, analysing demographics and global to local population trends can help policymakers tailor policies to improve the quality of life and well-being of families. The world population is expected to escalate over the next 50 to 60 years to a whopping 10.3 billion people in the mid 2080s, an estimated 8.2 billion more than the total population of 2024.¹ The current population of 8 billion is expected to reach at least 9.6 billion by 2050.²

The number of women of reproductive age (15-49 years) are also expected to grow at an exponential rate globally, especially around the 2050s. This growth is also instrumental in overall population growth and the overall growth of traditional family units. Evidence also suggests that the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) amongst women in many countries is declining. More than half of all countries have shown a rate below the replacement level of 2.1 live births per woman. This is the level required for a population to maintain a constant size in the long run without migration.³ It is important to analyse where the TFR is lowering constantly and which communities are the most affected with a rising TFR and lower access to resources, including sexual and reproductive health. How access to these resources is governed by the law and legal reforms and their overall impact on gender equity, is an area that requires continuous studies.

Undoubtedly, the world at large and the Asia Pacific region in particular, is undergoing an era of polycrisis that has definitely impacted the human rights of many, but those who stand at the intersections of multiple marginalisations are particularly impacted. It has also heightened the already existing health inequities amongst the population in the region.

The most populous region is the poorest region. Home to 60% of the world's population, or 4.3 billion,⁴ the Asia-Pacific is also home to the world's poorest populations.⁵ The Asian Development Bank has forecast that by 2030, 1% of Asia and the Pacific's population will be living in extreme poverty, 8.1% in moderate poverty and 30.3% will remain economically vulnerable.⁶ Meanwhile, a UN ESCAP report revealed that "more than 260 million people in the Asia-Pacific region could be pushed into poverty in the next decade unless governments step up with robust social protection schemes".⁷ The triple impact of the climate crisis, armed conflict and violence, and an economy still reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic led to a polycrisis that exacerbated the poor quality of life and state of human rights. Undoubtedly, the world at large and the Asia Pacific region in particular, is undergoing an era of polycrisis that has definitely impacted the human rights of many, but those who stand at the intersections of multiple marginalisations are particularly impacted. It has also

heightened the already existing health inequities amongst the population in the region.

Research, monitoring and evidence suggest that most countries in the region will not reach the Sustainable Development Goal universal health coverage target value of 100 by 2030, with many having coverage values below 50. Although the overall TFR in the region has reduced, there are significant sub-National disparities in fertility amongst women, with the ones in rural areas having higher fertility rates are also the ones with lowest wealth quintiles. There is thus a huge gap between reproductive autonomy and reproductive aspirations amongst women of the region.⁸ One of the major violations of human rights globally and regionally has been the very transgression of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), thereby reducing the autonomy of one's own bodies. SRHR violation doesn't happen in silos; it intersects with other inequities such as economic inequity and gender inequality and it is always the poorest and the least educated that are the ones who suffer the most.⁹

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international and regional treaties like the Convention on Elimination of All kinds of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention of Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2030 and the Plan of Action for the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) have been crucial in protecting the sexual and reproductive health rights of the most marginalised, especially women and girls across the region.

These treaties and plans of actions have also influenced Member States to adopt and reform laws that have protected and safeguarded the human rights of many, particularly sexual and reproductive health and rights and have been backbones of upholding gender equity.

Family Law in South Asia: How Do They Promote Human Rights and Gender Equity? In India, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 was reformed to protect children i.e. persons below 18 years from sexual harassment, conduct and offences. Similarly the age of consent for having sex was increased from 16 to 18 years to remove inconsistency with the law. However several cases were brought before the judiciary in which despite the consensual nature of the sexual relationship, young people were criminalised. Such cases have led to the criminalisation of consensual relationships between adolescents and young people, thereby undermining their autonomy in making decisions regarding their own bodies. However, a silver lining has been seen in judgements from several state and district courts who have clearly distinguished between consensual sexual relationships between adolescents and instances of sexual assault. Many of these judgments also advocate lowering the age of consent from 18 to 16 years and redefining the meaning of 'child'.¹⁰

Similarly the Right to Safe Motherhood and Reproductive Health Rights (SMRHR) Act in Nepal, 2018 has been one of the most progressive laws in the Asia Pacific Region that protects a diverse range of SRHR of women and girls in a holistic manner. It allows for women and girls to have choices around family planning needs, spacing between children, safe and stigma free abortion while making services, information and counselling around sexual and reproductive health accessible.¹¹ Despite this, the SMRHR Act 2018 is limiting as it still criminalises abortion post 28 weeks of pregnancy.

The conflation between natural miscarriage and illegal abortion post 28 weeks still gives a hazy picture of how enabling the act is. Although the SMRHR Act paves a path for adolescent girls, young women, and married women to decide for themselves whether or not to continue a pregnancy, abortion in Nepal is still stigmatised and health system actors continue to deny services.

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Family Law in Southeast Asia: How Do They Promote Human Rights and Gender Equity? Thailand's Health Ministry has been talking about reducing teenage pregnancies through the Prevention and Solution of the Adolescent Pregnancy Problem Act A.D. 2016. The aim is not just limited to preventing unwanted pregnancies, but also addressing underlying SRHR issues. The Act is designed to encourage families to create an environment that enables adolescents to talk about sexuality. It also guarantees SRHR of young people through the right to information and knowledge, autonomy in decision-making, and maintaining confidentiality and privacy.¹² There is a considerable focus on non-discriminatory practices that are provided through the act, where pregnant adolescents can access SRH services, continue their education, or receive vocational training. However,

factfile

despite the law being in place, schools continue to discriminate against pregnant individuals, citing compliance issues. Although the access to and usage of contraceptives has increased amongst adolescents and young people, the quality of these methods is still questionable.¹⁰

Similarly Vietnam has been making considerable strides towards ensuring gender equality and reducing maternal mortality by implementing the National Population and Reproductive Health Strategy. During 2017 it was one of the few countries in South East Asia with a promising legal and policy framework to protect the sexual and reproductive health rights of adolescents and young people.¹³ A 2021 study reveals that at least 84.8% of Vietnamese women in the reproductive age make their own informed decisions regarding sexual intercourse and 70.7% decide on the choices of contraception to be used. However this autonomy in decision making is not uniform amongst diverse Vietnamese women. It is lower if they come from ethnic groups such as the Mong community, or are adolescents and young people or if they live with disabilities.¹⁴ The maternal mortality rate has reduced considerably to 46 deaths per 100,000 live births but it is still high in mountainous and hilly regions where the indigenous population dwell.

Table 1 has three examples of laws from South Asian and Southeast Asian countries that appear to guarantee sexual and reproductive health and rights for all. However, a closer examination of these laws reveals a more complex reality. Once examined more carefully through an intersectional, gender equity lenses, these laws are restrictive as well.

Analysis and Recommendation.

As the population grows, it becomes increasingly important to recognise and address the diverse needs within these populations. Marginalised groups, which extend beyond women and girls, include migrant women, indigenous

TABLE 1: EXAMPLES OF LAWS FROM SOUTH ASIAN AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES THAT APPEAR TO GUARANTEE SRHR FOR ALL

<p>INDIA</p> <p>SRH LAW: Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPD), 2016</p>	<p>What SRHR/GE component does it guarantee?</p> <p>Of the multiple SRH Rights that the RPD Act protects for persons with disabilities (PWDs), Section 10(2), RPD Act specifically protects PWDs from being subjected to medical procedures which lead to infertility without their informed consent. The Act reinstates the idea of PWDs having equal rights to have children and build a family.</p> <p>What are the challenges?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The RPD Act does not consider the vulnerabilities that PWD, especially women and girls with disabilities, live with. • No remedy is stated in violation of this provision. There is mention of a minor penalty to the perpetrator that doesn't justify the gross violation of the bodily rights of PWDs. • There is no provision in the Act that talks about the access to information that PWDs should have in terms of SRHR so that they can fight such violations that restrict them from realising their full SRH potential and rights to have a family.
<p>THAILAND</p> <p>SRH LAW: Marriage Equality Law</p>	<p>What SRHR/GE component does it guarantee?</p> <p>The Thai Civil Code that mentions marriage in 70 sections removes heteronormative terms like men/women and replaces them with alternate inclusive terms like individuals and spouses, thereby recognising same sex marriages.¹⁵ The codes hereby also give marriage equality between gender diverse groups, guaranteeing equity amongst minorities.</p> <p>What are the challenges?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More Thai legal codes are yet to be made gender neutral. • Usage of surrogacy as a method to have children still possess legal barriers for same-sex couples thereby not guaranteeing complete autonomy on their SRHR. • Parents are still defined as 'father' or 'mother', and do not accept the identities and diversity of family that the law has brought in.
<p>PHILIPPINES</p> <p>SRH LAW: The Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act</p>	<p>What SRHR/GE component does it guarantee?</p> <p>The Act guarantees access to contraceptive information and services in all public health facilities to everyone regardless of age, gender, disability, marital status or background. This act is supposed to help anyone access contraceptive measures regardless of their identity, receive authentic information and make decisions regarding their own bodies.</p> <p>What are the challenges?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Supreme court clarified that although the Act guarantees everyone the right to access contraceptives and information thereof, minors (under the age of 18) still need parental consent. • The Act requires spousal consent before undergoing any surgical contraceptive treatment. This restricts women's ability to make informed decisions and choices regarding family planning. • The Act is not applicable in private health facilities or facilities run by religious groups. This restricts young adolescents visiting the facilities to seek any contraceptive information or services.

women, women with disabilities, and queer women who have unique needs, particularly when it comes to their sexual and reproductive health. Meeting these diverse needs is crucial for ensuring equitable access to healthcare services.⁸

Although laws and policies often fall short in safeguarding human rights and promoting gender equity due to their complexities, historical evidence indicates that countries with robust law enforcement have seen a decrease in issues such as gender-based violence.¹⁶ It is crucial for civil society organisations, individual activists, and communities to increase their presence in key advocacy spaces and push for more effective legal and policy reforms. These efforts should aim not only to advance gender equity but also protect against potential backlash.

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WEAPONISING THE WEB: *How Anti-Gender Movements are Threatening Gender Justice in Asia*

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Introduction. Patriarchal and authoritarian governance in South Asian societies has long hindered the advancement of people's rights. A draconian legal framework that suppresses civil liberties, coupled with conservative and right-wing control, enforces subjective patriarchal concepts such as "morality," "decency," and "obscenity" to dictate what is permissible and what must be criminalised. This, coupled with prevalent misogyny, has fueled the rise of anti-gender movements across the region.

Globally, one in three women have experienced¹ physical violence, and 38% of respondents in The Economist Intelligence Unit's research² reported facing some form of online violence.

Many countries in Asia exemplify these challenges, with growing opposition to laws designed to protect women, transgender individuals, and other marginalised groups. As a result, policymaking in the region has increasingly aligned with conservative ideologies—whether driven by the government's own ideological leanings, as seen in India, or by fear of backlash from right-wing religious groups, as observed in Pakistan. This resistance not only obstructs the progress of rights for individuals and communities already living on the margins but also threatens the realisation of critical gender justice commitments, like those outlined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Adopted at the UN Fourth World

Conference on Women in 1995, this landmark framework set the foundation for advancing global gender equality—a goal now at risk in the face of rising opposition.

As we mark the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration, the current state of gender equality serves as a stark reminder that we remain far behind in achieving the objectives outlined in this historic commitment. Moreover, the challenges of 1995 have evolved into more complex dimensions, shaped by today's shifting political, social, and technological contexts. The global rise of anti-gender, right-wing movements, intensified opposition to diverse gender and sexual identities fueled by

mis/disinformation and conservative ideologies, and the use of technology to amplify hateful narratives, all demand an urgent reimagining of the strategies for achieving gender justice. The principles of the Declaration must be adapted to address the heightened hostility and complexities of the present day.

This Factfile examines how anti-gender actors in Asia exploit technology to fuel cultural norms and misinformation to undermine gender equality, highlights critical gaps and offers actionable recommendations.

Anti-Gender Movements in Asia: A May 2023 UN Women report³ titled “Online Opposition to Gender Equality” focusing on the Asia-Pacific region, examines the narratives and strategies employed by anti-rights and anti-gender actors on the internet. The research

explores content and online groups predominantly frequented by men or with a significant male presence, and analyses how these spaces are being used to discredit gender equality and feminism while framing men as victims of these movements. The study identifies the following tactics and narratives (see Table 2) that these spaces project.

Anti-gender movements worldwide, and particularly in Asia, consistently employ these tactics, often pushing similar narratives in their campaigns. This resonance with conservative, right-wing, and anti-feminist ideologies reinforces existing biases, fueling the growth of hate speech and further amplifying attacks on gender justice movements. These patterns are evident in the campaigns highlighted in this section.

Pakistan

- Organised anti-gender campaigns, both online and offline, targeting women’s rights movements have been steadily increasing. In 2021, blasphemy cases were filed against the organisers of the annual Aurat March (Women’s March), with accusations that their demands for rights were contrary to fundamental Islamic principles—a frequent argument used to oppose rights-based advocacy in the country;
- The production and promotion of fabricated disinformation online targeting feminists and gender rights activists in the country is on the rise;
- Despite legal recognition, transgender individuals continue to face widespread violence in society, encompassing physical, social, psychological, and financial abuse;

TABLE 2: ANTI-FEMINIST TACTICS AND NARRATIVES

TACTICS	NARRATIVES
Deflect: Shifting the focus away from women's rights issues	> Justifying violence and hostility towards women
Deny: Denying the validity of gender equality and women's rights issues	> Justifying the belittling of women
Discount: Minimising the importance of gender equality and women's rights issues	> Portraying men as victims of gender equality
Threaten: Threatening to harm women and women's rights activists	> Justifying the exclusion of women
Flipping the narrative: Countering feminist claims with opposing narratives (positively) centering on men	> Promotion of patriarchy and male privilege
Discredit: Casting doubts on the legitimacy, motives and methods of women's rights activists	
Divide: Disrupting the unity between women's rights activists	

Source: *Online Opposition to Gender Equality – May 2023 – UN Women*

- Coordinated campaigns aimed at undermining transgender rights have escalated, resulting in the reversal of critical legislative advancements that once safeguarded the community's interests.

India

- Hate speech and violence against Muslims have become institutionalised and normalised under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leadership, with a noticeable gendered dimension to this violence. Digital hate targeting these groups has surged, with social media platforms playing a significant role in advancing anti-rights and anti-gender agendas within the country's heavily right-wing political environment;
- In 2020, Facebook's policy head Ankhi Das resigned⁴ following accusations of favoring the ruling BJP. Reports revealed that Das refrained from removing posts inciting violence against Muslims by BJP members, citing concerns that enforcing rules against violations by politicians from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party could harm Facebook's business prospects in India;
- Several mobile applications were discovered⁵ engaging in the "auctioning"⁶ of Muslim women, including journalists, activists, actors, politicians, and Nobel Laureate Malala Yousufzai. One app listed over 100 Indian Muslim women. In 2022, the alleged creator of this app, along with three others involved, was arrested. One of the arrested⁷ individuals admitted that her actions were influenced by Hindu right-wing ideology propagated on social media;
- Prominent Muslim journalist Rana Ayyub has been a frequent target of this violence. She has faced relentless online abuse, including doxxing, deepfakes, and cyber harassment, due to her reporting on violence linked to the BJP government. Ayyub has stated

that she has had to alter her online behavior to minimise the constant attacks.

Bangladesh

- Despite being legally recognised as a "third gender," the transgender community in Bangladesh continues to face extreme forms of violence and discrimination. Efforts to implement laws that protect their rights have faced significant challenges;
- Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh, a coalition representing over 25,000 madrassas⁸ and religious schools, has persistently lobbied against transgender rights. The group has labeled⁹ the proposed Transgender Rights Protection Act a "curse," claiming that transgender identities represent a distorted ideology that destroys faith and promotes mental instability;
- A wave of transphobic hate campaigns emerged both online and offline after a television series depicted the story of a character undergoing gender transition. Critics accused the show of promoting an LGBTQIA+ agenda and called for a boycott. This campaign ultimately led to the series being banned from airing, and the lead actor issued an apology in response to the backlash;
- Feminists in Bangladesh have been criticised³ in online commentary for allegedly promoting an LGBTQIA+ agenda, with claims that such activism has influenced individuals to identify as gay.
- Women politicians in Bangladesh have been frequent targets of online violence. A 2024 study that analysed nearly 25,000 Facebook posts found that organised efforts to spread misinformation and disinformation were common. The study¹⁰ noted, "Our analysis of 1,400 gender-based attacks reveals they mainly echo 300 original posts or their variations. The repetition of the same texts or posts

across multiple Pages or Groups points to an organised effort to disseminate misinformation and disinformation."

Myanmar

- Coordinated online anti-gender campaigns in Myanmar have created an environment of fear and insecurity for women, forcing many to retreat from public life and silence their voices, according to a 2023 study;¹¹
- The study analysed over 1.6 million Telegram posts and found, "The overall prevalence of abusive posts targeting women on Telegram was up to 500 times higher than international baselines for abuse prevalence on social media, where these exist.";
- A significant portion of the hateful content targeting women was politically motivated, with the study identifying up to 15,000 posts that violated victims' privacy through doxxing.

South Korea

- In South Korea, there has been significant¹² backlash against feminism and those who express feminist views. A stark example of this was the wave of online and offline gendered violence following the 2018 "Escape the Corset" movement, which challenged patriarchal beauty standards. Women who cut their hair short and stopped wearing makeup faced widespread harassment, including severe physical¹³ attacks;
- Olympic gold medalist archer An San became¹³ a target of coordinated online abuse due to her short hair. Anti-gender attackers justified the abuse by calling her a "feminist" as a derogatory term, and her Instagram account was flooded with hateful comments.

Philippines

- Anti-gender rhetoric is deeply institutionalised in the Philippines, with former president Rodrigo Duterte mainstreaming¹⁴ misogyny through hateful narratives against women and girls in all their diversities;
- In response, Filipino women launched their own #MeToo movement, using hashtags #BabaeAko (I am a woman) and #LalabanAko (I will fight back) to push back against institutional misogyny;¹⁴
- Patriarchy and misogyny remain pervasive, reflected in online abuse. A UN Women study³ found Google searches in the country spiked for terms like “women belong in the kitchen,” “gender equality problems,” and “feminism is bad” between 2020 and 2021;
- Anti-gender narratives thrive in male-dominated political spaces, where leaders gain support by endorsing rape. Justifications³ such as “men can’t control themselves” or “men are easily tempted” are frequently used to defend perpetrators of violence.

Future Strategies. When the Beijing Declaration was adopted in 1995, the scale and impact of digital anti-gender movements were virtually unimaginable. Today, the global landscape has shifted dramatically, and with it, the understanding and scope of gender justice have evolved. These changes call for a new, context-driven approach to advancing the gender equality agenda. For any strategy to be effective, it must recognise and address the lived realities of society’s most vulnerable individuals, proactively tackle the unique challenges they face, and work toward closing the systemic gaps that perpetuate inequality. Some of the strategies that are useful to realise the gender justice agenda include, but are not limited to:

- Strengthening multistakeholder collaboration among public, private, and nonprofit entities in legislative processes, with a deliberate focus on including communities and individuals directly affected by these policies and decisions;
- Anti-rights and anti-gender movements are driven by technology designs that profit from the hate and engagement they generate. It is essential to centre human rights in technology design processes, ensuring that tech companies implement systems and algorithms that go beyond automated detection of violations. Human oversight must be intentionally integrated to ensure that the widespread anti-rights and anti-gender content on social media and digital platforms is effectively removed before it gains traction and spreads further;
- Lawmakers must prioritise strengthening legislation and legal frameworks to ensure comprehensive protection and support for women and girls in all their diversities, particularly in the digital spaces. This includes effectively addressing technology-facilitated gender-based violence through rights-based policies, gender-sensitive enforcement practices, and accessible and inclusive support mechanisms.

International and national human rights networks must advocate for a shift in legal protections from politically driven agendas to rights-centred frameworks. Governments and law enforcement agencies have an obligation to foster an enabling environment for such advocacy. Public-private partnerships play a critical role in advancing gender equality and justice, particularly in societies grappling with persistent and evolving gendered violence. As technology advances, these partnerships are essential to addressing emerging challenges in the absence of robust regulatory mechanisms.

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