



JUSTICE, ABUNDANCE, AND POSSIBILITY FOR ALL: **Countering anti-gender movements in South Africa**

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“Fascist and fundamentalist worldviews are based on hatred and fear, on scarcity, limitation, and coercion. Our feminist realities are based on justice, expansiveness, abundance, and possibility for all.

This is the worst nightmare of anti-rights actors. Because the simple truth they seek to hide from society at all costs is that when we are free to live safely and respectfully in our bodies, our identities, and our chosen relationships and families, life is beautiful” (Michaeli & Marler, 2021, p. 15).

Introduction

Globally and across the African continent, progress toward realising the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of all people is slow and limited in scope (UN Women, 2022). This trend is unfolding alongside broader backsliding on gender equality goals: “Between 2019 and 2022, nearly 40% of countries – home to over 1 billion women and girls in 2022 – stagnated or even declined on gender equality” (EM2030, 2024, p. 3). Moreover, the rights of LGBTIQ persons are especially contested. While some African nations have taken steps to abolish colonial-era laws criminalising homosexuality, others are experiencing renewed waves of criminalisation (Matebeni, 2021).

A range of interconnected crises contribute to rights backsliding, including deepening global economic inequality, the climate emergency, and proliferating armed conflicts. Within this context, gender equality has emerged as a political battlefield with the rights of vulnerable and marginalised people especially targeted (EM2023, 2024). Coordinated, transnational movements that oppose gender justice have grown in influence, driving societal and political polarisation and yielding tangible impacts on laws, policies, and investments that affect girls, women, and LGBTIQ persons’ access to health, education and other rights (EM2023, 2024).

There is substantial evidence regarding the nature and scale of anti-gender movements in North America and Europe (GATE, 2024; Goetz, 2020; Roggeband & Krizsan, 2019; Shameem, 2021). However, far less is known about the strategies and tactics used by these movements when expanding their reach to the African continent,

particularly in South Africa (see, for example, Francis & McEwen, 2024; Kaoma, 2012; McEwen, 2024; van Klinken & Chitando, 2016). At the same time, some scholars caution against framing conservative mobilisation in South Africa and other African nations as directly mirroring the ultra-conservative ideologies of the Global North, underscoring the need for context-specific insights into rights rollbacks on the continent (Awondo et al., 2022; Nabaneh et al., 2022). This report addresses these gaps.

Purpose

This report unpacks the complex dynamics of organised resistance to SRHR and gender justice in South Africa, examines its impacts on activists and CSOs, and identifies strategic pathways for collective action to counter such movements.

Methodological approach

This report draws on desktop research, media analysis, and conversations with CSOs, activists, and other key players with direct experience with anti-gender organising in South Africa:

Data sources include:

- A rapid media analysis of online South African news archives examined articles, opinion pieces, press releases, and statements related to anti-gender movements. This also included reviewing the websites of anti-gender organisations to document campaign efforts.
- A systematic review of peer-reviewed research and unpublished organisational reports about anti-gender movements to provide a comprehensive understanding of the landscape and tactics used by these groups.
- Six interviews with key informants, including South African activists, academics, and practitioners in SRHR, LGBTIQ rights, and feminist social justice. As the findings will reveal, harassment of activists by anti-gender groups is prevalent. To reduce the risk of further victimisation, most participants elected to use pseudonyms.

The insights from these sources paint a picture of how anti-gender movements are operating in South Africa and highlight opportunities for SRHR civil society, funders, and allies to counter these movements effectively.

Report outline

The report is structured into six main sections:

1. An overview of what is meant when describing groups or movements as ‘anti-gender’.
2. A snapshot of key SRHR challenges in South Africa, sketching a picture of what is at stake when anti-gender movements gain ground.
3. A mapping of anti-gender movements in South Africa, highlighting the main groups and organisations.
4. A breakdown of three key strategies used by these movements to advance their agenda in South Africa, along with common tactics they employ.
5. Five strategic recommendations to strengthen SRHR CSOs and activists in responding to anti-gender movements, with real-world examples of actions taken by CSOs.
6. A collection of practical resources for CSOs to support implementation of the suggested strategic entry points.

What are anti-gender movements?

The term ‘anti-gender’ refers to concerted efforts to overturn or pre-empt policy and legal provisions for gender equality and SRHR. Anti-gender actors and movements – backed by substantial funding and coordinated on a transnational scale – actively resist equality, democracy, gender justice, bodily autonomy and integrity, as well as the right to live safely across diverse gender identities, expressions, and sexual orientations (Michaeli & Marler, 2021).

The rise of the concept ‘gender ideology’

Anti-gender actors and movements reject what they refer to as ‘gender ideology’, a concept that originated in ultra-conservative Catholic discourse in the 1990s. At the time, the concept was used to defend harmful patriarchal norms and power relations and push back against efforts to place gender equality and SRHR as urgent priorities on the global human rights agenda (Martínez et al., 2021).

Though a relatively recent construct, ‘gender ideology’ has since become central to various religious extremist movements, functioning as the symbolic glue that allows diverse anti-gender groups to work together. The use of this concept is insidious. By framing gender equality as an ‘ideology,’ anti-gender movements can claim that efforts by civil society, governments, or multilateral organisations like the United Nations to promote gender equality are ‘ideological’ and, therefore, not permissible (Kaoma, 2016; Mereles & Kane, 2021).

An overarching goal of anti-gender movements is to centralise power in ways that serve conservative patriarchal interests. Patriarchal norms reinforce systemic inequalities, such as the unequal distribution of power and resources, which undermine the rights of women and marginalised persons. Those who wish to maintain patriarchal power promote traditional gender roles to uphold their privilege and resist change (Khan et al., 2023).

Mobilising the ‘traditional’ family

The persuasive power of ‘gender ideology’ lies in its appeal to a specific vision of the family as the bedrock of social and religious values (Kaoma,

2018; McEwen, 2023). This vision – typically patriarchal, hetero-cisnormative, nuclear, and reproduction-oriented – is tied to a broader notion of societal and national well-being, and supported by the belief that:

- there are only two sexes, which are seen as being hierarchical and meant to complement each other (Martínez et al., 2021);
- inequalities between men and women are the natural outcome of biological differences that cannot – and should not – be changed (Martínez et al., 2021);
- women’s central role – although they may have others – is “to reproduce the nation, the race, and the religion” (Shameem, 2021, p. 33).

Gender equality, considered part of ‘gender ideology’, is seen as a ploy to dismantle the traditional family and ultimately undermine the nation (SDC, 2022). These social institutions are presented as under threat, both from ‘outsiders,’ such as migrants and refugees, and from ‘insiders’ who deviate from dominant norms – people of colour, ethnic and religious minorities, political dissenters (including feminists), and those with non-conforming sexual orientations or gender identities (Equal Rights Coalition, 2022; Harper, 2024; McEwen, 2021).

For instance, American politician Ed Martin – speaking at the anti-gender convening the World Congress of Families – merged pro-family rhetoric, nationalism and xenophobia when he declared to the audience, “We have to be a nation [...] what happens when countries are overrun is that our families are destroyed” (Shameem, 2021, p. 32). By linking the preservation of the ‘natural’ family to nationalist goals, the political value of the term ‘gender ideology’ for right-wing populist and authoritarian governments becomes clear.

Of course, the racist foundation of the concept ‘gender ideology’ as it is deployed in the Global North is less palatable in African contexts, necessitating repackaging for African audiences.

As this report will show, the flexibility of the concept allows US Christian fundamentalist organisations to tailor their messaging in African countries, framing ‘gender ideology’ as a form of

Western imperialism imposed on formerly colonised nations. In this narrative, efforts to achieve gender equality are portrayed as part of an external 'Western agenda' (McEwen, 2023; SDC, 2022).

Regardless of the context, a common theme in anti-gender rhetoric is how the groups promoting it position themselves as victims of 'gender ideology', despite often belonging to an elite with disproportionate access to power and resources. In contrast, the targets of these movements are largely historically marginalised groups that continue to face multiple forms of oppression (Martínez et al., 2021; Shameem, 2021).

A global movement with local impacts

Anti-gender movements have significantly impacted the Global North and are increasingly gaining influence in the Global South by successfully rallying public support against gender equality and SRHR reforms (McEwen, 2021).

Common entry points for anti-gender influence include opposition to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), the rights of LGBTIQ persons and their families, safe and legal abortion, and the provision of gender-affirming healthcare (GATE, 2024; Kaoma, 2012; McEwen, 2023, 2024). These movements also exert considerable influence in shaping political agendas, emboldened by rising authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism worldwide (GATE, 2024; Kaoma, 2023).

On the continent, US Christian fundamentalist organisations were identified as key in the introduction of regressive laws by a range of African governments (Kaoma, 2018; McEwen, 2021). Between 2008 and 2018, the US-based religious group Fellowship Foundation spent over \$20 million in Uganda alone, contributing to the passing of the 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act (Namubiru & Wepukhulu, 2020).

While conservative movements have a long and tenacious history, the organised and well-resourced nature of today's anti-gender extremism is particularly alarming, posing significant threats to hard-won progress in SRHR and gender justice.

What is at stake? A snapshot of the state of SRHR in South Africa

As part of post-apartheid efforts to redress inequality, several laws, policies, and guidelines have been developed to improve the delivery of comprehensive, quality SRHR services. Today, South Africa has a robust rights-based legislative framework, including constitutional prohibitions against discrimination based on sex, gender, or sexual orientation and constitutional provision for the right to access healthcare services, including reproductive healthcare.

In 2019, the country adopted a National Integrated Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) Policy that “consolidates various guidelines and aligns to various policies on SRHR in South Africa, thereby providing a broad framework for the provision of quality and comprehensive SRHR services recognising individual autonomy, enabling informed choice, and advancing human rights in the context of SRHR” (Department of Health, 2019, p. 4).

Yet, despite a largely progressive policy landscape, anti-rights movements are gaining ground in the context of pre-existing health system failures and entrenched challenges to SRHR. These challenges are well-documented, interconnected, and structural, yet progress toward creating more enabling conditions for SRHR remains slow.

Prominent SRHR challenges in South Africa include:

Harmful gender norms: Despite significant social and cultural shifts, outdated beliefs about harmful gender roles persist, undermining SRHR. Dominant norms associate femininity with being submissive in intimate and sexual relationships, and discourage girls and women from seeking information about sexuality or reproduction (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). Meanwhile, boys and men are socialised to seek power and control, take risks and actively pursue sex (Levon et al., 2017).

These norms stigmatise girls and women who seek contraceptives, become pregnant, or experience sexual violence (Fluks et al., 2019; Morison et al., 2022). They also harm boys and men, imposing unrealistic expectations of invulnerability and

emotional stoicism (Bhana & Chen, 2020; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Pervasive gender-based violence: South Africa has some of the highest rates of gender-based violence (GBV) in the world (DWYPD, 2020). Discrimination and violence against women, girls, and LGBTIQ individuals often begin at home. Gender discrimination and patriarchal norms are perpetuated within families, where deep-rooted power imbalances keep girls, women, and LGBTIQ people in subordinate positions (OECD, 2021). These unequal dynamics often lead to violence in intimate relationships (Brodie et al., 2023).

This violence is intersectional. People facing multiple forms of compounding marginalisation – such as migrants, refugees, unhoused individuals, and sex workers – report alarmingly high rates of violence, including hate crimes (Marais et al., 2022; Richter et al., 2020). Homophobic and transphobic violence is prevalent, particularly among LGBTIQ youth, who often endure physical and verbal abuse in schools (Francis & McEwen, 2024).

High rates of early unintended pregnancy: Early unintended pregnancy continues to be a significant challenge, with a notable percentage of pregnancies being recorded among primary school learners (Ndlovu & Padarath, 2024). Pregnancy contributes substantially to morbidity and mortality among adolescent girls, particularly in rural settings where pregnancy-related mortality rates are exceptionally high (Toska et al., 2019).

A range of factors contribute to unintended teenage pregnancy, including a lack of contraceptive knowledge, unmet contraception needs and sexual coercion and violence (Ajayi & Ezegebe, 2020). Access to modern, reliable contraceptives and safe, functional abortion facilities is especially limited in rural healthcare settings, making it difficult for girls and young women to avoid unwanted pregnancies (Stevens, 2021).

High HIV prevalence: South Africa has the largest population of people living with HIV in the world (Zuma et al., 2022). HIV infection rates among girls and young women aged 15 to 25 remain alarmingly high, even as rates decline in other age and gender groups (Simbayi et al., 2019). This is

partly due to power imbalances in age-disparate relationships (Murewanhema et al., 2022).

Stigma and marginalisation heighten HIV risk for LGBTIQ people, with transgender women bearing a disproportionate burden (Cloete et al., 2023; Zuma et al., 2022). This vulnerability is fuelled by an interplay of social determinants, including transphobic and homophobic stigma, discrimination in healthcare settings, high levels of violence and hate crimes, and educational and socio-economic exclusion (Savva et al., 2018).

Inadequate sexual health and relationship

education: In South Africa, inadequate sexual health and relationship education is influenced by cultural norms that discourage open discussions about sex between adults and young people. Essop et al. (2018) note that “the idea of withholding sexuality information from young adolescents is seen as a way to preserve their innocence and purity” (p. S38). This creates a double-bind where youth are expected to avoid risky sexual behaviour while lacking the necessary information and skills to do so.

To address these challenges, school-based Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) has been introduced to provide young people with age-appropriate, scientifically accurate information on issues like teenage pregnancy, GBV and HIV/STI risk. However, its success hinges on well-equipped teachers, who may also hold the same restrictive beliefs about discussing sexuality openly with young people (Shefer et al., 2015; Wangamati, 2020). This underscores the need for improved resources to support teachers implementing CSE.

Hetero-cisnormative health systems and stigma

among some healthcare providers: In South Africa, healthcare systems are predominantly hetero-cisnormative, leading to both subtle and overt stigma for individuals who do not conform to traditional norms – particularly those who are not heterosexual, cisgender and married – when seeking sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services (de Vries et al., 2020; Morison & Lynch, 2016). As a result, many young people face judgment that discourages them from accessing the care they need. Similarly, LGBTIQ persons are pushed out of services (Tolla et al., 2018).

Although gender-affirming healthcare for transgender and gender-diverse individuals has

been available in the public sector since the 1970s, access is severely limited, particularly in rural areas (Muller et al., 2023; Vincent & Camminga, 2009). In urban settings, gender-affirming hormonal treatment is offered at a few tertiary institutions, while surgical options are available in only a handful of state hospitals (McLachlan, 2019a). Those seeking surgery face long waitlists of up to 25 years (Spencer et al., 2017).

Healthcare system failures: Under-resourced healthcare systems and systemic failures severely limit access SRH services. Contraceptive stockouts are common, making it challenging for individuals to obtain essential birth control options (Rucell, 2023). Gender affirming hormonal care is also disrupted during stockouts (McLachlan, 2019b). Fewer than 7% of the country’s health facilities offer safe abortions despite existing legislation that enables such services. This lack of access contributes to septic abortions being one of the leading causes of maternal mortality in South Africa (Stevens, 2021). SRHR challenges remain classed and racialised “with black and poor women bearing the brunt of high maternal morbidity and mortality rates” (Stevens, 2021, p. 1).

South Africa's significant SRHR challenges, combined with the underfunded nature of civil society, have created fertile ground for fundamentalist groups to take root.

This includes not only efforts to roll back policy reforms, but also initiatives such as funding anti-abortion crisis pregnancy centres and abstinence-only school-based education programs (D’Angelo et al., 2024; du Plessis et al., 2019).

In what follows, this report unpacks the actions of anti-gender movements aimed at obstructing SRHR in South Africa and outlines strategies for civil society to push back against these efforts.

The presence of anti-gender movements in South Africa

The findings show that the presence of anti-gender organising in South Africa is seen in the actions of three main groupings of conservative actors. Similar to global manifestations of anti-gender organising, these groups have overlapping strategies and tactics and, at times, come together in shared campaigns, often relying on messaging that co-opts and distorts references to human rights, culture, family, and religion (Martínez et al., 2021).

TYPE OF ACTOR	IN-COUNTRY EXAMPLES
Civil society and non-profit actors	<p>Cause for Justice opposes provision of CSE and safe and legal abortion, under the guise of 'human rights' rhetoric.</p> <p>Doctors for Life is a medical practitioner non-profit that opposes, amongst other rights-based issues, the provision of safe and legal abortion.</p> <p>First Do No Harm SA (FDNH-SA), a coalition of medical professionals, is an anti-trans group that denies the existence of transgender and gender-diverse people and actively opposes access to GAHC.</p>
Religious groups	<p>CitizenGo is a global Catholic organization that harnesses civic participation to advance its campaigns, often using tactics that undermine democratic values, with local presence in South Africa.</p> <p>Family Policy Institute SA and Freedom of Religion SA (FOR SA) both promote anti-gender agendas – including opposition to CSE, access to safe and legal abortion, and protection of LGBTIQ rights – under the guise of 'pro-family' rhetoric. Family Policy Institute shares financial ties with US-based Christian fundamentalist groups. The group has openly acknowledged receiving mentorship and resources from US fundamentalist organizations like the UN Family Rights Caucus and Family Watch International, the latter of which is classified as an LGBTIQ hate group by Southern Poverty Law Centre.</p>
Political parties and representatives	<p>The African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) is a socially conservative Christian minority party in government. The party is highly vocal in its anti-gender campaigning and frequently collaborates with 'pro-family' organizations to oppose CSE, LGBTIQ rights, and access to safe and legal abortion.</p> <p>Freedom Front Plus is a right-wing Afrikaner nationalist minority party in government and less vocal on anti-gender issues but has shown involvement in campaigns against CSE.</p>

The findings highlight four main strategies deployed by anti-gender groups and movements in South Africa:

1. Co-opting religious narratives
2. Co-opting decolonisation narratives
3. Popularising transgender denialism
4. Closing down civic space

Strategies used by anti-gender movements in South Africa

1. Co-opting religious narratives

Anti-gender movements strategically co-opt religious narratives to further their agendas, framing their opposition to 'gender ideology' as a defence of religious values.

While these movements are often part of coordinated, US-backed transnational campaigns, their local actions exploit the religious convictions of individuals who become foot soldiers without necessarily understanding the broader, harmful objectives. As one interviewee noted, these individuals often see themselves as "doing the Lord's work" and believe they are part of a movement that is righting societal wrongs (Pontsho Pilane, individual interview). Still, they are not necessarily aware of the global, coordinated scale of organised anti-gender movements nor the alliances of the groups they are supporting with racist, nationalist and autocratic movements.

This strategy allows transnational anti-gender groups to gain local traction by tapping into deeply held beliefs, even as they work toward a more fundamentalist vision that does not necessarily align with the diverse realities of the communities they impact:

I think the fact that South Africa has the constitution and progressive civil society definitely makes it more difficult for these anti-gender actors to gain support. But obviously they're doing it nonetheless, and like in many African countries, the entry point has been religion (Haley McEwen, individual interview).

In South Africa, these groups primarily leverage religious narratives in two key ways: positioning themselves as defenders of the ordained 'natural' or 'traditional' family, and advocating for religious freedom. By capitalising on these themes, they actively oppose a wide array of rights, ultimately undermining gender justice and reinforcing existing structural inequalities.

Stoking anxiety that the 'traditional family' is under threat

Framing their agendas as protective of 'family values' helps anti-gender movements obscure the harmful impacts of their actions on marginalised persons (Kaoma, 2012; McEwen, 2023). For instance, the local anti-gender group Family Policy Institute SA describes their aim as "shap[ing] public debate and formulat[ing] public policy that values human life and upholds the institutions of marriage and family" (Pilane, 2024, p. 150). Yet the family form that they promote reflects only a narrow subset of South Africans – a "Judeo-Christian vision of family life" depended on marriage as a "one-man, one-woman institution" (Family Policy Institute, 2024).

In reality, the two-parent nuclear family has never been the norm in South Africa, where family structures are diverse and include single-parent households, LGBTIQ-led families, multi-generational homes, and rich extended family networks:

[L]ess than a third of South African families actually conform to the two-cisgender heterosexual biological parent model (Macleod et al., 2020, p. 24).

Anti-gender groups draw on the protection of the 'traditional' family in various local campaigns to block or delay progress in providing CSE, ensuring access to safe and legal abortion, and establishing improved legal protections for families created by LGBTIQ individuals. For instance, in a campaign against marriage equality reform¹ – under a banner claiming 'Sexual rights groups plan to abolish Biblical marriage' – Family Policy Institute SA frames policy efforts to harmonise marriage legislation as a vaguely defined threat to the "Biblically defined institution of marriage," attributing these reforms to "sexual rights groups and the UN agency UNICEF." The campaign material goes on to warn that allowing inclusive definitions of marriage and family will "sow the seeds of [the government's] own and the nation's destruction" (Family Policy Institute, 2024).

¹ Specifically, the legal reform Family Policy Institute SA was objecting to was a proposed policy change that would harmonise the country's three Marriage Acts – the Marriage Act 25 of 1961 for heterosexual unions, the Customary

Marriages Act 120 of 1998 for polygamous marriages and the Civil Union Act 17 of 2006 that regulates partnerships between same-sex and opposite sex unions.

The language in these campaigns closely mirrors that of US-based religious fundamentalist movements, particularly the insinuation that the United Nations is promoting a sinister global agenda (Shameem, 2021).

The actions being called for in this particular campaign remain unclear, although the online content is linked to an appeal for donations to Family Policy Institute SA. More broadly, however, calls by anti-gender movements to defend the 'traditional family' function to rally opposition to a range of SRHR issues. Other local examples of actions by anti-gender groups include:

- Efforts to block the decriminalisation of sex work, framed as an 'anti-family' agenda: "Global sexual rights radicals who influence ANC policy also fund certain NGOs in South Africa to push its anti-family agenda. SWEAT's [Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce] High Court application is an attempt to by-pass the democratic legislative process to get prostitution legalised by judicial decree" (E. Naidoo, 2024).
- Attempts to scrap draft Department of Education guidelines aimed at creating safer school environments for LGBTIQ youth. A statement representing anti-gender groups FOR SA, Family Policy Institute SA, ACDP and Freedom Front Plus argues that the guidelines are "godless and anti-family, [seeking to] completely invalidate the religious beliefs and convictions of Christian students".

Ultimately, however, the 'pro-family' messaging promoted by religious fundamentalist groups fails to support the well-being of South African families or children. At its core, this messaging implies that only families conforming to their narrow definition of a 'traditional' family are deserving of social, policy, and community protection.

Using 'religious freedom' to undermine SRHR

Globally, anti-gender groups have invested considerable efforts to appropriate and redefine religious freedom, arguing that the concept serves to protect the interests of a particular religion rather than the rights of individuals to hold diverse beliefs (Shameem, 2021). This distortion of the concept suggests that religious liberty is under threat from outside forces and from competing

human rights, particularly those related to gender, sexuality, and reproduction (Kaoma, 2023). For anti-gender groups, this creates a situation where they can advance claims of religious freedom as justification for violating the rights of others.

For instance, in South Africa, anti-gender groups have leveraged the concept of religious freedom to oppose legislation aimed at addressing hate crimes, which is particularly troubling given that such crimes frequently target marginalised groups like LGBTIQ persons. Freedom of Religion South Africa (FOR SA) has contended that a proposed Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill would conflict with fundamental rights of religious expression.

The organisation has previously used claims of religious freedom when defending a pastor who, when addressing school children during an assembly, reportedly compared LGBTIQ persons to murderers and paedophiles. During public consultations on the bill, FOR SA and Family Policy Institute SA falsely asserted that the bill would criminalise parts of the bible and that expressing biblical views and teachings could potentially lead to "jail time and limitless fines".

Arguing that efforts to enhance rights protections undermine religious freedom has become a common strategy to depict historically marginalised groups as the ones doing the oppression (Martínez et al., 2021).

Glossing over support for gender justice within faith-based communities

Anti-gender groups often gloss over the diversity of beliefs within religious communities, presenting their views as if they reflect a unified stance. It is crucial to distinguish between fundamentalist religious groups that promote anti-gender narratives, and faith-based organisations that do not align with these views. As Martínez and colleagues (2021) caution, "equating religiosity with support for a gender-restrictive, patriarchal, and authoritarian world order is part of the narrative and goals of gender-restrictive groups, but it is not always a reality on the ground" (p. 13).

By framing their arguments as if they speak for all religious people, anti-gender groups strategically silence opposition, creating the illusion of broad religious consensus. However, recognising that these groups do not represent the entire spectrum of faith-based communities opens up opportunities to "identify, support, and amplify

the work and voices of religious organisations and regular citizens that uphold their faith while rejecting the gender-restrictive agenda” (Martínez et al., 2021, p. 13).

For instance, in South Africa, the Good Hope Metropolitan Community Church has a long history of supporting the rights of marginalised people – including LGBTIQ rights – and has been a crucial ally of rights-based civil society. The church describes itself as “a theologically progressive and inclusive Christian community founded on the principles of Jesus Christ that celebrates diversity and provides a safe, non-judgmental space where all are welcome” (Good Hope MCC, 2023).

Similarly, incremental change within mainstream faith-based communities that have historically not been inclusive of LGBTIQ persons is creating pockets of support. As one interviewee shared about their activism within such communities:

The lesson we learned within churches was that we might not transform the full denomination. However, there are one, two, three inclusive congregations where we can say ‘go to Pastor X, go to Reverend Y, their congregation is inclusive’ (MV, individual interview).

2. Co-opting decolonisation narratives

A second strategy of local anti-gender groups identified in the findings is that of exploiting decolonisation narratives. In South Africa, as in other regions of the Global South, anti-gender

groups have increasingly appropriated decolonisation narratives to legitimise their opposition to CSE, LGBTIQ rights, and access to SRH services. An interviewee describes the following:

Opposition against homosexuality is becoming a way of defying the West and for countries to say they are anti-Western or anti-liberal (Haley McEwen, individual interview).

By framing SRHR and gender rights as tools of neo-colonial influence, anti-gender movements argue that Western powers impose a human rights framework on previously colonised nations, branding it as inherently Western or secular (D’Angelo et al., 2024; McEwen, 2023). This strategy, as described earlier in this report, assists in making anti-gender messaging – rooted in racist ideologies of the fundamentalist US religious right – more workable in African settings.

By co-opting decolonisation narratives, these movements distort legitimate concerns about global neo-colonial power dynamics, using them to promote an exclusionary agenda (McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023). Local anti-gender groups, often oblivious to this exploitation, readily adopt language such as ‘cultural imperialism’ and ‘ideological colonisation’ in their campaigns, notably when narrowing in on human rights protections of marginalised groups.

At the global level, anti-gender groups use decolonial narratives to undermine multilateral human rights frameworks, particularly within

ANTI-GENDER TACTIC: SPREADING DISINFORMATION

This tactic involves the intentional creation and dissemination of false information aimed at deceiving and manipulating public perception. Unlike misinformation, which is unintentionally inaccurate, disinformation is deliberately crafted to incite moral panic and stir public emotion, often with the purpose of mobilizing support for anti-rights campaigns (Gebel, 2021; Martínez et al., 2021).

For instance, an anti-CSE campaign on social media falsely claimed that the South African government's curriculum for Grade 8 students included lessons where children would be introduced to “sexual heroes and role models,” most of whom were supposedly HIV-positive and “80% identified as LGBTIQ” (Department of Basic Education, 2019). In response, the Department of Basic Education issued a press release to provide accurate information about the CSE curriculum.

In another case, anti-CSE activists created a fake circular, misrepresenting it as an official message from the Department of Basic Education. This fraudulent document further perpetuated public misconceptions about the CSE curriculum. The Department again issued a press statement to counter this disinformation. However, the effectiveness of these clarifying responses remains uncertain, as they often receive significantly less media attention than the sensational disinformation.

Box 1

spaces like the United Nations (McEwen, 2023). By invoking concepts such as national sovereignty and cultural imperialism, they aim to challenge the universality of human rights, arguing that these frameworks impose Western values on sovereign nations. This strategy is a calculated effort to limit state obligations to uphold universal rights, instead framing them as external impositions (GATE, 2024; Shameem, 2021).

Locally, anti-gender groups in South Africa do draw on this language, as noted in the previous section, but have, to date, not concentrated their efforts on dismantling multilateral spaces. Instead, they leverage these narratives primarily to influence public opinion and rally support, often echoing global anti-gender rhetoric without directly targeting national or international rights-based institutions. While this narrative appears across various campaigns in South Africa, it is particularly prominent in anti-CSE campaigns.

Framing anti-CSE campaigns as ‘home-grown’

Anti-CSE campaigns have increasingly adopted language that frames CSE as a Western imposition on local cultural values. This strategy falsely positions their campaigns as ‘home-grown’ rather than part of a transnational movement. Although CSE has been included in the South African school curriculum for over two decades, disinformation campaigns (see Box 1) that frame it as a corrupting influence on children began to gain traction in 2016.

Two campaigns in particular catalysed this shift:

- An online petition from the transnational anti-rights organisation CitizenGo was launched in

South Africa, denouncing the Department of Basic Education’s CSE curriculum as a harmful Western and UN-driven agenda that seeks to reshape local gender and sexual norms. The petition criticised CSE for promoting a “controversial ‘rights-based’ rather than health-based approach to sex education” (Shameem, 2021).

- An online campaign targeted scripted lesson plans (SLPs) intended to help South African teachers in implementing the CSE curriculum. Although the SLPs were still in development, excerpts were leaked on a US-funded website, as part of an anti-CSE disinformation campaign. This site misrepresented the content, quickly igniting a media frenzy that reinforced the narrative of CSE as an imposition of ‘foreign’ norms on ‘local’ culture. For example, the ACDP characterised the leaked content in a social media post as “encourage[ing] children to engage in oral, anal, homo and heterosexual practices, among other horrific sexual teachings” (Chaskalson, 2020, p. 68).

Despite claiming to represent concerned South African parents, teachers, and religious groups, these anti-CSE campaigns are not ‘home-grown’. Much of the content for petitions can be traced back to the predominantly US-linked ‘[Protect Children South Africa Coalition](#)’, a grouping supported by the US-based anti-gender powerhouse Family Watch International, amongst others. Local organisations include FOR SA, Family Policy Institute SA, and the Suid Afrikaanse Onderwysersunie (SAOU) (a conservative teachers’

ANTI-GENDER TACTIC: BUILDING LEGITIMACY THROUGH ASSOCIATION

One of the ways in which anti-gender groups build credibility is by associating themselves with well-regarded institutions, including secular organizations like universities. By appearing connected to these institutions, they create an image of authority that resonates with wider, nonreligious audiences (Martínez et al., 2021).

For instance, in September 2022, the Coalition to End Sexual Exploitation (CESE) Africa Summit was held at a prominent South African university, provided anti-rights groups a platform to spread disinformation. The summit was co-sponsored by the US-backed Family Watch International and South Africa’s Family Policy Institute, and included speakers like a Ugandan MP supportive of anti-homosexuality legislation and Sharon Slater, president of Family Watch International, who delivered a keynote equating CSE with sexual grooming.

The university’s involvement, with welcoming remarks from then Vice Principal Professor Thenjiwe Meyiwa, lent an appearance of legitimacy to the event, pushing anti-rights agendas further into the mainstream (Pilane, 2024).

Box 2

union). Family Watch International has close ties with Family Policy Institute SA in particular and has co-sponsored a launch of an anti-gender campaign with the organisation and other local groups (see Box 2).

By collaborating with such local groups, these powerful, US-based groups can amplify their message in South Africa under the guise of a culturally resonant, grassroots movement.

Impacts on public perception and media discourse

To date, these anti-CSE campaigns have not significantly impacted government policy, though they have caused delays in implementing initiatives aimed at strengthening delivery. However, they have been highly effective in shaping public opinion and fuelling intense media debate. Creating and sustaining moral panic is as much a goal for anti-gender movements as achieving policy changes. As D'Angelo et al. (2024) point out, "the key aim of gender-restrictive actors is to generate a long-term cultural shift to (re)establish hetero-patriarchal social norms" (p. 17). This long-term vision helps these groups remain resilient despite short-term setbacks.

The rise of vocal public pressure groups on social media illustrates such influence of anti-CSE messaging in shaping public perceptions (Ngabaza, 2022). For example, one parent described CSE on a Facebook page as a "controversial program forced on children by UN agencies like UNESCO," while another objected to a rights-based approach in CSE, claiming, "CSE is nothing even closely related

to sexual health; CSE is about SEXUAL RIGHTS" (Ngabaza, 2022, emphasis in original).

3. Popularising transgender denialism

This third strategy represents a significant shift in local anti-gender organising, mirroring global trends in fundamentalist anti-rights movements. Worldwide, anti-gender groups have increasingly intensified their efforts to dismantle societal and policy support for the rights and well-being of transgender and gender-diverse individuals. Since around 2020, researchers have documented the contestation of transgender rights as a significant strategy employed by anti-gender movements worldwide (Equal Rights Coalition, 2022).

Transgender denialism is a crucial element of establishing opposition to 'gender ideology', allowing anti-gender groups to obscure their religious fundamentalist roots through a veneer of secularisation.

By advancing a patriarchal, gender-restrictive worldview under the guise of 'common sense' narratives, these movements promote the idea that the gender binary – and the socio-political and economic hierarchies stemming from it – are innate and unchangeable, arising directly from anatomical differences, and that transgender persons do not (or should not) exist (Martínez et al., 2021).

ANTI-GENDER TACTIC: MANUFACTURING MORAL PANIC

This tactic involves deliberately instilling fear in society about a stereotyped group or issue, perceived as a threat to shared values and safety (Crossman, 2024; Hall et al., 1978). Moral panics often target marginalized individuals based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, gender identity, nationality, or religion. This tactic effectively channels public outrage into concrete actions, like signing petitions and spreading disinformation on social media, which fosters a sense of cohesion around contentious issues (Martínez et al., 2021).

Anti-gender groups – globally and in South Africa – frequently use this tactic by framing their arguments around child protection to incite fear and opposition. They portray gender justice initiatives as harmful to children and employ child protection rhetoric to rally support against various rights-based issues. This strategy is particularly effective because it exploits a collective desire to safeguard children. By presenting themselves as concerned adults focused on children's well-being and safety, they manipulate indignation, rage, and fear about children's welfare into social and political backing for gender-restrictive initiatives (Martínez et al., 2021). In South Africa this tactic is commonly observed in the moral panics surrounding CSE and ensuring access to GAHC for young people.

Box 3

Key informants expressed growing concern about the rise of overtly transphobic narratives in South Africa, specifically targeting the rights and well-being of transgender and gender-diverse youth. This raises alarms about the potential ramifications for this already marginalised population. Transgender denialism is seen in two 'streams' of anti-gender campaigning: opposition to providing CSE in schools, and the right of transgender and gender diverse people to access GAHC. These two streams target different sectors, the former predominantly focusing on education stakeholders (the Department of Basic Education, parents and school leadership) and the latter narrowing in on healthcare stakeholders (the Department of Health, higher education, and healthcare professionals).

A transphobic turn in anti-CSE campaigns

Anti-trans narratives are increasingly being integrated into local anti-CSE campaigns, marking a shift from previous strategies that primarily focused on broader claims of CSE 'sexualising children' without specifically addressing gender diversity. Anti-gender movements now employ 'gender ideology' narratives to depict transgender identities as new, coercive, and dangerous, aimed at generating moral panic among the public (see Box 3).

This framing enables these groups to argue that educating children about gender diversity poses a direct threat to both the children and society at large. Similarly, anti-trans groups fabricate a perceived danger by asserting that the spread of 'transgender ideology' is capable of 'turning' cisgender children trans. They often cite misleading statistics to create the illusion of an imminent crisis, or a so-called 'transgender epidemic' (FDNH-SA, 2024). The invocation of child protection rhetoric is a powerful symbolic tool that can be leveraged regardless of the actual circumstances (Amery & Mondon, 2024). An interviewee explained:

[W]hen there's a certain narrative in the religious right, particularly in the US, it starts to find its way to South Africa. We have non-profits that are now talking about 'transgender ideology' and how the government is colluding with sexuality activists to try and indoctrinate children. We're seeing the narrative turn into using children as a scapegoat to be anti-trans (Pontsho Pilane, individual interview).

A pertinent example of mobilising transphobia in anti-CSE campaigning occurred in April 2024, when the anti-rights group FOR SA launched an online petition against a Department of Basic Education guide titled "Promoting Gender Equality in Early Childhood Development: A Practical Guide for Teachers and Practitioners in South Africa." This guide aims to address harmful gender stereotypes and promote equitable beliefs and practices in education. However, leveraging moral panic tactics, FOR SA's petition mischaracterises the guide as a 'covert' initiative by the government to implement 'gender identity training' in schools. This framing not only distorts the guide's intent but also feeds into the growing anti-trans sentiment, further embedding transphobic narratives within broader anti-CSE campaigns:

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has covertly introduced the 'ECE Toolkit', a gender ideology and gender identity training programme for primary and pre-primary teachers and, by extension, for primary and pre-primary school children (FOR SA, 2024).

The deployment of terms like 'transgender ideology' to incite moral panic echoes patterns seen in other reactionary politics. As Amery et al. (2024) note, this tactic is alarmingly reminiscent of antisemitic and Islamophobic discourses, in that transgender individuals are portrayed as a conspiratorial minority with sinister intentions that threaten societal well-being.

Establishing trans-denialism in healthcare

Interviewees explained that the intensified focus on the rights of transgender and gender-diverse youth – notably through pushback against providing GAHC – can be partly attributed to the emergence of a highly vocal local transphobic group, First Do No Harm South Africa (FDNH-SA):

In South Africa, we strongly started seeing [an anti-gender presence], very strongly, regarding gender-affirming healthcare last year and again this year, with the First Do No Harm South Africa group making their arrival (Steve, individual interview).

Established in late 2023, this trans-denialist lobby group is composed of medical professionals who lack specialised knowledge in caring for transgender and gender-diverse youth, as well as broader LGBTIQ expertise, and predominantly practice in unrelated medical fields (FDNH-SA,

2024). The group employs global anti-gender framings, labelling GAHC as “ideologically driven rather than evidence-based” (FDNH-SA, 2024). As trans-denialists, FDNH-SA rejects the existence of transgender identities. The group frames transgender and gender-diverse youth as ‘vulnerable’ and advocate for ‘exploratory psychotherapy’, essentially a form of conversion therapy that has been discredited as unscientific and inhumane (T. Naidoo & Sogunro, 2021). The group’s website links to far-right opinion pieces in US media and content produced by Global North anti-gender actors and organisations.

Using a mix of pseudoscientific claims and a ‘common sense’ narrative, this group mimics global tactics by presenting the provision of GAHC as a ‘debate’ (see Box 4). This approach sharply contrasts with the consensus among international and local medical associations, which recognise these practices as medically necessary and lifesaving (Coleman et al., 2022; Muller et al., 2023; Rosenthal, 2024; Tomson et al., 2021). By promoting this narrative, FDNH-SA aims to shift the conversation, portraying an established medical approach as one that requires ‘cautious’ scrutiny. This enables trans-denialists to disguise their position as simply expressing “reasonable concerns” (Amery & Mondon, 2024, p. 11).

Groups like FDNH-SA not only obstruct access to already limited care for transgender individuals, but they also play a significant role in shaping perceptions about the legitimacy of transgender lives. FDNH-SA has directed considerable efforts toward influencing healthcare professionals and decision-makers in research and academic

institutions, capitalising on the marginalisation of transgender voices in these spaces:

Those seeds of doubt are planted [by anti-trans groups], even if it's not that a side is chosen, so to speak. Even if it's not that we've decided against human rights, even if it's very subtle, you start aligning with a certain position already. Because you only have those anti-trans people in your space (Autumn, individual interview).

4. Closing down civic space

Globally, the ability of civil society to respond to rights rollbacks is under significant threat. Recent analysis indicates that only 3.2% of the world’s population resides in countries with fully open civic spaces, with South Africa listed among the 14.9% of countries where civic space is obstructed (Civics Monitor, 2023).

Although South Africa has robust legislation that allows civil society organisations to register and operate without state interference, reports of civic freedom violations are on the rise, with human rights defenders increasingly facing threats and attacks (Civics Monitor, 2023). These trends reflect a broader global pattern; Amnesty International, for example, has identified at least 50 countries with anti-NGO laws either in place or in development (2019).

In South Africa, anti-gender movements are further exacerbating these pressures. At the micro level, they often engage in targeted harassment and victimisation of activists, creating a climate of trauma and burnout that

ANTI-GENDER TACTIC: MANUFACTURING CREDIBILITY THROUGH PSEUDOSCIENCE

Anti-gender groups frequently work to “professionalize” their image and build credibility by employing scientific language and drawing on discredited or dubious research, or selected readings of credible research, to support their arguments (D’Angelo et al., 2024). Similar to the tactic of building legitimacy through association, this “creates an appearance of rigor and legitimacy that appeals to nonreligious audiences” (Martínez, 2021, p. 29).

This tactic has a historical precedent, with local examples including HIV denialism during the Mbeki era and the Apartheid-era ‘Aversion Project,’ where the South African Defence Force subjected same-sex attracted conscripts to medical torture (Kaplan, 2001). Today, trans-denialist groups like FDNH-SA continue this approach by using pseudoscience to dispute established scientific consensus on GAHC. Members of FDNH-SA have published opinion pieces in reputable media outlets and local research journals; however, these often take the form of ‘letters to the editor’ rather than empirical research. Despite lacking rigorous scientific support, these publications can create a veneer of credibility, especially for naïve or unfamiliar audiences.

Box 4

diminishes advocacy and stifles dissent. On a larger scale, these groups work transnationally to hollow out funding streams critical to civil society, embedding their ideology within political systems to ensure foreign aid policies are increasingly gender-restrictive.

Political space for civil society is not 'shrinking', but rather being taken away, closed down, and rendered uninhabitable (White et al., 2018).

Together, these coordinated efforts significantly compromise the capacity of civil society organisations to respond effectively to anti-gender movements.

Targeted harassment and intimidation of SRHR activists

Interviewees describe relentless and targeted harassment and intimidation by anti-gender groups, which takes a profound toll on their personal and professional lives (see Box 5). Several participants reported being under constant surveillance, experiencing online abuse, and facing verbal attacks in public from anti-gender groups.

I've heard soul-breaking stuff about me without any truth or validity. [...] It's a nonstop attack. I would get emails from the same account and keep blocking it, but it keeps coming through later. You don't understand how they manage to do all of this (Steve, individual interview).

SRHR journalist and activist Pontsho Pilane describes how, after writing a news story uncovering an anti-abortion crisis pregnancy centre operating under the guise of 'options counselling', she was targeted in an online campaign, and "later found out that a message

had been posted in a Facebook page of one of South Africa's leading anti-abortion groups that appealed to its followers to send out these messages and emails" (Pilane, 2024, p. 54).

Harassment can be invasive, with one interviewee sharing, "I have been attacked in front of my family, with my children. And that is personal" (Steve, individual interview). In addition to personal harassment, anti-gender groups often target activists' professional credentials by threatening complaints to regulatory bodies, such as the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA), or hinting at potential lawsuits. Without evidence, this kind of targeted professional harassment is difficult to counter.

I guess that's their strategy [against] most of the professionals working in this space: You are constantly being discredited. Have they threatened some of us with the HPCSA or with being taken to court? Definitely. But I have nothing on paper, which makes it exceptionally difficult to challenge (Steve, individual interview).

These incidents accumulate, creating a climate of fear and isolation that leads to burnout and emotional distress.

[Activism] has never been an easy space, we all know that. It's never been easy work; you can easily burn out and feel ill and all of those things. But, yeah. It's been getting worse. It's never-ending (Autumn, individual interview).

In addition to the impact on individual activists, such harassment significantly undermines the capacity of organisations engaged in SRHR and gender justice work, as these actors actively shut down spaces meant for rights-based discussions. The findings highlight that trans-denialist groups, in particular, are increasingly disrupting what

ANTI-GENDER TACTIC: HARASSMENT AND INTIMIDATION

Some anti-gender groups employ harassment and intimidation tactics to silence and undermine opposition. These methods include defamation, harassment, and organized hate campaigns on social and news media, targeting feminist, LGBTIQ, and SRHR activists and organizations (D'Angelo et al., 2024).

For instance, reproductive rights activists have faced targeted harassment campaigns by anti-abortion groups. These campaigns include direct messages with inflammatory content and coordinated social media smear tactics, where anti-abortion activists share their personal details online, leading to cyberbullying and direct threats against them (Pilane, 2024). Additionally, trans-denialist groups like FDNH-SA employ similar tactics against professionals providing GAHC, and / or advocating for transgender persons' right to access such care.

Box 5

could be potentially productive public engagements to advance SRHR:

Where things seem to have changed in the last year, we now have groups that are specifically dedicated to showing up to these spaces and disrupting them and derailing conversations. [...] These groups show up in numbers, very much with the intention to derail (Autumn, individual interview).

Moreover, when anti-gender groups target SRHR events, they create unsafe spaces for marginalised individuals, limiting the spaces where they can gather, organise, and advocate for their rights without fear. Civicus Monitor notes that “a healthy or open civic space implies that civil society and individuals are able to organise, participate, and communicate without hindrance, and in doing so, influence the political and social structures around them” (2023). The presence and tactics of anti-gender groups jeopardise this objective when infiltrating events, intimidating participants, and, as interviewees highlight, specifically targeting transgender and gender-diverse individuals:

It not only becomes an unsafe space and conversation for the actual trans people in the room, but it also plants seeds of doubt for those people who are open, undecided, the people in the middle [who] decided to show up [and ask questions]. Where if those anti-gender groups were not there, we might have been able to address such questions in a very different manner (Autumn, individual interview).

Interviewees noted that disruption of such events is particularly acute in settings lacking an institutional response to shut such tactics down, making it increasingly challenging to invite marginalised groups and their allies to gatherings without exposing them to further harm:

I don't think I'm the only one to notice that our leadership hasn't completely taken a stance on anti-gender groups. So now there's intimidation, there are concerns over safety. And that's something we need to consider even more at every event I try to do. Anytime someone else needs to be invited to collaborate, I feel that [the intimidation] needs to be disclosed. It can be a challenge. It can be a big challenge, for sure (Autumn, individual interview).

Raising awareness about the strategies and tactics of anti-gender groups in spaces where institutional

responses are lacking – typically higher education, research, or direct service provision institutions, as highlighted in the findings – will become an increasingly important priority for SRHR civil society. This report provides more insights on this focus in the recommendations.

Hollowing out SRHR civil society funding support

Anti-gender movements are also contributing to the dismantling of civic space in South Africa by redirecting funding away from SRHR organisations. The influence of these movements on funding dynamics cannot be overstated. In particular, the retraction and reinstatement of the Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance (PLGHA) Policy – commonly referred to as the Global Gag Rule – over successive US administrations have weakened the capacity of CSOs to build robust SRHR movements (Stevens, 2021).

In South Africa, anti-gender groups are leveraging decades of US policy influence, which has fostered an environment conducive to anti-rights campaigning (Stevens, 2021).

This policy imposes restrictive funding conditions that have gradually fractured collaboration and solidarity among SRHR organisations, limiting the potential for sustained local movement building and effective responses to anti-gender movements in an increasingly hostile environment (du Plessis et al., 2019; Ndabula et al., 2024). As one interviewee noted:

There has been a shrinking funding landscape around LGBTI rights and CSE [...]. The impact of that in terms of what organisations can feasibly do is really restrictive (Haley McEwen, individual interview).

The redirection of resources to conservative organisations has also had devastating consequences for rights-based approaches to issues such as CSE. In South Africa, for example, the religious fundamentalist US organisation Focus on the Family received funding to implement abstinence-only sex education in South African schools (D'Angelo et al., 2024).

Strategic pathways for countering anti-gender movements

Having provided an overview of anti-gender organising in South Africa, this section offers strategic recommendations to bolster SRHR civil society responses to anti-gender movements. It highlights key examples of actions taken by SRHR civil society and presents practical suggestions for further initiatives. The recommendations are organised around five primary entry points.

1. Developing a collective and coordinated strategy

A lack of robust strategy and coordination across SRHR civil society limits current efforts to counter anti-gender groups. Many CSOs are under-resourced and focused on addressing urgent, immediate needs, which leaves little space for developing long-term strategies.

Without a clear, unified approach, responses to anti-gender movements risk being disjointed, reactive, and ultimately less effective in the face of well-organized opposition. As one interviewee noted:

People are really surprised to hear the extent of funding for anti-gender groups and how they are planning for 40-plus years. Maybe we could learn something from these groups in terms of long-term investment and strategy (Haley McEwen, individual interview).

The findings highlight four elements to consider in building a strategic response to anti-gender movements in South Africa.

First, there needs to be deliberate efforts to increase awareness and foster movement-building around the issue of anti-gender groups among SRHR civil society organisations. A significant barrier to collective action is the limited awareness within the broader SRHR community about the presence and impact of such actors in South Africa. This lack of awareness leads to fragmented, piecemeal responses that fail to address the broader challenges posed by anti-gender movements. As one interviewee emphasised:

There are a few civil society groups that are really aware of anti-rights actors. But then in the broader queer and feminist advocacy spaces, there's still not enough awareness. And if there's not enough awareness, there's not

going to be enough advocacy (H, individual interview).

Harnessing feminist movement building for collective strategy development

The organisation JASS offers an example of how feminist movement-building efforts can address the systemic issues that anti-gender groups exploit to undermine rights and equality. They focus on participatory investigations of structural violence, enabling women to collectively analyse the root causes of inequality and violence in their lives and develop strategies to dismantle them.

They emphasise, “[t]o have an effect on these deeply entrenched systems of power and the values that drive structural violence that have been built over centuries, we need to organise, mobilise, to act collectively, and to approach it as a long game that needs sustained actions” (JASS, 2023, p. 55).

Second, the findings underscore the need for a collective response to anti-gender movements to be grounded in intersectionality. Current efforts are often siloed, with LGBTIQ organisations focusing on marriage rights, reproductive justice groups addressing abortion, and transgender organizations confronting trans denialism. This fragmentation overlooks the interconnected nature of structural inequalities and the ways anti-gender movements exploit these divisions, highlighting the importance of an intersectional approach within SRHR civil society.

While still emerging, there are examples of successful intersectional collective action within SRHR civil society that illustrate the potential of such responses to “reaffirm support for marginalised communities; reject anti-gender politics; and refuse to let fringe groups speak in the name of the mainstream” (Equal Rights Coalition, 2022, p. 11). For example, the [Sexual and Reproductive Justice Coalition](#) frequently produces position papers and media statements through an intersectional lens, leveraging its diverse network to address anti-gender actions collectively. Similarly, amidst significant anti-trans hostility from groups like FDNH-SA, the [multi-sectoral endorsement](#) of a transgender and gender-diverse youth position statement has been crucial in amplifying trans-affirming messages and demonstrating broad support for the rights of transgender youth.

Third, creating dedicated, funded spaces for collective strategy development among civil society organisations is critical. By fostering an environment for collaboration and knowledge-sharing, organisations can think through the most impactful responses and develop joint action plans that enhance their collective impact against anti-gender movements. These spaces would facilitate opportunities for CSOs to come together and share insights and experiences regarding the presence and tactics of anti-gender groups within their respective contexts:

We need our own conference, in the same way that anti-gender groups have the World Congress of Families. We need our own [space] where people from all the different sectors can come and network, hear each other's presentations, have conversations, learn from each other, and get ideas. I'm still surprised that we don't have anything like that (H, individual interview).

Finally, a coordinated and strategic response must prioritise activist well-being to ensure resilience and sustainability within the movement, particularly in light of the hostile environments created by anti-gender groups. As highlighted earlier in this report, SRHR activists are facing targeted harassment and victimisation, which can lead to significant burnout. An interviewee remarked:

A huge thing for [civil society] right now is wellness and well-being. We find that activists and program leaders, organisational leaders, are burning out. There is no space for self-reflection. There is no space for doing the inner work for themselves. There is no space to step out and say, I need to recuperate (MV, individual interview).

Addressing well-being concerns requires dedicated responses within civil society that are adequately funded and integrated into organisations. Beyond civil society, where there is already some measure of organisational support, there is a need to strengthen institutional protection for activists located in research, higher education and government institutions where such support is almost entirely absent. The findings indicate that activists in these settings also face harassment and victimisation by anti-gender groups, necessitating improved institutional support such as policies, codes of conduct and action plans that outline

how institutions should respond to disinformation and attacks by anti-gender groups.

2. Investing in narrative change

Anti-gender movements invest significant resources in worldmaking strategies to craft and spread narratives that promote a gender-restrictive, patriarchal worldview (Martínez et al., 2021). This focus on worldmaking explains why, even in contexts where these groups lose legal and policy battles, they continue to gain social and political influence, often winning the "cultural and communications war" (Martínez et al., 2021, p. 12).

SRHR civil society requires investment in its own long-term, proactive worldmaking initiatives. This is crucial for shifting anti-gender narratives and building broader societal consensus around gender equality and justice.

Civil society organisation Just Associates (JASS) emphasises that "narrative change work is not the same as strategic messaging or communications. Its strength lies in the deeper work of understanding how invisible and systemic power shape meaning and how we can express transformational narratives that connect to what people care about and long for" (JASS, 2024). An interviewee offers the following:

[Narrative change work] requires the same level of funding that [the anti-gender movement] has, to hire experts that can create and craft these stories into these narratives.

For instance, this idea of a nuclear heteronormative family, right? In SA, and most of the continent, that is not what a family looks like. So really taking into account what it is like on the ground – that families are often just mothers, or families are aunts, or grandmothers. And those are legitimate families, where people prosper and become great people within their societies and communities, outside of a nuclear family (Pontsho Pilane, individual interview).

An example of SRHR civil society-led narrative change work in South Africa is the efforts by the Sexual Reproductive Justice Coalition (SRJC) to shift government policy language from an apartheid-era 'population control' narrative, to one of 'reproductive justice'. Through persistent engagement, the SRJC introduced the concept of

reproductive justice to the Department of Social Development (DoSD) in 2014, with this framing later documented to be adopted in speeches by government ministers (Stevens, 2021). By 2018, the DoSD co-sponsored a global conference on abortion and reproductive justice and integrated a reproductive justice perspective into the National Adolescent Sexual and Health Rights Strategy (Stevens, 2021).

Much of the narrative change work in South Africa remains concentrated within civil society's engagement with the government. While this focus is crucial, changing public perceptions requires targeting broader media and political forums. More efforts like these are essential, particularly as anti-gender movements are increasingly spreading transphobic content in mainstream media. In a context where the general public remains largely uninformed about gender diversity, there is a growing risk that anti-gender movements may control the narrative in ways that undermine the rights and well-being of transgender individuals. An interviewee highlighted the importance of activists proactively taking control of the narrative, especially in settings where anti-trans groups are exploiting the fact that transgender voices are marginalised:

If you're not making a special effort to have your information coming from trans people and listening to trans people, you're going to listen to whoever comes first, which is inherently not trans people (Autumn, individual interview).

Finally, given that the transnational anti-gender movements active in South Africa are primarily composed of fundamentalist religious organisations, amplifying progressive faith-based narratives can be particularly valuable. Organisations such as Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM) and the Global Interfaith Network, which are at the forefront of faith-based responses to promote gender justice and LGBTIQ inclusion within mainstream religious communities, serve as invaluable resources in this effort.

Narrative change work by the Global Interfaith Network: The Global Interfaith Network has developed rich expertise in addressing restrictive narratives about the family deployed by anti-gender groups through focused actions that build and strengthen inclusive narratives that more accurately reflect family diversity.

For instance, the network convened a Family and Traditional Values regional seminar series, bringing together a diverse group of experts – including activists, scholars, theologians, religious leaders, and human rights advocates – from various Global South contexts. These seminars aimed to develop counter-narratives and strategies to challenge the right-wing religious messaging prevalent in international political arenas. Through the seminar series, the Global Interfaith Network emphasises the importance of reclaiming narratives that affirm the diversity of families, which includes those of LGBTIQ individuals.

3. Building 'disinformation resilience' in higher education and research institutions

There is an urgent need to build critical literacy about anti-gender movements, particularly among decision-makers within institutions that hold academic and research influence. Such literacy empowers institutions to recognise and resist the tactics of anti-gender movements that seek legitimacy and credibility. Critical literacy involves actively analysing and reflecting on texts and narratives to uncover underlying power dynamics, biases, and agendas (Freire, 1993). In the context of anti-gender movements, it means equipping individuals to critically analyse the messaging and tactics of anti-gender groups, understand their goals, and assess the harm they cause.

This form of literacy is especially relevant for countering anti-gender groups that spread disinformation packaged as research evidence. The findings reveal how anti-gender movements in South Africa use pseudoscientific discourse – often leaning on research that has been debunked or has bypassed peer review – to undermine established scientific consensus on SRHR issues.

This tactic is particularly effective because it obscures the religious fundamentalist roots of these positions and avoids overtly opposing the rights and dignity of marginalised groups. Instead, these movements present a seemingly neutral appeal to 'objective evidence'. Anti-abortion groups, for example, continue to reference the discredited notion of 'post-abortion syndrome' to block access to safe and legal abortion (Moran, 2021).

Similarly, anti-trans groups use this tactic to cast doubt on the legitimacy of transgender identities, framing their opposition in terms of the supposed

lack of safety evidence for gender-affirming healthcare (FDNH-SA, 2024). As one interviewee notes, decision-makers in research and academic institutions often lack the analytical skills and experiential insight that those in justice-oriented spaces have to recognise and unpack the underlying anti-trans agenda:

It's very covert. These groups aren't saying, oh, I'm unsure if trans people do exist. It's very indirect. It's those things that if you don't know, if you haven't worked in [progressive] spaces, then you don't realise what the questions these groups are asking actually mean [...]

And then, from my point of view, the answer is not more statistics and evidence and data. The answer is really that emotional aspect of understanding why [anti-gender groups] are saying those things. Why are these people asking those specific questions? Why are they raising those specific concerns? (Autumn, individual interview).

Efforts to cultivate critical literacy about anti-gender movements among key audiences can be described as a process of inoculation. In a [guide to counter anti-gender disinformation](#), the Trans Justice Project describes this process: “You expose participants to your messages, then show them the opponents’ claims, demonstrate why they are untrue or misleading, and then unpack the agenda and actors behind the claims. This makes people more resilient to pieces of disinformation when they encounter it in the real world” (Trans Justice Project, 2024, p. 11). Building this kind of critical literacy is challenging work, requiring facilitators to foster a deeper understanding of oppression, not merely to provide information – though that remains an essential component:

That is where things have become incredibly challenging, because that is more difficult to understand. It's one thing to do a transgender 101, and it's another thing to understand historical oppression and how people have historically built up this gender panic (Autumn, individual interview).

In South Africa, anti-gender groups – particularly FDNH-SA – often exploit reputable news outlets as a tactic to build credibility, disseminate disinformation, and deny the existence of transgender identities. This makes the media an essential partner in building critical literacy among research and higher education stakeholders.

In response, the newly established African Trans+ Voices Alliance (ATVA) is collaborating with media organisations through a journalist capacity-building program aimed at raising awareness of the goals of anti-trans groups and improving reporting on transgender and gender-diverse individuals. By partnering with the media, these efforts enhance the ability of decision-makers in research and higher education to identify harmful narratives effectively.

4. Engaging diplomatic and foreign policy structures

As the findings indicated, SRHR civil society has a longstanding involvement in domestic policy development processes, holding the government accountable for upholding constitutional protections through SRHR policy submissions and strategic litigation. However, an often-overlooked area of advocacy is diplomatic and foreign policy engagement to ensure protections for SRHR and gender rights. Active engagement with Ministries of Foreign Affairs and diplomatic structures is crucial for influencing regional policies, building strong collaborations, and championing regional and global commitments to advancing SRHR. These efforts may include providing expertise, facilitating dialogues, contributing to policy frameworks, and ensuring that international commitments to SRHR are upheld.

Examples of such advocacy include the Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL) – a regional network of CSOs with a strong SA presence – which has played a crucial role in monitoring South African foreign policy engagement on protecting LGBTIQ rights. CAL also successfully advocated for a resolution protecting LGBTIQ rights within the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights by presenting evidence of violence against queer Africans (Sika & Okech, 2019). In South Africa, CAL has led engagements with the country's foreign Ministry – the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) – on strengthening South Africa's leadership on the continent on LGBTIQ rights, as well as other interconnected SRHR issues, and holding the government accountable for commitments made to this end (Jordaan, 2017).

In addition to leading these initiatives, CAL has also contributed to capacity building of South African and regional LGBTIQ organisations and activists in

engaging diplomatic structures, often adopting an intersectional approach by partnering with CSO networks and alliances with related goals.

An interviewee stressed the importance of SRHR CSOs further investing in engaging Ministries of Foreign Affairs and diplomatic structures, specifically through initiatives that build capacity and literacy.

One of the places where civil society actors are engaging, which of course makes a lot of sense, are Departments of Education and Departments of Health. But civil society needs to be engaging with Ministries of Foreign Affairs as well.

These Ministries are getting communications from the anti-rights actors saying beware of comprehensive sexuality, and they need to be engaged. It's a stakeholder that's often left out of the picture [yet] they sign off on all the agreements. We need to pay attention to what they're doing (H, individual interview).

Anti-gender groups, drawing on the depth of their financial resourcing, commonly use this tactic on the African continent and, to some extent, also in South Africa. These efforts are generally centred on convenings to build consensus, capacity and strategy on anti-gender campaigns. For instance, the US-based anti-gender World Congress of Families (WCF)² convened diplomats and political actors in South Africa as part of a campaign to roll back marriage equality:

In 2016, the WCF launched the International Organisation for the Family in Cape Town, South Africa, where delegates signed the Cape Town Declaration, confirming their efforts to 'firmly resis[t] every push to redefine marriage: to include same-sex or group bonds, or sexually open or temporary ones'. Prominent African signatories to the declaration include the head of the ACDP, Kenneth Meshoe and the Nigerian ambassador to South Africa, Uche Ajulu-Okeke (McEwen, 2017, p. 741).

With one of the world's earliest constitutions prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity and its strong ties to Africa and the broader Global South, South

Africa is in a favourable position to serve as a mediator between international supporters and critics of gender rights (Jordaan, 2017). However, despite occasionally taking strong stances on gender and LGBTIQ rights in international human rights resolutions, the country has been inconsistent – and at times even weak – in its support of such rights in foreign policy and diplomacy. This inconsistency persists even as its domestic policies become increasingly progressive on SRHR and LGBTIQ rights (Jordaan, 2017). A range of factors contribute to this inconsistency, including the government's desire to maintain close ties with African countries that hold regressive views on LGBTIQ rights.

Currently, however, a foreign policy focus by SRHR civil society is severely under-resourced, especially capacity building and sensitisation of diplomats and other foreign policy decision-makers on protecting gender rights and SRHR issues and equipping them to advocate for progressive gender policies in international forums and negotiations. Supporting the South African government in advancing SRHR in its engagement in diplomatic and regional human rights fora requires immense knowledge and skill, often built up by SRHR activists and CSOs over decades of engaging in such advocacy. Short-term, project-specific grants undermine this form of SRHR advocacy.

5. Transforming funding practices

The findings point to the urgent need to enhance CSO resourcing for them to counter anti-gender movements effectively. Currently, CSOs encounter significant constraints that limit their capacity to respond effectively to the challenges posed by these movements. The report findings highlight that civil society is often under-resourced and lacks the financial support needed to address the urgent issues stemming from anti-gender groups' actions. In contrast, transnational anti-gender movements operating in South Africa are typically well-funded and benefit from strong political and corporate connections (see Table 1).

² The World Congress of Families (WCF) focuses on regional and international convenings of anti-rights movements, with these events often being used to expand WCF political connections and launch specific anti-gender campaigns. The WCF also focuses significant efforts on lobbying at the UN to undermine the universality of human rights. The organisation

is listed as an LGBTIQ hate group by the [Southern Poverty Law Centre](#) and has been instrumental in creating support for anti-homosexuality legislation in Nigeria, Uganda and Ghana through its targeted convenings of political actors, diplomats and transnational anti-gender organisations.

Table 1: Differences in funding practices between anti-gender and progressive movements (Martínez et al., 2021)

Aspect	How Gender-Restrictive Organizations tend to Fund	How Gender Justice and Other Progressive Organizations tend to Fund
Time-frame	Long-term (40-50 years)	Short-term projects (1-5 years)
Funding Mechanisms	Block grants, endowments, trust funds	Project-based grants, capacity building, service procurement
Distribution of Funds	Duplication as a worldmaking strategy. Allows for several organizations to be working on the same thing at the same time; reinforces key messages in different contexts and through different media; contributes to long-term development of the gender-restrictive organizational ecosystem	Duplication as wasteful. Organizations must differentiate themselves from others; spreads money thinly, narrowing scope and diminishing impact of work; may promote competition instead of collaboration
Funding Constraints	Few constraints. Freedom to decide how to spend the money; encourages risk-taking and provides rapid response capabilities, flexibility and adaptability	Project-based, deliverable-driven and impact-evaluation-contingent. Cumbersome reporting procedures to donors; little flexibility, stymies creativity because it has little room for failure
Use of the Funds	Worldmaking strategies. Career development, cohorts of policymakers and analysts, media organizations, funding scholars to conceptualize and frame key issues	Reactive strategies. Expenses and personnel tied to specific projects and service provision programs, narrow set of deliverables
Issues Funded	Interconnected, worldmaking issues. Broad campaigns and slogans (e.g., "gender ideology") that simultaneously engage with all or several issues considered key for their gender-restrictive worldview, including women's, children's and LGBT rights, as well as anti-democracy efforts and environmental deregulation	Specialized and targeted funding that creates silos and makes cross-issue, cross-sectoral, transnational, and intersectional collaboration difficult

A focus on long-term, flexible funding could enable CSOs to be more responsive to the dynamic nature of anti-gender groups:

We need to get our funders back to school and say, in the context of our work, this is what we've seen. This is what the anti-gender, anti-rights movements are doing. These are the impacts of what they are doing on our continent. The money they are spending on our continent. And we are now seeing the fallout of it (M, individual interview).

A flexible funding approach may provide the financial stability necessary for effective advocacy and programming, allowing organisations to adapt their strategies to emerging threats. This consideration is particularly relevant in a context

where civic space is shrinking, and activists working to advance SRHR often operate with limited resources. By supporting the resilience and capacity of CSOs, funders can contribute to a more robust civil society response to anti-gender movements. As indicated earlier, a significant first step could be funding support for convening multi-sectoral SRHR organisations and key allies to develop a collective and coordinated strategy to counter anti-gender groups.

An essential consideration for funders is prioritising and supporting local grassroots SRHR and gender justice organisations and movements, which have decades of experience in developing context-specific responses. These organisations not only have the potential to counter anti-rights

organising but also to address cross-cutting social justice issues that indirectly contribute to fertile soil for anti-gender groups to take root. Okech and colleagues (2022) emphasise that “localisation approaches that centre feminist movements lead to actions that are informed by a robust gender power analysis to [reduce] risks associated with approaches that ignore gendered impacts of crisis” (p. 265).

By prioritising local expertise and initiatives, funders can ensure that their investments yield effective and sustainable outcomes in countering anti-gender movements.

Resources for South African activists and civil society organisations

Membership organisations and civil society organisation networks countering anti-gender movements

The [Professional Association for Transgender Health South Africa \(PATH-SA\)](#) is an interdisciplinary health professional public benefit organisation working to promote the health, well-being, and self-actualisation of transgender and gender-diverse people.

The [Sexual and Reproductive Justice Coalition \(SRJC\)](#) is a South African membership-based platform for individuals and organisations to mobilise, advocate and produce and use evidence to realise sexual and reproductive justice for all.

[African Trans+ Voices Alliance \(ATVA\)](#) is a platform to unite individuals, organisations, and service providers under one umbrella to help make trans voices heard.

Strategic communication and narrative change tools

[Purpose](#) developed a practical resource for evidence-based strategies to combat disinformation.

The [Centre for Story-based Strategy](#) has a practical guide for narrative change in movement building.

The [Trans Justice Project](#) has a guide with tools to respond to anti-gender disinformation campaigns effectively.

The [Just Power: A Guide for Activists and Changemakers](#) includes a chapter on narrative change work.

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Acronyms

ACDP	African Christian Democratic Party
ATVA	African Trans+ Voices Alliance
CAL	Coalition of African Lesbians
CESE	Coalition to End Sexual Exploitation
CSE	Comprehensive sexuality education
CSO	Civil society organisation
DoSD	Department of Social Development
DIRCO	Department of International Relations and Cooperation
FDNH-SA	First Do No Harm South Africa
FOR SA	Freedom of Religion South Africa
GAHC	Gender affirming healthcare
GBV	Gender based violence
LGBTIQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer / questioning
NGO	Nongovernmental organisation
PATH-SA	Professional Association for Transgender Health South Africa
SAOU	Suid Afrikaanse Onderwysersunie
SLPs	Scripted lesson plans
SRJC	Sexual and Reproductive Justice Coalition
SRHR	Sexual reproductive health and rights
WCF	World Congress of Families