



Roots of Resilience: Unravelling Anti-Gender Movements in Southern Africa's Sexual & Reproductive Rights Landscape.

A synthesis report examining the organized resistance to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) across Southern Africa, drawing on country studies from Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.

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Marion Baumgart dos Santos – “The faceless opposition: Mapping Resistance against Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Mozambique.”

Rudo Chigudu – “Mapping the Sexual and Reproductive Rights terrain in Zimbabwe: Understanding rights proponents and anti-rights actors.”

Ingrid Lynch – “Justice, abundance, and possibility for all: Countering anti-gender movements in South Africa”

Abigail Solomons – “Cry, the Beloved Country: Delving into the organised resistance to sexual and reproductive rights in Namibia.”

Afrikagrupperna To our commissioning organization – your unwavering commitment to feminist solidarity, human rights, and social justice makes this work possible. Your belief in the power of local movements continues to inspire transformative change.

A Call to Action

This report is more than documentation – it is a bridge to action. This report calls upon:

- Policymakers to listen and respond
- Funders to support local movements
- Communities to stand in solidarity
- Individuals to challenge harmful narratives

Every conversation, every act of solidarity, every moment of courage moves us closer to a world of true reproductive justice.

The struggle continues. The resistance persists. Hope endures.

Abigail

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Acronyms

CSE:	Comprehensive Sexuality Education
CSO:	Civil Society Organization
FDNH-SA:	First Do No Harm South Africa
GALZ:	Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe
GCD:	Geneva Consensus Declaration
GGR:	Global Gag Rule (also known as Mexico City Policy)
INGO:	International Non-Governmental Organization
LGBTQI+:	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, plus other identities
MCP:	Mexico City Policy (also known as Global Gag Rule)
NGO:	Non-Governmental Organization
PEPFAR:	President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief
PLFA:	Protecting Life in Foreign Assistance
PLGHA:	Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance
SOGIESC:	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics
SRHR:	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
UN:	United Nations
UNFPA:	United Nations Population Fund
USAID:	United States Agency for International Development
WLC:	Women's Leadership Centre
WLSA:	Women and Law in Southern Africa
Y-Fem:	Young Feminists Movement Namibia

Glossary

Anti-gender movements: Organized efforts to undermine gender equality, LGBTQI+ rights, and sexual and reproductive health and rights, often using religious, cultural, or pseudo-scientific arguments.

Bodily autonomy: The right to governance over one's own body without external influence or coercion.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE): Age-appropriate, scientifically accurate education about human sexuality, relationships, and sexual health.

Geneva Consensus Declaration (GCD): A 2020 declaration, initially led by the Trump administration, that opposes abortion rights while claiming to promote women's health.

Global Gag Rule: A U.S. policy that restricts foreign NGOs that receive U.S. funding from providing abortion services, counselling, or referrals, even with their own funds.

Project 2025: A detailed policy blueprint developed by the Heritage Foundation for a potential second Trump administration, including extensive anti-SRHR provisions.

Protego: An operational framework created to implement the Geneva Consensus Declaration principles.

Strategic litigation: The practice of bringing carefully selected court cases with the goal of creating broader legal or social change beyond the specific case.

Transgender denialism: The rejection of transgender identities as legitimate, often framed in pseudo-scientific language.

Weaponizing disgust: A political strategy that deliberately triggers visceral disgust reactions to marginalize certain groups and bypass rational consideration of issues.

Executive Summary

This research synthesis examines the organized resistance to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) across Southern Africa, drawing on country studies from Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. The report analyses how anti-SRHR movements operate, their strategies, impacts, and the resilience shown by SRHR advocates in response.

The findings reveal a well-coordinated, transnational network of anti-SRHR actors with significant resources and sophisticated strategies. These include co-opting religious and decolonization narratives, weaponizing disgust, advancing transgender denialism, and systematically closing civic space. The impacts are tangible: delayed legal reforms, healthcare access barriers, and community division.

Despite these challenges, SRHR advocates across the region demonstrate remarkable resilience. Through strategic litigation, contextual religious engagement, coalition-building, community-led monitoring, and economic empowerment initiatives, they continue to advance rights in hostile environments.

The report further examines the implications of Project 2025—a detailed policy blueprint for a potential second Trump administration which expands restrictive policies globally, with particularly severe consequences for SRHR work in Africa.

1. Background and Purpose

This research synthesis was commissioned by Afrikagrupperna, a Swedish, feminist, member-based solidarity organization committed to challenging norms, attitudes, and stereotypes around gender and sexuality that prevent people from enjoying bodily autonomy regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics.

Social conservative forces worldwide are trying to limit the rights of girls, women, and LGBTQI+ community members to control their bodies, opposing abortion rights, comprehensive sexuality education, LGBTQI+ rights, gender equality, and challenging harmful norms and stereotypes.

This report synthesizes findings from four country studies in Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe to analyse how anti-SRHR movements organize, their strategies, and impacts, while highlighting resistance and resilience. The purpose is to help Afrikagrupperna and its partners (1) gain a better understanding of the context and (2) develop more effective counterstrategies against conservative backlash.

The research questions include:

- How does organized resistance against sexual and reproductive rights manifest across the region?
- What resistance do organizations and activists encounter and how does it affect them and their work?
- What strategies are used to tackle this resistance?
- What are the needs within organizations/among activists to strengthen their strategies?
- What recommendations could be given to organizations, activists, and stakeholders?

2. The Transnational Character of Anti-SRHR Movements

Like ancient trade routes that once connected distant lands, today's anti-SRHR movements weave a complex network across continents, sharing resources, strategies, and ideologies. These movements represent not isolated pockets of resistance but coordinated efforts with deep transnational roots.

The anti-SRHR movements operating across Southern Africa are part of a global, well-coordinated network with significant resources. Research indicates that U.S.-based religious groups like the Fellowship Foundation have spent over \$20 million between 2008 and 2018 to support anti-LGBTQI+ laws in the region (Namubiru & Wepukhulu, 2020, as cited in Chigudu, 2024).

These transnational connections are not merely financial. The Geneva Consensus Declaration (GCD), signed by 32 countries in 2020, was "the brainchild of the first Trump administration and was drafted and launched by Valerie Huber, in her former role as the United States Special Representative for Global Women's Health" (Harper, 2024). This declaration, which denies the right to safe abortion and undermines SRHR, has been operationalized through the Women's Optimal Health Framework and its Protego program in various African countries.

COUNTRY SPOTLIGHT: Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, the transnational nature of anti-SRHR movements is clearly visible in political rhetoric. Former President Mugabe frequently positioned homosexuality as a foreign imposition, stating during election campaigns: "Hell for gays if ZANU-PF wins." The ruling party's manifesto explicitly declared intent to "defend Zimbabwe's traditional and religious values against such evils as homosexuality" (Chigudu, 2024). This political weaponization of anti-LGBTQI+ sentiment demonstrates how external ideologies become embedded in local political discourse.

The impact of state security forces in Zimbabwe further illustrates how anti-SRHR sentiment translates into coordinated suppression. GALZ (Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe) has experienced systematic office raids, surveillance, and shutdown of meetings by security forces, creating an environment of fear for LGBTQI+ organizations. Security services have reportedly infiltrated SRHR organizations, creating distrust within advocacy networks. The timing of public protests against LGBTQI+ organizations often coincides with statements from political leaders, suggesting coordination between official government positions and seemingly spontaneous public actions (Chigudu, 2024).

Zimbabwe's ongoing economic challenges have also been weaponized against SRHR progress. Economic pressures directly drive early forced unions as families seek financial stability. Financial constraints have decimated the public health system, resulting in contraceptive stockouts and limited SRHR services. Economic vulnerability increases power imbalances in sexual relationships, with young women often engaging in relationships with multiple financial providers, reducing their ability to negotiate safe sex practices (Chigudu, 2024).

Project 2025's Global Implications

The implications of Project 2025 - the detailed policy blueprint for a potential second Trump administration - extend far beyond U.S. borders. According to Harper (2024), Project 2025 was drafted by the Heritage Foundation and several former Trump administration officials, including Huber, and centres on "anti-LGBTQI+, anti-immigrant, anti-DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion), and anti-SRHR rhetoric." The project proposes a strategy for utilizing U.S. foreign assistance and foreign policy to "restore the centrality of family to American life."

PERSONAL IMPACT: A Healthcare Provider's Perspective from Zimbabwe

"During the last Global Gag Rule implementation, I watched our entire HIV prevention program for key populations collapse. We had integrated comprehensive sexual health services, including abortion referrals funded by European partners. When our organization decided not to be 'gagged,' we lost 60% of our budget overnight. I had to tell my staff of 15 community health workers that we could no longer pay them. These were people who had built trust with marginalized communities over years. Our patients—especially transgender people and men who have sex with men—had nowhere else to go where they felt safe. It wasn't just a service interruption; it was the dismantling of a community safety net. Now we're hearing about Project 2025's expanded restrictions, and I'm terrified that what we've painstakingly rebuilt will be destroyed again, only worse this time." (Chigudu, 2024)

Project 2025 calls for ending diplomatic support for LGBTQI+ communities abroad, specifically criticizing U.S. diplomatic efforts in Africa to protect LGBTQI+ rights as "imposing pro-LGBT initiatives" (Harper, 2024). This would signal to governments across African countries that there would be little diplomatic consequence to passing anti-LGBTQI+ legislation.

Project 2025 proposes extensions to the Global Gag Rule, including "Protecting Life in Foreign Assistance" (PLFA), which would affect approximately \$66 billion of U.S. foreign assistance covering 178 countries and 2,400 primary recipients (Harper, 2024). This policy would introduce "cross-cutting gags designed to prevent 'pro-abortion groups' from accessing funding for interventions outside the scope of global health assistance." Unlike previous iterations, the PLFA would specifically target U.S.-based

international NGOs, multilateral agencies like UNFPA and WHO, humanitarian aid, and bilateral government-to-government agreements. A real-world example of potential impacts under Project 2025 policies was seen during Trump's 90-day foreign aid freeze in early 2025. Key populations clinics suspended operations, leaving vulnerable groups like children and LGBTQI+ communities without access to antiretroviral drugs.

Programs keeping girls in school, such as free lunches and initiatives against early forced unions, were abruptly halted. NGOs reliant on U.S. aid ceased operations, leaving volunteers unpaid and communities without support networks.

3. Strategic Approaches of Anti-SRHR Movements

Anti-SRHR movements have developed a sophisticated arsenal of strategies that operate across cultural, religious, political, and emotional domains. Understanding these approaches is essential for developing effective countermeasures.

3.1 Co-opting Religious and Cultural Narratives: Patterns and Tactics

Like skilled weavers appropriating traditional patterns for new purposes, anti-SRHR movements have become adept at co-opting religious and cultural narratives. They select threads from religious traditions that appear to support their positions while discarding the broader fabric of compassion and dignity that characterizes most faith teachings. These movements employ several consistent tactics:

Selective Interpretation of Religious Texts: These movements carefully select and amplify religious passages that appear to condemn homosexuality or non-traditional gender roles while ignoring broader themes of love, acceptance, and human dignity. Religious leaders who oppose SRHR often claim to represent the entirety of their faith tradition, despite significant diversity of views within religious communities.

COUNTRY SPOTLIGHT: Mozambique

In Mozambique, interviews with religious leaders revealed a nuanced approach to co-opting religious narratives. One imam remarked: "What we have today is a complete domination of capitalist values; everything is for sale, and those with more money hold more value in society... We must fight to guide our youth back on track" (Baumgart dos Santos, 2024). This framing positions religious opposition not as anti-rights but as pro-morality, creating a seemingly positive narrative that nonetheless restricts bodily autonomy.

Religious leaders skilfully blend traditional values with selective religious interpretations, presenting their views as protective rather than restrictive. A Protestant pastor in Mozambique was observed during a wedding ceremony instructing a bride to kneel before her husband as the "traditional way women greet their husbands," despite the ceremony taking place in an urban setting where such practices are increasingly uncommon (Baumgart dos Santos, 2024).

What makes Mozambique's opposition particularly challenging is its "faceless" nature. Unlike in countries where anti-SRHR movements are vocal and visible, Mozambican resistance operates through subtle mechanisms. As Baumgart dos Santos (2024) notes: "All interviewees agreed that organized public hate speech or physical violence, as seen in other African countries like Uganda or Nigeria, does not exist in Mozambique." Instead, resistance manifests through institutional inertia, silent non-compliance with progressive policies, strategic omission of information about rights and services, and unofficial community pressure.

This resistance is further complicated by the complex interplay between customary and statutory law. While Mozambique's formal legal system provides strong SRHR protections on paper, customary law—which varies among ethnic groups—often governs daily life, especially in rural areas. In matrilineal societies in northern Mozambique, women may have more autonomy in sexual and reproductive decisions, while patrilineal systems in central and southern regions often restrict women's decision-making. According to research by WLSA, "After the introduction of colonialism, customary law was reconstructed to serve the political interests of capital; even now, post-independence governments use the law as a tool to oppress women" (Armstrong, 1994, as cited in Baumgart dos Santos, 2024). This legal pluralism creates a disconnect between progressive legislation and lived reality in communities, serving the interests of capital, which often aligns with the anti-rights lobby's aims of maintaining traditional power structures and economic inequalities.

Framing SRHR as Moral Corruption: A common tactic involves portraying comprehensive sexuality education and LGBTQI+ rights as deliberate attempts to corrupt youth and destroy family values. Religious leaders across the region have characterized SRHR initiatives as "morally bankrupt" or "pornographic," creating fear among parents and communities.

Positioning Opposition as Religious Freedom: Anti-SRHR forces increasingly frame their resistance as a matter of religious liberty, arguing that respecting SRHR requires compromising religious beliefs. This strategic framing attempts to establish a false dichotomy between religious freedom and SRHR, when in reality many religious communities support comprehensive SRHR.

Creating Parallel Structures: Rather than merely opposing existing SRHR frameworks, these movements establish alternative structures and narratives grounded in religious language. Organizations create their own "holistic" approaches to women's health and family planning that exclude essential components like abortion care or LGBTQI+ services.

Building Cross-Denominational Alliances: While theological differences might otherwise divide religious communities, anti-SRHR causes have become rallying points for unusual alliances. Evangelical, Catholic, Islamic, and traditional religious leaders who might disagree on many theological points find common ground in opposing SRHR.

Transnational Religious Influence: Evangelical Christianity, particularly through Pentecostal and Apostolic denominations, has gained significant influence across the region. These movements have become increasingly involved in shaping SRHR-related policies and public discourse. The transnational nature of this influence is evident in how judicial decisions in one country inform legal arguments in others. For example, the U.S. Supreme Court's anti-abortion decision (*Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*) was cited by Uganda's Constitutional Court when justifying the Anti-Homosexuality Act (Harper, 2024). This demonstrates how religious perspectives on SRHR from the Global North can be strategically incorporated into legal frameworks across Africa, creating a transnational network of mutually reinforcing legal precedents that restrict SRHR.

3.1 Strategic Co-optation of Decolonization Narratives: Manipulation and Messaging

In a profound irony, many anti-SRHR movements appropriate decolonization language while advancing agendas often tied to former colonial powers' religious influences:

Historical Revisionism: These movements selectively rewrite historical narratives to portray pre-colonial African societies as uniformly heteronormative and gender-binary, despite historical evidence of diverse gender expressions and sexual orientations across the continent. This revisionism erases indigenous forms of gender and sexual diversity.

COUNTRY SPOTLIGHT: South Africa

In South Africa, anti-CSE campaigns illustrate how decolonization narratives are weaponized against SRHR. In 2016, the transnational anti-rights organization CitizenGo launched an online petition denouncing the Department of Basic Education's CSE curriculum as a harmful "Western and UN-driven agenda" seeking to reshape local gender and sexual norms. The petition criticized CSE for promoting a "controversial 'rights-based' rather than health-based approach to sex education" (Lynch, 2024).

When excerpts from draft scripted lesson plans were leaked on a US-funded website, it triggered a media frenzy with political leaders characterizing the content as encouraging children "to engage in oral, anal, homo and heterosexual practices, among other horrific sexual teachings" (Lynch, 2024). These campaigns appear grassroots but are actually connected to US-based organizations like Family Watch International, revealing how local cultural sovereignty claims often mask transnational conservative influence.

Social media has become a powerful amplifier for anti-SRHR sentiment, as evidenced by South Africa's 2022 textbook controversy. Images of a grade 7 textbook that had been used without controversy for over a decade suddenly sparked outrage when a parent posted about its content addressing masturbation and homosexuality. The post triggered "a wave of homophobic comments, with many users expressing anti-LGBTQI+ sentiments under the guise of care and protection" (Lynch, 2024). The rapid spread suggested algorithmic amplification and potential coordination. Within days, the Ministry of Education announced the controversial page would be removed from future editions, demonstrating how social media outrage can lead to concrete policy changes even when the material had previously been accepted (Lynch, 2024).

Framing SRHR as Western Imperialism: A central tactic involves characterizing SRHR frameworks as "Western impositions" or forms of "neo-colonialism" that threaten authentic African cultures. This framing deliberately obscures how many anti-SRHR positions themselves originate from Western colonial and missionary influences.

Leveraging Anti-Colonial Sentiment: Anti-SRHR actors exploit legitimate grievances about Western domination and intervention to advance their agenda. By positioning themselves as defenders of sovereignty against foreign influence, they tap into powerful anti-colonial sentiments while obscuring their own external connections and funding.

Manipulation of Language and Terminology: These movements have become adept at co-opting language from progressive movements, using terms like "authentic development," "cultural sovereignty," and "African solutions" to mask regressive agendas. This linguistic sleight-of-hand makes it difficult to identify and counter their messaging.

Creating False Dichotomies: Anti-SRHR messaging frequently presents false choices between "African values" and SRHR, forcing people to choose between cultural identity and rights. This deliberately ignores how SRHR principles align with indigenous African values of dignity, community care, and autonomy.

3.3 Weaponizing Disgust: The Politics of Emotional Manipulation

At the heart of anti-SRHR strategies lies the deliberate exploitation of emotional reactions, particularly disgust. Like ancient armies that poisoned wells to render territories uninhabitable, these movements poison public discourse by triggering visceral disgust responses that bypass rational consideration.

A fundamental driver of anti-SRHR movements involves weaponizing visceral emotions, particularly disgust, to marginalize LGBTQI+ individuals and restrict sexual and reproductive rights. This emotional manipulation serves multiple strategic purposes:

Creating Visceral Rejection: By deliberately focusing on graphic descriptions of sexual acts rather than human relationships, anti-SRHR messaging triggers automatic disgust responses that bypass rational consideration.

Dehumanizing Target Groups: The consistent emphasis on sexuality rather than humanity makes it easier to deny rights and dignity to LGBTQI+ individuals, positioning them as defined solely by sexual behaviour rather than as complete human beings.

Masking Ideological Agendas: Appeals to disgust provide seemingly "natural" justifications for discrimination that conceal underlying ideological or political motivations.

COUNTRY SPOTLIGHT: Namibia

In Namibia, researchers documented how the "politics of disgust" operates as a powerful tool for anti-SRHR movements. As one LGBTQI+ activist explained: "It's the politics of disgust. They share [descriptions of] anal sex, gay people, continuously. It's a very effective strategy. It's to continuously fuel that disgust. Queer people are always sexualized first before they are 'dignitized'. It's always about the sex aspect and how we operate intimately. And I don't think it's anything to do with religion or protecting family values" (Solomons, 2024).

This strategy works by emphasizing sexual acts to trigger disgust reactions, sexualizing LGBTQI+ individuals before recognizing their humanity, and framing them as fundamentally "other" and threatening. Despite Afrobarometer surveys showing 64% tolerance for homosexuality in Namibia (ranking third on the continent), this weaponization of disgust continues to drive legal and political resistance.

What makes Namibia particularly interesting is the disconnect between public opinion and policy. Despite ranking third on the continent for tolerance of homosexuality, "legal reform faces significant opposition from government officials" (Solomons, 2024). This gap between public acceptance and political resistance highlights how well-organized opposition groups can capture political institutions despite representing minority viewpoints. The Namibia Coalition for Bodily Autonomy has strategically leveraged this data in their messaging, "emphasizing bodily autonomy as a fundamental right, connecting abortion access, LGBTQI+ rights, and sex workers' rights under a cohesive narrative" (Solomons, 2024).

The landmark Dausab case of June 2024, which struck down colonial-era sodomy laws, triggered significant backlash that illustrates the pattern of resistance to judicial progress. Within weeks, "the government filed an appeal to the Supreme Court" and "introduced new marriage bills aimed at defining marriage exclusively as a union between persons of opposite sex" (Solomons, 2024). More disturbing was the increase in violence against LGBTQI+ individuals, "with several brutal murders reported, forcing organizations to implement new security measures to protect activists" (Solomons, 2024). In response, CSOs working with marginalized communities developed community-led security protocols including a quick response team and digital security training for activists (Solomons, 2024).

3.4 Transgender Denialism and Attacks on Gender Identity: Strategic Evolution

The evolution of anti-SRHR strategies to focus on transgender identities represents a tactical adaptation that reveals the movement's flexibility. Like a river changing course to overcome obstacles, these movements have shifted their primary focus while maintaining their ultimate goal of restricting bodily autonomy. The rise of transgender denialism represents a strategic evolution in anti-SRHR organizing, employing these specific approaches:

Pseudo-Scientific Rhetoric: Anti-trans movements have shifted from overtly religious arguments to pseudo-scientific claims about biology and psychology. By couching their opposition in scientific language, they attempt to gain credibility among healthcare professionals and policymakers who might otherwise reject religious reasoning.

COUNTRY SPOTLIGHT: South Africa

In South Africa, First Do No Harm SA (FDNH-SA), a coalition of medical professionals, exemplifies the strategic shift toward pseudo-scientific transgender denialism. Despite lacking specialized knowledge in transgender healthcare, this group positions itself as medical authorities and labels gender-affirming healthcare as "ideologically driven rather than evidence-based" (Lynch, 2024). Their website links to far-right opinion pieces from US media and content from Global North anti-gender actors, revealing their transnational connections while maintaining a veneer of local medical expertise.

This approach allows anti-SRHR groups to obscure their religious fundamentalist roots through a veneer of secularization and appeal to audiences who might reject overtly religious messaging. By promoting a "common sense" narrative that contradicts established medical consensus, they create an artificial "debate" where none exists in the scientific community (Lynch, 2024).

Manufacturing "Experts": These movements cultivate and promote healthcare professionals who lack specific training in transgender healthcare but who lend their credentials to anti-trans causes. These figures often operate outside their areas of expertise while claiming professional authority.

Creating Moral Panic: Much like earlier anti-gay campaigns, anti-trans narratives rely heavily on generating moral panic, particularly around children and youth. False claims about "rapid onset gender dysphoria" or "transgender contagion" create fear without scientific basis.

Strategic Wedge Issues: Anti-trans campaigns deliberately focus on issues like sports participation or bathroom access as wedges to divide potential allies and create seemingly "reasonable" entry points for broader discrimination. These narrower issues become gateways to more comprehensive opposition.

Leveraging Feminist Language: Some anti-trans movements co-opt feminist language around women's rights and spaces to pit cisgender women's concerns against transgender rights. This "divide and conquer" approach attempts to fracture natural alliances between feminist and LGBTQI+ movements.

3.5 Closing Down Civic Space: Systematic Suppression

The most direct strategy employed by anti-SRHR movements involves systematically constricting the space for advocacy and service provision. Like a slowly tightening net, these efforts gradually reduce the operational capacity of SRHR organizations through multiple, overlapping constraints. Tactics systematically employed include:

Legal Harassment: SRHR organizations and activists face strategic lawsuits, licensing complaints, and regulatory challenges designed to drain resources and divert energy from advocacy work. Even when these legal actions ultimately fail, they succeed in their primary aim of creating operational burdens.

PERSONAL IMPACT: An Activist's Experience in South Africa

"I've been an SRHR activist for fifteen years, but the last two years have been unbearable. 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. I have been attacked in front of my family, with my children. And that is personal. They've threatened me with complaints to the Health Professions Council and with lawsuits. But I have nothing on paper, which makes it exceptionally difficult to challenge. The fear and isolation are wearing me down. Many of my colleagues have already quit." (Lynch, 2024)

Digital Harassment Campaigns: Coordinated online attacks target SRHR advocates, particularly those from marginalized communities, with harassment, doxxing, and threats. These campaigns create significant psychological burdens and safety concerns that limit public engagement.

Infiltration of Public Events: Anti-SRHR groups systematically disrupt public forums and educational events on SRHR topics, creating hostile environments that prevent productive discussion and intimidate attendees. This tactic effectively limits public discourse by making public spaces unsafe.

Bureaucratic Obstruction: Where anti-SRHR forces have government influence, they implement administrative barriers like complex registration requirements, excessive reporting demands, or arbitrary inspections that consume organizational capacity and impede effective operation.

Resource Strangulation: By influencing donor priorities or implementing restrictive policies like expanded versions of the Global Gag Rule, anti-SRHR movements limit financial resources available to SRHR organizations, forcing difficult choices between service provision and advocacy.

COUNTRY SPOTLIGHT: Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, despite office raids, shutdown of meetings, surveillance, and arbitrary arrests, GALZ (Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe) continues its operations supporting the LGBTQI+ community. In June 2024, protesters ambushed the GALZ offices, chanting anti-gay slogans and defacing walls with homophobic graffiti (Chigudu, 2024). Shortly before this, Zimbabwe's vice-president Constantine Chiwenga denounced GALZ's tertiary education scholarship program as "an attempt at recruiting young people into LGBTQI+ activities," declaring that educational institutions would not enrol "persons associated with such alien, anti-life, un-African and unchristian values" (Chigudu, 2024).

This coordinated pressure from both official government sources and seemingly spontaneous protesters demonstrates how bureaucratic obstruction works in tandem with public intimidation to shrink civic space for LGBTQI+ organizations.

4. Impact of Anti-SRHR Movements on Law Reform and Communities

The strategies deployed by anti-SRHR movements aren't merely theoretical—they produce concrete impacts that affect the daily lives of millions across Southern Africa. From legislative chambers to rural healthcare clinics, these impacts ripple through societies with profound consequences.

According to the four country reports, the organized resistance to SRHR has resulted in tangible negative impacts across multiple dimensions:

4.1 Delayed Law Reform and Policy Implementation

Across Southern Africa, anti-SRHR movements have successfully delayed, blocked, and in some cases reversed progressive legislation. In Mozambique, despite strong legal protections for LGBTQI+ rights on paper, Lambda has been unable to register officially as an organization since 2006, with authorities using various excuses to block their registration even after a 2017 Constitutional Court ruling that should have paved the way (Baumgart dos Santos, 2024).

In Zimbabwe, there is evidence of extremely slow progress on reducing rates of early forced unions despite the National Strategy and Action Plan on Early Marriage (2015) and the 2019 Law on Prevention and Combat of Premature Unions. The percentage of young women aged 15-19 who were married dropped only from 43% in 1997 to 39% in 2017, showing minimal change despite years of advocacy and legal reform (Chigudu, 2024).

4.2 Healthcare Access Barriers

In the intricate landscape of Southern African healthcare, the journey of marginalized communities is not just about medical treatment—it's a profound narrative of survival, dignity, and systemic resilience.

Intersectional Healthcare Challenges:

Identity as a Barrier

- Transgender individuals face multiple layers of healthcare discrimination
- Medical providers often lack understanding of gender diversity
- Mental health support is virtually non-existent for many marginalized groups
- Fear of discrimination, lack of confidentiality, and stigma prevent many from seeking care
- Services are rarely youth or LGBTQI+ friendly, creating additional barriers

Testimonial: A Transgender Patient's Experience

Healthcare facilities often become spaces of additional trauma: "Finding a doctor who understands transgender healthcare needs is nearly impossible in Namibia. There are no specialized clinics or providers trained in gender-affirming care. When I first sought help for my transition, I was met with confusion and often hostility. Many had never encountered a transgender patient before and didn't know how to treat me.

When I asked about hormone therapy, one doctor told me it was 'unnatural' and tried to convince me to accept my birth gender. Another simply said they didn't know anything about it and couldn't help me. Mental health support, which is crucial for many trans individuals, is also severely lacking.

The lack of legal recognition for my gender identity compounds these healthcare challenges. Without ID that matches my gender expression, I face suspicion and discrimination every time I visit a clinic or hospital. I've been outed in waiting rooms, denied service, and even verbally abused by staff who don't understand or accept trans identities." (Solomons, 2024)

Geographical Inequity

Rural communities bear the heaviest burden of healthcare exclusion:

- Limited access to specialized services
- Reduced contraceptive availability.
- Higher rates of untreated chronic conditions

Economic Vulnerability and Health

The economic precarity of marginalized communities directly impacts healthcare access:

- Cost prohibits preventative care.
- Emergency interventions become the primary healthcare model.
- Chronic conditions remain untreated due to financial constraints.

The Ripple Effects: Beyond Individual Health

Healthcare exclusion creates systemic vulnerabilities:

- HIV Transmission Dynamics
- Lack of comprehensive sexual health education
- Limited testing and treatment for vulnerable populations
- Increased risk of viral transmission due to inadequate healthcare infrastructure

Maternal and Reproductive Health

- High maternal mortality rates
- Limited access to family planning services
- Increased risk of unsafe abortions

Country Spotlight: Logistical and Transportation Barriers in Mozambique

Beyond cultural and social barriers, practical logistical challenges can severely limit access to SRHR services. In Mozambique, U.S. policy restrictions during the previous Trump administration created a stark example of how international policies can affect local healthcare delivery. USAID-supported logistics companies were prohibited from transporting medication required for safe abortion: "The logistics companies that transport medication to health facilities are not permitted to carry medication required for safe abortion, specifically Mifepristone" (Baumgart dos Santos, 2024).

Similar restrictions affected gender-affirming hormone therapy, creating dangerous treatment interruptions for transgender individuals. These limitations disproportionately impacted rural communities, where "over 70% of Mozambique's population lives... often lacking access to essential public infrastructure and health services" (Baumgart dos Santos, 2024). When faced with difficult choices between losing support for all medication transport or accepting restrictions on abortion medications, the

Ministry of Health prioritized maintaining transportation for other essential medications, effectively restricting access to abortion services in rural areas.

This example illustrates how seemingly technical or bureaucratic decisions can function as powerful mechanisms for restricting SRHR access, particularly for the most geographically isolated and vulnerable populations.

(Baumgart dos Santos, 2024).

4.3 Community Division and Intimidation

Anti-SRHR movements have successfully exploited existing social divisions to create community-level resistance to SRHR. In Mozambique, healthcare providers who know they should provide contraceptives to adolescents often refuse to do so due to community pressure and internalized cultural beliefs about youth sexuality. Even when accompanied by their mothers, young women report being denied contraception by nurses who insist they remain abstinent until age 18 (Baumgart dos Santos, 2024).

In Zimbabwe, anti-SRHR actors have exploited economic vulnerability. During periods of economic hardship, food insecurity, and natural disasters, the incidence of early forced unions increases dramatically as families seek economic stability through marrying off daughters (Chigudu, 2024).

Cabo Delgado in Mozambique, Save the Children, documented that 18% of women aged 20-24 were married before age 15, and 61% before age 18, with rates increasing during humanitarian crises (Baumgart dos Santos, 2024).

5. Resistance and Resilience Strategies

Like the baobab tree that stores water within its massive trunk to survive drought, organizations, advocates have built remarkable resilience through creative adaptations to hostile environments.

5.1 Strategic Litigation: Principles for Success

Strategic litigation has proven an effective tool for advancing SRHR across the region, with several key lessons emerging from successful cases:

Constitutional Framing: The most successful legal challenges frame SRHR issues within broader constitutional principles like dignity, equality, and privacy rather than as isolated rights. This approach connects SRHR to fundamental legal frameworks that courts are obligated to uphold.

Building Strong Legal Precedent: Effective litigation strategies build incremental legal precedent through carefully selected cases before tackling larger systemic challenges. Each successful case becomes a building block for more ambitious legal reform.

Complementary Advocacy: Legal strategies work best when paired with public education, media engagement, and policy advocacy. This creates a supportive environment for judicial decisions and helps translate legal victories into practical implementation.

Diverse Petitioners: Cases with diverse petitioners representing different affected communities strengthen legal arguments by demonstrating the broad impact of rights violations. This approach prevents courts from dismissing challenges as affecting only narrow interests.

International Law Integration: Successful litigation increasingly incorporates international human rights law and regional agreements as interpretive frameworks for national constitutions, creating paths for progressive jurisprudence even in restrictive settings.

Post-Decision Implementation: Recognizing that court victories are only the beginning, effective litigation includes explicit strategies for monitoring and enforcing judicial decisions, often through continued court engagement when implementation lags. Also making sure that the public is aware of new laws and their rights is essential for meaningful implementation.

COUNTRY SPOTLIGHT: Namibia's Landmark Dausab Case

The Dausab case in Namibia represents a watershed moment for LGBTQI+ rights through strategic litigation. In June 2024, the High Court struck down colonial-era laws criminalizing same-sex relations by emphasizing how enforcing private moral views based on prejudice contradicts democratic principles. The court declared that criminalizing gay men "poses a greater threat to society than tolerance" (Solomons, 2024).

What made this case successful was its strategic framing around constitutional values rather than just LGBTQI+ rights specifically. By positioning sodomy laws as violations of dignity, equality, and privacy protections guaranteed to all Namibians, advocates created a compelling constitutional argument that even conservative judges had to acknowledge.

The victory, however, triggered immediate backlash. Within weeks, the government filed an appeal to the Supreme Court and introduced new marriage bills defining marriage exclusively as a union between opposite-sex partners. More disturbing was the increase in violence against LGBTQI+ individuals, with several brutal murders reported. This pattern of legal progress followed by multi-channel resistance illustrates the challenges of sustaining momentum after court victories. (Solomons, 2024).

5.2 Engagement with Religious and Traditional Leaders: Effective Approaches

Rather than accepting the false dichotomy between religious tradition and SRHR, effective organizations have found ways to engage constructively with religious and traditional leaders. This approach recognizes that religious interpretations are not monolithic and can evolve through respectful dialogue.

Successful engagement with religious and traditional leaders has yielded important lessons for advancing SRHR:

Contextual Analysis Methods: Effective approaches use structured methodologies for contextual analysis of religious texts that emphasize historical context, interpretive diversity, and core principles of dignity and compassion. These methods help leaders discover progressive interpretations within their own traditions.

COUNTRY SPOTLIGHT: Faith-Based Engagement through contextual Bible analysis

In Namibia and South Africa, progressive faith leaders have introduced contextual Bible analysis in interfaith dialogues, helping pastors see religious texts through a lens of inclusion rather than condemnation. One pastor who had been vocal in his opposition to SRHR experienced a breakthrough moment during these dialogues: "I've always read the Bible through the lens of condemnation. But now I see it's a story of radical love and inclusion" (Solomons, 2024).

This approach recognizes that religious opposition often stems from particular interpretive traditions rather than inherent religious positions. By creating space for alternative readings of sacred texts, these dialogues have helped religious leaders discover supportive passages and principles within their own traditions that affirm human dignity and inclusion.

The success of this method lies in its respect for religious belief while creating space for reinterpretation. Rather than positioning religion as inherently opposed to SRHR, it reveals how progressive, inclusive readings can emerge from within religious traditions themselves.

Leader-to-Leader Influence: Programs that facilitate dialogue between progressive and conservative religious leaders create more sustainable change than outside interventions. Peer influence from respected figures within traditions carries particular weight.

Values-Based Framing: Successful engagement frames SRHR in terms of shared values like family wellbeing, harm reduction, and community health rather than rights language that might trigger resistance. This creates common ground for productive dialogue.

Practical Problem-Solving: Approaches that begin with practical community challenges (like maternal mortality or gender-based violence) rather than ideological positions create space for collaborative solutions that can gradually expand to more contested issues.

Long-Term Relationship Building: Sustainable engagement requires continuous relationship-building rather than one-off workshops. Programs that maintain consistent presence and demonstrate respect for religious contexts achieve more lasting influence.

Celebrating Progressive Religious Voices: Amplifying existing progressive voices within faith traditions helps counter the narrative that religion is inherently opposed to SRHR and provides alternative religious interpretations for communities.

5.3 Coalition-Building and Unified Messaging: Strategic Alignment

In the face of well-coordinated opposition, SRHR organizations have recognized that isolated efforts are insufficient. Successful coalitions have developed shared frameworks while respecting the diversity of approaches among member organizations.

Effective coalition-building across diverse stakeholders has yielded valuable lessons:

Common Ground Identification: Successful coalitions identify specific areas of common interest while respecting differences in approach or emphasis. This allows organizations to work together on shared goals without requiring complete alignment on all issues.

Strategic Message Framing: The most effective coalitions develop unified messaging frameworks that allow diverse organizations to communicate consistently while adapting language to their specific constituencies. This creates coherent public narratives without forcing homogeneity.

Balancing Visibility: Effective coalitions strategically determine when to operate publicly versus behind the scenes based on political context and security considerations. Sometimes the most influential work happens through quiet diplomacy rather than public advocacy.

Power Analysis and Complementary Roles: Strong coalitions explicitly analyse power dynamics among members and strategically assign roles based on relative influence, security concerns, and specific expertise. This prevents the dominance of larger or more privileged organizations.

Sustained Coordination Mechanisms: Successful coalitions establish clear coordination structures with adequate resources rather than ad-hoc collaboration. Dedicated coordination staff and regular communication channels maintain momentum beyond immediate crises.

Shared Credit and Resources: Coalitions that explicitly address resource sharing and public credit create more sustainable collaborations. Transparent processes for managing joint funding and acknowledging contributions build trust among partners.

COUNTRY SPOTLIGHT: Community Conversations in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, the Community Working Group on Health (CWGH) has engaged traditional leaders in discussions about SRHR, resulting in greater community acceptance of family planning initiatives (Chigudu, 2024). This approach recognizes the crucial role that traditional authorities play in shaping community norms and practices.

Rather than positioning traditional leaders as obstacles to overcome, this model engages them as partners in improving community health and wellbeing. By focusing on shared concerns about maternal mortality, child welfare, and family stability, these conversations create common ground between SRHR advocates and traditional authorities who might otherwise be skeptical of rights-based approaches.

The success of this approach demonstrates how acknowledging and working through existing community power structures can create more sustainable change than attempting to bypass or challenge them directly.

5.4 Community-Led Monitoring: Lessons Learned and Best Practices

Recognizing that top-down models often fail to capture the reality of SRHR violations, organizations have developed sophisticated community-led monitoring approaches. These practices shift power to affected communities while generating evidence for advocacy.

Community-led monitoring has emerged as a powerful tool for countering anti-SRHR resistance, yielding important insights:

Building Community Ownership: The most successful initiatives prioritize genuine community ownership from the outset. This means training community members not just in data collection methods but also in data analysis and using evidence for advocacy. When communities themselves identify what needs to be monitored based on their lived experiences, the resulting data is more relevant and the commitment to using it for change is stronger.

Creating Safe Documentation Systems: Given the sensitive nature of SRHR violations and the potential for reprisals, successful programs have developed secure reporting systems that protect both data collectors and respondents. Anonymous reporting mechanisms, encrypted data storage, and clear protocols for handling sensitive information have proven essential.

Establishing Feedback Loops: Effective systems establish clear pathways for the data to influence policy and practice. This includes regular meetings with service providers and decision-makers where community representatives can present findings and collaboratively develop solutions. The most successful initiatives create formal accountability mechanisms where authorities must respond to documented shortcomings.

Building Diverse Coalitions: Initiatives that engage a broad range of stakeholders from the beginning have proven more sustainable and effective. This multi-stakeholder approach helps pre-empt resistance and creates champions for change within systems that might otherwise be defensive.

Using Technology Appropriately: Digital platforms have revolutionized monitoring by enabling real-time data collection and analysis. However, the most successful implementations carefully balance technology with analogue methods appropriate to local contexts. In areas with limited connectivity or digital literacy, paper-based systems with subsequent digitization have proven more inclusive.

Linking Monitoring to Services: Programs that connect monitoring directly to service improvements show the greatest sustainability. When communities see tangible changes resulting from their monitoring efforts, participation and commitment increase.

Developing Graduated Advocacy Responses: Successful initiatives develop tiered advocacy strategies that begin with collaborative problem-solving but escalate to public accountability or legal action when necessary. This graduated approach maintains relationships while ensuring that serious violations aren't ignored.

5.5 Community Engagement Strategies: Principles for Success

Moving beyond top-down awareness campaigns, effective SRHR organizations have developed sophisticated community engagement approaches that centre local wisdom and foster collective reflection.

Effective community engagement to counter anti-SRHR narratives has generated valuable lessons:

Cultural Resonance and Asset-Based Approaches: The most effective engagement strategies build on existing community strengths and cultural frameworks rather than imposing external models. By identifying positive cultural values that align with SRHR principles—such as care for family wellbeing or community responsibility—these approaches create contextually resonant entry points.

Trusted Local Facilitators: Programs that train and support local community members as facilitators achieve deeper engagement than those relying on outside experts. These facilitators understand local nuances and have established credibility that external actors lack.

Interactive Methodologies: Approaches using participatory techniques like community dialogues, forum theatre, and storytelling circles generate deeper reflection and more sustainable change than didactic information sessions. These methods create space for communities to process complex issues collectively.

Intergenerational Dialogues: Structured dialogues between generations have proven particularly effective for addressing sensitive SRHR topics. These conversations allow elders to share traditional wisdom while creating space for younger perspectives, bridging divides through mutual respect.

Engagement Across Multiple Levels: Successful strategies engage multiple layers of community influence simultaneously—from individual youth leaders to families, community institutions, and policy environments. This multi-level approach recognizes that change must occur at multiple levels to be sustainable.

Phased Approaches to Sensitive Topics: Effective programs begin with less controversial topics to build trust before addressing more sensitive issues. This gradual approach allows relationships to develop and demonstrates respect for community pacing.

Authentic Participatory Design: The most sustainable programs involve communities in program design from the outset rather than imposing predetermined interventions. This co-creation approach ensures relevance and builds ownership that withstands external pressure.

5.6 Economic Empowerment and Sustainability: Essential Strategies

Faced with funding volatility and external pressure, forward-thinking SRHR organizations have developed innovative sustainability models. These approaches reduce vulnerability while maintaining mission alignment.

Diversified Revenue Streams: Organizations that develop multiple funding sources—including social enterprises, membership fees, local philanthropy, and diverse international donors—show greater resilience against political funding fluctuations and restrictive policies.

Skills-Based Income Generation: Successful economic empowerment initiatives focus on marketable skills aligned with organizational expertise, such as training services, research capabilities, or specialized consulting. These approaches generate income while advancing organizational missions.

Strategic Reserve Building: Organizations that prioritize building financial reserves demonstrate greater ability to maintain core operations during funding transitions or political pressure. These reserves provide crucial operational flexibility.

Shared Resource Models: Collaborative approaches like shared office spaces, equipment pools, or joint administrative services reduce costs while strengthening movement infrastructure. These models allow smaller organizations to access resources they couldn't sustain individually.

Local Funding Cultivation: Programs that systematically develop local funding sources—including community contributions, domestic philanthropy, or government contracts—reduce vulnerability to international policy shifts while building local ownership.

Value-Aligned Enterprise: The most successful income-generating initiatives align closely with organizational values and missions rather than operating as disconnected business ventures. This alignment maintains organizational integrity while building sustainability.

Horizontal Knowledge Transfer: Organizations that share sustainability strategies across movements build collective resilience. Formal and informal knowledge exchange mechanisms help spread innovative approaches throughout the SRHR ecosystem.

COUNTRY SPOTLIGHT: Community-Based Economic Models in Mozambique

In Mozambique, organizations are developing innovative sustainability models to counter shrinking civic space and funding constraints. As one interviewee noted: "If we can influence the economy in a positive way by creating opportunities for LGBTQI+ people to be employed, they would be able to make informed choices about their lives and be able to educate themselves and have access to resources, access to health, access to justice" (Baumgart dos Santos, 2024).

This economic empowerment approach recognizes that financial independence is crucial for exercising bodily autonomy and claiming rights. By creating employment opportunities and income-generating projects, these initiatives reduce dependency on external funding while building community resilience..

5.7 Arts and Cultural Approaches: Creative Engagement

Recognizing the power of cultural expression, innovative SRHR organizations have embraced arts-based strategies. These approaches engage emotion and imagination, creating spaces for reflection that purely cognitive approaches often miss.

Arts-based strategies have proven particularly effective for shifting narratives and engaging communities on SRHR issues:

Participatory Arts Processes: The most transformative arts initiatives engage community members as creators rather than passive audiences. These participatory approaches build agency and ownership while developing authentic narratives rooted in lived experience.

Multiple Modes of Expression: Successful programs employ diverse artistic forms—including theatre, visual arts, music, dance, and digital media—to reach different audiences and engage multiple learning styles. This multimodal approach increases accessibility and impact.

Safe Expression of Difficult Truths: Arts-based approaches create safe containers for exploring sensitive topics that might be too controversial for direct discussion. Through metaphor, storytelling, and creative expression, communities can process complex emotions and experiences.

Cultural Reclamation: Effective arts initiatives often reclaim and reinterpret cultural traditions, demonstrating how indigenous cultural elements actually support rather than oppose SRHR. This reclamation counters narratives that position SRHR as inherently foreign.

Strategic Amplification: Successful arts approaches include strategic plans for amplifying community-created content through media partnerships, social platforms, and public exhibitions. This amplification extends impact beyond immediate participants.

Building Creative Leadership: Sustainable arts initiatives invest in developing local creative leaders who can continue cultural engagement beyond specific projects. This leadership development creates lasting capacity for cultural narrative change.

Cross-Generational Collaboration: The most effective arts programs bring together elders and youth in collaborative creation, building intergenerational understanding while ensuring cultural relevance across age groups. This collaboration bridges divides that anti-SRHR movements often exploit.

COUNTRY SPOTLIGHT: Indigenous Knowledge Integration in Namibia

In Namibia, Young Feminists Movement Namibia (Y-Fem) and the Women's Leadership Centre (WLC) have prioritized building indigenous knowledge stores, anthologies, and educational materials that centre bodily autonomy within local cultural contexts. The WLC works with marginalized groups, including indigenous San women and lesbian women, to address harmful cultural practices (Solomons, 2024).

This approach draws on traditional storytelling and cultural practices while reinterpreting them through a feminist lens. By rooting bodily autonomy in indigenous knowledge systems rather than importing Western frameworks, these organizations create culturally resonant advocacy tools that can bypass resistance to perceived foreign concepts.

The approach honours traditional wisdom while challenging harmful practices, creating space for communities to reclaim and redefine their cultural heritage in ways that support bodily autonomy and SRHR.

6. Threats on the Horizon: Project 2025 and U.S. Foreign Policy

On the horizon, gathering like storm clouds, looms a significant threat to SRHR work across Southern Africa: Project 2025. The potential implementation of this detailed policy blueprint under a second Trump administration would extend well beyond U.S. borders, creating ripple effects throughout global SRHR ecosystems.

The implementation of Project 2025 under a second Trump administration would significantly impact SRHR work across Southern Africa. Previous experience with funding freezes provides a sobering preview of potential consequences.

In early 2025, during former President Trump's first term, a 90-day foreign aid freeze as part of his "America First" policy caused immediate disruptions to essential services throughout Africa. This freeze halted funding for PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief), a program credited with saving over 25 million African lives. In South Africa, which receives 20% of its HIV/AIDS budget from PEPFAR, clinics closed, and patients were turned away, risking viral rebound and increased transmission rates. The Wits RHI Key Populations Clinic in Johannesburg had to suspend operations, leaving vulnerable groups like children and LGBTQI+ communities without access to antiretroviral drugs.

Similar impacts were seen across health sectors. TB and malaria programs faced interruptions, threatening outbreaks. Maternal and child health initiatives including nutrition programs, prenatal care, and emergency obstetric services faced closures, exacerbating maternal mortality and child malnutrition.

Humanitarian aid was equally affected. In South Sudan, flood-affected families lost access to USAID-funded food deliveries, forcing households to sell livestock for survival. In Uganda and Malawi, agricultural projects were disrupted, with seeds left to rot in warehouses.

The geopolitical consequences included creating opportunities for China to expand influence in Africa through infrastructure and development deals, undermining U.S. diplomatic leverage. The sudden halt also damaged trust in U.S. partnerships, with African leaders calling for reduced dependency on foreign aid and greater self-reliance.

Project 2025's proposals would exceed these previous impacts by:

1. **Expanding the Global Gag Rule** to cover all foreign assistance (approximately \$66 billion annually), not just health aid.
2. **Applying restrictions to U.S.-based NGOs** for the first time, forcing them to choose between receiving U.S. government funding and providing comprehensive SRHR services with other donors' funding.
3. **Extending restrictions to multilateral organizations** like the Global Fund, GAVI, and UN agencies, which have previously been exempt.
4. **Targeting humanitarian assistance**, which would severely impact the most vulnerable populations in crisis settings.

This approach would significantly affect the ability of other donor countries, including European nations, to implement their own SRHR programs as the "gag" applies even to activities funded entirely by non-U.S. sources. It would also result in a shrinking civic space for SRHR advocacy as organizations struggle with bureaucratic compliance or choose to avoid addressing sensitive topics.

7. Recommendations for Countering Anti-SRHR Movements

Drawing on the innovative approaches documented across Southern Africa, we can distil key recommendations for strengthening SRHR advocacy in the face of coordinated resistance. These strategies represent not isolated tactics but an integrated ecosystem of approaches that reinforce one another.

7.1 Strategic Communications: Effective Framework

In the battle for hearts and minds, strategic communications are essential. Effective messaging frames SRHR issues in ways that resonate with diverse audiences and counters false narratives spread by opposition forces.

Developing strategic messaging requires several essential elements:

Values-Based Framing: The most effective communications anchor SRHR issues in broadly shared values like family wellbeing, community health, and human dignity rather than abstract rights concepts. This values-based approach creates common ground with audiences who might initially resist rights language.

Positive Narratives Over Defensive Responses: Proactive positive messaging about the benefits of comprehensive SRHR proves more effective than reactive defenses against opposition attacks. These positive narratives should emphasize how SRHR improves lives and communities.

Authentic Messengers: Messages delivered by trusted local voices—including religious leaders, healthcare providers, teachers, and community elders—carry greater weight than those from external advocates. Identifying and supporting these authentic messengers is crucial.

Humanizing Personal Stories: Concrete stories demonstrating the human impact of SRHR issues create emotional connection more effectively than abstract arguments or statistics. These narratives should centre dignity and agency rather than victimhood.

Bridging Divided Audiences: Effective messaging identifies "bridge issues" that resonate across ideological divides, such as reducing maternal mortality or preventing gender-based violence. These entry points build common ground for subsequent dialogue on more contested topics.

Pre-Framing Controversial Issues: Strategic communications anticipate and pre-frame potentially divisive issues before opposition narratives can take hold. This proactive framing sets the terms of debate rather than constantly responding to opposition frames.

Cultural Resonance: The most effective messaging draws on culturally resonant metaphors, proverbs, and references that connect SRHR to existing knowledge frameworks. This cultural rootedness counters narratives that position SRHR as foreign or culturally inappropriate.

7.2 Comprehensive Implementation Strategies: Integrative Approaches

Beyond communications, SRHR organizations need holistic implementation strategies that address multiple dimensions of change simultaneously. These approaches recognize that sustainable progress requires coordinated efforts across individual, community, institutional, and policy levels.

Multilevel Engagement: Effective strategies simultaneously address individual knowledge and attitudes, community norms, institutional practices, and policy environments. This multilevel approach recognizes that change at any single level is insufficient for lasting transformation.

Evidence-Informed Adaptability: Successful implementation balances fidelity to evidence-based models with flexibility to adapt to local contexts. This adaptability ensures relevance while maintaining core effective elements.

Integrated Service Delivery: Programs that integrate SRHR services with other valued community services—such as primary healthcare, economic development, or education—increase accessibility and reduce stigma. This integration embeds SRHR within broader community systems.

Rights-Based Quality Assurance: Effective implementation includes explicit quality standards grounded in rights principles, with community-led monitoring to ensure accountability. These mechanisms maintain focus on dignified, non-discriminatory service provision.

Sustainable Capacity Building: The most successful programs invest in long-term capacity development across multiple levels—from community volunteers to healthcare providers to system managers. This layered capacity strengthens entire systems rather than creating isolated pockets of excellence.

Transparent Governance Mechanisms: Implementation models that include clear governance structures with meaningful community representation demonstrate greater sustainability and responsiveness. These structures ensure programs remain accountable to the communities they serve.

Knowledge Management Systems: Effective programs establish systems for documenting, analyzing, and sharing implementation learning across contexts. These knowledge systems accelerate innovation and prevent repeated mistakes across the SRHR ecosystem.

8. Conclusion

The anti-SRHR and anti-gay movements operating across Africa represent a coordinated, well-resourced threat to hard-won progress in sexual and reproductive rights. Their strategies—co-opting religious and decolonization narratives, promoting transgender denialism, and closing civic space—have measurable impacts on laws, policies, and communities across the region.

Yet there is significant cause for hope. Innovative approaches by CSOs in Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe demonstrate the resilience of SRHR movements. From community conversations with traditional leaders to contextual Bible studies with religious leaders, from community-led monitoring to theatre projects, organizations are finding creative ways to advance SRHR in challenging contexts.

Like baobab trees that adapt to harsh conditions by storing water within their massive trunks, SRHR movements across the region have developed remarkable resilience in the face of growing hostility. They have learned to draw from deep reservoirs of community wisdom, to bend without breaking under political pressure, and to nurture extensive root systems of solidarity that sustain them through the most challenging seasons.

The path forward requires continued vigilance, solidarity, and adaptation. As external threats like Project 2025 loom on the horizon, Southern African SRHR organizations must strengthen their networks, diversify their funding sources, and centre community needs and voices. Addressing anti-rights forces requires a multipronged approach that integrates proactive defensive mechanisms, collaborative advocacy, and people-powered movements. This includes not only monitoring and accountability but also engaging with rights-based allies in legislative bodies and building movements that bridge different issues and geographies.

By doing so, SRHR organizations can not only withstand the current wave of anti-SRHR sentiment but emerge stronger and more deeply rooted in the communities they serve.

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