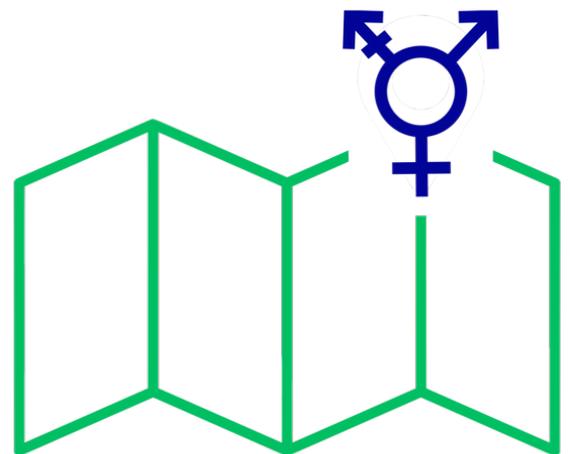


GENDER BACKLASH

Recommendations:
Advancing Global Gender Equality

10 December 2025



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TACKLING THE GLOBAL GENDER BACKLASH

Against the backdrop of [global realignment](#), authoritarian, nationalist and religiously conservative forces are probing the boundaries of international human rights and seeking to replace them with sovereignty-, family- or “traditional values”-based frames. Gender and sexuality are chosen because they easily polarise societies, and “justify” the takeover of independent institutions, particularly in the regions with strong identity politics.

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic made existing inequalities visible and politically exploitable. It pushed women back into unpaid care work, exacerbated domestic violence and removed many from paid employment. In several countries, it was also used as an excuse to suspend services for survivors.

The pandemic did not create the gender backlash; it intensified it. Anti-gender coalitions seized the opportunity to promote a narrow, binary, family-first model, portraying women’s and LGBTQ rights as a luxury and as the result of advocacy by pro-diversity groups.

Five years later, in 2025, we face a structured campaign to roll back gender equality. Progress for women’s rights and wellbeing has stalled globally, according to the [2025/26 Women, Peace and Security \(WPS\) Index](#).

Attempts to erase ‘gender’ from international law are political, not technical. The October 2024 report of the UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls and the 2025 joint statement by 46 UN Special Procedures on reaffirming the centrality of gender point to this trend.

However, governments [invoke culture, security or demography](#) to excuse their failure to comply with gender-related standards and commitments.

This gender backlash exists within the same ecosystem as the assaults on humanitarian

access and the protection of civilians during conflicts and crises, and the assaults on energy transition and climate change.

Attacking gender equality aims to undo the [30 years’](#) worth of development that it made possible to recognise and address multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination.

Without “gender equality” dimension women’s and LGBTQ rights and many forms of violence will become invisible once more. When human rights are deemed negotiable, it is the most vulnerable social groups that pay the highest price.

Human rights defenders, particularly women and LGBTQ rights defenders as well as those working to remedy gender-based violence, are increasingly targeted through smear campaigns, criminalisation, and funding cuts. [Defending defenders](#) is more crucial than ever.

All of this is happening at a time when leadership in multilateral settings is already under strain and [fractured](#). On the UN level, efforts to integrate gender across peace and security, climate and digital agendas have been chronically underfunded and downplayed.

The global renewal of the gender equality and LGBTQ rights agenda is not just an abstract item on a “wish list.” Rather, it is a prerequisite for rebuilding a rules-based order in which democracy, human rights and equality reinforce one another.

2025 also saw steps in the right direction. The October [Paris Declaration by 31 States pledged ,to defend women’s and girls’ rights and gender equality’](#) and offered a welcome recommitment to feminist foreign policies.

To move beyond symbolism, the next step must be to provide extensive budgetary and legislative backing for the Paris commitments

RECOMMENDATIONS: ADVANCING GLOBAL GENDER EQUALITY

The following recommendations are the result of a convening of over 25 leading international human rights defenders and experts, which was held on 28 October 2025. The brief and recommendations reflect the discussions at the convening and complemented by additional research. The policy brief has been reviewed by an editorial committee of Human Rights Compass.

» Reinvest in Accountability, Monitoring and Strategic Litigation

Recommendation:

Donors and regional human rights institutions should prioritise supporting monitoring and strategic litigation addressing gender-based violence (GBV), domestic violence, discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity – including measures leading to full implementation of court judgments.

Explanation:

Without credible enforcement, gender equality strategies cannot deliver change. Strategic litigation in national courts and regional human rights mechanisms remains one of the most effective ways of establishing binding standards, securing justice for survivors of domestic and gender-based violence, including [digital violence](#), and pressuring governments to ensure that their laws and practices align with their international commitments. Adopting a [survivor-centered](#) and trauma-informed approach strengthens the fairness and impact of this work. To translate rights protections into real-world outcomes, renewed investment is essential in feminist legal expertise, training for judges and prosecutors, and in authoritative monitoring mechanisms (e.g. Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women/ [CEDAW](#), etc.).

» Resource Frontline Women's and LGBTQ Organisations

Recommendation:

Bilateral and multilateral donors should create rapid, flexible and multi-year funding lines for women's rights organisations, LGBTQ groups and youth feminist movements operating in the context of gender backlash.

Explanation:

Women's rights and LGBTQ organisations are amongst the first targets when restrictive governments seek to limit civic space. According to UN Women, one in three organisations have [suspended or shut down](#) programmes on ending violence against women due to funding cuts in 2025. Donor withdrawal leaves these groups exposed at a time when they face increased pressure, public hostility, persecution, prosecution and criminalisation. Sustained and flexible funding is essential for them to provide legal assistance, documentation of violations, public advocacy, and support services. Funding should cover core costs, digital and physical security, legal support, relocation when necessary.

It is critical that gender equality advocates grow their domestic support base: coalition-building is essential, including across partisan divides, to protect key gains. Maintaining cross-border solidarity networks helps

resist coordinated disinformation and anti-rights campaigns. Multi-year support strengthens resilience, allowing groups to plan strategically and ensuring that locally rooted expertise continues to shape the gender equality agenda.

» Use Regional Organisations to Defend the Standards

Recommendation:

All regional organisations - notably the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the African Union, the Organisation of American States and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations - should conduct joint reviews of gender-related backsliding and coordinate responses. These should include public statements, technical assistance, and the use of conditionality where appropriate.

Explanation:

Gender equality commitments are undermined when regional organisations act in isolation or respond unevenly to backsliding. Anti-rights governments exploit these gaps by shifting between regional forums that offer the least scrutiny. A coordinated inter-regional approach can reduce this ‘forum shopping’ and reinforce gender standards across borders. Joint monitoring, shared early-warning mechanisms and coordinated diplomatic messages help ensure that regression is identified quickly and addressed collectively. Regional organisations should also integrate gender standards into their electoral observation missions, mediation and peace processes, and technical assistance programmes. This should be done drawing on the [Women, Peace and Security framework](#) and ensuring meaningful participation of civil society.

» Engage Men and Boys to Close the Mobilisation Gap

Recommendation:

Governments should incorporate work on masculinity, the prevention of male radicalisation and the engagement of boys and men into national gender equality policies. The next [Gender Equality Strategy](#) of the European Union (2026-2030) should prominently include this element.

Explanation:

Efforts to advance gender equality will remain incomplete if they only address half of society. The combination of harmful ideas about manhood and economic insecurity has created fertile ground for misogynistic influencers, anti-rights movements and political actors seeking to mobilise resentment. Preventive education and positive engagement with boys and men are essential to reduce vulnerability to radicalisation and to counter narratives that frame gender equality as a threat. Governments should invest in long-term gender-transformative education programmes, community initiatives and school-based projects that promote healthier models of masculinity and respect for women and LGBTQ people. Strategic engagement with fathers, teachers, youth workers and local leaders can further reinforce these efforts.

» Put Women in Global Leadership, Starting with the Next United Nations Secretary-General

Recommendation:

States should commit to supporting highly qualified women in leading international positions, including as candidates for the next Secretary-General of the United Nations, and to ensure gender parity in senior multilateral roles.

Explanation:

Who leads global institutions determines which issues receive attention, how agendas are framed and how firmly rights commitments are defended. As the UN begins the process of selecting its new Secretary-General in 2026, several states have called for “an open, participatory and gender-inclusive process”. No woman has ever held the post. Finally selecting a [woman Secretary-General](#), with a vision and leadership that is representative, grounded in human rights and uniting of diverse groups, would send a clear message to the ‘gender sceptics’.

It would also bolster the UN credibility and reinforce its efforts to embed equality across its mandates for peace, security, development and human rights. Elevating women to the highest levels of the system would also set a standard for other institutions and demonstrate that leadership diversity is vital for a resilient and legitimate international order.

» Adopt a UN Compact on Gender Equality

Recommendation:

Member states, UN entities and regional international organisations should negotiate and endorse a non-regressive United Nations Compact on Gender Equality that reaffirms, protects and develops existing international standards.

Explanation:

The fragmentation within the United Nations system has created openings for coordinated attempts to dilute or remove gender language, reinterpret equality norms or challenge long-standing commitments under the [Beijing Platform](#) for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ([CEDAW](#)). A common framework is necessary to prevent regressions from being pursued mechanism by mechanism. A United Nations Compact on Gender Equality would provide shared definitions and commit all parts of the system to uphold existing standards. It would also improve coordination between UN bodies and regional organisations in monitoring, data collection, early-warning and responding to gender-related backsliding and be a reference point for nations and civil society. The creation of the Compact can be further reinforced by a coalition of states prioritising commitments to gender equality.

» Finance and Support Gender Equality

Recommendation:

The States should allocate resources to meaningfully advance these agendas and get more states on board. Investments in gender equality enhance stability and legitimacy, not only values.

Explanation:

Financing gender equality is essential for sustainable development and for strong, inclusive economies. According to the UN Women, in 2025 developing countries are [falling short](#) by an estimated USD 420 billion a year in the funding needed to achieve gender equality under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Case Study: Ukraine Is Advancing the Implementation of the Istanbul Convention Despite Russia's War of Aggression

In June 2022, Ukraine ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GBV), known as [the Istanbul Convention](#). Despite the pressures of Russia's war of aggression, Ukraine chose to strengthen protection against domestic and gender-based violence.

Pre-war reforms laid an essential foundation: Legislation adopted between 2005 and 2017 on equal rights, anti-discrimination, voluntary consent in sexual crimes, and the Law on Preventing and Combating Domestic Violence already reflected key Convention principles. The establishment of a Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration with a gender mandate, a Government Commissioner for Gender Equality Policy, and the National Social Service helped to anchor gender policy prior to the invasion. These frameworks enabled Ukraine to make progress during wartime rather than starting from scratch.

Implementation efforts continue despite conflict: Ukraine has maintained a broad policy framework, encompassing the 2021-2025 State Social Programme on Domestic and Gender-Based Violence and the 2022 Strategy on Equal Rights and Opportunities. Training for judges, prosecutors, police, military personnel, and social workers is ongoing and is supported by online education platforms (Prometheus, Diia, and JurFem).

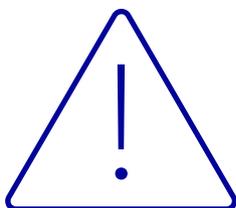
Growing risks exist and gaps remain: Survivors of domestic and gender-based violence face barriers when reporting incidents, and there is limited forensic capacity and delays in issuing protection orders. Procedures are also insufficiently victim-centered. The absence of unified national data and the non-functional State Register of Domestic and Gender-Based Violence continue to be major obstacles to compliance with the Convention. Underfunding of shelters, psychological services, and specialised police units further undermines implementation.

The role of civil society is central, yet not always recognised by the authorities: Victims of domestic and gender-based violence rely heavily on services provided by civil society for legal aid, shelter, psychological support. Despite the difficulties of operating in a war zone, civil society is also essential in monitoring the situation. Furthermore, the consequences for women and families of war-related post-traumatic stress disorder of veterans widely remain taboo, but are being addressed thanks to a few initiatives (e.g. the Veteran Mental Health Centre of Excellence, started by the Federation Global Initiative on Psychiatry/ FGIP and hosted by the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv). Despite their essential role, civil society receives little to no structural state funding in an independent and transparent manner.

Ukraine's progress is a form of democratic resilience: Implementing the Istanbul Convention during wartime strengthens the rule of law, improves protection for survivors, and reinforces the country's European trajectory. However, full implementation of the Convention will require addressing data gaps, securing stable funding for services and improving coordination.



Tackling the Global Gender Backlash



- ⇒ Instrumentalising “family values” to weaken human rights
- ⇒ Attempts to erase gender from international law
- ⇒ Rising misogyny, homophobia and anti-LGBTQ mobilisation
- ⇒ Targeting women’s and LGBTQ organisations through repression and funding cuts
- ⇒ Covid-19 intensifying unpaid care burdens, violence and economic exclusion
- ⇒ Fractured multilateral leadership and chronic underfunding of gender mandates

