



People celebrate after Taiwan's parliament votes to legalise same-sex marriage. Credit: Carl Court/Getty Images

PART 3

STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY REPORT 2020

CHALLENGING EXCLUSION AND CLAIMING RIGHTS

ACTION FOR WOMEN'S AND LGBTQI+ RIGHTS

CONTENT WARNING: PARTS OF THIS CHAPTER DETAIL CASES OF SEXUAL ABUSE, ASSAULT AND RAPE.

Past editions of this report have tracked the ways in which people who are often marginalised or excluded from rights and power as a result of their identities are coming under attack. The lurch towards right-wing populism and nationalism seen in many contexts (*see section*) and the burgeoning of **anti-rights groups** are having real-life consequences for women and LGBTQI+¹ people, the focus of this chapter.

Women and LGBTQI+ people are being targeted for political gain by the leaders and agents of repression who seek to deny and erase the reality of their lives. Political leaders are mobilising hatred against LGBTQI+ groups and seeking to remove women's control over their bodies by attacking sexual and reproductive rights. Misogyny and homophobia remain powerful social forces, stoked and manipulated in the service of anti-rights narratives. Anti-rights groups are sowing division by presenting women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights as mutually incompatible, and as threats to other people's rights or notions of national identity or the social order.

But the story of 2019 was not solely one of repression. In some contexts, major advances in winning legal recognition for LGBTQI+ identities and relations were achieved. The effects of the #MeToo movement continued to spread around the world, triggering pushback but also significant

¹Various formulations of this abbreviation were used by interviewees quoted in this chapter. For this text, they have been standardised in the abbreviation LGBTQI+, which may not necessarily have been the form originally used by the respondent.

progress in changing attitudes and holding the perpetrators of sexual abuse to account. Women political leaders made breakthroughs, potentially modelling different styles of leadership and challenging strongarm, macho politics. Victories were achieved through combinations of mass street action to demand visibility and claim space and years of advocacy and legal action undertaken by civil society.

In acting in the public sphere, women and LGBTQI+ people made themselves visible and shared their lived experiences, but they had to be brave to do so, as they faced harassment, threats and violence. Civil society worked best to support activists and demand women's and LGBTQI+ rights when it mobilised global solidarity alongside local-level action and worked in ways that offered intersectional responses to the multiple and overlapping layers of exclusion that deny people their rights.

The struggles described below are still in progress; even where there has been considerable success there has also been backlash. Civil society around the world will need to keep on engaging in the battle for rights, and persuading publics of the merits of our claims. We need to keep working at all levels to defend women and LGBTQI+ activists and human rights defenders, protect them and prevent violence and harm. And within civil society organisations (CSOs) we need to model best practice, ensure that all our behaviours and actions are challenging rather than reinforcing exclusion, and recognise, enable and support innovation.



People gather outside Taiwan's parliament ahead of a vote on same-sex marriage in May 2019. Credit: Carl Court/Getty Images

1. THE STRUGGLE FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY



Members of the Non una di Meno group participate in a flash-mob protest against GBV and patriarchy in Rome, Italy. Credit: Simona Granati/Corbis via Getty Images

2019 saw continued mobilisation for women's rights and against gender-based violence (GBV), one of the world's most widespread rights violations. Much of this mobilisation took place in a regressive environment, in which civil society had to work to protect past gains against backlash from right-wing politicians and anti-rights groups. The story of the year was therefore one of progress in some places but backward steps in others.

All the breakthroughs of the year had some common hallmarks: they were the result of long-running civil society campaigning; they only occurred after bitter reversals were overcome along the way; and they focused on making the invisible visible and making silenced voices heard, shifting the public imagination in a way that ultimately made change inevitable, making it a matter of when rather than if.

DEMANDING VISIBILITY: A YEAR OF FIRSTS

Civil society's efforts to advance equality and challenge patriarchy are part of a bigger picture of progress. 2019 saw a number of landmarks in which women achieved visibility across a wide range of fields of human activity. True, the endless availability of new 'firsts' – the first government coalition of all-women party leaders, in Finland, the first **all-women spacewalk**, the **first woman** – in Slovenia – appointed to lead the army in a NATO country, the first **female pilot in the Indian navy** – also revealed how far there is still to travel before the presence of women in leadership roles becomes normalised. Nonetheless, an impressive batch of women excelled in their fields and called public attention to the obstacles and discrimination women continue to face. In April, the world saw the first **image** of a black hole thanks to Katie Bouman, a 29-year-old PhD candidate who created the algorithm that made it possible. In October, 46-year old Esther Duflo, alongside two male colleagues, won the **Nobel Prize in Economics**, awarded for their work to develop a successful approach to alleviate global poverty; she was only the second woman ever to win this prize.

Throughout the year several female athletes across the world broke records in a variety of sports – including **gymnastics**, **running** and **swimming** – becoming role models for millions of girls, offering the living proof that women can be sporting icons every bit as much as their male counterparts. Issues of equal pay were raised in the sporting world, as in so many other spheres: in July, after winning their fourth FIFA Women's World Cup, the US Women's National Soccer Team **filed a lawsuit** to demand pay equal to that received by their male counterparts, who are better paid while being not nearly as successful.

Civil society celebrated these achievements and was at the forefront of progress, leading the way with our own breakthroughs. In the key protest events of 2019, including those mentioned below, many young women took leading roles. Many of the young people who mobilised to make climate change a political priority (*see section*) were young women. The movement triggered by Greta Thunberg, then aged 15, built into an enormous groundswell in which young women all over the world demanded urgent action on the climate emergency and called out the gendered impacts of the climate crisis.

GENERATION EQUALITY: A RENEWED PUSH FOR VISIBILITY AND NORMALISATION

A landmark opportunity approaches to build on and accelerate these successes. In the run-up to the 25th anniversary of the **Beijing Platform for Action**, which falls in September 2020, the United Nations (UN) body for gender equality and women's empowerment, UN Women, launched its '**Generation Equality**' campaign. It demands equal pay, equal sharing of unpaid and domestic work, healthcare services that respond to women's and girls' needs, the end of sexual harassment and violence and equal participation in decision-making and politics. This offers a rallying point for a new generation of women's rights activists to help make good on the promise of the Beijing Platform, the most progressive international blueprint for advancing women's rights, adopted unanimously by 189 states at the UN's **Fourth World Conference on Women** in China in 1995. The Beijing Platform focused on eliminating violence against women, ensuring access to family planning and reproductive healthcare, removing barriers to women's participation in decision-making and providing decent jobs and equal pay for equal work. It also called on states to address the impact of environmental degradation on women and recognised the disproportionate burden of unpaid care that falls on women.

Thanks in part to sustained civil society action, almost 25 years later, and five years into the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include Goal 5 on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, significant progress has taken place. **Serap Altinisik** of **Plan International** relates the tale:²

131 countries have enacted 274 legal and regulatory reforms in support of gender equality, maternal mortality has decreased by at least 45 per cent, primary school enrolment for girls and boys has almost equalised and approximately 25 per cent of seats in national legislative bodies are held by women, a number that has doubled over the past few decades.

² All interviews quoted in this report are edited extracts. Full versions of interviews can be found on our website at <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-center/news/interviews>.

However, progress is uneven and nowhere has it gone far enough: **no single country** has achieved gender equality. No country is **on track** to achieve SDG targets that relate to gender by 2030, the year by which they are supposed to be accomplished. As Serap indicates, too many continue to institutionalise blatant injustices against women, fed by misogyny and prejudice:

The most persistent factors that are holding back girls and women from leading, deciding and thriving equally as boys and men are social norms, stereotypes and sexism. Studies and experiences of girls and women showcase that household-level practices in many countries subordinate women even when they are educated, even when they are in the workforce and even when they serve in government. Given that the personal is political, as the slogan from the feminist movement of the 1960s put it, gender equality and girls' and women's rights have to be a priority in politics, economics, practices and social norms – and this starts at home. It cannot be an add-on if the goal is to achieve the promise of gender equality fully by 2030.

If governments continue at this pace, it will take us nearly a century to reach that goal.

While women's rights movements are experiencing pushback in many places, as Serap points out, they remain determined not to let past gains and the promise of a better future slip away:

Across the world girls and women are raising their voices, collaborating and showing solidarity, and are not willing to wait for change and gender justice any longer. In this, women's rights organisations and feminist leaders are playing a vital role! They are challenging the status quo and are at the forefront in highlighting that another world is possible.

As examples in this report suggest, a **new young generation** of women activists is rising. Much of their efforts focus on gaining visibility and normalising the presence of women and the realities of women's bodies.

One of the struggles being fought is over language, which often lags behind social changes, reflecting entrenched power structures and denying women recognition and visibility. In English, non-gendered job titles and the use of 'they' as a singular pronoun have become more common; in September, this latter usage was **added** to the Merriam-Webster dictionary. For Spanish speakers, the focus has been on discarding the 'generic' masculine plural, which effaces women in mixed-gender settings, and replacing it with a neutral, gender-inclusive form that is neither masculine nor feminine. In Argentina, this initiative was **championed by teenagers** who deflected scorn and ridicule and simply put it into practice by themselves. **Similar battles** over gendered and binary language are being fought by Arabic, French, German and Hebrew-speaking feminist and LGBTQI+ activists, among many others around the world.

“GENDER EQUALITY HAS TO BE A PRIORITY IN POLITICS, ECONOMICS, PRACTICES AND SOCIAL NORMS; IT CANNOT BE AN ADD-ON. IF GOVERNMENTS CONTINUE AT THIS PACE, IT WILL TAKE US NEARLY A CENTURY TO REACH GENDER EQUALITY.”

SERAP ALTINISIK



Another strand of the struggle for visibility came in the form of ‘period politics’. Period stigma is rampant in various cultures, and translates into practices that range from the uncomfortable to the life-threatening, as exemplified by the **custom**, still common in some Nepali communities despite having been outlawed, of banishing menstruating women and girls to ‘menstrual huts’, even though these expose women to health risks and violent attacks. Even when stigmatisation takes less extreme forms, an inescapable fact of women’s lives is intentionally hidden, and women are held back as a result.

The push by civil society has been to break the stigma by opening up space

for conversation about menstruation on social media and through public performances. In 2019, activists **organised** a public photo shoot to tackle taboos around menstruation in Kazakhstan, applied their illustration skills to design public campaigns in the UK and put together videos, hosted rallies and established community programmes in rural areas in Nepal. Various international CSOs, such as **ActionAid**, supported girls’ clubs that help girls learn about periods, distributed sanitary kits in emergencies, trained women to make cheap, reusable sanitary pads and campaigned to encourage women and girls to manage their periods with dignity. A campaign by **Plan International UK** pushed for a period emoji – a drop of blood – which Apple made available in early 2019, providing girls with a much-needed new way to talk about their periods.



A young woman holds blood-stained underwear during a student demonstration against GBV and for gender parity in Milan, Italy, where tampons and menstrual pads are taxed as if they were luxury goods. Credit: Emanuele Cremaschi/Getty Images

Part of civil society's efforts have focused on challenging the high costs that women must pay for essential sanitary items, a reality that adds insult to the injury of unequal pay. Activists in India and Nepal, among other countries, **organised** to provide reusable sanitary pads to hundreds of thousands of girls. In South Africa, civil society created a campaign, #WorthBleedingFor, to push for universities and schools to install sanitary pad dispensers in their bathrooms.

In response to civil society advocacy, in January the government of Australia **removed** the 'tampon tax' – a tax on tampons, pads, menstrual cups, maternity pads and menstrual underwear – saving women money and sending out the key message that sanitary products are essential items that no one should be financially penalised for needing. In early 2020, Scotland's devolved government became the first in the world to put an end to 'period poverty' – the lack of access to menstrual hygiene products due to financial hardship – by **approving legislation** to make them freely available to anyone who needs them at designated public places such as community centres, youth clubs and pharmacies. Civil society will continue to push for these ideas to be adopted in more contexts, and CSOs will now be expected to apply them widely in our own workplaces and programming activities.

WOMEN IN POWER: CHANGING POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

One indication that gender equality is being advanced is that more women are winning political office. In 2019, **women's presence in politics** continued to increase. More women were **elected** to the European Parliament than ever before (*see section*), although men still made up more than 60 per cent of its members. This prompted a **call** to the European Union (EU) by 70 leading politicians that at least one woman should be elected as president of either the European Commission or Council, positions that had only been held by men. In July, Ursula von der Leyen from Germany was elected as the European Commission's first female president. In September, the incoming leader proposed the **most gender-diverse executive team** in EU history, including 13 women alongside 14 men. In October, Christine Lagarde became the first woman to be appointed to lead the European Central Bank.

In the UK, female politicians were elected to the lower house of parliament in **record numbers** in December, taking 220 out of 650 seats. In Spain, the two elections of 2019 (*see section*) saw the rise of the far-right Vox party, which opposes abortion rights and policies against GBV, but also the election of the **largest share of women** in any parliament of a European country and, when a government was formed, a cabinet characterised by gender parity. Sanna Marin, Finland's new 34-year old female prime minister who took office in December, leads a cabinet where 12 out of its 19 members are women. Marin heads an unprecedented all-female-led coalition government, in which all five coalition partners are led by women, and four of five leaders are younger than 40. Her appointment meant that four out of five Nordic countries – Denmark, Iceland and Norway, along with Finland – are currently headed by women.

Also joining the ranks of women leaders was Zuzana Čaputová, who won the election to become Slovakia's new president in March. While the role is mostly ceremonial, with the prime minister wielding everyday political power, she emerged successful from a highly competitive field of 15 candidates, beating the ruling party candidate in the run-off vote to become Slovakia's first woman president and the youngest-ever holder of the office. Without any prior history of running for office, Čaputová ran a positive, progressive **campaign**, in contrast to the other candidates' negative campaigns.

President Čaputová's campaign also promised to tackle **corruption and cronyism**; she said she had been prompted to stand by the murder in 2018 of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his partner Martina Kušnírová. Ján Kuciak had been investigating links between Slovak politicians and business leaders and the mafia, and public anger about the killing led to the resignation of then-Prime Minister Robert Fico. One power President Čaputová has is to appoint key judicial figures, and she promised to ensure **judicial independence**.

Encouragingly, President Čaputová's background is in civil society. She won the prestigious **Goldman Prize**, which recognises outstanding environmental activism, for her work to oppose an illegal landfill site. As a longstanding advocate for climate action, she will be pushing for stronger policies on climate change; in September, Slovakia **joined** the Powering Past

Coal Alliance, an alliance of states and sub-national authorities committed to transitioning away from coal-generated electricity. President Čaputová has also expressed her support for LGBTQI+ rights.

President Čaputová stands as a symbol of the possibility of change in a country with several prominent far-right political figures and a region dominated by strongarm male politicians, who are usually right-wing populists and nationalists, and where high-profile women politicians are rare. This is an era when strongman styles of macho leadership are being asserted and winning support in many contexts, as part of the resurgence of right-wing populism and nationalism. But several women leaders have suggested that a different approach is possible.

Among them is New Zealand's Prime Minister **Jacinda Ardern**. In the face of the worst terrorist attack her country had ever seen – a mass shooting by a far-right extremist that left 50 people dead in the city of Christchurch in April – Prime Minister Ardern showed empathy and compassion for those affected, embraced the universality of human rights, condemned racism and Islamophobia, pointed at social media giants for their role in spreading hate and initiated immediate measures to tighten gun laws, winning many admirers for doing so; it was easy to imagine any of the current cadre of macho leaders handling the situation entirely differently and stoking division as a result. Notably, her **approach to climate change** appeared to be guided by identical values, as reflected in her acknowledgement that her country – which is being spared the worst of the climate crisis – is surrounded by low-lying small-island nations that are experiencing it acutely, which makes New Zealand responsible for leading the change towards sustainability.

There is still a long road to travel, but these recent shifts are showing that there is no good reason to reject the idea of having a female head of government or a cabinet with equal numbers of women and men. Arguments that some jobs are necessarily the province of men are being eroded. Girls and young women can see the possibility of breaking the glass ceiling and aspiring to more. Of course, female leaders are not all alike. The current wave of young women political leaders is diverse, but there seem to be some common threads that unite several of them – an

emphasis on kindness, compassion and humanitarian impulses as guiding forces, an acceptance of diversity and belief in inclusion. These are core civil society values, which suggests the potential for common ground. Civil society in response needs to ascertain what opportunities for access and influence may open up as a result of the current wave of young, female leadership. A key question for future civil society research will be to characterise what is different about such leadership, how it is distinct from macho, strongarm leadership styles, and what additional value for human rights and social justice it delivers.

Around the world, women continued to fight for fairer political representation. Another breakthrough came in Chile, where sustained mass anti-government protests to demand a new constitution and an end to neoliberal economics led to an agreement on a referendum to trigger a process to draft a new constitution ([see section](#)). Throughout the process, women demanded equal representation in constitutional decision-making, with the aim of ensuring that any new institutional arrangements would challenge women's exclusion. A historic win came in March 2020, when the Chilean Senate **approved** in the first reading a bill to establish gender quotas to ensure parity throughout the constitutional process.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, when a new government formed after months-long negotiations, 17 per cent of the new **cabinet** were women. Around 20 women's rights CSOs had **demand**ed that the new prime minister ensure a better representation of women in government; they rightly complained that the percentage was still too low, but welcomed the fact that women had taken some important portfolios, including the foreign ministry. In Kenya, however, hopes of progress were thwarted when parliament refused to enact a Gender Bill. In February 2019, a **vote** meant to guarantee Kenyan women more seats in parliament flopped because the body was **not quorate**. The bill had been expected to align legislation with the provision of the 2010 Constitution, which states that "not more than two-thirds of the members of elective public bodies shall be of the same gender." This was the **fourth failed** attempt to pass a law to correct the gender imbalance of Kenya's parliament, suggesting that many current male politicians have no interest in ending their privilege and can cling onto it simply by doing nothing.

The Kenyan experience hints at some of the challenges. It remains the case that only around five per cent of the world's heads of government, **20 per cent** of cabinet ministers and under 25 per cent of legislators are women. The glass ceiling has been breached but not shattered.

Many women remain discouraged from putting themselves forward by sexist attitudes and practices, and threats of harm and violence towards themselves and their families. Even where women are able and willing to compete, they face selection and election processes that are harder for them to navigate. Gendered attacks against women involved in politics remain commonplace. In the UK's 2019 election, for instance, an alarming number of female members of parliament **stood down**, pointing to spiralling levels of abuse, harassment and threats. In South Korea, a female

candidate was **attacked** for not having children and therefore having 'failed the nation'.

In some cases, violence is lethal. In Colombia, a female candidate for local office was **murdered** in September. Karina García had received several threats and demands calling on her to end her political career. Amidst all-round high levels of violence, several male candidates were also murdered during Colombia's election season; but as feminist CSOs pointed out, the key difference is that men were attacked on the basis of their political positions, whereas women were also targeted because they were women, and because by running for office they were seen as threatening the patriarchal order. In reaction to these restrictions, the **Estamos Listas** (We are Ready) movement emerged to encourage more Colombian women to run for office.



A student marches on International Women's Day in Manila, Philippines, with the slogan 'women moving forward' written on her chest. Credit: Jes Aznar/Getty Images

WOMEN AT THE FOREFRONT OF PROTESTS

Alongside participation and leadership in institutional politics, women were on the frontlines and in leading roles in many of 2019's great wave of protest movements that demanded democratic freedoms ([see section](#)) and economic change ([see section](#)). Everywhere they could, women grasped the megaphone and spoke their truths to power.

In Chile, the focus on gender parity in constitutional processes was one indication of the visibility that women insisted upon. Women also stepped in to **revitalise the protests** when they started to falter in response to the disproportionate violence employed by the security forces; thousands of Chileans took to the streets in late November after hundreds of women staged a performance decrying sexist violence (see below).

As in Chile, many protests did not begin with a specific focus on gender issues, although many of the problems people were protesting about – lack of political voice, corruption, unemployment – disproportionately affect women. But time after time, women took highly visible roles in protests, and in leadership as well as support roles. Women organised and directed protests. They forced protesters to confront and take on questions of women's exclusion and empowerment, and make solutions to these part of protest demands. Even when women filled more traditional roles, such as cooking and distributing food among protesters, they used these positions as platforms to demand change. In some cases, women took advantage of the more deferential treatment they received from security forces to set themselves as a buffer between police officers and protesters.

In Lebanon, during extensive **protests** demanding a new government and system of governance ([see section](#)), one fearless woman embodied the spirit of the revolution when she defended herself against an armed man who was trying to prevent her from protesting; the moment, caught on a video, went viral. In the space opened by mass dissent, women **demand**ed their rights. One protest insisted that 'women's rights are not a footnote'. Women protesters called for any new democratic institutions that emerged as a result of protests not to leave them behind, and demanded new laws to

criminalise sexual harassment and counter discrimination, seeking reform of a legal system that favours men over women in everything related to marriage, divorce and the custody of children.

In Sudan, the **ousting** of long-time dictator Omar al-Bashir and successful resistance to his replacement by military rule ([see section](#)) was brought about by months of protest in which women played significant roles. In April, 22-year-old protester **Alaa Salah** became a symbol of the revolution after being photographed dressed in white while standing atop a car leading protest chants. As in Lebanon, Sudanese women protesters demanded legal recognition of women's rights in a country where women have little control over their lives and are in many ways legally dependent on their husbands. In October, Alaa Salah **addressed** the UN Security Council and called on the international community to ensure women's meaningful participation in Sudan's democratisation processes.

In Algeria ([see section](#)), Iran and Iraq too ([see section](#)), women played **leading roles** in protests for democracy, in all cases defying and challenging social and religious norms of submission and invisibility. In Iraq, women **were seen** leading chants and standing up to security forces, alongside the more usual roles of organising protest camps, nursing the wounded and feeding protesters, helping to sustain protests in the face of grotesque state violence. Iraqi women of all ages mobilised over the course of months, and in early 2020 hundreds of them flooded the centre of the capital, Baghdad, alongside male protesters, **defying an order** by a powerful cleric to separate women from men in the protests.

Women's visibility turned them into icons with domestic and international audiences alike, but also exposed them to backlash, including gendered violence from security forces, such as sexual abuse and threats against their children. From Chile to Sudan, reports abounded of gender-specific abuses perpetrated by security forces against female protesters. In Sudan, where very serious abuses were documented, a civil society **analysis** concluded that as soon as anti-regime demonstrations began, women, including women human rights defenders, were targeted. Collected testimonies showed that women were exposed to various forms of violence and threats, including sexual violence and threats of rape. The Regional Coalition of Women

Human Rights Defenders in the Middle East and North Africa **urged** the UN Human Rights Council to establish an international inquiry to investigate gross human rights violations and the widespread use of rape and sexual violence against Sudanese women protesters and activists.

Backlash against women protesters both included and was fuelled by demeaning media coverage that portrayed them as at best pretty faces among the crowds and ridiculed and undermined them, and by trolls who remorselessly harassed and threatened women online. In many contexts, the gendered nature of these attacks both took advantage of and reinforced women's continued exclusion from power.

WOMEN MARCH FOR THEIR RIGHTS

Alongside women's leading role in the mass protests of 2019, there were many mobilisations that specifically focused on women's demands for rights. Many of these were organised around International Women's Day, on 8 March. In country after country, women gathered and marched in celebration and protest. Many of these protests were intersectional in nature, recognising the common ground between the denial of women's and LGBTQI+ rights and the fact that lesbian and trans women experience specific forms of exclusion.



A woman holds a sign that reads 'We are not afraid' during a demonstration on International Women's Day in Valparaíso, Chile. Credit: Marcelo Benitez/Getty Images



Women protesters in Colima, Mexico, carry a banner that reads 'Abortion is a debt of democracy'. Credit: Leonardo Montecillo/Agencia Press South/Getty Images

In South Korea, women **mobilised** under the motto 'gender equality is the consummation of a democracy'. They made the point that the transformations brought by 2017's '**Candlelight Revolution**', in which mass protests led to the toppling of a corrupt president, remained incomplete while women were still being denied rights. South Korea has the biggest pay gap between women and men of all Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member states, with men receiving on average an equivalent of an extra three hours' pay a day. To call attention to this, on 8 March women workers were encouraged to leave their workplaces at 3pm.

In Melbourne, Australia, women **called for** full rights for trans and gender-diverse people, and sex workers, among other working women. In Pakistan, the march **focused** on cultivating intersectionality and demanding social and economic rights and an end to GBV and discrimination. Similarly in Spain, where the Vox party and anti-rights groups seek the repeal of the 2004 law on GBV, **more than 500** protests involving hundreds of thousands of people were held on 8 March to denounce continuing GBV and discrimination. In Argentina, women marched under the banner of demanding **legal abortion** – discussed further below – and an end to femicides. Similar marches took place in several other Latin American countries, including Chile and Mexico.

Many of these marches were peaceful and celebratory, but in too many countries, the space for protest was contested. In Cambodia, women were **prevented** from marching on the grounds that they would cause traffic congestion. In Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital, the media offered much negative coverage of the participation of LGBTQI+ groups in the International Women's Day march; it could not be a coincidence that participants were harassed by men, both on the street and on social media. Because of its LGBTQI+ focus, government officials **accused** protesters of participating in an illegal assembly, and organisers of the march were questioned by the police.

Similarly, an International Women's Day march that included LGBTQI+ people in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, was characterised by prominent politicians as a 'gay parade'. They used this as an opportunity to criticise CSOs as foreign-funded entities engaged in importing values; this connected to ongoing attempts to introduce a law to designate CSOs as 'foreign agents', similar to Russia's. An extremist anti-rights group threatened a participant in the march, organised a protest against LGBTQI+ 'propaganda' and called on the mayor of Bishkek to resign for allowing the march to take place. The threats **continued** after the march in the form of hate speech on state media and social media and an attack on a peaceful gathering of the 8/365 movement, which brings together feminist and LGBTQI+ groups and activists. People were being attacked for practising and promoting intersectionality by those seeking to foster division.

In other cases, women marched unobstructed but faced anti-rights backlash. Two days after the 8 March protests in Spain, a counter-protest called the 'March for Femininity' was held. As a mirror image of the march held two days earlier, participants protested against advances in women's and LGBTQI+ rights and feminist legislation.

International Women's Day was of course far from the only day on which women mobilised for their rights. On 1 January, women protested against a traditional prohibition for women of childbearing age from entering the Sabarimala temple in Kerala, India. Although in 2018 India's Supreme Court had ruled it illegal, this practice had continued, until the first day of 2019, when women protested by joining hands and forming a symbolic wall that

stretched more than 300 miles. Two days later, two women **defied** the centuries-old tradition by forcing their way into the temple. In the context of India's resurgence of highly politicised Hindu nationalism (*see section*), the action triggered clashes between protesters and police.

On 19 January, **thousands of people** in cities across the USA took to the streets for the third annual Women's March, which had first taken place in 2017 in **counterpoint** to President Donald Trump's inauguration. Crowds were smaller than in previous years but were still numerous and enthusiastic. People marched in support in **Canada** and other countries.

In Lebanon, hundreds of people mobilised in the capital, Beirut, under the '**My Nationality, My Dignity**' campaign to call for reforms of Lebanon's

discriminatory and misogynistic **citizenship laws**. Held on 17 March, the demonstration marked Women's History Month and Mother's Day, which in 2019 fell on 21 March. Lebanon's current citizenship laws deny women married to foreigners the right to pass Lebanese citizenship onto their children. This violates children's and spouses' rights by denying them legal residency and access to work, education, social services and healthcare, and could leave children at risk of statelessness.

In Tunisia, CSOs working for the protection of women's rights protested on May Day outside the country's Ministry of Women, Family, Children and Elderly Affairs to **demand** policies to improve women's working and living conditions in rural areas. They mobilised after seven female rural workers died when travelling to work in an unsafe vehicle.



A woman holds a candle at a vigil held by anti-government protesters on 6 November 2019 in downtown Beirut, Lebanon. Credit: Sam Tarling/Getty Images

In Switzerland, women went on strike for **equal pay** on 14 June. As in South Korea, they complained that they make, on average, 20 per cent less than men, and demanded ‘more time, more money, more respect’, including through the introduction of a national minimum salary.

In Brasília, Brazil’s capital, tens of thousands of women **took to the streets** in August to denounce President Jair Bolsonaro’s misogynistic and racist policies, in what was possibly the largest protest since the **far-right leader** was inaugurated in January. Protests rallied in solidarity when Indigenous women travelled to the capital to express their outrage at what they described as Bolsonaro’s ‘genocidal policies’ against Indigenous peoples, including the government’s intention to open up Indigenous territory to mining (*see section*).

Throughout 2019 women continued to mobilise, and many experienced backlash in return. In **Russia**, activists working for legislation to curb domestic violence were threatened on social media. **Algerian women** participating in protests received online threats that they would be attacked with acid. **Pakistani women** who participated in International Women’s Day marches received death and rape threats. **Gulalai Ismail**, who with her sister founded Aware Girls, an organisation in northern Pakistan that fosters peace in a conflict-ridden area and informs young women of their rights, was accused of inciting hate and violence against state institutions after she spoke at a protest over the lack of police action following the rape and killing of a 10-year-old girl in May. After receiving death threats and being placed on a ‘kill list’, she went into hiding and eventually had to leave the country.

In **Colombia**, women mobilising in support of the peace process and standing up against armed groups and drug traffickers were threatened, attacked and sexually assaulted, and many fell victims of femicides. In several countries with heavily restricted civic space, including **Saudi Arabia** and **Uganda**, women human rights defenders and protesters were routinely targeted with arbitrary arrests, detentions and various forms of physical abuse. Under repressive regimes, sexual violence was commonly used as a form of torture to silence women human rights defenders. In numerous locations, including **Indonesia**, **Papua New Guinea** and several countries

in Central America, women leading fights against extractive companies and for control over their communities’ natural resources frequently faced sexual violence and threats against their families.

Women journalists also faced attacks, in countries as disparate as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Nicaragua and Sierra Leone. In September, the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists **condemned** the beating of female journalists by presidential guards and expressed concerns that ‘the trend seems to indicate a calculated attack on female journalists’. That same month, Nicaragua Investiga, an independent news outlet, published a report about the **additional risks** faced by female media professionals due to their gender. The research made clear that the Nicaraguan police force often uses threats of sexual violence to intimidate female journalists. In November, female journalists in Bosnia and Herzegovina **demand action** against GBV, following a report by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s **mission** to the country, which found that female journalists were being attacked twice as often as their male counterparts.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE MAKES HEADLINES AND SPARKS PROTESTS

In June, a young woman in Spain finally received a measure of justice after being raped in 2016 by five men who referred to themselves as ‘la manada’ (‘the wolf pack’). The Spanish Supreme Court found the five **guilty** of rape and increased their prison sentences, changing a lower court verdict that had found them guilty of the lesser charge of sexual abuse, following a trial in which the victim had been blamed and depicted as something of a willing participant of her own ordeal. The lower court verdict had prompted **protests** in December 2018.

A few months after the Supreme Court victory, however, protest again grew out of outrage when a court in Catalonia **sentenced** five men charged with gang-raping a 14-year-old girl to 10 to 12 years in prison for sexual abuse, concluding that they had not committed rape – which would have carried a longer sentence – because the victim was unconscious at the time and therefore did not offer any resistance. Protesters took to



Protesters stage a performance representing murdered women during the International Women's Day march in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Credit: Ricardo Ceppi/Getty Images

Twitter with the hashtags #JusticiaPatriarcal (#PatriarchalJustice) and #NoEsAbusoEsViolación (#ItsNotAbuseItsRape).

Sadly, there were many places where it was necessary to protest against political indifference, police inaction and judicial misrule in the face of rape. In February, a **silent rally** was held in Albania's capital, Tirana, in reaction to a group rape of a 13-year-old girl by fellow students, who then blackmailed the victim. The protest brought together hundreds of parents and students who claimed that this was just one of many similar cases. In a parliamentary debate held around the same time, government and opposition exchanged

accusations – the government was accused of covering up the incident, while the opposition was criticised for improperly exposing it to the public and harming the victim – but there was no commitment to introduce improvements.

In South Africa, protesters carrying placards bearing the names of two murdered female students of the University of Cape Town **marched** on 4 September outside the venue where the World Economic Forum was taking place, demanding action against GBV. The police used stun grenades and water cannon to disperse them. Barely a week later, women **protested** on



Demonstrators protest against GBV and femicides on 25 November 2019 in Istanbul, Turkey. Credit: Burak Kara/Getty Images

the streets of Johannesburg following the release of the South African Police Service's crime statistics, which revealed that 2,771 women had been murdered and 36,507 cases of GBV had been reported over the previous year. The protests forced President Cyril Ramaphosa to **admit** that the country faced a national crisis of GBV and announce a plan to curb it.

Throughout March and April, in Galkayo, in Somalia's self-governing Puntland region, women protested against the rape and murder of a 12-year-old girl, part of what they said was a recent surge in rapes in the region. In a **video clip** of a protest that went viral, two unidentified women urged the authorities and tribal leaders to find the perpetrators and bring them to justice. In October, 7,000 people marched in Zagreb, capital of Croatia, to demand '**Justice for girls**' and express support for victims of sexual abuse. The protest was spurred by reports of a rape where the police

had allowed five suspects to walk free. Peaceful gatherings were held in **15 other cities** across Croatia.

In Dakar, capital of Senegal, hundreds of people – mostly women – **took part in a sit-in** against GBV on 25 May. The protesters used the slogan #Dafadoy ('enough' in the Wolof language) and some daubed their faces with fake blood. The protest was organised in reaction to a series of femicides, including of a young woman, Bineta Camara, after an attempted rape in Tambacounda, eastern Senegal. Protesters demanded stricter enforcement of criminal law and a review of the law to criminalise rape properly, including by increasing penalties. The outrage had an impact: on 3 June, President Macky Sall **announced** that he had instructed the Minister of Justice to draft a law to criminalise rape.

In other cases, protests were triggered by cases of sexual violence against women committed by security forces. In one such instance in Nigeria, hundreds of protesters **gathered** in the capital, Abuja, on 4 May to demand an end to impunity for sexual assault perpetrated by police officers. The protest, organised by women's rights groups and other CSOs, followed **police operations** in which dozens of women were arrested in raids on bars and nightclubs, often on prostitution charges. Protesters accused police officers of sexually assaulting women after arresting them.

The frontline for GBV and civil society actions to confront it remained Latin America. GBV is pervasive in the region, which includes **14 of the 25 countries** with the highest femicide rates in the world. Feminist protests in several Latin American countries continued to bring international attention to a problem that is rampant in all spheres of life, but particularly in the realm of the family and intimate relationships, where it largely remains hidden, stigmatised, underreported and under-punished.

In February, about 4,000 people **marched** in Mexico City to demand that the government do more to stop violence against women. Women and girls chanted and carried signs, many bearing the names and photographs of women who had been murdered or kidnapped. Online, people shared their stories using hashtags such as #LaNocheEsNuestra (#TheNightIsOurs) and #LaCalleEsNuestra (#TheStreetIsOurs). The day before the rally, hundreds of cyclists staged events in several cities as part of a 'Bike Ride for Women's Lives and Freedom'.

The momentum continued in Mexico, where on 8 April, hundreds of students forced a shutdown at the University of Ciudad Juárez, protesting at the killing of a pregnant college student, allegedly by her ex-boyfriend. Starting in August, **all-female marches** were repeatedly held in Mexico City, triggered by the alleged rape of a teenager by the city police, and over subsequent murders of women and women's rights activists in different parts of the country. Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries in the world for women, and most femicides go **unpunished**. Later in the year, following the annual Day of the Dead celebrations, a march commemorating the 'Day of the Dead Women', organised by the group Voices of Absence and led by journalist and activist **Frida Guerrero**, was held in Mexico City.

Participants carried photos and more than 100 purple crosses through the capital, each bearing the name of a woman who had been murdered or was missing.

On 23 October, members of the Nicaraguan feminist group Matagalpa Women's Collective organised an artistic intervention outside a radio station to denounce the more than 50 femicides that had taken place in Nicaragua in 2019, but they suffered police harassment as they were setting up, and were not allowed to stage their activity. They were also targeted by an online defamation campaign, with messages circulated on social networks accusing them of terrorism and conspiring against the government. Close by in El Salvador, hundreds of people **gathered** on 4 November in front of a judicial centre in San Salvador, the country's capital, to protest against a **court ruling** in favour of a judge accused of sexually abusing a 10-year-old girl. According to news reports, the court decided that the judge had not committed sexual assault but rather 'impudent touching', a much less serious offence punished with a fine. Outraged protesters demanded justice for the girl and a review of the case. Soon afterwards, on 25 November, feminist and women's rights groups **marched** in El Salvador to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, a day on which women across the world took to the streets to denounce sexism and GBV.

In India, two gang rapes and femicides over the course of two weeks triggered a **wave of protests** in December. The first victim was a 27-year-old woman who was gang-raped and burned to death on her way home from work; the second was a 23-year-old woman who was set on fire by a gang of men while on her way to attend a court hearing over her rape case, which had been filed in March. These sickening acts prompted angry street reactions in the cities of Bangalore, Delhi and Hyderabad, with people demanding stricter laws to protect women. Violence against women has been in the spotlight in India in recent years; in 2012, the fatal gang rape of a young woman on a bus prompted hundreds of thousands to take to the streets. As a result of those protests, laws were amended: prison terms for rapists doubled to 20 years and voyeurism, stalking and the trafficking of women were criminalised. 2019 events showed there is still much progress to be made.

In Taipei, capital of Taiwan, **migrant workers** from Indonesia and the Philippines protested on 25 March against GBV and the poor work conditions experienced by migrant women, who are often raped and beaten by their employers; they made clear how different layers of exclusion reinforce each other. The event was held under the banner of the 'One Billion Rising' movement to end rape and sexual violence against women.

Peaceful protests in solidarity with the victims of wartime sexual violence were held in Kosovo and South Korea. On 20 May, The Kosovo Rehabilitation Center for Torture Victims held a protest, under the banner of 'Treat Me With Dignity', to draw attention to the plight of **survivors of sexual violence**

during Kosovo's late 1990s war. In Seoul, capital of South Korea, dozens of people **gathered** in front of the Japanese embassy on 1 February to protest about the use of forced labour and wartime brothels during the Second World War. They **marched** with the coffin of Kim Bok-dong, a so-called 'comfort woman' – a Japanese term for women forced into prostitution and sexually abused during the Japanese occupation of Korea. Kim Bok-dong was one of the first victims to come forward and a campaigner for redress, who became a fixture at weekly protests outside the Japanese embassy, before her death in January. There are currently 23 registered former 'comfort women' who are still alive, and human rights activists continue to call for a formal apology and legal compensation for them.

PERFORMANCE ART TAKES ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE



Feminist activists perform 'A rapist in your path' in Santiago, Chile, on 6 December 2019. Credit: Marcelo Hernández/Getty Images

In the context of the protests that erupted in Chile, a feminist performance group, Las Tesis, created a song, 'A rapist in your path', that became a **feminist anthem** that **spread around the globe**. It was adapted to different contexts and re-enacted **at least 367 times in 52 countries** in a wealth of languages, including sign language, and on every inhabited continent. It even made an appearance **outside the Manhattan Criminal Court** where Harvey Weinstein was being tried for rape and sexual assault. Inspired by the song, a group of Chilean women went on to start registration procedures for Chile's first **feminist political party**.

The song singles out the structures and institutions, notably state authorities, that are responsible not only for ignoring and condoning but also for committing, promoting and perpetuating unspeakable acts of violence against women. It also encourages men to think about their own behaviours and potential complicity. The lyrics are simple:

"The patriarchy is a judge that judges us for being born, and our punishment is the violence you don't see. It's femicide. Impunity for the killer. It's disappearance. It's rape. And the fault wasn't mine, not where I was, not how I dressed. ... The rapist is YOU. It's the cops, the judges, the state. The president. The oppressive state is a rapist."

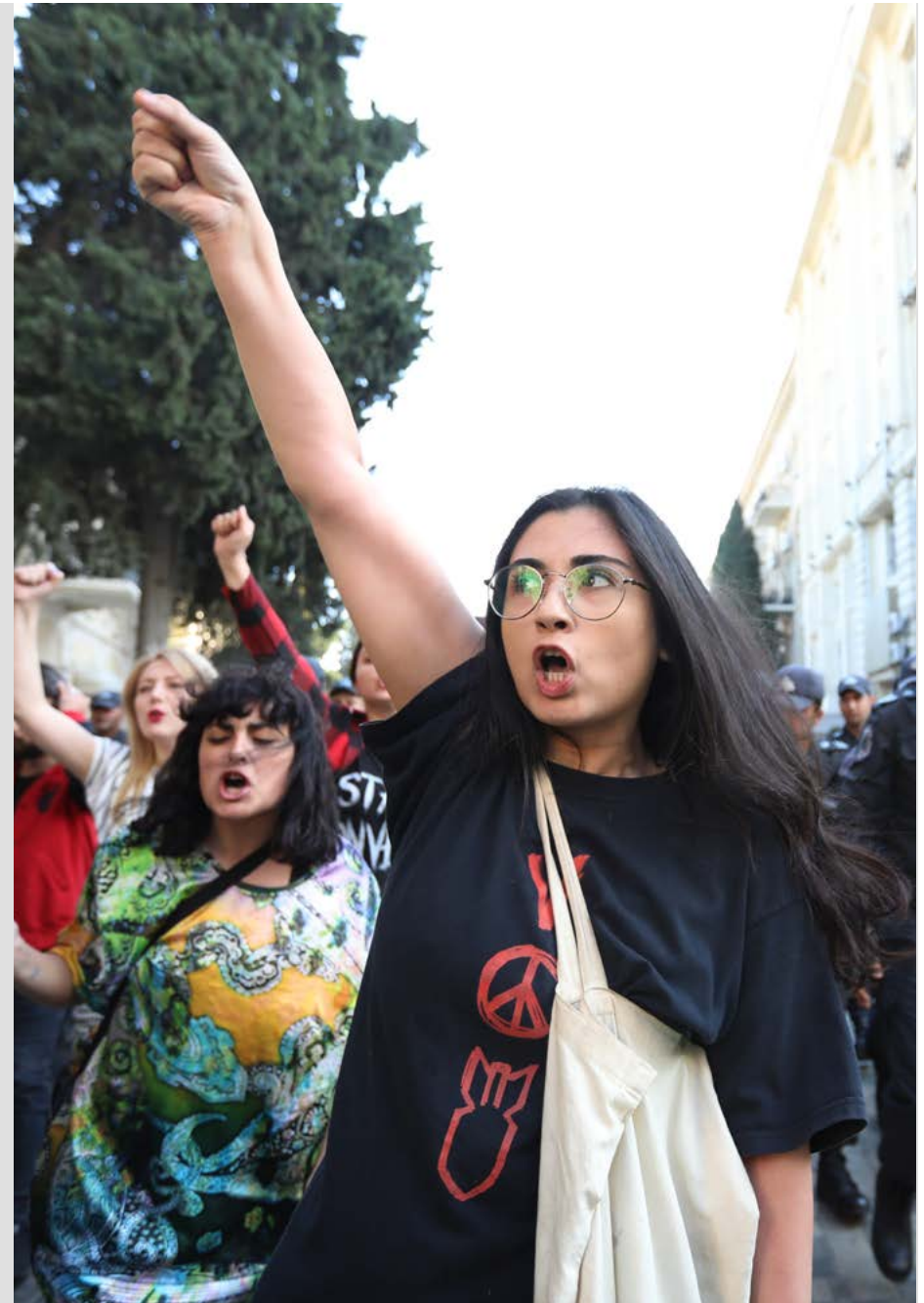
The performance was visually powerful because it took elements of

women's traumatic experience and reinterpreted them. It used women's bodies to ask questions about how those bodies are viewed and politicised in public space; parts of the performance spoke directly to the sexually abusive treatment of Chile's women protesters by security forces. The performance acted as a repudiation of the victim-blaming culture that positions women as somehow being the cause of the violence meted upon them, with dance becoming a liberation, a casting off of guilt. It enabled a wave of powerful testimonials from women who were finally able to say that they were not at fault for their abuse.

Paula Cometa, one of the four members of Las Tesis, explained that their aim was to convert feminist texts into accessible formats. This performance drew from Argentine anthropologist Rita Segato's work on rape culture. The artists investigated GBV in Chile, including in relation to the former dictatorship and the various forms of state violence that have continued since, including by the security forces. The performance questioned the state's response, or lack of response, to GBV.

Amid protests and state violence towards protesters, the play that included the song could not be premiered as planned, and was instead taken to the streets. It was staged on 20 November in the city of Valparaíso, as part of a series of street interventions organised by a theatre company. It was a small action, comprising about 20 people, but around a hundred turned up when a call was made to stage it again five days later in the capital, Santiago, on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.

Despite its local roots, the performance resonated strongly elsewhere and soon **spread** to other countries; groups in Colombia and Mexico made contact to stage their own versions. In response the group made the music and lyrics freely available, so that it could be adapted to any context. That it found an international audience of course spoke to the common and widespread experience of GBV. The memetic spread of the song made clear that around the world, the experiences of GBV are remarkably similar, as is the demand by women to speak about their experiences, know they are not alone and challenge their status as victims.



Activists march on, unintimidated by police officers, during a protest against GBV held in October 2019 in Baku, Azerbaijan. Credit: Aziz Karimov/Getty Images

WOMEN AND GIRLS IN CONFLICT AND CRISIS

The above examples highlighted some of the ways in which women and girls are targeted in contexts of conflict and crisis. Women and girls are also often excluded from processes that seek to prevent and resolve conflicts and build peace.

In 2019, Afghanistan and South Sudan were among the places where women struggled to have their experiences as targets of wartime violence acknowledged and ensure their fair representation in peace processes. In April, a group of South Sudanese women **launched a petition** calling for their inclusion in the upcoming three-year transitional government to implement the outcome of the **Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan**, signed in September 2018. “We, South Sudanese women and girls, who are 65 per cent of the population, are the ones who bear the brunt of wars and violence the most; rape, sexual violence, physical and health vulnerability, and poverty in general,” said the activists. They pointed out that they had been historically excluded from decision-making, but that according to the peace pact, women were expected to occupy 35 per cent of ministerial positions in the transitional government.

In Afghanistan, civil society in general and women’s groups in particular denounced peace talks with the Taliban in the USA-backed peace process for excluding and sidelining human rights and women’s rights CSOs and media rights organisations. Under the leadership of the **Afghan Women’s Network**, women’s rights groups organised across the country to claim their space and mobilise local and international support to defend women’s rights.

Despite the lack of space, women have tried to make the most of what opportunities are available. In February, the **National Women’s Consensus for Peace**, organised by the Office of the First Lady, brought together over 3,000 women from 34 provinces to the capital, Kabul, to share their views, concerns and suggestions on the peace process. In April, a **Consultative Loya Jirga** – a traditional assembly of Afghans – on Peace **convened** some 3,000 delegates from across Afghanistan, with 30 per cent women’s participation,

to discuss the peace talks. Following advocacy by women’s groups, 30 per cent of the jirga’s committees were **chaired by women** and two women held jirga leadership positions. For the second intra-Afghan peace conference between the Taliban and Afghan representatives, initially **scheduled for April**, the government had proposed 250 representatives, including 52 women and some civil society members. The talks were subsequently **cancelled** over a disagreement over proposed participants.

In parallel with these institutional processes in which they had limited participation, Afghan women campaigned on social media to set ‘**red lines**’ and demand their rights in the peace process, under the banner of #AfghanWomenWillNotGoBack and #MyRedLine. These were aimed at putting pressure on the government, the Taliban and the USA to ensure that hard-won advances in women’s rights would not be undermined in the rush to produce a political peace settlement. **According** to a prominent women’s rights campaigner, over the first months of 2019 the Afghan Women’s Network mobilised more than two million women across the country.

In response to this advocacy, in April 2019 US Senator Jeanne Shaheen, the only woman on the Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee, **issued a statement** denouncing the US Secretary of State’s refusal to commit to prioritising Afghan women’s inclusion in peace negotiations; in June, a bipartisan group of over 75 US legislators **sent a letter** to the Secretary of State urging him to include Afghan women in the peace negotiations and called for any agreement to guarantee the protection of women’s rights.

As these examples indicate, women continue to be severely **underrepresented** in peace negotiations, and in diplomacy around arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament, even though almost 20 years have now passed since the UN Security Council adopted **resolution 1325** on women and peace and security. The resolution recognised the role played by women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and post-conflict reconstruction. Passed in October 2000, resolution 1325 urged all actors to increase the participation of women and incorporate gender perspectives in all UN peace and security efforts, and to take

special measures to protect women and girls from GBV, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, in situations of armed conflict.

Consistent with this resolution, the 2019 Conference of States Parties to the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), which was adopted in 2013 and entered into force since 2014, focused on gender. **Aaron Lainé** and **Raluca Muresan** of **Control Arms**, the civil society coalition that successfully advocated for the ATT, emphasise the gendered impacts of armed conflict, and therefore the importance of adopting a gender perspective on arms control:

A gender perspective in arms control requires governments to examine how socially constructed gender roles affect policy decisions, particularly related to arms exports and controls. It requires a better understanding of the gendered impact of armed violence and conflict, including of how women and men are impacted on, due to their sex or prevailing expectations about gender.

While the body of evidence that connects women and peace and security with arms control policies is continually growing, several studies outline the disproportionate effect of irresponsible arms transfers and arms proliferation on women and children and the gendered impact of modern armed conflicts. While men and boys are both the perpetrators and primary victims of armed violence and conflict, women and girls bear a substantial and differentiated burden, including because of GBV, displacement and lack of access to medical care during pregnancy and childbirth due to the destruction of medical facilities. Research on the gendered impact of conflict also indicates that bombs, missiles, mortars and rockets, when used in populated areas, result in disproportionate casualties among women and children.

CSOs following the ATT process urge governments to examine the potential of arms to facilitate GBV before agreeing to transfer them. In doing so they are holding to provisions of the ATT that resulted from civil society advocacy and, explain Raluca and Aaron, can be used to protect women and children:

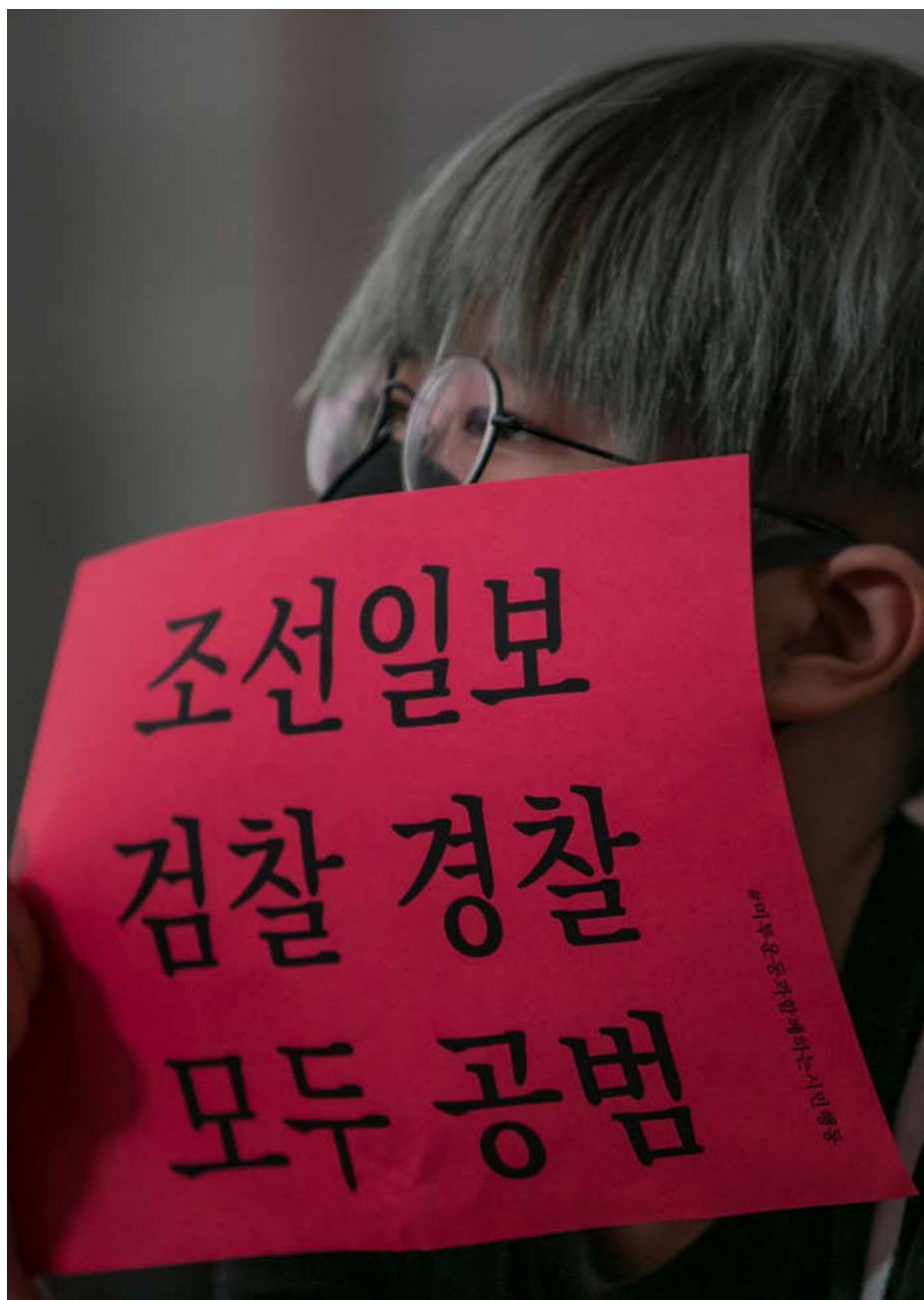
According to ATT's Article 7.4, '[t]he exporting State Party, in making this [risk] assessment, shall take into account the risk of the conventional arms covered under Article 2.1 or of the items covered under Article 3 or Article 4 being used to commit or facilitate serious acts of GBV or serious acts of violence against women and children'.

The aim of Article 7.4 is to ensure that an exporting state party takes into account the risk that the arms transferred will be used to commit or facilitate acts of GBV, when conducting its export assessment outlined in Article 7.1. It is an explicit requirement aimed at reducing the historical tendency to overlook GBV.

“A GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN ARMS CONTROL REQUIRES GOVERNMENTS TO EXAMINE HOW SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED GENDER ROLES AFFECT POLICY DECISIONS. IT REQUIRES A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF HOW WOMEN AND MEN ARE IMPACTED ON DUE TO THEIR SEX OR PREVAILING EXPECTATIONS ABOUT GENDER.”

AARON LAINÉ AND
RALUCA MURESAN





South Korean #MeToo demonstrators accuse the prosecutor's office and the police of hampering prosecution of sexual abuse cases. Credit: Jean Chung/Getty Images

Control Arms has sought to raise awareness about the importance of this provision, through bilateral and regional meetings, social media campaigns such as **10 Reasons to #StopGBV** and interventions and statements in ATT-related meetings.

Control Arms also produced a range of resources such as the **Practical Guide** on how to use the ATT to address GBV, a **paper** that provides interpretations on key terms from Article 7 and a **factsheet** on gender in the ATT. These resources were used in the first-ever **training programme** for export control officials on the implementation of the GBV criteria.

Women are not just the parties that suffer the most severe effects of the problem. They can also play a big part in the solution. According to Raluca and Aron, greater women's participation in disarmament and arms control negotiations and processes would increase the prospects for peace:

Several studies, for example by the **Council on Foreign Relations** and a **2018 study by Jana Krause, Werner Krause and Piia Bränfors**, highlight the positive impact of women in conflict resolution, concluding that "women's participation in conflict prevention and resolution can improve outcomes before, during, and after conflict." Similarly, gender equality among participants in international multilateral mechanisms can lead to more inclusive, effective and sustainable policy outcomes. This is relevant particularly for disarmament and arms control forums that have remained largely male-dominated and are stuck in an ideological window characterised by aggression, dominance, egotism and other characteristics of toxic masculinity.

PROGRESS AND PUSHBACK FOR #METOO

Women's voices were heard to powerful effect in early 2020, when several of the women whose accusations against Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein helped spark the **#MeToo movement** got to tell their stories in court. A long string of sex crimes dating back decades was put on the record, and the New York jury found Weinstein **guilty** of criminal sex acts in the first degree and rape in the third degree; he was sentenced to 23 years in jail. The outcome

offered a vindication for the bravery of those who came forward, and sent a powerful symbol that women could successfully seek justice to challenge impunity for sex crimes.

In the meantime, #MeToo-style movements continued to spread in the global south, shaking off critiques that attempted to portray #MeToo as a response of the relatively privileged. In northern Nigeria in February, a young female pharmacist reported on Twitter that her boyfriend had abused her and almost killed her. Soon, **#ArewaMeToo** – Arewa means ‘north’ in the Hausa language – took off on social media. Then in June, well-known Nigerian photographer Busola Dakolo publicly accused her former pastor of raping her some years ago. After her **interview** aired, other women contacted Dakolo to tell her that the same man, a prominent pastor in the city of Lagos, had sexually assaulted them as well. Fierce outrage ensued, but so did backlash. The accused pastor took a leave of absence from his church but was soon back at the pulpit, denying all allegations. Nigeria’s most influential Muslim leader, the Sultan of Sokoto, formally **banned** #ArewaMeToo in Sokoto State, northwest Nigeria.

In July, more than a hundred people **marched** in The Gambia’s capital, Banjul, following **revelations** by Human Rights Watch and TRIAL International that at least three women had accused former President Yahya Jammeh, **ousted from power** in January 2017, of rape and sexual assault while he was in office. In the spirit of the **#MeToo movement**, protesters displayed placards carrying the slogans ‘No means no’ and ‘Let’s Break the Silence’. Women started speaking up about sexual harassment on social media after one of the rape survivors, Fatou Toufah Jallow, publicly spoke out about her ordeal.

In Japan, survivors of sexual abuse and their supporters began holding monthly protests in April. They **urged** reform of a controversial anti-rape law, last revised in 2017, that places excessive burdens on rape survivors, discouraging them from coming forward. The law requires prosecutors to prove that violence or intimidation was involved and that the victim ‘**fought back**’. Outrage over these requirements was revived by several acquittals in rape cases, in which due to lack of firm evidence that the victim resisted, prosecutors were unable to prove rape. According to **polls**, only 2.8 per cent of sexual assault victims in Japan report the crime to the police, due to



Supporters of journalist Shiori Ito, who accused a former TV reporter of rape in one of Japan’s #MeToo cases, demonstrate outside the Tokyo District Court. Credit: Takashi Aoyama/Getty Images

fear of being blamed or publicly shamed. In June, protesters **demonstrated** in nine cities across the country; at the Tokyo event, signs held by protesters read ‘#MeToo’ and ‘#WithYou’.

Also in Japan – a country that ranks a low 121st out of 153 countries in the World Economic Forum’s **Global Gender Gap Index** – Yumi Ishikawa, a feminist artist and writer, launched a petition to ban office dress codes that force women to wear high heels to work. This was the birth of the **#KuToo movement**, playing on the Japanese words ‘kutsu’, meaning shoes, and ‘kutsuu’, meaning pain, as well as the #MeToo hashtag. The #KuToo campaign, which gathered tens of thousands of signatures, developed along the lines of a similar one conducted in the UK in 2016.

In Australia, increased awareness of workplace sexual harassment in the aftermath of #MeToo resulted in a comprehensive **national inquiry**, in which more than 420 submissions were made to the Australian Human Rights Commission, 70 per cent of them from individuals, most of whom were women, recounting their experiences. In Bangladesh, women employed in the textile industry **organised** against endemic workplace sexual harassment. Thailand’s **Thaiconsent** platform **shared** hundreds of testimonies of rape and sexual assault, challenging established practices of victim-blaming. In Chile, following civil society activism and awareness raising, Congress passed a **bill** to punish street sexual harassment.

Recognition also came at the international level in a landmark development in June, when the International Labour Organization **adopted** two new legal instruments – the **Violence and Harassment Convention** and the **Violence and Harassment Recommendation** – recognising violence and harassment at work as human rights violations and setting out minimum obligations for states to address them.

However, while there were these important success stories, in several instances women who came forward to testify and stand against sexual harassment experienced backlash. Such was the case with activists in El Salvador from the Colectiva Amoraless group, who in May were **sued for slander** by a professor at the University of San Salvador, who they had accused of taking advantage of his role and status to sexually assault his

students. Colectiva Amoraless **denounced** this court case as an attempt to censor and silence them.

In September, Sandra Muller, who started the #MeToo campaign in France, **lost a defamation case** brought by the man she had accused. The man in question characterised his behaviour as flirtation rather than harassment, and the court found in his favour. The signal seemed to be that verbal harassment was considered acceptable in France. In October, the Indian High Court **ordered** Facebook and Instagram to reveal the identity of the person running an anonymous account that shared #MeToo stories in India’s art world. In Nepal’s art community as well, the sharing of #MeToo stories led to **counter-accusations** and pushback.

RESISTANCE AGAINST THE ANTI-RIGHTS WAVE

A rallying point for those working to hold back women and LGBTQI+ people came in March, when the World Congress of Families (WCF) was held in Verona, Italy. It was the year’s peak gathering of anti-rights groups and right-wing populist and nationalist political leaders, who came together to celebrate their growing power and share strategies to attack rights. The gathering was met with a strong response from women’s rights groups from across Europe.

Asia Leofreddi, of the Italian think tank and magazine **Confronti**, characterises the WCF as a key anti-rights forum:

The WCF’s pro-family agenda translates into support for the traditional family model and reflects a highly conservative view of gender roles. Accordingly, the WCF opposes abortion, surrogate motherhood, same-sex marriage and any progress towards equality in sexual and reproductive rights. Their gathering is organised by the International Organization for the Family, which is active at many other levels. At the international level, beyond organising international conferences, it tries to influence international institutions, such as the UN, in order to promote a conservative and restrictive interpretation of human rights, in particular of Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, on marriage and the family. In domestic politics,

PROGRESS IN CHANGING DISCRIMINATORY LAWS

2019 showed that progress in changing laws that hold women and girls back is possible, but it often takes years of civil society advocacy. In 2019, **Mozambique** passed a law to criminalise child marriage, a practice that closes down girls' futures. In Tanzania, the Supreme Court **upheld a 2016 ruling** that prohibited child marriage, establishing a ban on the marriage of girls under 15 and directing lawmakers to raise the age of marriage to 18 within a year. In Indonesia, parliament **raised the legal age of marriage for girls** to 19, in response to a decision by the Constitutional Court that ruled it discriminatory for girls and boys to have different legal ages for marriage. After extensive civil society campaigning, in Bangladesh, the discriminatory classification of 'virgin' was **removed** from Muslim marriage certificates; brides had been forced to class themselves as either virgins, widows or divorcees.

In Sierra Leone, the CSOs Equality Now, the Women Against Violence and Exploitation Society and the Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa **took the state to the regional court** – the Economic Community of West African States' Community Court of Justice – over a ban on

pregnant girls attending school and sitting exams, a policy that was introduced in 2015 when schools reopened following the Ebola outbreak, which created the conditions for a rise in teen pregnancies as girls were exposed to greater risk out of school and unable to access family planning services. This policy held back tens of thousands of girls and deprived them of their equal right to education, doubling down on the stigma and discrimination they already faced as young expectant mothers. The case was filed in May 2018 and hearings took place in May and June 2019. The **court ruling**, handed down in December, revoked the ban. It was hailed as a landmark moment for gender equality in Sierra Leone and sent a message to other African governments that have imposed similar bans, such as Equatorial Guinea and Tanzania.

Progress is never easy, and it typically comes after years of efforts and setbacks. In Tunisia, the cabinet submitted a **draft bill** to parliament to enshrine equal inheritance rights for men and women – something that was also a focus of the protests in **Lebanon** – but the proposal faced opposition; according to polls, almost 60 per cent of Tunisian women said they were against the proposed change. This challenge – as with law changes to realise LGBTQI+ rights, discussed below – highlighted the need to win over public opinion as well as advocate for changes in laws.

its member organisations link with or operate as interest groups infiltrating parties and academic institutions, lobbying officials and using democratic means such as referendums and mobilisations to advance their claims in national public spheres.

In recent years anti-rights ideas promoted by the WCF have been adopted by right-wing populist and nationalist parties and put into effect where they are in power, resulting in setbacks for rights. Italy's League party has been an enthusiastic proponent of socially conservative policies and has mobilised divisive rhetoric that targets excluded groups, including while part of a coalition government from June 2018 to September 2019 ([see section](#)). The League and its leader Matteo Salvini, then Italy's deputy prime minister, were a prominent presence at the WCF, and Verona's city

council has been something of a **far-right laboratory** in recent years. In 2019 the council approved an initiative to 'prevent abortion and promote motherhood' and declared Verona a 'pro-life city'.

In response to the WCF being held in Verona, the local branch of the transnational feminist movement Non Una di Meno ('Not one woman less') organised a three-day mobilisation encompassing a variety of events across the city. Asia describes this initiative and other events staged around the same time:

These events looked like a real counter-congress, complete with panels, shows and speakers coming from every part of the world.



People outside the Italian Parliament in Rome protest against the WCF and attacks against women's rights. Credit: Simona Granati/Corbis via Getty Images

A forum took place at the Academy of Agriculture, Letters and Sciences on 30 March. This encounter was organised by the International Planned Parenthood Federation – European Network and the Union of Atheists and Rationalist Agnostics in collaboration with Rebel Network and other national and international organisations. This event gathered more than 30 speakers representing the transnational struggle of civil society for women's and LGBTQI+ rights.

Some Italian politicians also decided to show their opposition to the WCF, and several female representatives of the Democratic Party organised a public meeting on the same day.

On 30 March, the sheer number of people mobilising proved the scale of the determination to stand up to anti-rights groups and realise human rights, as Asia attests:

The demonstration held on 30 March was the biggest Verona had ever seen: more than 100,000 people took to the streets of the city to side with women's right to choose.

Mobilised groups focused their activism on defending sexual and reproductive rights, strongly jeopardised by the narratives promoted and political strategies used by WCF participants.

Meanwhile Italian citizens took to the streets mostly in reaction against the strong support that the WCF received from an important sector of the Italian government at the time. A majority of Italians viewed the institutional promotion of a gathering detrimental to civil rights as a political action against our constitution.

As Asia goes on to explain, the impact of these protests in Italy was strong, not least because they were on such an unexpected scale and enabled disparate elements of civil society to come together:

This was the first time the WCF had to face such a huge protest. I don't think anyone expected such a big reaction – not even our politicians attending it.

At the national level, the protests achieved good results. For instance, they forced Salvini to publicly proclaim that Law 194 – the Italian law recognising abortion rights – would not be touched. Additionally, the days of the Congress were a great opportunity to unmask the strong connections that the League party has with the global far right, despite its rhetoric on national sovereignty.

At the international level, the WCF in Verona offered an opportunity for participating opposition movements to forge new transnational alliances and reflect on the construction of common narratives and strategies. It was then that groups that until then had focused on their own national, and sometimes provincial, contexts realised how important it was to act globally. The presence of foreign experts and activists helped Italian movements to understand better the strategies of ultra-conservative groups and their ability to function simultaneously at different levels.

While we in Italy have always been confronted with the conservative positions of the Vatican and its influence on politics and civil society regarding sexual and reproductive rights, the WCF in Verona made it clear that we are facing a process of modernisation and professionalisation of ultra-conservative activism. These actors now enter public debate with their religious claims and turn them mainstream. They present them in a non-religious language, translating them into the language of human rights or natural law. They disseminate them by using tactics and strategies typical of progressive mobilisations and campaigns. During the WCF in Verona, Italian progressive movements became aware of the dimension of the phenomenon that they face as well as the fact that far from being limited to a national context, the politicisation of religion and pro-family rhetoric are actually part of a much broader political project.

While the women's rights mobilisations in Verona demonstrated the importance of a vigilant and connected civil society, Asia emphasises that this does not mean the 2019 edition of the WCF failed:

About 10,000 people took part in their 'family march' on 31 March.



Activists take part in the Queer Liberation March in New York, USA marking the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots. Credit: Kena Betancur/Getty Images

“PROTESTING ONCE IS NOT ENOUGH. WE NEED TO REMEMBER TO FIGHT BACK EVERY SINGLE DAY. WE NEED TO BE AWARE THAT OUR OPPONENTS REMAIN ACTIVE EVEN WHEN THEY DISAPPEAR FROM THE SCENE.”

ASIA LEOFREDDI



They were far fewer than those who took to the streets to participate in the feminist and progressive mobilisation of the previous day, but they were still many. Moreover, I think the success of the WCF is measured more by what happens inside the Congress than what happens outside. In the WCF in Verona there were many representatives of governments from all over the world – far more than in previous years – which offered them a great opportunity to strengthen their networks.

As Asia concludes, there is a clear need for a sustained civil society response beyond peak events:

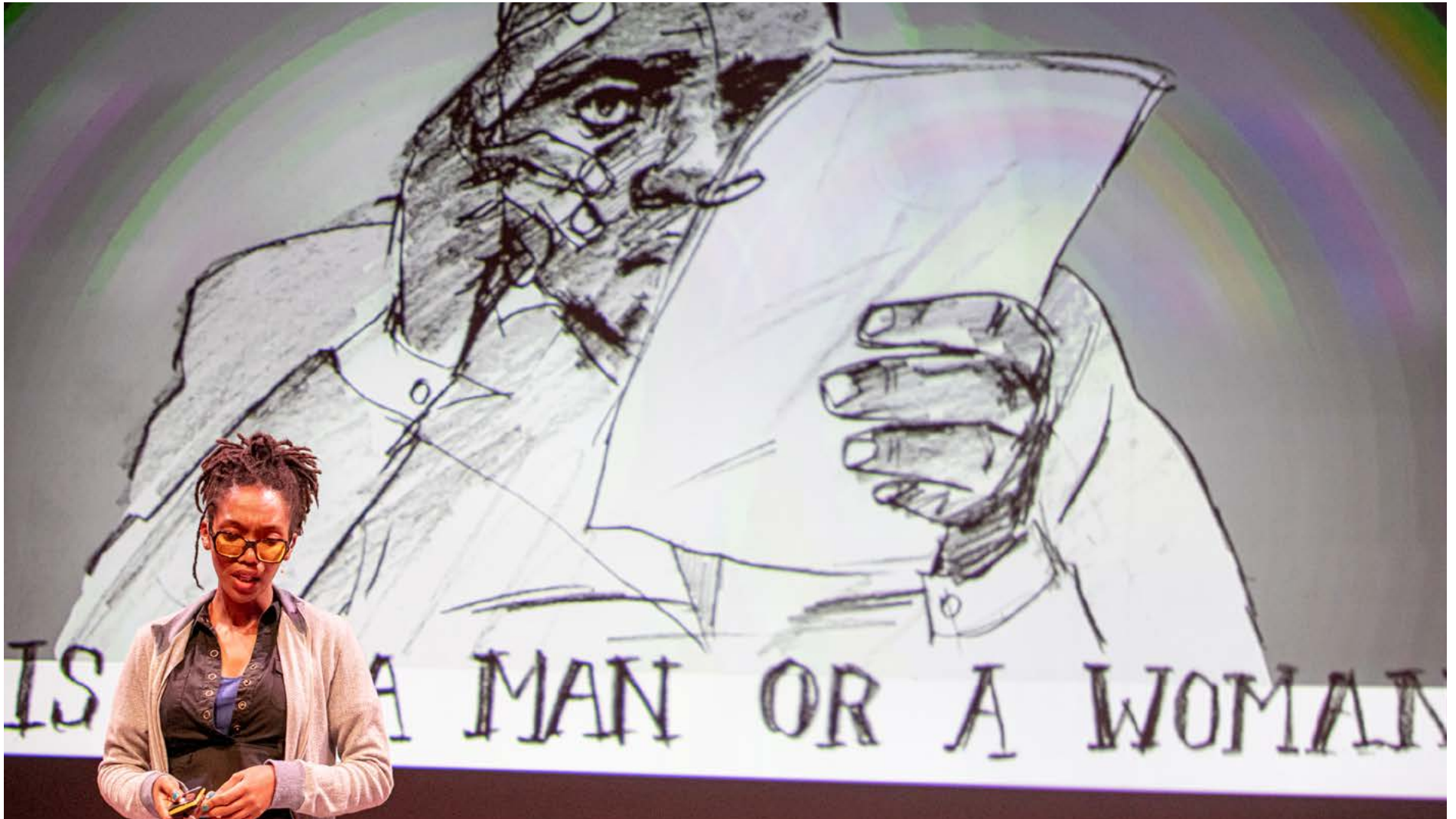
Protesting once is not enough. We need to remember to fight back every single day. We need to be aware that our opponents remain active even when they v the scene. Ours is a battle for public opinion, which must be informed on a daily basis.

Civil society needs to remain vigilant because anti-rights groups continue to gain influence and push regressive policies. An example of this is the Vox party in Spain, which connects closely with ultra-conservative Catholic anti-rights groups in a joint campaign to push back the gender violence law.

Pushbacks offer real threats to women experiencing or at risk of harassment and GBV. In Turkey, parliament held a first debate in January 2020 on a ‘**marry your rapist**’ bill introduced by authoritarian President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party ([see section](#)), which would provide an amnesty for men convicted of statutory rape, provided they marry their victim. The bill is a new version of a 2016 attempted law that had to be **withdrawn** following widespread domestic and international protest.

Alongside their influence on political parties and governments, anti-rights groups are using a range of common tactics to attack women’s and LGBTQI+ rights, many of them imitating the successful tactics civil society has used to claim and defend those rights. They make use of legitimate channels, such as initiating court actions, campaigning in elections, triggering referendums, participating in consultations and mobilising people in public spaces. But alongside these, they use more underhand tactics that aim to disrupt and prevent civil society mobilisations and activities. They tend to be adept manipulators of social media, which they use to promote anti-rights narratives and recruit support, spread disinformation and conspiracy theories, mobilise hate speech and smear and harass civil society. Anti-rights groups sometimes also enable or directly deploy physical violence.

As foundations for these attacks, anti-rights groups borrow, manipulate and distort the language of human rights. They are increasingly active at the international level, adapting the language of rights and using their close relationships with regressive governments to insert themselves into key international processes relating to human rights, including the UN’s annual Commission on the Status of Women meetings, which in 2019 was once again an arena in which women’s rights were attacked ([see section](#)).



Kenyan transgender activist Audrey Mbugua speaks about her life and struggles at the Oslo Freedom Forum 2019 in Norway. Credit: Julia Reinhart/Getty Images

In those settings, anti-rights groups typically instrumentalise some categories of rights in order to attack others. For instance, they package anti-migrant and racist views under the guise of respect for women's rights, demonising Islam and seeking to ban head coverings. They **attack transgender people** in the name of women's rights, intentionally sowing division between rights activists. But they also work to restrict women's

control over their sexual and reproductive health, in part because they seek to boost the birth rate of populations defined as 'native' as a counter to migrant populations. They assert the 'rights of the unborn' as pre-eminent over women's rights, and have couched attacks on abortion in the language of protecting the rights of **people with disabilities**. As these inconsistencies suggest, a concern with women's rights is never their real motivation.

ATTACKS ON ASSOCIATIONAL RIGHTS

One of the ways in which anti-rights groups and repressive states work to clamp down on voices for women's and LGBTQI+ rights is by seeking to deny the ability of CSOs to exist, register and function. CSOs that lack legal recognition can struggle to receive funding or fall foul of state rules about permission to hold activities.

In 2019, *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir – Perú* (Catholics for the Right to Decide – CDD-Perú), a Catholic and feminist movement that focuses on women's sexual and reproductive rights, was sued by the Tomás Moro Legal Centre, which wanted to strip it of its legal status. **Eliana Cano** of CDD-Perú relates the attack:

We were notified that the Santo Tomás Moro Legal Centre, which is a self-appointed representative of the Catholic Church, had brought a lawsuit against us. According to the lawyers who are advising us, this



CDD activists demonstrate for LGBTQI+ rights under the banner 'God loves all people'. Credit: CDD-Perú @Facebook

group began to look into the work done by our organisation about a year ago. They decided to sue us in the civil courts because they want to make this a long, tedious, tiring process, one of permanent appeal. The whole thing can take up to three or four years. Basically, their strategy is to drain us of energy in the process.

They want us to cease to exist as a registered organisation, recognised by the National Superintendency of Public Registries. In other words, they want us to lose our legal status and not be able to continue operating in Peru. They argue that, by calling ourselves what we do, we are disrespecting the Catholic Church and its parishioners. They say that, in light of the existing agreement between the Vatican State and Peru – which recognises the role of the Catholic Church – we are using the term 'Catholic', which represents an institution and a historical identity, in bad faith. They do not accept the interpretation we make of biblical texts on the basis of feminist theology in order to question dogma, imposed conscience and control of people in the name of God. It is important to note that our organisation is not registered with the Catholic Church as a faith group, and therefore is not subject to the internal mandate of the Church.

As Eliana goes on to describe, the action to strip CDD-Peru of its legal status is part of a range of attacks that seek to erase the organisation's voice and influence; the attacks reflect a hardline and defensive approach in the face of changing social attitudes:

We have claimed ownership of the language of the Gospel that focuses on the right of people to deliberate in conscience, to discern and to decide, and this bothers them. I am a Catholic, I was baptised and I am guided by feminist theology. You cannot question my faith, just as I cannot question yours. This is a very hard fight, because it is easy to fall in the face of a mass telling you that you are not one of them. From the beginning we knew that we would face disqualification, defamation and lies; we did not, however, think that the attacks would become as violent as those we are currently experiencing on social media, as well as in the form of a lawsuit.

Given that the experience of faith cannot be taken away from us, what they are trying to do is take away our legal status, make us disappear. We represent a danger because we are not just a few. In fact, more and more people are increasingly getting to know us and identify with us. We represent the position of many people who do not necessarily have the opportunity to articulate this strand of thought publicly, but who feel it and live by it. There is a wide and diverse congregation that does not think the same way as the Church hierarchy and considers that the ultra-conservative response to public policy is more suitable to Inquisition times than today. According to polls, most Catholics disagree with the Church hierarchy on many important issues, such as homosexuality, which they do not consider to be an illness or a divine punishment, or same-sex marriage. Choosing an abortion in specific life circumstances is a highly ethical and responsible decision, and it does not make you a bad woman, a lesser Catholic, or a bad mother. Using contraceptives to regulate motherhood and fatherhood or enjoying a sexual relationship without procreating is not prohibited by the Gospels. The state of virginity is losing its divine quality and this is freeing women from feelings of guilt.

CDD-Perú will not go quietly, and has won support in its defence, as Eliana indicates:

Fortunately, the Legal Defence Institute decided to sponsor the case as part of its institutional priorities. They consider that this is an 'ideological fight' and that questioning our name is a 'pretext' to make us disappear as influential actors. Theirs has been a gesture that we are infinitely thankful for.

As far as discourse is concerned, however, we should not move from our positions, but rather show that the appropriation of the discourse of human rights and democracy by ultra-conservative groups is as superficial as disrespectful of democratic principles. As happened recently with the 'do not mess with my children' campaign – against education about gender equality and respect for sexual identities – their discourse tends to become very aggressive every time they feel cornered. They seem to be desperate, because deep down they do nothing but react in the face of newly acquired rights.

CDD-Peru is far from the only CSO working for women's and LGBTQI+ rights that faces a threat to its legal existence. For instance, in Kazakhstan in September, an appeals court **upheld a decision** to deny registration to Feminita, a national feminist initiative that has been operating informally since 2015 and has been seeking to register since 2017. Feminita focuses on promoting the rights of marginalised women, including LGBTQI+ women, women with disabilities and sex workers. Its applications have been repeatedly rebuffed by the Ministry of Justice and its lawsuit against the ministry was **rejected** on the grounds that the CSO did not work to strengthen 'spiritual and moral values' and the 'role of the family'.

On a more positive note, in May a Tunisian CSO that works to support sexual and gender minorities, Shams, won a victory in the court of appeal to **overturn** a government order that it should be shut down. The order had been made on the grounds that Shams undermines Islamic values and defends prohibited practices; this latter assertion was particularly troubling, given that one of the fundamental and legitimate roles of civil society is to advocate for changes to unfair laws, such as those that criminalise LGBTQI+ people in Tunisia.

ABORTION RIGHTS: THE KEY BATTLEGROUND

Anti-rights groups and right-wing political parties are fiercely contesting abortion rights, while civil society continues to strive to defend and extend women's right to choose.

In Argentina, the Latin American country that **came closest** to legalising

abortion in 2018, the **National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe and Free Abortion** remained active and determined to bring about a change in the law in 2020. The National Campaign, which has been building momentum for over a decade, includes hundreds of CSOs and social movements. Thanks to massive, fast-growing women-led street mobilisations that people called 'the revolution of the daughters' due to the prominent presence of young women and adolescent girls, 2019 saw steps forward in the visibility of



Abortion rights demonstrators march in Belfast, Northern Ireland, UK ahead of a legislative session on abortion rights and same-sex marriage on 21 October 2019.
Credit: Charles McQuillan/Getty Images

women, the mainstreaming of feminism and gender equality and public engagement with reproductive rights. The reproductive rights movement rode on the wave of the #NiUnaMenos (#NotOneWomanLess) movement, which originated in Argentina and grew to challenge GBV across Latin America. In this context, hundreds of thousands of young people – most with little to no political experience – made an instant connection between violence against women and the denial of women’s sexual and reproductive rights, and mobilised for both.

On 28 May, to mark the International Day of Action for Women’s Health, the National Campaign **submitted** a modified **abortion bill** to the country’s parliament. Tens of thousands of people marched in the capital, Buenos Aires, to support the bill and call for an end to GBV. They also demanded

that the existing law on comprehensive sexual education be properly implemented. The fact that abortion had long moved from the fringes to the mainstream as a political issue was apparent during the October election campaign, when parties across the political spectrum fielded several outspoken feminist candidates.

In early 2020, the Health Minister of Argentina’s newly inaugurated government publicly **acknowledged** the impact of the women’s rights movement. In a radio interview, he stated that feminism “sociologically is one of the most important things that have happened to Argentina in recent years, because it is about a lot more than the legalisation of abortion: it is about the role of women in society.” After promising that his government would soon respond to the women’s movement’s demand, he bluntly

recognised that “if abortion were a male issue, it would have been resolved long ago.”

Advances in Argentina have inspired a wave of feminist activism across Latin America, and legislative change in Argentina would therefore have broader regional significance. Abortion is currently legal in only two countries in the region – in Cuba since 1968, and since 2012 in Uruguay, where a 25-year-old struggle yielded a decriminalisation law that remains criticised to this day, both by those who wanted the law to go further and those who opposed any liberalisation. In the many **countries** where abortion remains illegal under all or most circumstances, women who have abortions and pro-choice advocates remain highly vulnerable and often experience harassment and prosecution.

In El Salvador, where the anti-abortion regime is particularly harsh, women have been charged, prosecuted and handed lengthy prison sentences for homicide following events such as a miscarriage or stillbirth. In 2018, the world watched in shock as **Imelda Cortez**, a young woman who had been repeatedly raped by her stepfather, went on trial for the premature birth of the child conceived as a result of that crime. Global attention prompted by the blatant injustice may have influenced the decision to **acquit and release** her in December 2018, but more than 20 other women in similar situations reportedly remained in jail.

The efforts of civil society and the international media helped some of those others in 2019. Young rape survivor **Evelyn Hernandez** was exonerated at a retrial in August, overturning an earlier verdict of homicide and a sentence of 30 years after her baby was stillborn. Hernández spent 33 months in jail and might still face a third trial, as the prosecution announced it would appeal against her acquittal. She was raped by a gang member and had been unaware of her pregnancy. In January, Sara Gross, a member of Salvador’s Citizen’s Group for the Decriminalisation of Abortion, was **awarded** the Simone de Beauvoir Prize in recognition of their fight for women like Evelyn.

In Morocco, independent journalist Hajar Raissouni was disgracefully tried for having extramarital sex and obtaining an illegal abortion, a charge she was clear was politically motivated as a result of her journalism, which is

critical of the state. Despite being able to prove scientifically that she had never had an abortion, she and her partner were each sentenced to a **year in prison**. **Protests** were held outside the trial, and Hajar and her partner were eventually **pardoned** in October. The experience showed how laws that repress women’s bodily rights can easily be extended to restrict their civil rights.

On the positive side, in April, South Korea’s Constitutional Court **struck down** a 66-year-old law that banned abortion, giving parliament until the end of 2020 to revise it. The law remained in force, but it will become null and void if legislators do not meet the deadline. According to its provisions, undergoing an abortion outside cases of rape or danger to a woman’s health is a crime punishable by up to a year in prison or a fine of up to 2 million won (approx. US\$1,750), while performing an abortion entails a punishment of up to two years in prison. While illegal, abortion is widespread and rarely punished in South Korea, where historically there was relatively little stigmatisation over the issue. For decades abortion was even welcomed by a government eager to curtail population growth; however, in recent years a falling birth rate has been accompanied by a reversal of these attitudes and increasing social expectation that women should have children. This opened an opportunity for anti-rights groups, which started pushing morality-based campaigns and set up a hotline where people could report doctors for performing illegal abortions. For women’s rights advocates, the landmark ruling therefore represented a victory for rights following a prolonged struggle.

In July, the UK parliament cast two historic **votes** to extend abortion and same-sex marriage rights to Northern Ireland, which had previously been exempt from mainland UK laws on these matters. In October, the high court in Belfast, Northern Ireland’s capital, **ruled** against the province’s near-blanket abortion ban, stating that it breaches the UK’s human rights commitments. The decision came in response to a case brought by a woman who had been denied a termination in 2013 despite a scan showing that her foetus would not survive. After travelling to the mainland for an abortion, as many other Northern Irish women have had to do, she began a six-year legal fight to change the law.



Protesters dressed in Handmaid's Tale costumes protest against Georgia's 'heartbeat' abortion bill outside the State Capitol in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, on 25 May 2019.

Credit: Elijah Nouvelage/Bloomberg via Getty Images

REGRESSIVE WINDS BLOWING FROM THE USA

Global discourse around abortion rights is increasingly being influenced by the cultural war around bodily rights currently being waged in the USA, where anti-rights groups are on the rise and have become increasingly politically influential. The country is the source of much of the funding that flows towards groups that oppose women's and LGBTQI+ rights around the world. In the USA, anti-rights groups aim to overturn the 1973 landmark *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court ruling, which recognised women's right to choose and which they have challenged ever since.

Groups opposed to women's right to choose are emboldened by the inflammatory anti-rights rhetoric of President Trump and his circle, characterised by the use of scientifically inaccurate language and fabrications that vilify abortion advocates and providers. In May, the National Abortion Federation published a **report** documenting the alarming escalation of incidents of disruption and intimidation of abortion providers and women seeking abortions. The report noted a hike in trespassing, picketing and vandalism at clinics.

Throughout 2019, several Republican-controlled US states passed a series of laws restricting abortion rights that were so severe that the UN Deputy

High Commissioner for human rights, Kate Gilmore, **described** them as a form of extremist hate that amounts to the torture of women. Among the most restrictive laws were the **misleadingly** described ‘heartbeat bills’ adopted by **Georgia**, Kentucky, Mississippi, **Ohio** and **Tennessee**, which imposed a virtual ban on all abortions. These bills seek to outlaw abortion once cardiac activity can be detected in the foetus, which can happen as early as six weeks into pregnancy, when most women do not know they are pregnant.

In **Alabama**, a male-dominated Senate passed a bill that **banned abortions** even in cases of rape or incest and made it a felony crime for doctors to perform abortions. Rights defenders pointed out that the new law was **less forgiving** even than Saudi Arabia’s. As she signed the bill into law, the **Republican governor** stated that “every life is a sacred gift from God,” even though Alabama is the **fourth-worst US state** for infant mortality and among those with the lowest overall life expectancy.

Ohio legislators attempted to **introduce** a medically impossible procedure to restrict abortion, ordering doctors to ‘re-implant ectopic pregnancies’ or face charges of ‘abortion murder’. Indiana passed two laws in 2019, the first **banning** dilation and evacuation procedures, a method commonly used for second-trimester abortions, and the second allowing medical professionals to refuse to perform abortions. Missouri **banned** abortion at eight weeks.

Arkansas and **Utah** passed laws banning abortions after 18 weeks of pregnancy, with few exceptions. North Dakota passed a law that **outlaws** a specific second trimester abortion procedure. Some states, including Arkansas and Tennessee, also passed so-called ‘trigger laws’, which would automatically make abortion illegal in their territories if Roe v. Wade were overturned.

This wave of regressive state-level laws is at odds with federal law, which means that the new laws will not take effect immediately. In state after state, judges have temporarily blocked new laws from going into effect while they are being challenged in court by civil rights and women’s rights organisations. The intention of the anti-rights camp seems clear: to escalate the legal fight to the Supreme Court, where a conservative majority could reverse or revise Roe v. Wade. Conservative-led states are seeking to

prepare the ground and normalise the suppression of legal abortion.

The movement is however not all one way. Some US states, including **Illinois**, Maine, Nevada, **New York** and Vermont, passed bills to ensure abortion rights. The New York Governor signed a bill to **protect access to abortion** even if Roe v. Wade is overturned.

Rising restrictions triggered a wave of **activism** from local and national-level **women’s rights groups**, which responded with legal action, street protests and electoral campaigning. Major civil society groups, including the **American Civil Liberties Union** and **Planned Parenthood**, filed lawsuits against restrictive abortion laws, on the grounds that they violate the right to liberty and privacy under the US Constitution’s 14th Amendment. At the grassroots level, women organised to provide each other the support they might need if the situation worsens; for example, ‘**Auntie Networks**’ were announced in cryptic Facebook posts, reaching out across state borders to help women leave the jurisdictions that are passing the most severe restrictions and obtain abortion services elsewhere if necessary.

But the large-scale anti-abortion movement also rallied, including through actions outside abortion clinics. In early 2019, the mass ‘March for Life’ was held in the capital, Washington, DC, with Vice President Mike Pence among the speakers. The following edition of this annual march, held in January 2020, featured an even more **prominent speaker**, as President Trump became the first US president to speak at this polarising event. Many participants wore Trump regalia or carried signs that read ‘most pro-life president ever’. The strategic positioning of anti-rights groups in high places was also reflected in the increasingly visible role played by one of Vice President Pence’s daughters as a **link** between anti-abortion groups and the White House.

Even as abortion remains legal, the circulation of **rampant disinformation** about women’s rights and abortion procedures on social media, tightened regulations and the use of other tactics that starve abortion providers of funding and **the intimidation and harassment** of abortion providers, women’s rights defenders and women undergoing abortions are turning some states into ‘**contraceptive deserts**’ where virtually **no clinics** can be found that perform abortions.

At the same time, in the USA and elsewhere, so-called ‘**crisis pregnancy centres**’, linked to conservative faith organisations and posing as abortion clinics or reproductive health facilities, have mushroomed, tricking women into believing they will be provided with contraceptive methods and abortion services, but instead coercing them into carrying their pregnancies to term.

Women’s rights defenders are responding to this trend by creating safe spaces and support networks and working to investigate and unmask the workings of anti-rights groups. Over nine months, women’s rights activists and journalists in 18 countries posed as pregnant patients to **document** the workings of Heartbeat International and Human Life International, two anti-rights organisations that make much of their close ties to the Trump administration and have set up clinics that present themselves as abortion service providers but try to stop women having abortions. The activists recorded, photographed and documented what went on in more than 60 such centres. They showed that these places prey on vulnerable women and try to convince them not to have an abortion by giving them false information that causes panic and offering promises of legal assistance, baby gear and supplies.

Another **investigation** found that a popular women’s health and fertility app was funded and led by anti-abortion, anti-LGBTQI+ hardline Catholic campaigners, and the app provided medically dubious advice and was meant to foster doubt about birth control.

Even as civil society tries to fight back, the USA’s culture war has global implications. The US government is working at the UN and other international areas to forge a **new international coalition** focused on eliminating mentions of gender, LGBTQI+ people and sexual and reproductive health from international agreements (*see section*).

President Trump has also **twice tightened** the so-called ‘global gag rule’ that bans foreign CSOs that receive US health assistance from providing legal abortion services or referrals, or even advocating for abortion law reform, even if no US funds are used to do so. In 2017 the global gag rule was expanded to include recipients of any US global health funding, from

HIV/AIDS programming to programmes that support water, sanitation and hygiene. The gag rule was tightened even further in 2019, to restrict organisations from funding other groups that provide abortion services and information. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is the world’s biggest development funder, so the implications of these policy changes are far-reaching.

GETTING OUR HOUSE IN ORDER: TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY WITHIN CIVIL SOCIETY

In **2018**, civil society had our very own #MeToo moment, initially dubbed by some as #AidToo. The scandal was triggered by **revelations** that Oxfam staff had paid women, including underaged girls, for sex during an earthquake relief mission to Haiti in 2010 and 2011, and that senior staff had tried to cover up the scandal rather than seek justice. These allegations came in the wake of a long string of mishandled complaints of internal sexual misconduct within Oxfam. The accusations soon snowballed into widespread revelations of harassment and abuse within civil society, including in organisations dedicated to children’s rights, such as Save the Children, which was also revealed to have routinely covered up allegations of internal misconduct and harassment against senior executives.

According to some women who came forward, it was the newly receptive environment for hearing women’s voices created by the #MeToo movement that made the difference, as women had made the same complaints before but without a remotely similar impact. It became apparent that no matter how good our intentions may be, civil society as a whole was far from immune to the weaknesses that plague other spheres in the absence of strong regulations and institutional restraints.

In response to media revelations, public apologies were uttered, enquiries and expert panels were held, **calls** for civil society-wide professional standards were made, and various new procedures were designed and put in place by multiple CSOs. However, actual enforcement and the effectiveness of these rules and procedures will ultimately depend on civil society’s ability to modify the entrenched internal power imbalances that keep placing women in subordinate and vulnerable positions. Within many

CSOs, women and men are now more sensitised than before about what constitutes inappropriate and demeaning behaviour, and more vigilant and willing to guard newly recognised rights, but women's rights cannot be secure until the presence of women in decision-making and power-holding positions becomes fully normalised.

What would be required, in other words, is a 'fair share' of female representation within CSOs. This is a goal that constitutes the central mission of the Fair Share initiative, dedicated to exposing the gap between reality and aspirations and pushing for progress in women's representation, as **Serap Altinisik** explains:

Fair Share of Women Leaders is a CSO that seeks to test and showcase new forms of governance that reflect feminist values and principles and overcome some of the pitfalls of power imbalance, hierarchy and bureaucracy of traditional governance mechanisms. We push for proportionate representation of women in leadership roles in the social sector – a goal that we want to achieve by 2030 at the latest.

Although women make up nearly 70 per cent of the global social impact workforce, they hold less than 30 per cent of the top leadership positions in their organisations. This lack of diverse voices in key decision-making positions undermines the impact organisations have towards achieving SDG 5. In the wake of #MeToo and a number of sexual abuse scandals in civil society, many organisations have had to rethink their strategies. Our sphere needs to start systematically promoting women's leadership as a lever of change.

To push for this change, Fair Share monitors the number of women in leadership to hold civil society accountable, promotes feminist leadership and mobilises women and men to create feminist organisations, and seeks to create opportunities for women from diverse economic and social backgrounds, nationalities and ethnicities who are currently less likely to be in leadership positions.

Serap acknowledges the positive change that has already taken place within civil society, but warns that it is still not enough, and more needs to be done

if we are to live by the same standards that we demand governments and the private sector to uphold:

Some CSOs have committed to developing an organisational and leadership culture that values gender equal representation, diversity and participatory decision-making, but we have still ourselves a long way to go to achieve gender equality. We have to live up to our values if we want to be legitimately asking for positive change in the world. We have to be the change if we wish to see it.



Planned Parenthood supporters protest against increased abortion restrictions in the USA on 25 February 2019. Credit: Spencer Platt/Getty Images

2. BREAKTHROUGHS AND SETBACKS: CIVIL SOCIETY STRUGGLES FOR LGBTQI+ RIGHTS



People take part in the largest-ever pride march in Kiev, Ukraine, on 23 June 2019. Credit: Brendan Hoffman/Getty Images

Often connecting with struggles for women's rights, 2019 also saw some major advances in the rights of LGBTQI+ people. Highlights of the year included same-sex marriage becoming legal in Taiwan and sex between men being decriminalised in Botswana. As with changes in laws to enable

women's rights, years of civil society advocacy, litigation and mass protest lay behind these landmark decisions. Also similarly, successes brought often hostile reaction.

TAIWAN: A HISTORIC FIRST FOR ASIA

In Taiwan, the law **passed** in May to legalise same-sex marriage – a historic first in Asia – came after extensive civil society **campaigning** and followed the 2017 Constitutional Court ruling that Taiwan's marriage laws discriminated against same-sex couples. The momentum for change had experienced a **setback** in 2018, when conservative faith groups organised and won an advisory referendum on the court ruling after mounting a polarising public campaign. However, the court judgment stood, and the ruling party went on to win the parliamentary vote by a comfortable margin. The first marriages took place immediately: it was **reported** that in the week after the law was passed 166 couples exercised their newly recognised right.

Taiwan's Digital Minister **Audrey Tang**, who herself made history in 2016 by becoming Taiwan's first transgender cabinet minister, relates how the change resulted from action by both government and civil society:

On 17 May– the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia – the Legislative Yuan – Taiwan's parliament – passed the Enforcement Act of Judicial Yuan Interpretation #748 after three readings. This achievement, made in Taiwan, was a historic first in all of Asia, and was not fulfilled overnight. It took the efforts of both government and civil society.

The decades-long struggle entailed many brave people stepping forward, taking advantage of Taiwan's open civic space to challenge outdated social taboos and assert their claims to rights. As marriage laws in other countries liberalised, same-sex couples who had been able to marry abroad started to seek the same recognition in Taiwan. People began to demand their right to raise or adopt children, and to secure their inheritance for their partner. Alongside litigation, visibility achieved through action on the streets was important, with large-scale annual demonstrations for LGBTQI+ rights taking place in Taipei; government recognition of the validity of these protests was significant, as Audrey relates:

In 2003, the Taipei government gave support to the first LGBTQI+ protest organised in the whole of Asia, gathering more than 2,000

participants. Ma Ying-jeou, who was then Mayor of Taipei and went on to become President, said that Taipei as an international city should respect individuals from different ethnicities and cultures. The following day, widespread media reporting helped raise acceptance of the LGBTQI+ community in Taiwan. Since then, this event has been organised regularly on the last Saturday of October every year. In 2018, a total of 137,000 people took part in the demonstration.

In 2015, Taiwan's President, Tsai Ing-wen, then a presidential candidate, publicly expressed her support for marriage equity on the eve of the annual LGBTQI+ demonstration. On 20 May of the same year, the Kaohsiung government accepted the registration of same-sex couples; the first municipality to accept registration. Following that, all special municipalities and some cities and counties accepted registration one after another. After the announcement of the Judicial Yuan Interpretation #748 in 2017, the Ministry of the Interior announced the opening of registration for same-sex marriage nationwide and allowed administration across cities.

The Judicial Yuan Interpretation #748 ruled that the restriction of marriage as being between a male and a female was in violation of the constitution. The authorities were requested to amend or enact the laws as appropriate within two years. The president of the executive, Yuan Su Tseng-chang, communicated with ruling party legislators personally and went through countless discussions and compromises to see the Enforcement Act of Judicial Yuan Interpretations #748 finally pass the third reading on 17 May and come in force on 24 May.

However, while celebrating their victory, Taiwan's LGBTQI+ rights campaigners are clear that the battle to win hearts and minds has not yet been fully won. 2018's divisive advisory referendum emphasised that some sections of the public still need to be convinced, as Audrey indicates:

Taiwan has gone through more than 30 years of LGBTQI+ campaigning since 1986. The issue of same-sex marriage aroused many different opinions in society, and caused cracks and intense discussions within families, generations and even religious groups.



People celebrate in Taipei, Taiwan after parliament votes to legalise same-sex marriage on 17 May 2019. Credit: Carl Court/Getty Images

In 2015, the Institute of Sociology of Taiwan, Academia Sinica, published the Basic Survey of Social Changes in Taiwan, which showed that the percentage of supporters and opponents to the question that 'homosexuals should have the right to marriage' was 59 per cent and 41 per cent respectively, while among people with higher education and young people, the support rate was higher than 80 per cent. In November 2016, the Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation published a poll that found that 46 per cent of citizens were in favour of the legalisation of same-sex marriage, 45 per cent were opposed and 8 per cent were neutral.

During the 2018 referendum, opponents and supporters not only debated vehemently at referendum explanation conferences that were broadcast live, but also launched information wars via social media. They raised funds to buy commercial advertisements to express themselves through print media, loudspeaker vans, radio and magazines. As the referendum attempted to delay the progress of same-sex marriage, debates and clashes were ubiquitous in society. The divergence lies in the fact that same-sex marriage was an issue of human rights, as the Judicial Interpretation indicated, but the referendum meant to remind people to consider the thoughts of traditionalists and religious people.

Many remain opposed to the new law and, Audrey concludes, there is still a journey ahead to convince those people and ensure that everyone has the same access to rights:

Opponents of same-sex marriage proposed a version of a ‘same-sex cohabitation law’, defining people in same-sex relationships as ‘same-sex family members’ and allowing them to form a family without getting married or having the right to adopt.

They suggested that the results of the 2018 referendum should be adopted and raised the question: the referendum reflects the opinions of 7.65 million people, but the Interpretations are made by 10. Which one matters more?

Groups opposing same-sex marriage believe that 24 May, the day the Act came into force, was the darkest day of legislation. So on the same day, they declared that they had formed a party to select 10 candidates for legislators to compete with the legislators that supported the Act.

The implementation of the Act made Taiwan was first in Asia in terms of guaranteeing LGBTQI+ rights, but we are only halfway there. Embracing each other, respecting differences and refusing discrimination are still important areas for our government to learn and act on.

PROGRESS IN ECUADOR AND BHUTAN

Ecuador followed suit in June as its Constitutional Court **ruled** in favour of same-sex marriage, making Ecuador the 27th country in the world and fifth in Latin America – after Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Uruguay – to do so. The decision, significant in part because Ecuador is generally seen as a socially conservative country with a strong church influence, came after lawsuits were brought by LGBTQI+ couples, including by the head of an LGBTQI+ CSO, the Ecuadorean Equality Foundation. Civil society advocacy for change had begun in earnest in 2013.

The judgment was duly condemned by conservative faith groups, but Ecuador’s President Lenín Moreno promised to respect the decision. Significantly, the court’s finding recognised a 2018 advisory **opinion** from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights that its member states should respect the rights of same-sex couples equally as those of heterosexual couples; it therefore showed the important role that progressive international norms can play in driving forward domestic human rights progress and opening up space for civil society advocacy.

More Latin American states can be expected to join the wave – Costa Rica, which asked the Inter-American Court for its opinion, has **committed** to implement it in full – and this is vital, not only for LGBTQI+

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AUDREY TANG





The Ecuadoran LGBTQI+ community celebrates the court ruling on same-sex marriage. Credit: Franklin Jácome/Agencia Press South via Getty Images

people in those countries, but for those in the many others where rights are still denied, because it shows that LGBTQI+ rights are being demanded and claimed by people in the global south: they are not, as right-wing politicians and anti-rights groups maintain, being imported from the global north.

Alongside Taiwan, Bhutan is another Asian country that moved to recognise LGBTQI+ rights in 2019, when it took a significant step on the road to decriminalisation of same-sex relations. In June, the lower house of its national assembly overwhelmingly **voted** to overturn the sections

of the penal code that criminalise 'unnatural sex'; at the time of writing, the decision was scheduled to go to the **upper house** and then receive royal assent. While criminalisation has not been enforced in practice, the listing of Bhutan alongside states that take a hardline stance on same-sex relations had come to be seen as unacceptable, particularly in comparison to its giant neighbour India, where gay sex was **decriminalised** by the Supreme Court following a case brought by civil society in 2018; Bhutan's finance minister described the existence of the law as a 'stain' on the country's reputation, and its removal was recommended by Bhutan's 2019

UN Human Rights Council review. The move sparked **celebrations** among Bhutan's LGBTQI+ civil society, which has reported that LGBTQI+ people experience discrimination, including in access to institutions of education and justice.

In India, there was, however, a sting in the tail for Lawyers Collective, the CSO that **helped bring** the 2018 case that resulted in decriminalisation: in July the authorities **raided** the homes and offices of its co-founders Anand Grover and Indira Jaising, accusing them of violating the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, a draconian law often **used** to attempt to silence people with whom the government disagrees.

Even in less promising circumstances in Asia, civil society continued to act to defend LGBTQI+ rights. In May, and in the face of an increasingly authoritarian government in Singapore, Sayoni, a feminist group that upholds LGBTQI+ rights, **launched** the country's first systematic documentation of human rights violations against lesbian and trans women; in June, the 11th edition of Pink Dot, the country's flagship LGBTQI+ pride event, attracted thousands of people, particularly focusing on repealing Section 377A of Singapore's Penal Code, which criminalises sex between men. In recent years the government has acted to prevent foreign companies from sponsoring Pink Dot and restricted participation in the event to Singaporean citizens and permanent residents; in doing so it has clearly attempted to position LGBTQI+ identities as foreign importations, an attitude that civil society will have to continue to argue against.

AFRICAN LANDMARKS

Africa saw significant progress too. In January, Angola's parliament **adopted** a new penal code, replacing the 133-year-old law that had applied since Portuguese colonial rule. The new law removed the old code's provision against 'vices against nature' that effectively criminalised same-sex relations. The government went further, **banning** discrimination against people on the basis of their sexual orientation. The previous year, it had also acknowledged the important role of LGBTQI+ civil society advocacy when it legally **recognised** the registration of CSO **Iris Angola Association**, which like many other such CSOs had struggled to win legal recognition.

Botswana followed in Angola's footsteps in June, when homosexuality was **decriminalised** by a High Court decision, overturning a law that dated back to British colonialism. As Botswana LGBTQI+ rights campaigner **Dumiso Gatsha** of **Success Capital NGO** relates, while, as in Bhutan, it may have been relatively rare for people to find themselves criminalised, the law contributed to a climate of stigma and discrimination; its reversal therefore opens up opportunities for LGBTQI+ people to demand rights on a greater scale:

Although the prohibition was not necessarily implemented by law enforcement agencies, it could have been, as it added elements of uncertainty and arbitrary treatment. It essentially provides an avenue for building protections and safeguards in health, employment, business, governance, service delivery and, more importantly, eliminating systemic stigma and discrimination.

As in Taiwan, civil society played an essential role. In Botswana, as Dumiso describes, civil society supported the legal action:

Litigation for decriminalisation was led by civil society, on behalf of a young gay man. Procedurally, only an individual can bring such a challenge to the courts, not an organisation. The most progressive of recent court cases, in terms of gender marker changes, were led by people. Civil society partnerships helped ensure financial and technical assistance.

But as in Taiwan, the court ruling may have put the law somewhat ahead of social attitudes, bringing a corresponding need to also win the argument in the court of public opinion. In Botswana, opportunistic anti-rights forces – including highly conservative faith groups and a new populist political party – seized on the increasing prominence the court case brought to LGBTQI+ issues to make political capital. Once again, the reaction showed how anti-rights actions can come in backlash to successful demands for rights and the increasing visibility of excluded groups. The danger was of increasing polarisation, rather than acceptance of the court's decision; the message seemed to be that LGBTQI+ people should stay silent or pay the price. Dumiso outlines the backlash that ensued, while also pointing to a



Singer Buhle Mda performs at the 2019 Feather Awards, an event highlighting LGBTQI+ issues in South Africa. Credit: Oupa Bopape/Gallo Images via Getty Images

disappointing lack of solidarity across civil society as a whole:

While some civil society actors, including human rights groups, that we thought would be supportive, remained quite passive, anti-human rights groups have been increasingly active, using LGBTQI+ rights as a populist tool, by taking advantage of the dynamics regarding 'immorality' that prevail among the public – in other words, of the fact that many people are simply anti-LGBTQI+ by default, with no critical thinking.

It is very difficult to bring the rest of the community along with these advances: yes, you achieve decriminalisation, but decriminalisation does not mean protection or mean it will be any easier for people to navigate difficult conversations about sexual orientation and gender identity with family members or educators, or in the workplace.

I think society is divided, and attitudes may take longer than laws to change. In this context, a new opposition populist party has used this issue as a populist tool. The ruling political party initially said that it would abide by the court decision and it backed non-discrimination. The current president had previously released a statement commemorating 16 days against GBV and spoke about discrimination experienced by people in same-sex relationships. This was the first time a sitting head of state publicly recognised and acknowledged the gay community affirmatively in an African country that criminalised same-sex intercourse.

What changed after the High Court ruling, and lead to the state deciding to appeal, was that the new opposition party saw an opportunity to use the ruling to seek votes. They blamed the current president for singlehandedly decriminalising same-sex intercourse. Given the intolerance in public opinion, it was an opportunity to appeal to the majority. This turned into a political issue rather than one of rights, particularly because this new political party is backed by a former president. This was the first time ever in Botswana's living history that LGBTQI+ issues were used within an intentionally populist narrative.

This did not happen in isolation. Since the court ruling, religious institutions, mostly evangelical groups, became more vocal in their intolerance of LGBTQI+ people. It was surprising to us. We didn't quite expect this. Public statements were released, including some stating that they would be appealing against the court ruling. They perceived this court ruling as an avenue for same-sex marriage and adoption of children by LGBTQI+ people.

The need this suggests is for concerted, coordinated and intersectional action across a broad range of civil society to defend gains that have been made, take on the divisive arguments of anti-rights forces and convince people of the need for progress. As part of this, Dumiso calls for arguments that support LGBTQI+ rights to be rooted in locally driven narratives that resonate with people:

Even if the High Court ruling survives the appeals and any other further legal challenges, a gap will remain. There have been some fragments of civic action aimed at educating people on LGBTQI+ issues. There is an urgent need to work on changing the hearts and minds of people. More importantly, there is a lot of work needed in moving LGBTQI+ people from surviving to thriving, especially in issues of efficacy, agency and having an influence within their communities. We focus on the individual and their access to rights, because rights are not really effective if they cannot be exercised at key touch points of service delivery, such as in a police station or a clinic. The community needs healing, at individual and collective levels. There has been a lot of pain and harm, even within activism.

We need to move towards a community-led narrative. This is how we will get the best results in terms of transforming people's hearts and minds. In that regard, there is a need to strengthen the intellectual body of knowledge of LGBTQI+ communities and decolonise our institutions, because a lot of our conversations are in fact based on Western narratives. We also need to rethink the narratives used for campaigning. The narratives that have been used so far are based on the assumption that the human rights-based approach works, without any reflection on the need to adapt the language in a way that resonates with people and makes issues easier for people to digest.

Examples such as those of Angola and Botswana also demonstrated that, while there is undoubtedly a level of homophobia among some sections of the public, the denial of LGBTQI+ rights is often rooted in outdated colonial-era laws, and there is nothing that says these archaic laws cannot be repealed and better ones put in their place. They also showed how the criminalisation of same-sex relations, even if not actively implemented, effectively creates barriers for LGBTQI+ people against access to other rights, including rights to obtain essential services, such as education and healthcare, and to seek employment, and enables violence and hate crimes and impunity for these to flourish. As well as conferring formal rights, decriminalisation therefore opens up space for further civil society action.

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DUMISO GATSHA



The positive steps taken in Angola and Botswana showed that there is nothing innately ‘un-African’ about same-sex relations. As with laws and practices that deny women’s rights, it is not LGBTQI+ identities that have been **imported**, but rather discriminatory policies that were first enacted by former colonial powers and are currently being aggressively promoted, along with funding, by ultra-conservative faith groups mostly based in the USA, that enables anti-rights backlashes such as that experienced in Botswana.

The pressure of that opposition sometimes told, and at the same time as advances in Africa, there were setbacks. In Kenya, a similar attempt to legalise same-sex relations foundered in May when the country’s High Court **rejected** a petition brought by three CSOs to amend the penal code. The Penal code’s article 162 prohibits ‘unnatural offences’, ‘indecent practices’ and ‘carnal knowledge against the order of nature’, all of which can be used to criminalise LGBTQI+ people and expose them to the risk of lengthy jail sentences. LGBTQI+ campaigners mobilised in numbers at the courthouse and online, under the banner of #Repeal162, urging their country to join the wave of those embracing change, but the three-judge panel thwarted their hopes, **ruling** that there was insufficient evidence of discrimination.

Conservative faith groups and leading politicians – including Kenya’s president – have continually positioned LGBTQI+ identities as incompatible with national values or downplayed the importance of the issue. Following the court decision, a swift **backlash** was mobilised by anti-rights groups. As in Botswana, it seemed LGBTQI+ people and groups were being attacked for daring to make themselves visible. In July, several conservative faith groups joined together to file a petition to parliament calling on the government to investigate the funding of LGBTQI+ groups working in Kenya, including funders such as HIVOS and Open Society Foundations. The groups pointed to Kenya’s Constitution in justification of their petition, given its references to Christianity and the family. As in Singapore, the implication was that LGBTQI+ identities were a foreign-funded import.

The struggle will continue in Kenya, and civil society will appeal against the decision. Progress is possible, even in unfavourable conditions: in one positive change, in August, Kenya’s national census **included** a third gender option of intersex alongside those of female and male, something that could

help challenge the social invisibility of people who do not conform to narrow gender binaries.

STILL NO PROGRESS: LGBTQI+ RIGHTS IN UGANDA

But across the border in Uganda, no progress was made in the recognition of LGBTQI+ rights in 2019. Discrimination and violence against sexual and gender minorities continued unabated.

As in Kenya, much of this came from the top. In May, the police chose to mark the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia by **raiding** an event held at the offices of Chapter Four Uganda, a CSO that promotes the civil and political rights of LGBTQI+ people. Police ordered the cancellation of the event and prevented people from entering the office; participants were forced to move their meeting to a private home. This was one of several events disrupted by the police on the orders of the Minister of State for Ethics and Integrity, and was consistent with long-time President Yoweri Museveni’s repeated stoking of homophobia for political advantage.

In another shameful episode, 16 Ugandan LGBTQI+ activists working for a sexual health CSO were **arrested** in October and forced to undergo anal examinations; if found guilty of engaging in gay sex, they face life sentences. As **Pepe Julian Onziema** of **Sexual Minorities Uganda** (SMUG) describes, the government’s repression of LGBTQI+ rights is only part of the problem. Social attitudes and the influence of US anti-rights groups are working hand in hand with regressive laws and divisive politics:

If I had to say which the biggest problem is, I’d say it’s social attitudes and widespread lack of acceptance. If this changes, I am sure the law would follow.

There is a lot of gay panic because if anyone just mentions that someone else is LGBTQI+, it is to be expected that action will be taken, including physical violence. They can beat up the accused person or use extortion and blackmail. This is especially common with trans people, who are accused of impersonating someone else, adopting a fake identity.

The intolerance enshrined in the law and expressed in social attitudes is fuelled by anti-rights groups and leaders. This backlash was particularly intense around 2009, when right-wing evangelical groups from the USA came to Uganda and helped our government draft a law, the Uganda Anti-Homosexuality Act, that would have criminalised same-sex relationships and introduced the death penalty for serial offenders, HIV-positive people who engage in sexual activity with people of the same sex, and people who engage in same-sex sexual acts with minors. The law also sought to punish the promotion of LGBTQI+ rights with fines, imprisonment, or both.

We fought this bill for years. The proponents of the law said that we are after children, that we were recruiting them and needed to be stopped. They wanted to turn people into spies – our own neighbours, our parents, teachers, doctors and priests. Anyone who knew a gay person had to report this fact to the authorities or they would also become a criminal.

A modified version of the bill was passed in 2013, and it punished ‘aggravated homosexuality’ with life in prison instead of the death penalty. In reaction, the US State Department announced several sanctions against Uganda, and in 2014 the Constitutional Court annulled the law on a technicality. But its effects are still there, in the form of ingrained discrimination against LGBTQI+ people. And the root causes of such laws being proposed in the first place are also still there. It all comes down to the idea of turning people’s religious belief into law.

As with several feminist CSOs discussed above, it is hard for CSOs that advocate for LGBTQI+ rights to access the freedom of association. Because homosexuality is illegal in Uganda, no organisation deemed to be promoting what is defined as a crime is allowed to register formally as a CSO. This makes it easier to restrict them. Still, as Pepe relates, civil society has been able to identify some cracks in the system and work within them:

SMUG was founded in 2004, so it will soon be turning 16 years old, and is still unregistered. As well as the lack of legal recognition, we face restrictions in our daily work. For instance, when we hold a

workshop or some formal function for the community, we are usually raided by the police. The Minister of Ethics and Integrity has been particularly notorious and shameless in shutting down our meetings. He has gone on radio and other media to say that he would never allow LGBTQI+ organisations. So we try to keep up our work by doing it through collaborations with other CSOs, but there’s only so much we can do, because when they learn that we are working with us then somehow they also become targets by association.

Our right to associate is limited in several ways, but we’ve been persistent and consistent in challenging the government. We take advantage of legal loopholes and organise ourselves as a loose group. We have sued the government on the basis that the constitution grants us the right to the freedom of association. We’ve found the court system is not terribly fair, but still, it does not always work against us, and we have won several cases.

In the past few years, the High Court has issued several progressive rulings, stating that the fundamental rights recognised in the constitution, such as the right to personal liberty, the right not to be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, and the right to privacy, apply to all citizens. As a result of a High Court ruling on discrimination, it is now possible for LGBTQI+ people to file cases against employers who have fired or harassed them, or landlords who have evicted them. So we’ve seen some progress within the justice system, and this has given us the courage to continue going to the courts to fight when the government wants to impose further restrictions.

We’ve worked a lot to raise awareness, informing people that even under our regressive laws, being gay is actually not a crime. It’s subtle, but the law talks about acts that are not permitted, rather than about identities that are not allowed to exist. There is more awareness of this now, but this awareness has made intolerant people more clever: they know they cannot denounce someone just for being gay, so they go on and invent stories. They tell the police false stories about things that gay people have done, so the police have to come and arrest them.

While the work of LGBTQI+ civil society remains difficult, efforts to raise awareness appear to be achieving some impact, as Pepe indicates:

We put most of our work on social media, and about 10 years ago, we would find out on Facebook that 98 or and 99 per cent of Ugandans were against homosexuality. Ninety-nine per cent – it's crazy, because it would mean that even gay people – who are definitely more than one per cent of the population – rejected homosexuality.

But now we've come to the point where both sides appear to be more balanced. We post something on our website or our social media platforms, and find reactions are split approximately in half. So I think there has been a change of attitudes, especially among young people, because there are a lot of young people on social media who really don't care about this whole debate over sexuality. They are just trying to live their lives.

Still, a further challenge that needs to be addressed, similarly to Botswana, is the lack of unified action among civil society. Only a handful of Ugandan CSOs stand with LGBTQI+ civil society, Pepe reports. In response there is a need, he suggests, to build a greater coalition to achieve change, but to always ensure that the voices of LGBTQI+ people themselves are put at the centre of any attempts to claim rights:

There definitely are divisions within civil society. You have to remember that we all come from the same society and have the same background, which is religious, and we are talking about a society and a religion that consider homosexuality as an abomination. However, there are a few – fewer than 10 – CSOs that stand with us. Most of our allies are organisations working on health, and a couple of them do legal work. They have all come from a long way educating themselves about LGBTQI+ issues, and when they do not know something, they ask.

What we need most urgently is to empower more LGBTQI+ people to occupy positions of influence. We've experienced violence and discrimination from within the movement, from our own allies, so we need to start having more honest conversations and better accountability for the work that human rights organisations do on LGBTQI+ issues, and see if they really understand what they are doing. To me, it's about power coming back to the LGBTQI+ community, and the LGBTQI+ community being able to use those positions of power to speak up and negotiate for our own freedom. So my main advice would be, don't fund other people to speak for us, because we can speak for ourselves.

“ IT'S ABOUT POWER COMING BACK TO THE LGBTQI+ COMMUNITY, AND THE LGBTQI+ COMMUNITY BEING ABLE TO USE THOSE POSITIONS OF POWER TO SPEAK UP AND NEGOTIATE FOR OUR OWN FREEDOM. SO MY MAIN ADVICE WOULD BE, DON'T FUND OTHER PEOPLE TO SPEAK FOR US, BECAUSE WE CAN SPEAK FOR OURSELVES.”

PEPE JULIAN ONZIEMA





LGBTQI+ people protest for rights on 30 June 2019 in Istanbul, Turkey. Credit: Chris McGrath/Getty Images

PRIDE, PROTEST AND PUSHBACK

As in Taiwan and in common with the struggles for women's rights, alongside action in the courts there was often activism on the streets, as numerous public mobilisations challenged the exclusion of LGBTQI+ people. For example, in Israel in June, 23 same-sex couples took part in an unofficial **mass wedding** to protest against discrimination by conservative faith groups and the state's continued denial of equal marriage rights.

Pride events, held annually in many contexts, have become an important means of how LGBTQI+ people make themselves visible and their demands for rights mainstream. For example, Timor-Leste **held** its third annual pride event in its capital Dili in July, with around 3,000 people participating and President Francisco Guterres expressing his support for the event. Ukraine **held** one of its biggest pride events in June, which passed with no major incidents, under strict security measures to prevent disruption from anti-rights groups.

As with many women's rights protests, pride marches often took place against backdrops of harassment, threats and some physical violence, from security forces and anti-rights groups. Serbia's annual pride march, held in September, passed peacefully, but extremist nationalist groups **mobilised** a show of force with the aim of preventing the march through the centre of the capital, Belgrade, leading to clashes with the police. While the pride march was joined by Serbia's Prime Minister, Ana Brnabic, some people reported that the police had blocked them from accessing the march route, and others complained of being on the receiving end of derogatory remarks from law enforcement officers.

Cuba's government abruptly cancelled the annual, state-organised pride march – the Conga Against Homophobia – shortly before it was due to take place in May. The decision, after the government claimed that people would use the march to undermine the state, was condemned by many LGBTQI+ activists, who saw rather a government giving ground to socially conservative forces. Tensions around the recognition of LGBTQI+ people in Cuba came to the fore in 2018 when attempts to include a gender-neutral definition of marriage in the country's new constitution were **blocked** by conservative faith groups, and activists saw the cancellation of the march as

another concession to these increasingly influential voices.

In response, activists organised their own event, the Alternative March Against Homophobia, working via **social media** to coordinate. Over 100 people **defied** the authorities to mobilise. Because the event did not have government permission, it attracted a heavy and violent police reaction, and at least five people were arrested. Police officers were stationed outside the houses of some protest organisers, who were **arrested** as they tried to go to the event. But Cuba's LGBTQI+ activists had at least demonstrated a new agency, organising for the first time outside of state structures.

In Turkey, 19 people – 18 of them students – were **arrested** for taking part in a pride march at their university campus in May, after they refused to disperse in the face of pepper spray, teargas and rubber bullets fired by the police. At the time of writing they were awaiting trial. Even in the open civic space conditions of Canada, to be visible and vocal could bring risks. A pride march in Hamilton, Ontario in June was subject to several acts of **violence** by a group of organised thugs brought together by conservative faith groups. The police were reportedly late to intervene and made no arrests. However, such risks did not deter people. In Edmonton, Alberta in May, thousands of students **walked out** of classes in protest at the new state premier's proposed law to inform parents if their child joins a gay-straight school alliance; protests continued in June and July. While the law was passed in July, the protests showed once again how young people are prepared take mass action not only on the climate emergency, but also on other profound questions of social justice.

TOP-DOWN HOMOPHOBIA: SPOTLIGHT ON POLAND

The pride events that took place in cities **across Poland** in 2019 did so amidst a toxic atmosphere in which hate speech and threats were mobilised by politically powerful right-wing forces.

Partly in reaction to the recent spread of pride marches across Poland, in 2019 around 30 local administrations declared their municipalities to be 'LGBT-free zones'. They did so with the evident encouragement of the

ruling Law and Justice Party and its related media platforms. The stoking of homophobia was clearly part of the right-wing nationalist party's strategy to consolidate its socially conservative support base ahead of October's election; in a similar attack to those seen in many other countries, the party leader described LGBTQI+ people as a 'foreign import' that threatens Poland's national identity and citizens.

Bart Staszewski of the **Lublin Equality March Association** describes the spread of 'LGBT-free zones', and what these meant for Poland's LGBTQI+ population:

A third of Polish municipalities have adopted resolutions 'against LGBT propaganda' which are essentially unwelcoming of LGBTQI+ people and practices – although the way they put it, it is as if being an LGBTQI+ person was some 'foreign ideology'. As a result, these municipalities have become so-called 'LGBT-free zones'. Local governments in these municipalities have issued non-binding resolutions in which they pledge to refrain from taking any action to encourage tolerance of LGBTQI+ people. While they do not have material implications in practice, their symbolic effect is huge, as they stigmatise LGBTQI+ people in a way that legitimises further attacks against us.

'LGBT-free zones' are the formalisation of homophobia, the institutionalisation of prejudice. They confirm homophobes in their beliefs and encourage them to turn them into action. The hooligans who throw stones at us during pride marches every year will now feel empowered because the law now tells them that they are 'protecting Christian values against homo-propaganda and ideology'. Families that don't accept their LGBTQI+ kids will now feel more confident about their hateful decisions. Teachers will feel uncomfortable when teaching content on LGBTQI+ issues in schools, now that they know that local politicians are against it – and they are the ones who make decisions on school funding. Some teachers have even asked us if they are allowed to teach anything at all related to LGBTQI+ issues after the new policies were put in place.

An increasing number of citizens are more confident than ever that

homophobia is good and something to be proud of. The idea that is being disseminated is that there is something wrong with LGBTQI+ people and you'd better be careful around them. Homophobic billboards have gone up in major cities across Poland, accusing homosexuals of molesting kids, associating them with paedophilia.

As Bart goes on to relate, the 'LGBT-free zones' are one facet of a powerful combined attack on Poland's LGBTQI+ community from different tiers of government and anti-rights groups:

Homophobia is growing due to the regressive government at all levels, from the national level to the very local. Governments at these different levels are using the same hate speech that we have already seen in Russia, in exactly the same wording, for example accusing LGBTQI+ organisations of disseminating 'homo-propaganda'. We are also facing growing homophobia on public TV, which disseminates what are basically 'fake news' stories about us.

They also produced a documentary, 'Invasion', which stated that the Polish LGBTQI+ movement is sponsored by the Hungarian-American billionaire George Soros, who according to them is paying people to attend pride events; this is why, according to them, so many people are attending our events.

But it is not just the government and the state media. The LGBTQI+ movement is not as afraid of the government as we are of anti-rights organisations like Ordo Iuris, a right-wing legal foundation that offers legal assistance to municipalities that are curtailing LGBTQI+ rights. They are a think tank for anti-LGBTQI+ rights and anti-women's rights policies, supporting reinforcing marriage laws as pertaining to the union of a man and a woman, total abortion bans and divorce bans. This group is quite well connected to the government; for instance, one of its prominent members was Poland's Secretary of State under the previous right-wing government. They are also connected to Agenda Europe, a pan-European, Christian fundamentalist network that seeks to restore 'natural order' and that offers an umbrella for many right-wing organisations across Europe.



As part of an awareness-raising campaign, LGBTQI+ people are photographed next to the billboards that design their hometowns as 'LGBT-free zones'. Credit: Bart Staszewski

They have people who teach in schools and universities and who are running a series of campaigns against us. All of their advocacy and campaigns have turned us into easy targets. Many activists, including myself, have received death threats for denouncing homophobia. The government has unleashed this with its homophobic rhetoric but now does not take responsibility for its consequences.

With powerful forces stoking homophobia, threats and violence against pride events were sadly inevitable. Tens of thousands of people defied the threats to march in the capital, Warsaw, joined by the Mayor of Warsaw and several foreign diplomats. But the mayor of the city of Rzeszow banned its pride event on security grounds; when this was overturned by the courts, the march took place under heavy police protection. Across Poland,

marches were often held amidst heavy police security, and in the face of threats and the hurling of objects such as eggs, while in the city of Białystok the projectiles were of a more serious nature, including flash bombs, glass bottles and rocks.

In another indication of the Polish authorities' increasing intolerance of LGBTQI+ expressions, in May a woman was **arrested** for making 'rainbow Madonna' posters, which juxtaposed a well-known religious icon with the colours of the rainbow flag. But in repudiation of such intolerance, a July **Twitter campaign** saw tens of thousands of people express support for LGBTQI+ rights under the '#jestemLGBT' ('I am LGBT') banner. Bart describes a further response that he led, which in part helped LGBTQI+ people confront the everyday homophobia they encounter:

I asked LGBTQI+ individuals that I knew in municipalities that had been declared 'LGBT-free zones' to participate in the project. It was key that the participants were from those areas, either still living there or that they had at least grown up there. I asked them if I could take a few photos of them with the signs. I took the first photos of LGBTQI+ people standing behind the 'LGBT-free zone' signposts in December 2019.

*I uploaded some photos to Facebook page, and then created a **webpage**, in the hope of triggering some debate in Poland. I never imagined it would lead to a worldwide response.*

Initial reactions depended a lot on how much interest in politics people had. Some of them had not really thought about the amount of homophobia they had been coexisting with. One of my project's participants, Kate, who was about 18 years old, first told me she did not feel anything had changed after her town had been declared an 'LGBT-free zone'. But then I asked her how she felt in the town that she lived in: could she hold hands with her girlfriend, go to a dance with her and dance together as a couple? And she said she could definitely not; she could not even imagine herself going out onto the street with her girlfriend. She was so deeply submerged in homophobia that she didn't even notice it was happening.

The situation in Poland remains a contested one. Evidently and sadly, the Law and Justice Party's homophobic strategy paid off: it **came first** in the October election, increasing its seats. But, as Bart relates, there are also some signs that public attitudes could shift towards greater support for LGBTQI+ rights, giving some cause for hope and a need for greater support:

Last year we had the biggest turnout at a pride march in Poland. My association conducted a survey that showed that even when homophobia is at its highest in Poland, people are more supportive than ever and are marching for equality and in support of same-sex civil unions. Our biggest problem is with the politicians and not the citizens. People have the internet, they have HBO and Netflix, they are more understanding and supportive than politicians. Things are slowly changing for the best, and we need to make sure they keep going that way.

HATE SPEECH, CENSORSHIP AND CULTURAL SILENCING

As the above examples demonstrate, prejudice against LGBTQI+ people is often fuelled from the top, stoked by political leaders and the anti-rights groups associated with them. Victor-Madriral Borloz, the UN's independent expert on sexual orientation and gender identity – a post **created in 2016** following civil society advocacy and opposed by many states – raised concerns in an August **report** about hate speech in South Korea coming from political and faith leaders towards LGBTQI+ people. Alongside some

“PEOPLE ARE MORE UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTIVE THAN POLITICIANS. THINGS ARE SLOWLY CHANGING FOR THE BEST, AND WE NEED TO MAKE SURE THEY KEEP GOING THAT WAY.”

BART STASZEWSKI



recent challenging of abortion rights (see above) South Korean civil society reports some recent growth in politically influential faith groups targeting sexual minorities.

A similarly top-down **moral panic** has been fuelled in Indonesia in recent years, after an education minister urged that LGBTQI+ people be banned from university campuses in 2016 and incumbent President Jokowi chose a stridently anti-LGBTQI+ cleric as his running mate in the April election ([see section](#)). The effect has been to reduce the visibility and voice of LGBTQI+ people in public life. A symbol of this continuing invisibility came in April, when a film, 'Memories of My Body', was **banned** by local authorities in a number of Indonesian cities because of its LGBTQI+ content, even though the national film censorship board had approved its release and it had been recognised at major international film festivals.

This was one of several examples of how repressive states and anti-rights groups tried to erase the visibility of LGBTQI+ people from popular culture,



People in Thailand demonstrate for LGBTQI+ rights on International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. Credit: Lauren DeCicca/Getty Images

potentially denying people the ability to see themselves and their issues represented on screen, and seeking to erase the reality of LGBTQI+ lives. Georgian film 'And Then We Danced' was also critically acclaimed, but its depiction of same-sex relations in the culturally conservative world of Georgian dance attracted a backlash from ultra-conservative groups. Filming had to take place under heavy **security** due to the level of threats. When the film was shown in Georgia in November, screenings were sold out but viewers had to face aggressive **far-right protests** that tried to stop them entering cinemas.

Even mass-market biopic Rocketman was deemed too sensitive for Samoan people, who were denied the opportunity to make their own minds up about it; in June its screening was **banned** by the Samoa Censorship Board, on the grounds that its depictions of same-sex relations were inconsistent with Christian beliefs and its narrow interpretation of the country's cultural values. LGBTQI+ civil society protested against the ban, as did members of Samoa's Fa'afafine community, a group of biological males who behave in traditionally feminine ways and have been part of the country's culture for centuries.

In Brazil, the evangelical mayor of Rio de Janeiro, Marcello Crivella, **ordered** armed police to stop the circulation of copies of a comic book at a major literary event because it depicted a same-sex kiss. The move sparked a spontaneous protest in support of the freedom of expression, while Brazil's highest-circulation **newspaper** printed the same-sex kiss on its front page. Issues over censorship in Brazil also came to the fore when Henrique Medeiros Pires, Brazil's special secretary of culture, **resigned** in August following the government's censorship of LGBTQI+ TV programming.

In Egypt, where the authoritarian state is driving an ongoing and vicious **crackdown** on LGBTQI+ rights, the repression of dissenting voices is such that in January, TV host Mohamed al-Gheiti was **sentenced** to a year in jail merely for interviewing a gay man.

FIGHTING BACK IN THE FACE OF VIOLENCE

In some places, anti-LGBTQI+ violence was lethal. Honduran trans rights activist **Bessy Ferrera** of the Asociación Arcoiris collective was shot dead in July; members of the association reported receiving numerous threats and instances of intimidation, and had in vain sought protection from the National Protection Mechanism. Trans journalist Santiago Carbajal was shot dead on her way to participate in a TV programme the same month. Across the border in Guatemala, **two LGBTQI+ women**, Betzi Esmeralda Co Sagastume and Kelli Maritza Villagrán Recinos, were stabbed to death in April; their bodies were covered in homophobic messages. With Guatemalan law not recognising hate crimes, monitoring is hard and impunity widespread.

Again, prejudice took its cue from leading politicians. Guatemala held its first round of presidential elections in June and the run-off vote in August, and both main presidential candidates targeted LGBTQI+ people in an attempt to galvanise support, **pledging** to back a bill drafted by conservative faith groups that would prohibit any moves towards same-sex marriage and inclusive sex education, as well as banning abortion in all circumstances. Hate speech and violence against LGBTQI+ people, including from the police, accordingly soared. As in Poland, it seems LGBTQI+ people offered a convenient target, an enemy to organise a political constituency against and an expedient distraction from the widespread evidence of corruption implicating Guatemala's leaders. And as in Poland, worryingly, it appeared the strategy worked: **Alejandro Giammattei**, who has been compared to Brazil's President Bolsonaro, swept to power. Brazil itself saw a **surge** in attacks on LGBTQI+ people, alongside sexual assaults, GBV and racial abuse, after Bolsonaro took office in January.

In Paraguay too, top-down homophobia helped fuel violence. President Mario Abdo Benítez made numerous homophobic statements during the 2018 election campaign, effectively giving his supporters a licence to attack LGBTQI+ people. At a pride march in the city of Hernandarias in September, people were **assaulted** with flash grenades and stones, and anti-rights groups surrounded those protesting, making it harder for them to get medical help.

The attacks were not limited to Latin America. Russian activist **Yelena Grigoryeva** of the Alliance of Heterosexuals and LGBT People for Equal Rights was found murdered in July. She had reportedly notified the police that she was receiving death threats from unknown sources, but the police failed to take any action. Vykhod, a St Petersburg-based LGBTQI+ rights organisation, subsequently reported that an anti-rights group, known as the Saw Against LGBT movement, had published a list of activists against whom it threatened to take action. Yelena Grigoryeva's name was on the list.

As these examples indicated, the challenges and dangers are all too real. But civil society will keep fighting back. Hope is offered by the breadth and impact of the global backlash that followed the state of Brunei's **introduction** of its harsh sharia penal code in April, which brought in the punishment of death by stoning for gay sex, as well as for sodomy, adultery, rape and extramarital sex between non-Muslims. A range of other punishments were introduced for other actions codified as offences, including abortion, lesbian sex and indecent dressing.

With the Sultan of Brunei exerting a tight grip on the country's governance and his family owning the country's major media sources, it was hard for those within the country who were opposed to the harsh new punishments and at risk of death and violence at the hands of the state to speak out. But outside Brunei, there was an international outpouring of solidarity for the country's LGBTQI+ people. A **boycott** of the Sultan's extensive hotel interests, led by high-profile entertainment figures, put the issue firmly on the global agenda. Such was the strength of the reaction that the Sultan was forced to **concede** a moratorium on the gay-sex death penalty.

But while Brunei's repressive law remains on the books it still has power to subdue people. Civil society around the world will therefore continue to keep up the pressure for its repeal, mobilising solidarity for practical purposes. All across the globe it will continue to fall on civil society to demand that everyone has access to rights. We will need to keep building broad-based coalitions, modelling best practice within our own organisations and above all ensuring that the voices of people in excluded groups are placed front and centre in everything we do, making their voices heard and the realities of their lives visible.



LGBTQI+ activists in London, UK, protest against Brunei's law that made homosexuality punishable by stoning. Credit: Guy Smallman/Getty Images