



GENDER STRUGGLES: RESISTANCE AGAINST REGRESSION





Thousands of people take to the streets of Toulouse, France on International Women's Day, 8 March 2023.

Photo by Alain Pitton/NurPhoto via Getty Images.

After decades of steady progress, gender is now bitterly contested territory. Global movements for women's and LGBTQI+ rights brought about profound change in consciences, customs and institutions. They elevated more than half of humanity, excluded for centuries, to the status of holders of rights.

But these gains brought brutal backlash that has all but halted further progress. In 2023, women's and LGBTQI+ movements had to devote increasing efforts to defending rather than expanding rights. They still managed to achieve some memorable victories, such as the legalisation of abortion in Mexico and the recognition of same-sex marriage in Estonia – but strong regressive trends overshadowed these and other gains. From Russia's LGBTQI+ crackdown to Uganda's anti-gay law, and from Afghanistan's gender apartheid system to record levels of femicide in numerous countries, 2023 saw rights under attack.

Prospects of equality have receded. The 2023 United Nations (UN) report on gender progress across the 17 Sustainable Development Goals confirmed gender equality will by no means be achieved by the target date of 2030 ► **GO TO CHAPTER**. Instead, the World

Economic Forum estimates that, at the current rate, it will take another 131 years to achieve gender parity. The Gender Social Norms Index **reports** that nine out of 10 people of all genders are biased against women. The figure hasn't budged in a decade.

Crises – which invariably hit women and girls **the hardest** – worsened in 2023. The number of women and girls living in conflict contexts reached **614 million** in 2022, up 50 per cent from 2017, and the multiple conflicts raging in 2023 are pushing it even higher ► **GO TO CHAPTER**. In war after war, women's bodies have become battlefields, weapons and bounty – but women have refused to be pigeonholed as victims, standing at the forefront of humanitarian response and peacebuilding efforts, including in **Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine**.

Women are likelier to live in extreme poverty than men, and when food is scarce, they're often the ones eating last and least. **Sixty per cent** of an estimated 690 million people currently facing food insecurity are female, and growing food insecurity caused by climate change will **affect** women and girls disproportionately.



AT THE CURRENT PACE, GENDER PARITY WILL TAKE **131** MORE YEARS



ONLY ABOUT **10%** OF STATES ARE LED BY WOMEN



1 IN 3 WOMEN EXPERIENCE PHYSICAL OR SEXUAL VIOLENCE AT LEAST ONCE IN THEIR LIVES



65 COUNTRIES STILL CRIMINALISE SAME-SEX RELATIONS



SAME-SEX MARRIAGE IS NOW LEGAL IN **37** COUNTRIES

A regressive political current worsened the situation in 2023. Throughout the year, anti-gender narratives made headway on all continents and across cultural and ideological divides, driven by well-organised and well-connected anti-rights movements. Supported by powerful conservative foundations, anti-rights movements are **much better funded** than their progressive counterparts, and have coopted human rights language to shift the narrative. In 2023, this fuelled more violence and harassment of gender activists and LGBTQ+ people.

Just as feminist struggles became more necessary than ever, they also became harder. Three quarters of activists **surveyed**

in 67 countries reported threats or harassment against them or their organisations. A third reported incidents targeting their families and a quarter reported they'd received death threats. Reflecting democratic setbacks in many countries, almost 60 per cent identified state authorities as the source of heightened risk. Conditions for activism have declined steeply and quickly and, in a global context where gender-based violence remains pervasive, politically motivated harassment now tends to pass off as part of the everyday violence against women or LGBTQI+ people, when it's a specific weapon of repression – and one taking a severe toll.

Still, civil society resisted by supporting activists under threat, reclaiming the human rights narrative, campaigning for social change, promoting legal reform, demanding accountability and challenging impunity. Alongside the victories in Estonia and Mexico, campaigners in Mauritius claimed a crucial court victory decriminalising same-sex relations. In the USA, the source of so much of the global anti-abortion and anti-gender backlash, civil society and allies have stepped up, creating networks of support and passing laws to protect abortion and LGBTQI+ rights. While they didn't make up for the rollback on rights, these efforts improved many lives and proved that the struggle for equality is far from over.

THE GENDER GAP

Even before 2023 brought further regression, gender equality was still a long way off. As the year began, the **gender gap** – the unfair disparities between women and men in status and opportunities – had barely returned to pre-pandemic levels, with only nine countries, five in Europe, having closed it by at least 80 per cent. Just 14 countries— 13 in Europe plus Canada—legally guaranteed equal rights for women and men. Likewise, just 61.4



Students raise candles and red roses during a 'Dark Valentine' vigil to commemorate the lives of young victims of femicides at the University of Nairobi, Kenya on 14 February 2024.

per cent of prime working-age women were in the global labour force, compared to 90 per cent of men. On average, the next generation of women will still spend over two hours extra a day on unpaid care and domestic work than their male counterparts.

Parity in decision-making remains a long way away. Although by early 2023 there were **more women than ever** in positions of power around the world, women were still vastly underrepresented in leadership. Only 9.8 per cent of countries had female heads of state and 11.3 per cent women heads of government, representing hardly any progress over the last

decade. Only 13 countries, mostly in Europe, had gender-equal cabinets, while there were nine with no female ministers.

2023 wasn't a year of firsts, but 2024 will likely see **Mexico** elect its first-ever woman president, as the two front-runners are women. However, women who take these roles aren't necessarily feminists or champions of women's rights, as seen with **far-right prime minister** Giorgia Meloni in Italy – and when they are, they often experience relentless **gender trolling**, as was the experience of former **New Zealand prime minister** Jacinda Ardern, who resigned in January 2023.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE TO THE FORE

Among the many daily struggles of women's movements around the world, gender-based violence was undeniably at the top of the agenda in 2023. Throughout the year, women's movements provided support for victims and survivors and took to the streets to demand government action to put an end to violence.

A **femicide epidemic** is underway. **Around 48,800** women and girls were killed by intimate partners or other family members in 2022. These killings represented over half – 55 per cent – of all female homicides, compared to only 12 per cent for men. Estimates indicate Africa and Asia had the highest prevalence of femicides, although no national bodies seem to be keeping count.

While fresh global estimates aren't yet available, there are no reasons to expect things improved in 2023. If anything, the year's multiple conflicts and crises likely made things worse. Countries in Latin America, including **Argentina** and **Brazil**, reported record numbers of **femicides** in 2023. Even where the total number fell,

as in **Mexico**, the number of people murdered for their gender remained staggeringly high. Overall, **no country** came close to eradicating intimate partner violence in 2023, and only 27 have comprehensive systems to track and provide funding for gender equality and women's empowerment.

It's **estimated** that almost one in three women — a dizzying 736 million — have experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence at least once in their lives. Given likely under-reporting, numbers could be much higher.

“ I personally don't know a woman who has not been affected by some form of this insidious violence. Women have the right to feel free and safe in their own bodies, at home, in the streets and in any public spaces, but unfortunately that is not — and has never been — their reality. We need to start believing survivors so that perpetrators can be brought to justice. When women see the law is on their side, more will be encouraged to speak up.



LINA ABIRAFEH
Arab Institute for Women, Lebanon

If women were the ones making policy, a problem of this magnitude surely wouldn't be ignored. But with women shut out of political power almost everywhere, it's no wonder governments provide ridiculously insufficient budgets to respond to and prevent gender-based violence. Many don't even recognise it as a problem.

In the face of this injustice, women's organisations and activists all over the world work daily to create safe spaces, support victims and survivors, increase public awareness and mobilise and advocate for the adoption and implementation of policies to tackle the problem. Some paid a steep price, targeted with the

violence they strive to eliminate. Among them was **Lilia Patricia Cardozo**, director of a women's rights organisation in Colombia's Boyacá region, injured in an acid attack in April.

One of the most dangerous things women's rights activists do, particularly in contexts of closed civic space, is take on ingrained discriminatory values that underpin violence against women. Harassment and criminalisation are common responses, as seen in countries including **Afghanistan**, Iran, **Saudi Arabia** and **Syria**.

Protests against gender-based violence

Protests focused on gender-based violence on key dates in the women's movement's calendar. When women took to the streets on 8 March, International Women's Day, gender-based violence often shared the spotlight with other issues, and 25 November, Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, was dedicated exclusively to the problem. People also protested when instances of gender-based violence struck a chord.

Gender-based violence was front and centre in many International Women's Day events in Asia, Europe and Latin America. This focus was particularly prominent in **Italy**, **Mexico**, **Pakistan** and **Turkey**. Even in countries where protests are relatively rare due to restrictions, such as **Kyrgyzstan**, people marched on 8 March to demand an end to gender-based violence.

Again on 25 November, women's rights organisations around the world joined UN experts in **calling on states** to increase efforts and dedicate resources to preventing violence and helping survivors. Women **mobilised** across Latin America, including in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, **Uruguay** and Venezuela. They took to the streets in numerous **French**, **Italian** and **Spanish cities**, and across Europe from Portugal to Turkey.

In Italy, this year's march reflected a fresh wave of anger at the femicide of 22-year-old student Giulia Cecchettin, who'd been reported missing before her body was found on 18 November. Countering media coverage that sympathetically portrayed her controlling ex-boyfriend, suspected of **killing** her, feminists **insisted** that '**femicide** is not a crime of passion, it is a crime of power'.

Pressure worked, and on 22 November Italian lawmakers unanimously **backed** a raft of measures to clamp down on violence against women. The Ministry of Education presented an initiative that included awareness-raising activities in schools and information campaigns, but was criticised for not involving gender-based violence experts in its design.

When the education minister called for a minute's silence to honour Giulia in schools and universities, many students chose to make a minute of noise instead, symbolising their demand to break the silence surrounding femicides. In the run-up to 25 November, feminist collectives in several cities **organised** torchlight walks and 'angry walks'. On 25 November, up to half a million people marched in a national protest held by the **Non Una Di Meno** movement in Rome.

Anger at femicides following a **rise in killings** also fuelled protests in Kenya in January 2024. Much like in Argentina in 2015, when a string of gruesome femicides set off the #NiUnaMenos movement that became a regional watershed, it was Kenyan civil society that sounded the alarm. While state institutions weren't paying attention, a civil society organisation, Femicide Count Kenya, steadily **documented cases** to force the issue onto the agenda and urge the state to produce the public policies needed to address it. The crimes that triggered mobilisation followed a common trend: they were mostly perpetrated by men who were in intimate relationships with their victims.

This element was similarly at the centre of the debate in Bulgaria, where an infamous case of gender-based violence triggered large demonstrations and brought about positive change.

Following years of efforts by women's rights advocates, in July 2023 Bulgaria's parliament finally reformed the Protection Against Domestic Violence Act to criminalise violence in intimate relationships. The change was met with instant anti-rights backlash, with those against claiming it sought to implement what they call 'gender ideology' – a **catch-all term** used by opponents around the world to vilify advocacy for equal rights. They also claimed the intent was to force the ratification of the Istanbul Convention – the Council of Europe treaty against gender-based violence that Bulgaria, unlike most European states, hasn't ratified. The Bulgarian Socialist Party **collected signatures** for a referendum against 'gender ideology' in schools.

The changes didn't satisfy the women's movement either, because they were based on a narrow definition of what constitutes an 'intimate relationship', leaving those in relationships other than marriage or domestic partnerships unprotected. This included an 18-year-old woman beaten and disfigured by her boyfriend in the city of Stara Zagora. The attack happened in June, but only became public in late July, when her family talked to the media out of frustration with the slow pace of the investigation. Unprecedented mass protests that followed in the capital, Sofia, and across the country, forced parliament to amend the law to widen its scope.

Still, protections under the new version of the bill only apply to relationships at least 60 days old. Additionally, a last-minute change inserted the words 'man' and 'woman' into the definition, excluding people in same-sex relationships. Women's rights activists continue demanding further change.



Activists of feminist group Femen stage a protest against femicides in Madrid, Spain on 27 January 2024.

There was a shift in public sentiment that revealed heightened awareness and empathy for victims. The usual response in these cases is often victim-blaming. This time, however, many more people sided with the victim. Although some anti-rights voices questioning the victim's innocence emerged, particularly on social media, most public figures refrained from such insensitivity. As a result, we have started to see more and more domestic violence cases being reported on the media.



VICTORIA PETROVA
Bulgarian Fund for Women



INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2023: NOT ONE STEP BACK

#METOO STRIKES BACK

Eight years after it first erupted, #MeToo made waves again in 2023. In **Taiwan**, a TV series on sexual harassment in politics opened up a long-overdue conversation on the issue and gave several female ruling party employees the courage to accuse powerful politicians of sexual harassment and assault. As the movement spread to cultural and academic circles, more women came forward with allegations against hundreds of celebrities, doctors and professors who'd long taken advantage of their positions to abuse women.

Soon after, **Spanish football** had a #MeToo moment, unleashed by the non-consensual public kissing of a female player by the male president of the football federation when Spain won the Women's World Cup. Reflecting a polarised political environment ahead of an election in July in which the far-right

Vox party hoped to make strides, opinions split between those who supported the women's movement's demands and those who judged their outrage misplaced or exaggerated. Three weeks after the scandal erupted, the culprit **resigned**.

Public opinion has been divided. There are those of us who believe we have a responsibility to work for equality in sport and to eradicate all expressions of sexist violence. However, others have trivialised, minimised, denied, ignored and ridiculed this episode.



ISABEL ABELLA RUIZ DE MENDOZA
lawyer and equality consultant, Spain

There are obviously some who think we women are overreacting. But the reality is that we are no longer willing to tolerate disrespect or abuse of power. There is no turning back now.



ELEONORA GIOVIO
El País newspaper, Spain

A few months before, the Spanish parliament had passed a law on **paid menstrual leave**, allowing women to call in sick if they experience 'incapacitating menstruation'. The same polarisation could be seen: feminists celebrated the change but the far right decried it as a step too far. The backlash is telling. According to **polls**, the number of Spaniards – overwhelmingly but not only men – who think equality has gone 'too far' and see it as anti-male discrimination is increasing.

In Spain and beyond, 'men's rights' influencers are on the rise, shaping the worldviews of boys and young men who get sucked into the '**manosphere**', the online universe of anti-feminist men's groups.

These groups are multiplying beyond Europe and North America, increasingly in Latin America and also Africa and Asia. In South Korea, this kind of anti-feminism has weighed decisively on politics. In its **2022 presidential election**, the candidate who narrowly won appealed to disaffected young men who see limited progress made in addressing women's inequality as coming at their expense. Despite blatant persisting gender inequalities, the new government **announced** it would abolish the gender equality ministry, triggering a reaction to the reaction, as women took to the streets to protest. **Harassment** of women viewed as feminists has increased under its watch.

GENDER APARTHEID

The most extreme expressions of anti-women repression in 2023 were seen in Afghanistan and Iran. The year saw the Taliban, back in power since August 2021, consolidate their rule in Afghanistan, and the theocratic regime of the ayatollahs recover its footing in Iran. These may be outliers, but they show how far the backlash can go if left unchecked.

In Afghanistan, the year began with the Taliban **banning** women from universities and civil society jobs. In July the authorities ordered the closure of **beauty salons**, one of the few places left for women to gather outside their homes. By the two-year mark, the regime had stripped women of all their rights, almost succeeding in erasing them completely from public life.

But Afghan women still refused to comply and remained at the forefront of acts of defiance against the regime. The announcement of the forced closure of beauty salons prompted a small **women's protest** in Kabul on 19 July. In August, ahead of the second anniversary of the Taliban's return, a group of women

in burqas **gathered** to demand the right to education in the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif.

The authorities pre-emptively suppressed other planned protests, such as those around Independence Day in September. Activists adjusted their activities to reduce risk, holding **indoor rallies** in private homes and sharing photos and videos of their events on social media and through their **networks** at home and abroad. Navigating restrictions, they have continued producing information and advocating for their rights through an **online magazine** and a **radio** station.

It's a similar story in Iran. A brutal government crackdown that extended into 2023 suffocated the wave of protests sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini at the hands of the morality police in September 2022. With more than 500 dead, Iranian acts of civil disobedience became more subtle. But they never went away.

Despite the authorities' success in regaining control, we have continued to see acts of civil disobedience across Iran. Activists, artists and academics express themselves through social media and make public displays of protest not wearing hijab. The fact that the voices of protesters have not been silenced sustains hope for change.



SOHRAB RAZAGHI
Volunteer Activists, Iran

Iranian activists, in the country and among the diaspora, kept up the pressure to try to focus international attention on the plight of Iranian women even as many other tragedies unfolded elsewhere. Women all over the world **expressed solidarity** with their Afghan and Iranian sisters on International Women's Day, and again shortly after the first anniversary of the protests, when the Nobel Committee awarded the **2023 Peace Prize** to Narges Mohammadi, an imprisoned Iranian woman activist who for

more than 20 years has demanded democracy, human rights and women's rights in Iran.

However, the international community hasn't taken any fresh action over Iran's treatment of women. The surge in conflict in the Middle East enables Iran to exploit its strategic regional role, strengthening the theocracy and dampening down the prospects of international pressure ► **GO TO CHAPTER.**



The people of Iran are unfortunately not receiving the international support that they need. The Islamic Republic will retain its power as long as international support for internal struggles doesn't materialise.



ASAL ABASIAN
journalist and queer feminist activist, Iran

While resisting at home, Afghan and Iranian women sought international support to have **gender apartheid** recognised as a crime under international law so those responsible can be prosecuted and punished. The 1973 UN Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid only applies to racial hierarchies, but they want it extended to the specific and extreme form of gender-based discrimination and exclusion they suffer on a daily basis. Their demands have found an echo in pronouncements by **UN experts** and the **European Parliament**, while civil society has **warned** about the potential of similarly restrictive regimes to be imposed elsewhere, notably in parts of Yemen under Houthi rebel control.



READ MORE

- **AFGHANISTAN: GENDER APARTHEID MUST BE STOPPED**
- **IRAN, BACK TO THE GRIM NORMAL**



Feminist activists demand the decriminalisation of abortion in Mexico City on International Safe Abortion Day, 28 September 2023.

FIGHT STILL ON FOR ABORTION RIGHTS

Backlash from well-organised and lavishly funded international networks of ultraconservative forces placed abortion at the centre of culture wars in 2023, forcing women's movements increasingly on the defensive.

The long-term trend in abortion rights is progress, with **over 60 countries** liberalising their abortion laws over the past three decades. In contrast, only four have gone the other way. But regression has accelerated in recent years. El Salvador imposed a total ban in the late 1990s and Nicaragua did so in 2006. Poland

tightened its laws to eliminate nearly all exceptions in 2020 and the US Supreme Court eliminated abortion as a federal right in 2022. Reversals are rare but, particularly with the USA, highly consequential in slowing down global progress.

As the ultimate expression of a woman's right to make decisions about her body and life, abortion remained at the heart of the struggles of women's rights movements in many parts of the world, particularly the Americas. While the recent backlash has forced many to focus on resistance, others have been able to keep pushing for more. They've often faced disappointment – as in **Chile**, where hopes were dashed for a progressive new constitution that would have recognised sexual and reproductive rights – but sometimes decades of struggle finally paid off, as in Mexico.

Even in the USA, ground zero of the anti-rights backlash, it's far from game over for sexual and reproductive rights, as abortion rights advocates have raced to enact protections faster than anti-rights forces could introduce prohibitions.

In 2023, the first full year since the US Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, the Guttmacher Institute **documented** that US states enacted 417 provisions to protect reproductive rights or expand access to reproductive health, compared to 148 restricting access or curtailing rights. In reaction to bans, 22 states and the District of Columbia passed measures to protect abortion access, including '**shield laws**' – laws that protect healthcare professionals who provide abortion medication – that abortion rights advocates are using to reach out to women who need abortions in states where they're illegal.

But at the year's end, 14 states had total abortion bans and seven had limited access. Abortion bans have already had catastrophic impacts, with tens of thousands of **rape victims**

unable to terminate pregnancies caused by rape, women who've experienced miscarriages **exposed to** criminalisation and those with serious pregnancy complications **risking their lives**. Due to its key role in circumventing bans, abortion medication has increasingly become the target of **legal challenges**.

Abortion rights in the USA are at their weakest point in half a century, but there are early signs the backlash is backfiring. Pregnant women are taking **leading roles** in legal challenges to abortion bans, having become activists after experiencing firsthand the effects of restrictive policies.

Total bans are incredibly unpopular. According to a May 2023 **poll**, only 13 per cent think abortion should be completely illegal, while 51 per cent think it should be legal under some circumstances and 34 per cent in all circumstances. This made abortion a potential electoral lifeline for the Democratic Party, and as the 2024 presidential election grows closer it's been placed **at the centre** of its agenda. Drawing from the experience of the 2022 midterms, when many voters **rejected** anti-abortion Republican candidates and measures, rights groups have launched **initiatives** to put abortion rights on the ballot in several states, seeking to enshrine them in state constitutions.

Things went differently south of the border. After Argentina in 2020 and Colombia in 2022, Mexico, Latin America's second-biggest country, became the fifth to enshrine abortion rights.

In response to legal action taken by a women's rights organisation, on 6 September the Mexican Supreme Court declared the Federal Penal Code articles criminalising abortion unconstitutional. Abortion had already been decriminalised in a dozen Mexican states, but this ruling effectively decriminalised it in all 32, forcing federal health institutions to provide access to anyone requesting

the procedure. Now Mexican feminists continue to push for changes in the laws criminalising abortion that remain on the books of 20 states, while monitoring compliance so resistance in bureaucracies and medical institutions doesn't obstruct access, particularly for people from excluded groups.

There are conservative reactions and resistances all the time, but unlike what used to happen until a few years ago, these are no longer so up-front. The most important barrier we face today is the absence of service guarantees. Although there are never guarantees that backsliding won't occur, we currently have the advantage of very pro-choice public opinion.



BRENDA RODRIGUEZ
Information Group on Reproductive Choice, Mexico

The Mexican win had a strong regional dimension, as Latin American feminists work together to push for liberalisation in countries with total bans such as **El Salvador**, where women from poor backgrounds can receive long prison sentences for miscarriages and other obstetric emergencies.

Our movement is part of a broader movement that encompasses all of Latin America and the Caribbean. The green tide has been an inspiration for the whole region, and has even reached the USA. The tide has already become a tsunami that won't stop. We are deeply engaged with what is happening in Central America, where abortion is extremely criminalised. We have worked intensely to achieve the decriminalisation of abortion and effective access to this right in Mexico and across the region.



ALBA ADRIANA JIMÉNEZ PATLÁN
Network for Sexual and Reproductive Rights in Mexico

The Salvadoran women's rights movement is hoping for good news from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. The regional court is believed to be close to issuing a ruling in the case of **Beatriz v. El Salvador**, centred on a 21-year-old woman with health complications who carried a foetus that wouldn't survive outside the womb but was refused a request to terminate her pregnancy. Women's rights advocates argue the state violated multiple rights under the American Convention on Human Rights. The ruling is expected to establish that absolute abortion bans violate human rights, which would have positive regional repercussions.

Along with the USA, Poland is a notorious outlier in the long-term trend towards abortion liberalisation. In March 2023, a Polish court **convicted** abortion rights activist Justyna Wydrzynska, a member of the Abortion Dream Team organisation, for helping a pregnant woman access abortion pills. The work of her organisation, and the broader cause of abortion rights, was vindicated in December when the European Court of Human Rights **ruled** that Poland's restrictive legislation, which prevented a woman accessing an abortion and forced her to travel abroad, violated her right to privacy and family life, protected under the European Convention on Human Rights.

But change may be coming in Poland, where Prime Minister Donald Tusk **returned to office** in October 2023 on promises to liberalise abortion laws within his first 100 days ► **GO TO CHAPTER**. It's not a done deal. **Opposition** comes both from the far-right nationalist Law and Justice party, the former ruling party that brought in the ban, and within the new ruling coalition. But mobilised women, on the frontlines of the three-year resistance against the ban and a key factor in Tusk's victory, are **determined** to hold him to his promise.

The balance is tipping in favour of women's rights elsewhere in Europe. In October 2022, Finland's parliament passed a **law** eliminating the requirement for women seeking abortions to state their motivations and seek approval from two doctors. The updated legislation entered into force in September. And in France, in reaction to global regression, on International Women's Day President Emmanuel Macron **announced** an initiative to enshrine abortion rights in the constitution so they'd become '**irreversible**'. The **change** materialised in early 2024.



READ MORE

- MEXICO ON THE RIGHTS PATH
- USA: BATTLE STILL ON FOR ABORTION RIGHTS

PRIDE, REGRESSION AND DEFIANCE

The same forces pushing regression in women's rights are driving attacks on LGBTQI+ rights. Against this challenging backdrop, LGBTQI+ people around the world keep mobilising to assert visibility, demand respect for diversity and claim equal rights.

LGBTQI+ rights follow a long-term trend of progress similar to that of women's rights, with most countries decriminalising same-sex relations in the second half of the 20th century and early 21st, initially in Europe and the Americas and then in other global regions, with a peak in the 1990s and a steady trickle afterwards. Recognition of further rights followed decriminalisation, including equal marriage and adoption rights, the right to legally change gender, recognition of genders beyond the male-female binary and bans on multiple forms of discrimination.

But still today, **65 countries and territories** – most in Africa, followed by Asia and the Middle East – still criminalise private, consensual, same-sex sexual activity, particularly between men. In 12, people found guilty can be handed the death penalty, and six have applied it.

The good news is that the list of criminalising states no longer includes Mauritius and Nepal, both of which liberalised their laws in 2023. But some countries that criminalise same-sex relations took the path of further regression, notably Uganda followed by Ghana, states that are increasing penalties and pressure to the point of making life unbearable for LGBTQI+ people.

Progress was achieved on another key front, with same-sex marriage now legal in 37 countries– including Estonia, which legalised it in 2023, and **Greece**, which did so in February 2024. Progress has been swift: the first country to recognise equal marriage rights was The Netherlands in 2001, with many making the change around the mid-2010s.

Although there've been some disappointments – notably in the Caribbean, where a decriminalising trend that swept three countries in 2022 didn't spread further in 2023 – most global regions saw some progressive change over the past year. But progress has significantly slowed down, with a powerful backlash making the situation of LGBTQI+ people much worse in numerous countries, notably in Commonwealth Africa and parts of Europe and the USA.

But rather than cowering LGBTQI+ activism into quitting, the anti-rights reaction only encouraged it to push harder – through legal advocacy, public campaigning, mutual assistance, solidarity and protest. In the face of attempts to deny LGBTQI+ people's right to exist in public, LGBTQI+ movements responded by defiantly asserting their visibility.



Photo by Louisa Gouliamak/Reuters via Gallo Images.

People celebrate the legalisation of same-sex civil marriages outside the Greek parliament in Athens on 15 February 2024.

Where they could be held, Pride events were a key response. Underneath all the glitter, they were clearly still protests. Participants used them to celebrate hard-won victories, build the unity that offers the strength to fight back against setbacks and express solidarity with people in more restrictive environments unable to mobilise.



READ MORE

➤ PRIDE 2023: DEFIANT JOY AGAINST ANTI-RIGHTS BACKLASH

Anti-trans hysteria in the USA

Anti-LGBTQI+ reaction in the USA, long a source of inspiration and funding for anti-rights forces around the world, focused obsessively on trans rights. Under one per cent of people are transgender, but the issue offers a lightning rod to mobilise regression in what anti-rights movements insist is a 'war on woke'.

Culture wars played out largely in US state legislatures, where the American Civil Liberties Union tracked a record total of **506 anti-LGBTQI+ bills** put forward in 2023. Of these, 140 aimed to restrict student and educator rights, while 80 focused on healthcare, mostly seeking restrictions and bans on access to gender-affirming care for young trans people. Sixty-five weakened civil rights laws, including by embracing narrow definitions of gender identities and undermining non-discrimination legislation through religious exemptions, while 25 contained free speech and expression bans, including to prohibit or censor performances like drag shows. Nine limited people's ability to update gender information on public documents while seven banned transgender people from public facilities such as public bathrooms. Sixty-nine additional bills included bans on same-sex marriage and a mix of other restrictions. Overall, 214 of these bills were defeated but 84 passed into law.

More than half of these restrictive bills targeted young trans people, **almost 100,000** of whom now live in US states that have recently banned their access to healthcare, sports or school bathrooms.

As was sure to happen, receding legal protections have been accompanied by **intensifying violence** against LGBTQI+ people.

But LGBTQI+ activists, including parents of young trans people, haven't simply let rights slip away. Their continuing fight for recognition and against discrimination and violence resulted in an even bigger number of progressive initiatives. Some states banned '**conversion therapies**', pseudoscientific practices aimed at changing people's sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression that UN experts consider akin to torture. Others passed shield laws to protect doctors and parents who prescribe or seek access to healthcare for transgender young people. An estimated half of US young transgender people now live in states with these protections.

As with the anti-abortion backlash, which has left the USA split between reproductive rights deserts and haven states, battles over LGBTQI+ issues are causing a situation where access to rights increasingly depends on place of residence. The fact that some people are **switching states** to those that confirm their worldviews can only reinforce bubbles and perpetuate culture wars.

Disappointment in the Caribbean

While 2023 saw deepening division in the USA, it brought disappointment in the Caribbean, underscoring the broad trend of mixed results following years of progress. After a year of unprecedented change that buoyed hopes, there was no further progress on LGBTQ+ rights in the Caribbean.

In 2022, courts in **three countries** of the Commonwealth Caribbean – Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados and St Kitts and Nevis – struck down regressive British colonial-era laws criminalising same-sex relations. After this crucial step, activists in these countries are pushing for more, **putting forward**

demands for states to recognise trans people and introduce effective anti-discrimination protections.

Six Caribbean countries still criminalise gay sex: Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St Lucia and St Vincent and the Grenadines. In February 2024, to activists' disappointment, the high court of St Vincent and the Grenadines **rejected** a civil society lawsuit against decriminalisation. But advocacy continues across the Caribbean. In 2023, Guyana's Pride Festival explicitly raised the **banner** of decriminalisation. So did Pride events in Jamaica, which **framed** the struggle for LGBTQI+ rights as a fight for full citizenship, **linking** liberation from repressive colonial-era legislation to the country's potentially imminent break from the British monarchy.

But civil society has experienced backlash rather than further progress, coming from an unlikely source: the signing of a cooperation agreement between Caribbean states and the European Union (EU).

The **Samoa Agreement** between the EU and members of the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States focuses on poverty reduction, trade cooperation and migration management – but also includes references to climate change, human rights and sexual and reproductive health and rights. In Commonwealth Caribbean **countries**, some governments read this as code for pressure to legalise abortion, sex education, same-sex marriage and other LGBTQI+ rights, which they view as opposed to local values and traditions, playing to the idea that demands for rights are western impositions.

Governments signed, but not without making clear to domestic LGBTQI+ movements they would keep setting the agenda with no plan to concede civil society demands.

The anti-rights offensive in Africa

In Africa, the already bleak outlook for LGBTQI+ rights mostly worsened, with some states that criminalise same-sex relations pushing for stronger enforcement of existing restrictions and the imposition of new punishments.

Thirty-one African countries criminalise same-sex relations. In many of them, LGBTQI+ activism is fully in resistance mode. LGBTQI+ people strive to connect and sustain one another but are often forced to stay in the closet, unable to assert visibility as LGBTQI+ activists and openly advocate for rights without fearing for their lives.

In many African countries, a slow but consistent long-term trend towards decriminalisation has brought anti-rights reaction. In country after country, politicians have introduced near-identical repressive bills following templates created by the US conservative organisation **Family Watch International**. Behind these are opportunistic politicians making a name for themselves, church leaders concerned with losing their relevance if society changes and government heads seeking to appeal to social conservatism to dampen potential threats to their power. While the anti-rights narrative in Africa denounces LGBTQI+ rights as 'un-African' and 'foreign imports', the role of US-based foundations in reinforcing a legacy of British rule leaves no doubt that it's the anti-rights reaction that's been imported from the global north.

Uganda has taken the lead. In May 2023, its parliament passed the Anti-Homosexuality Bill with near-unanimous support. Under the guise of protecting traditional church culture and family values against 'depravity' and 'promiscuity', the law increased jail terms to up to 20 years for people identifying as LGBTQI+ and made 'aggravated homosexuality' – a broad term that includes



Protesters march against Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Bill at the Uganda High Commission in Pretoria, South Africa on 4 April 2023.

those considered 'serial offenders' – punishable by death. In August, **the first** person, a 20-year-old man, was charged with 'aggravated homosexuality' under the law. Others followed.

The Anti-Homosexuality Act's main impact has been to enable abuses against LGBTQI+ people. A **report** by the Convening for Equality, a civil society coalition, found that the law and the rampant homophobic rhetoric that preceded its passage radicalised people against the LGBTQI+ community to the point that almost all the recent abuses documented – including torture, rape and eviction – were perpetrated by private individuals rather than state agents. Tracking by the Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum also showed a **marked increase** in human rights violations against LGBTQI+ people since the law came in.

Ugandan LGBTQI+ activists haven't cowered in the face of injustice and violence. The Strategic Response Team, a group of five LGBTQI+ organisations, documented the effects of the new law while coordinating community responses and offering referrals to providers of safe shelter and legal, safety and protection services. LGBTQI+ groups have also **challenged** the Anti-Homosexuality Act in Uganda's Constitutional Court.

The ruling is pending at the time of writing, but while waiting for it, activists face relentless violence. In January 2024, Steven Kabuye, head of the community action group Uganda Key Populations Consortium, was stabbed and left for dead in what was labelled a **hate crime**.

As the Anti-Homosexuality Act was being debated in parliament, Uganda hosted the first **Inter-Parliamentary Conference on Family Values and Sovereignty**. Held under the motto 'Protecting African Culture and Family Values', the meeting **brought together** numerous Christian fundamentalist, anti-rights hate groups and pseudo-experts from around the world, including conservative US foundations. Addressing politicians from at least 22 African states, President Yoweri Museveni spoke of his country as the spearhead of the 'fight against vice' and for the 'survival of the human race'. Many signalled they'd follow suit.

Politicians in some, like **Ghana**, were already pushing draconian anti-LGBTQI+ bills through parliament. Ghana's parliament eventually **passed** a law making it illegal to identify as LGBTQI+ in early 2024. At the time of writing presidential approval is **on hold** until the Supreme Court has ruled on its constitutionality.

In Kenya, 2023 started with the **vicious killing** of gay rights activist Edwin Kiprotich Chiloba. Violence intensified in February in response to a civil society **court victory** for LGBTQI+ rights:

the Supreme Court upheld a 2015 ruling that ordered the government to register an LGBTQI+ organisation, the National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, specifying that it could keep the words 'gay' and 'lesbian' in its name.

President William Ruto and other high officials condemned the ruling with incendiary rhetoric, triggering a **violent backlash**. As the attorney-general announced the government would challenge the decision and put the matter up for public consultation, an opposition politician vowed to table a bill to increase penalties for homosexuality. In March, the Ministry of Education announced a **plan**, agreed with clerics led by the Anglican Archbishop, to set up chaplaincies in schools to address 'the spread of LGBTQI+ practices'. A few months later, the **Family Protection Bill** came before parliament, aimed at strengthening colonial-era prohibitions and increasing penalties for homosexuality, same-sex unions and LGBTQI+ activities and campaigns.

■ ■ We push back on negative pervasive norms and attitudes and celebrate the limited but important progress made on the rights of LGBTQI+ people in Kenya over the last 10 years, largely obtained through victories in court. The Family Protection Bill threatens to destroy all this progress and so our work continues to be a reminder that the freedoms we fight for are for all Kenyans, and not only for the LGBTQI+ community.



IVY MERIMBA
galck+, Kenya

For LGBTQI+ people, this is an existential struggle. It's their right to exist at stake, so they don't have the luxury of giving up. This means that even in regressive times and places, progressive change can happen, because rights advocates are relentless. Activists draw strength from within, from belief in their own freedom, something no restriction can ever disprove.



We commemorated Pride and helped host the Changing Faces Changing Spaces conference organised by the East African Sexual Health and Rights Initiative, for which we helped secure visas and provided advice to LGBTQI+ people and sex workers from across Africa. We worked in solidarity with East African groups in the context of increasing anti-LGBTQI+ sentiments, engaged in strategic policy-oriented dialogue with other civil society leaders, made a solidarity visit to Namibia and networked to ensure that we would be prepared for whatever came next.



DUMISO GATSHA
Success Capital, Botswana

2023 saw long-term civil society advocacy and strategic litigation produce positive results in parts of Southern Africa, home to countries making some strides on LGBTQI+ rights.

In Mauritius, civil society's activism was rewarded with a Supreme Court decision decriminalising private same-sex acts between consenting adults. Issued in response to lawsuits brought by LGBTQI+ activists and organisations, the justification for this historic ruling inverted anti-rights views of LGBTQI+ rights as a western imposition, instead rejecting criminalisation, imposed under British colonial rule, as a foreign import.



This ruling paved the way for greater inclusion of LGBTQI+ people in Mauritius. But although same-sex private sexual relationships among consenting adults have been decriminalised, it remains crucial to educate queer people and people in general about the ruling and its implications for human freedom, equality, dignity and rights.



NAJEEB AHMAD FOKERBUX
Young Queer Alliance, Mauritius

But even in Southern Africa, 2023 saw mixed results. In Namibia, where sex between men is still criminalised, the Supreme Court ruled in May that the government must recognise unions of same-sex couples registered abroad. The backlash was rapid. In July, parliament's upper house passed a law banning same-sex marriage and punishing those who support it. The text of the bill defines marriage as a union between two people born genetically male and female, states that same-sex marriages conducted abroad can't be recognised in Namibia and makes it a criminal offence to participate in, solemnise, promote or advertise same-sex marriages, punishable with up to six years in prison and steep fines.

Key issues on the Namibian LGBTQI+ rights movement's agenda include decriminalisation of same-sex relations and the establishment of stronger legal protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, equal access to healthcare, including gender-affirming care, educational initiatives and awareness campaigns to increase understanding of LGBTQI+ issues and acceptance of LGBTQI+ people, and firm policies to address hate crimes and violence against LGBTQI+ people.



KEVIN WESSELS
LGBTQI+ rights activist, Namibia

Pre-emptive backlash against potentially positive changes also mobilised in Malawi, where in July a constitutional case challenging the criminalisation of gay sex and the ban on same-sex marriage triggered **anti-LGBTQI+ protests** in Lilongwe, the capital, and other major cities.



READ MORE

- COMMONWEALTH AFRICA: LGBTQI+ RIGHTS UNDER ATTACK
- MAURITIUS BEGINS TO CORRECT A HISTORIC WRONG TOWARDS LGBTQI+ PEOPLE

Asia's patchwork

Asia offered more diverse outcomes compared to the broad regression in Africa. The LGBTQI+ movement scored progress in Hong Kong, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Taiwan, but failed to make expected gains elsewhere, particularly in India and Japan. Some countries – including Afghanistan and Iran – remained stuck in a complete denial of rights. They and several more, such as China, offered no civic space for LGBTQI+ activism. A few experienced conservative backlash – of a kind that came across as more obviously politically driven than in Africa, and which therefore achieved less impact.

Asia is still home to **22 countries** that criminalise same-sex relations. Only one, Sri Lanka, got closer to decriminalisation in 2023. Sri Lanka is among the former British colonies where criminalisation provisions also apply to women, and the process kicked off in 2018 when **civil society groups** filed a complaint with the UN Committee for the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, asking the government to decriminalise same-sex relations in general and specifically between women. In response, a bill was submitted to parliament in August 2022. Then Sri Lanka's Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council, in which LGBTQI+ organisations played a key role, made recommendations to decriminalise, and in February 2023 the government committed to complying.

While this process was underway, the Supreme Court issued a **groundbreaking ruling** in response to anti-rights petitions for decriminalisation to be declared unconstitutional. The decision clarified that, contrary to the arguments of anti-rights groups, decriminalisation was in line with the constitutional principles of equality, human dignity and privacy. The bill is still up for parliamentary vote, but LGBTQI+ groups believe their pressure through high-level advocacy and public campaigning will see it ultimately pass.

Our fight, even after decriminalisation is achieved, will continue to aim to integrate LGBTQI+ people into our society. When we established our organisation back in 2004, we were the only ones fighting for all LGBTQI+ people, and we remained alone in this journey for a very long time. Only after 2015 did other organisations and people start coming out and getting involved. Until then we lived under a dictatorship and it was difficult to be open, but we have held Pride celebrations since 2004. Our Pride celebrations are turning 19 this year, and so is EQUAL GROUND. We're very proud of what we have achieved so far.



ROSANNA FLAMER-CALDERA
EQUAL GROUND, Sri Lanka

Among those states that continue to criminalise same-sex relations, Malaysia moved in the opposite direction, driven by a **new ruling party** that took a socially conservative tack to ensure its election win.

The government recently **banned** Swatch watches and accessories that made LGBTQI+ references, making their possession punishable by up to three years in prison. In January 2024, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim **made clear** there'd be no recognition of LGBTQI+ rights or protections against discrimination and violence under his leadership. No public display of LGBTQI+ activism is allowed by a government that sees a brightly coloured watch as a danger to national values.

It's also hard for LGBTQI+ people to speak out publicly for rights in Indonesia. At the height of Pride season, a regional gathering of LGBTQI+ activists in its capital, Jakarta, was **cancelled** in response to harassment and death threats from religious conservatives.

Some Asian states that ban human rights advocacy in general are increasingly targeting LGBTQI+ people for political reasons. These



Activists protest against India's Supreme Court verdict on same-sex marriage in New Delhi, India on 18 October 2023.

include China, where the state once tacitly tolerated LGBTQI+ people but is now imposing **growing restrictions** on LGBTQI+ expression and **organising**. This is all part of the party-state's totalitarian enforcement of a monolithic identity, with no alternate forms of identification or belonging allowed. As the state has turned the screws on dissent, only **below-the-radar events** can now take place. In May, the authorities **forced the closure** of the Beijing LGBT Center, which had operated for 15 years. In August, government censors **shut down** key LGBTQI+ social media accounts.

Taiwan, home to Asia's **biggest Pride** event, offered the starkest possible contrast with China. It's the only Asian country with open civic space, allowing civil society to mobilise fully for change, and it's also the only one that recognises same-sex marriage, which it legalised in 2019. Following four years of civil society advocacy, the government **announced** the end of all remaining restrictions on transnational same-sex marriages in January 2023, on the basis that 'marriage equality is now the common consensus in Taiwan'.

Change in the same direction should come soon in Nepal, where in June the Supreme Court **ruled** that the government must immediately register same-sex marriages pending reform of the law.

Actual policy change will take a lot of time. But this landmark decision represents significant progress for all LGBTQI+ people in Nepal. The legal recognition of same-sex marriage will foster greater acceptance in society as a whole and among policymakers, which will have a further positive impact on laws and policies.



SANJAY SHARMA
Blue Diamond Society, Nepal

Although falling short of marriage equality, an **important decision** for LGBTQI+ rights came in Hong Kong, where

despite China's **crackdown**, courts currently retain a degree of independence on some issues. In September, the top court ordered the government to establish a framework for recognising same-sex partnerships. The ruling came in response to a claim brought by activist Jimmy Sham, who married his husband in the USA and argued that the lack of recognition of foreign same-sex marriages violated the constitutional right to equality.

However, big disappointments came in 2023 in India and Japan, where hoped-for progress on marriage equality failed to materialise.

In India, where same-sex relations were decriminalised in 2018, the Supreme Court issued an inconclusive verdict in October, criticised by civil society as a **missed opportunity**. While the court stated that discrimination against same-sex couples must end and acknowledged they have constitutionally protected rights, it refused to recognise same-sex marriage and left the issue for parliament to decide. That signals no imminent change, since strongman Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party is opposed to recognising same-sex relationships.

In Japan, the only G7 country that doesn't uphold marriage equality, April's **Tokyo Rainbow Pride** attracted over 200,000 people to – in the words of its motto – 'press on till Japan changes'. With **public opinion** showing growing support, a district court **ruled** the ban on same-sex unions unconstitutional. It was the second court ruling to that effect, but two other courts concluded that the ban was in line with the constitutional definition of marriage and therefore constitutional. Legal deadlock leaves the issue unresolved, and the ruling party is **dragging its heels**.

Following intensive civil society advocacy, in June Japan's parliament passed what was described as an anti-discrimination law but it didn't ban discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and

gender identity. **Activists** saw it at best as merely a preliminary effort aimed at promoting awareness and mandating the government to create a plan, monitor progress, conduct research and establish a liaison body to coordinate policy implementation.

Three crucial steps should be taken. First, a proper anti-discrimination law banning discrimination on the basis of SOGI must be enacted. Second, marriage equality must be recognised. And third, inhumane requirements for legal gender recognition such as sterilisation must be removed.



AKIRA NISHIYAMA
Japan Alliance for LGBT Legislation

In Japan and beyond, activists continue demanding marriage equality. This was a clear demand voiced by 2023 Pride marchers in Singapore, where the colonial-era law that criminalised sex between men was finally **repealed** in 2022. In the face of the government's refusal to countenance further progress, protesters marched under the motto '**A Singapore for All Families**', pushing back against the politically enforced notion of the traditional family.

For transgender rights, the biggest blow came in Pakistan, where a May 2023 **ruling** of the Federal Shariat Court of Islamabad stated that gender must conform to biological sex, revoking sections of the 2018 Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act. Transgender rights groups have filed as many as 12 **petitions of appeal** with the Supreme Court.



READ MORE

➤ NEPAL'S SAME-SEX MARRIAGE BREAKTHROUGH

Europe's two faces

Throughout 2023, two different trends played out in Europe, with some countries scoring significant victories for LGBTQI+ rights and others seeing the deepest regression in decades. The contrast couldn't be starker than that between Estonia, where open civic space allowed activism to flourish and make it the first post-Soviet state to recognise same-sex marriage, and the country leading the anti-LGBTQI+ assault, Russia, where civic space has completely shut down under Vladimir Putin's authoritarian rule.

As part of Putin's ongoing crackdown on civil society, the state's attention has focused on LGBTQI+ activism. It might seem an odd choice for Putin to attack LGBTQI+ people while engaged in full-scale war, but it's part and parcel with it. There's no place for LGBTQI+ rights, vilified as an alleged western import, in the narrow definition of national identity Putin is pushing to sustain his imperialistic war.

In December 2022, the Russian government **expanded** its 2013 ban on 'gay propaganda', making it illegal to praise LGBTQI+ relationships, publicly express non-heterosexual orientations or suggest they're normal, with **fines** up to US\$6,370 for individuals and US\$80,000 for organisations.

Another new law **prohibited** surrogacy arrangements between Russian men and foreigners, making fatherhood **inaccessible** to gay men. In July, a further law **banned** almost all medical help for trans people, including gender-affirming healthcare, as well as gender changes on official documents. It also prohibited people who've already undergone gender-affirmation processes from adopting children or serving as legal guardians, and declared their marriages void.

The Russian authorities have increasingly **smeared** LGBTQI+ organisations as ‘foreign agents’, a label intended to associate them in the public mind with espionage. In May they added LGBTQI+ organisation **NC SOS Crisis Group** to the ‘foreign agents’ registry.

In late November, following a **request** submitted by the Ministry of Justice, the Supreme Court **outlawed** what it called ‘the international LGBT movement’ for its ‘extremist’ views, **characterising** it as a danger to the moral fabric of society. Under Russian criminal law, **participating in** or **financing** an extremist organisation is punishable with up to 12 years in prison. A person found guilty of **displaying such groups’ symbols** faces up to 15 days in detention for a first offence and up to four years in prison **for a repeat offence**. People suspected of involvement with an extremist organisation can be blacklisted and their bank accounts frozen.

As there’s no entity that can be identified as the ‘international LGBT movement’, people broadly understood the ruling to mean a blanket ban on all LGBTQI+ activism. The ruling also enabled **further violence** against LGBTQI+ people. Within days, security forces **raided** gay clubs and bars across Moscow.

LGBTQI+ activists have denounced all of this as an intimidation tactic. Some have understandably felt forced to leave, but many more have **vowed to stay** in Russia. As with other activists, they’re having to move underground, since even public acts of dissent by solo protesters are being swiftly punished.

In stark contrast, encouraging news from neighbouring Estonia raised hope that other Baltic countries could follow suit. A decades-long struggle for visibility and respect by LGBTQI+ and broader human rights groups came to fruition following the formation of an LGBTQI+-friendly government after elections in April.



LGBTQI+ activists take part in the 2018 edition of Baltic Pride, an annual event that has rotated among the capitals of the three Baltic states since 2009.

Photo by Ilmars Znotins/AFP via Getty Images.

“The ongoing debate and increased visibility have played a crucial role in driving cultural change and garnering support for LGBTQI+ rights. Legal changes seem to have further deepened the positive cultural shift.”



KELLY GROSSTHAL
Estonian Human Rights Centre

Next door in Latvia, in November parliament passed a long-delayed package of laws granting rights to same-sex couples. While falling short of equal marriage rights, LGBTQI+ activists viewed the recognition of civil unions as a major step forward in one of the EU's most hostile countries for LGBTQI+ people. The legislative win, a response to a favourable court ruling, came after decades of civil society advocacy bolstered by the election, in May, of Latvia's first out gay president, **Edgar Rinkēvičs**. This political shift opened a window of opportunity and sent a message of encouragement to Latvian civil society to keep up the work.

But the anti-rights backlash was swift: conservative groups immediately started gathering signatures to call for a referendum to stop the new law coming into force.

“We've experienced instant conservative backlash and the issue isn't settled yet. The civil partnership bill was passed by a small majority, and opposition parties asked the president not to promulgate it so they could have time to collect signatures for a referendum to repeal it.”



KASPARS ZĀLĪTIS
Mozaika, Latvia

LGBTQI+ activists in the Baltics also received a boost from the European Court of Human Rights, which in January 2023 **ruled** that Lithuania's restriction of access to a book mentioning same-sex marriage violated the right to freedom of expression.

Campaigns for transgender rights won some progress in February as Spain became the 10th country in Europe to recognise the **free self-determination** of gender. As a result, anyone over 16 can now change their gender on official documents simply by expressing their will to do so. The law also eliminated any requirement of a medical diagnosis to legally change gender, banned conversion therapies, protected the rights of intersex minors and included measures to promote workplace inclusion and access to medical care for trans people.

The law is one of the world's most permissive and brought instant anti-rights backlash, with Vox seeking to sow alarm among parents to try to profit from the issue in the election

► **GO TO CHAPTER.**

“This election campaign has been plagued by expressions of homophobia and transphobia. We have seen politicians refuse to address trans people in a manner consistent with their gender identity and threaten to abolish laws that have enshrined rights, such as the Equal Marriage Law and the Trans Law. This has reflected in an increase in harassment of LGBTQI+ people both in the classroom and on the streets. The LGBTQI+ community fears both legal and social backlash.”



EMILIO DE BENITO
LGTB+ Collective of Madrid, Spain

Similar culture wars played out in other western European states. In the UK, ruling party politicians are increasingly politicising trans rights and voicing outright transphobia ahead of the upcoming election – a tactic LGBTQI+ groups **say** is bound to fail, believing most voters won't be swayed by culture war issues they overwhelmingly think are invented or exaggerated by politicians.

In **Belgium**, conservative groups sought to restrict the circulation of information about sexuality and sexual diversity. Controversy erupted out of the blue over a longstanding school sex education programme. Civil society defended it by campaigning to counter disinformation and dispel myths surrounding its aims, uses and effects.

“The disinformation campaign against education in relational, emotional and sexual life (EVRAS) is being waged by a network made up of COVID-19 conspiracy theorists, people immersed in paedo-criminal theories, children’s defence associations and ultra-conservative and far-right associations. Anti-EVRAS groups spread disinformation to frighten the public and parents in particular. They use moral panic to divide public opinion and sow doubt among a section of the public that is not aware of the news.



CÉLINE DANHIER
O’YES, Belgium

The situation is more tense in Eastern European countries where LGBTQI+ people and activism face more barriers and hostile governments mobilise hate for political advantage.

In Hungary, which doesn’t recognise same-sex marriage and bans same-sex registered partners adopting children, a new law passed in April enabled people to anonymously report on same-sex couples raising children, anyone defying the ‘constitutionally recognised role of marriage and the family’ or children not conforming to their sex at birth. A **presidential veto** stayed the law, **but the issue is far from over** and the threat continues to loom over many families.

The veto may have been a calculated move, enabling the ruling party to capitalise by stoking outrage without further antagonising the EU. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s anti-LGBTQI+ campaign has put him at odds with EU institutions, even as it helps him rally his base and solidify his dominant position.

Hungarian LGBTQI+ groups have resisted his assault on social media, on the streets and through engagement with EU bodies.

As a result of EU-level civil society advocacy, Hungary’s government was forced to spend the year defending its version of Russia’s ‘gay propaganda’ law, the 2021 Child Protection Act, at the European Court of Justice. This law, which conflates homosexuality with paedophilia, has resulted in LGBTQI+ topics being banished **from schools**. It made new waves in November when, at the behest of a far-right politician, it resulted in people under 18 being barred from visiting the World Press Photo exhibition in Budapest because of the inclusion of some photos featuring LGBTQI+ people.

But the cracks are showing, with President Katalin Novak and Justice Minister Judit Varga both **forced to resign** in February 2024 over their role in pardoning a senior orphanage official implicated in a sexual abuse scandal. Some have started to doubt the government’s rhetoric about protecting children, which it uses to try to justify its LGBTQI+ attacks, with former supporters **accusing** the ruling party of opportunism.

“Public attitudes to the government’s anti-LGBTQI+ campaign are shifting both ways. On one side of the divide, people are getting outraged by the government’s propaganda and hence showing more support and understanding. On the other side, people are beginning to feel emboldened and legitimised to express discriminatory thoughts and act in discriminatory ways. We are losing the feeling of security in our own society. We feel outlawed and can’t understand how this can be happening in Europe nowadays. Many LGBTQI+ people are starting to think about whether we should leave the country before it’s too late.



IMRE ZSOLDOS
Hungarian LGBT Alliance

The Turkish ruling party also stepped up its attacks on LGBTQI+ people ahead of the **May election**, in which authoritarian President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won a new term. When LGBTQI+ groups took to the streets for the 2023 Pride event in June, police detained **at least 113** people.

In 2003, Turkey made headlines for becoming the first Muslim-majority country to hold a Pride event. But since 2015, with the government taking an increasingly **conservative turn**, authorities have systematically denied permission, supposedly on security and public order grounds. Every year since, hundreds and sometimes thousands have defied the ban, facing repression as a result – unwavering in the conviction that the struggle for rights must go on.

Despite facing oppressive conditions and lack of opportunities, the LGBTQI+ movement in Turkey remains resilient and strong. Alongside feminists, we are the only groups that continue to take to the streets and demonstrate for our rights, showing immense bravery in the face of police violence and detention. Simply persisting in organising demonstrations is an achievement in itself.



DAMLA UMUT UZUN
Kaos GL, Turkey

If 2023 was a disappointment for many in movements for gender rights, it's also clear things could have been much worse without civil society's steadfast defence. Across the world, civil society resisted—through protest, campaigning, protection, solidarity, litigation and legislative lobbying – and held the line. While global progress slowed significantly, most historical gains withstood the latest assaults. In 2024 and beyond, civil society will persevere, and once again look to make breakthroughs wherever it can and as opportunities arise.



photo by Kemal Aslan/AFP via Getty Images



READ MORE

- HUNGARY'S LATEST ASSAULT ON LGBTQI+ RIGHTS
- LATVIA: A VITAL FIRST STEP TOWARDS MARRIAGE EQUALITY
- ESTONIA: THE START OF A RAINBOW DOMINO EFFECT?



CONNECT WITH US



civicus.org



info@civicus.org



[/CIVICUS](https://www.facebook.com/CIVICUS)



[@CIVICUSalliance](https://twitter.com/CIVICUSalliance)

HEADQUARTERS

25 Owl Street, 6th Floor
Johannesburg, 2092
South Africa
Tel: +27 (0)11 833 5959
Fax: +27 (0)11 833 7997

UN HUB: NEW YORK

We Work
450 Lexington Avenue
New York, NY, 10017
United States

UN HUB: GENEVA

11 Avenue de la Paix
Geneva, CH-1202
Switzerland
Tel: +41 (0)22 733 3435