

NOVEMBER 2019



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



# AGAINST THE WAVE

CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSES TO ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS



**SAY NO TO  
STIGMA  
AROUND  
HEPATITIS**

**OUT & PROUD  
COMMUNITY GROUP**

**WE STAND  
AGAINST  
LGBT**

Photo by Chris J Ratcliffe/Getty Images

Ugandan LGBTQI rights campaigners take part in the 2016 Pride celebration in London, UK.

# ABOUT THIS REPORT

This summary report presents key findings of research carried out by CIVICUS, the global civil society alliance, and informed by CIVICUS members and stakeholders, on how civil society is being impacted upon and is responding to anti-rights groups. For the full report and other research outputs, please see our [website](#).

This report is from and for civil society, based on the voices and views of many CIVICUS members and stakeholders, and informed by the following sources:

- Interviews with 40 civil society activists, leaders, experts and stakeholders, carried out between 2017 and 2019.
- A survey of CIVICUS members, with 903 valid responses from 115 countries in every global region, conducted in September 2019.
- 10 civil society dialogues involving over 400 civil society practitioners, convened in Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Malawi, Mexico, Nigeria, Tanzania and the USA by CIVICUS members and the CIVICUS secretariat between July and September 2019.
- A collaborative research project on non-state actors and civic space, drawing on over 150 hours of interviews with activists, undertaken by CIVICUS and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2019.
- CIVICUS Monitor posts published during 2018 and 2019.
- Media coverage of anti-rights issues published during 2018 and 2019.

All in all, the voices of people from over 50 countries in every global region are directly reflected in the full report. All conclusions and recommendations drawn are however the views of the CIVICUS secretariat only and do not necessarily reflect the views of the individual contributors.

Cover photo by Inés M. Pousadela

Caption: March for abortion rights in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

## ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS ON THE RISE

Anti-rights groups – non-state groups that position themselves as part of civil society but attack fundamental and universal human rights – are on the rise. Excluded groups – including women, young people, LGBTQI people, people living with HIV/AIDS, religious minorities, Indigenous peoples, ethnic and racial minorities, migrants and refugees – are feeling the brunt of their attacks. Civil society that defends rights, particularly the rights of excluded groups, is being targeted.

Anti-rights groups have risen in prominence and are now a key part of the repression of civil society space – civic space – seen in most countries of the world. In some contexts, civil society reports that their main threat comes not from arms of the state but from anti-rights groups.



“I DON’T THINK THIS IS NEW. THESE GROUPS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN AROUND, ALWAYS IN THE BACKGROUND. BUT THERE IS A MASSIVE RESURGENCE OF ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS UNDERWAY.”

– UMA MISHRA-NEWBERY,  
WOMEN’S MARCH GLOBAL

## IMPACTS AND TACTICS

Nationalist groups are stoking violence against minorities in India; ultra-conservative faith groups are conspiring to block women’s access to abortion in Argentina; neo-fascist groups are smearing civil society and the political opposition in Serbia: these are just a few examples of groups that differ in terms of their membership, histories and outlooks but together are part of a growing threat to civil society. Anti-rights groups include highly conservative groups that work to deny women’s equality, sexual and reproductive rights and the rights of LGBTQI people; far-right nationalist and xenophobic groups that attack the rights of minorities and also attack groups that promote social justice and social cohesion; groups rooted in majority faiths that attack faith minorities and promote ethno-nationalism; and groups that are set up to attack the opponents of authoritarian political leaders, including by suppressing civil society. While groups vary in composition and ideology and are represented in different strengths in different countries, the tactics they use are remarkably similar.

Participants in our research are clear that they have long had to contend with well-established anti-rights groups. But they are also clear that they are seeing many new anti-rights groups and that groups are achieving unprecedented levels of influence and impact. This current rise of anti-rights groups has come at least in part as a backlash to the success civil society has won in past decades, with the aim of rolling back the gains civil society has achieved. In many cases anti-rights groups have updated their tactics and image, have become adept at using new

technologies and are demonstrably opportunistic, switching tactics and targets, attaching themselves to causes and latching onto media stories to promote themselves and stoke outrage as opportunities arise.

Anti-rights groups are now more confident, more visible and better resourced. They have grown in success through winning support from sections of the public, and they are doing so because their narratives are resonating with some people. They are shaping public narratives, including through disinformation and manipulation, and are sowing hatred and division. They are both helping to make and benefiting from a change in the political weather in many contexts, in which right-wing populism and narrow nationalism are on the rise.

Sometimes anti-rights groups are genuinely non-state groups and sometimes they are set up as the proxies of state interests, but often they sit somewhere in between, tightly enmeshed with political parties and repressive states. Anti-rights groups are most effective when political leaders, parties and states pick up on and echo their narratives, and when anti-rights groups are able to connect with and amplify regressive discourse that comes from the top.

These often close connections between anti-rights groups and political power are one of the multiple forms of linkages that are enabling anti-rights groups to achieve influence. Anti-rights groups are networking with each other, linking across issues and forging common narratives and campaigns; faith-based groups and secular groups are putting aside differences to work with each other; and anti-rights groups are increasingly sharing strategies and resources internationally and working in international arenas, where they seek to reverse global human rights norms and prevent progressive international agreements.

Anti-rights groups pursue a range of common tactics that together make up the anti-rights playbook. These include the use of apparently legitimate channels, enabled by positioning themselves as part of civil society, including court actions, campaigning in elections, triggering referendums and participating in consultations; mobilising people in public space, including with the intent of disrupting or preventing civil society mobilisations; using and manipulating social media, including to promote narratives and recruit support, and to spread disinformation and conspiracy theories, promote hate speech and smear and harass civil society; and enabling and directly deploying physical violence. As foundations for these attacks they are borrowing and distorting the language of human rights; organising in opposition to what they characterise as 'gender ideology'; and mobilising highly conservative interpretations of faith identities and appeals to distorted notions of tradition and culture.

“THE ANTI-RIGHTS MOVEMENT UNDERWENT A RAPID RENEWAL, AND ITS NEW LEADERS WERE VERY YOUNG, ELOQUENT AND AWARE OF THE POTENTIAL OF DEMOCRATIC INSTRUMENTS. IN THEIR PUBLIC APPEARANCES, THEY STARTED DOWNPLAYING RELIGION [AND USING] CONTEMPORARY, COLOURFUL AND JOYOUS VISUALS”

– GORDAN BOSANAC, ACTIVIST AND ANALYST, CROATIA



“THERE IS ONE THING THEY DO BETTER THAN GROUPS ON THE LEFT: THEY ARE VERY EFFECTIVE IN CREATING CONNECTIONS AND COALITIONS AMONG THEMSELVES; EVEN WHEN THEY WORK ON DIFFERENT ISSUES THEY ARE ABLE TO FIND COMMON GROUND.”

–TERESA FERNÁNDEZ PAREDES, WOMEN’S LINK



As a result, anti-rights groups are impacting directly on people’s lives and on civic space. Their impacts are further increasing their confidence and visibility, encouraging them to push forward with ever more extreme views and positions.

## ANTI-RIGHTS GROUPS VERSUS CIVIL SOCIETY

Anti-rights groups work by positioning themselves as part of civil society. Doing so enables many of their tactics. It helps them win visibility and recruit support, and grants access to domestic and international consultation processes. But it should be made clear that anti-rights groups fall outside the family of legitimate civil society in two fundamental respects.

First, they do not share civil society’s ways of working. Civil society is a diverse sphere, but it is one with unwritten rules of engagement, in which we debate and dialogue openly and respectfully, listen to other points of view and negotiate consensus; it is also one in which we are committed to non-violence, even when we engage in civil disobedience. In contrast, anti-rights groups do not share our civil ways of working. They try to shut down or hijack debate. They are generally not open to persuasion or interested in genuine dialogue. They engage in violence directly or enable it by promoting hatred and division.

Second, civil society, as CIVICUS recognises it, is a sphere where we pursue diverse ends, but we all share a commitment to universal human rights, social justice and the improvement of our societies as a whole. Even when we promote the rights of particular groups, such as members of an excluded group, we do so on the assumption that social justice and universal rights as a whole are advanced. We are motivated to act by humanitarian values of empathy and compassion. In contrast, anti-rights groups see rights as a zero-sum game: they want to advance the rights of their supporters or constituencies by taking rights away from other groups. They want to challenge the universality of human rights. They seek to deny civil society’s fundamental rights – of association, peaceful assembly and expression – for those who stand in their way.

Understanding these key differences between anti-rights groups and genuine civil society helps point the way towards a response. We need to promote a new understanding of what civil society is and does, centred not around our structures and the narrow negatives often offered as definitions – as the non-state, non-profit sphere



Photo by Jes Aznar/Getty Images

People march for LGBTQI rights near the presidential palace in Manila, Philippines, during Pride Month in 2019.

– but rather around our positives – as a broad family that stands for universal human rights, humanitarian values and social justice, and that is characterised by a civil way of working, opposed to hatred and violence, and believes in dialogue and compromise. In doing so, we can challenge the confusion between genuine civil society and anti-rights groups that helps anti-rights groups thrive.



“VILIFICATION OF WOMEN’S AND LGBTQI RIGHTS GROUPS IS ALSO INCREASINGLY TAKING PLACE ONLINE. WE ARE NOW CONSTANTLY HARASSED ON FACEBOOK. AT SOME POINT WE REALISED THESE WERE NOT THE USUAL PEOPLE WHO USED TO ATTACK US [...], AND FOUND LINKS TO EVANGELICAL CHURCHES.”

– KASPARS ZĀLĪTIS,  
MOZAIKA, LATVIA



“SOLIDARITY IS KEY. CIVIL SOCIETY MOBILISATION IN SUPPORT OF THREATENED GROUPS PROVIDES A LOT OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STRENGTH NEEDED TO KEEP GOING, AND HAS ALSO BROUGHT IMPORTANT, TANGIBLE SUCCESSES.”

– GIADA NEGRI,  
EUROPEAN CIVIC FORUM

## CIVIL SOCIETY FIGHTING BACK

Based on a new, confident and bold assertion of what civil society is and does, we can apply some common response tactics. As suggested by participants in our research, responses in the broad categories below can help civil society fight back against the range of anti-rights groups that we encounter. Key strategies include:

1. We can improve our **collective working** between different parts of civil society and diverse forms of civil society groups and movements to offer joined-up responses.

We need to take on the collective power that anti-rights groups are leveraging by stepping out of our niches and mobilising around shared, broad-reaching narratives, focused on universal and intersecting human rights. We should build connections between civil society groups working on different issues and between formally constituted civil society organisations and less formal parts of civil society, and enable spaces where dialogues between different parts of civil society can take place. To stop anti-rights groups positioning themselves as part of civil society, we should assert that civil society is a sphere shaped by our commitment to shared values: those of human rights, compassion, the pursuit of social justice and social cohesion, and civil ways of working, characterised by debate, respect and non-violence.

2. We can mobilise greater **transnational solidarity** to share common responses across different contexts.

Our coalitions and conversations should cross borders and recognise that even in very different contexts, anti-rights groups of various kinds are using remarkably similar tactics, and so there is value in sharing experiences and response tactics that can be adapted to different contexts. We can undertake joint advocacy, including to influence donors and international institutions to take stronger action against anti-rights groups, and we can lobby for and try to mobilise the new and innovative resources that civil society needs to respond to anti-rights groups. We can also pool campaigning and communication resources transnationally. When mobilising international solidarity, we need to be careful not to play to critiques that come particularly from nationalist and xenophobic groups that civil society is imported and foreign-funded, and that rights are somehow incompatible with domestic traditions and cultures.





Photo by Ines M. Pousadela

Demonstrators march in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on the eve of a decisive congressional vote on abortion rights in August 2018.

“WE SHOULD BE ABLE TO COMMUNICATE BETTER. WHAT IS OUR ROLE? WHAT IS OUR SUCCESS STORY IN TERMS OF SUPPORTING AND STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY? [...] OUR ROLE IS ESSENTIAL AND MOST EXISTING RIGHTS RESULTED FROM CIVIL SOCIETY DEMANDS AND VICTORIES.”

– ALESSANDRA NILO,  
GESTOS – HIV AND AIDS,  
COMMUNICATION AND  
GENDER, BRAZIL



3. We can develop better and more creative **communications** to respond to the impacts that anti-rights narratives are achieving.

We need to develop a compelling narrative and communicate it better to rebut anti-rights arguments and recruit support. We need to take on divisive narratives, typically rooted in appeals to fear, prejudice and emotion, that anti-rights groups propagate, often with great success. We need to offer narratives of hope and empathy and tell positive stories about how respect for rights makes our societies better, and advances in rights for excluded groups benefit everyone. We have to become adept at using social media to counter the false narratives of anti-rights groups. We can make more use of humour, art and popular culture in our communications, in order to broaden our reach, encourage public scrutiny of anti-rights groups and help us navigate restrictive environments.

4. We can build enhanced **connections with the public** and invest in greater bridge-building to reach and debate with people and bring them into our movements.

We need to win hearts and minds by talking to people who may currently have some sympathy with anti-rights narratives but be open to persuasion. This means we have to reach the people who we do not normally connect with, and listen to them and their motivations, emotions and dreams. Even after we achieve a success, such as winning a court victory to defend rights, we need to engage with the public to win them over to the merits of our campaign. We need to create spaces where community-level conversations can happen and local-level dialogues can help start to build bridges across differences.

5. We can make **unusual connections** – with groups that are outside our ambit but potentially open to working with us, with states concerned about the anti-rights tide and with political parties that share common ground.

We need to build broad coalitions that reach outside civil society to take on the growing power of anti-rights groups, including with independent media groups and private companies interested in supporting rights as well as states. Within civil society, we need where possible to engage to split groups that are socially conservative but still recognise the importance of universal human rights away from anti-rights groups. As part of this, we need to recognise the importance of faith identities to many people, build connections with progressive faith groups, encourage moderate faith positions and make arguments for rights that are rooted in progressive interpretations of faith texts.

6. We can **reclaim human rights language** from anti-rights obfuscation, including by making a new case for the value of universal human rights.

We need to expose the falsity of appeals anti-rights groups make to sectional rights, such as the ‘rights of the unborn’, and push back against the understanding they assert of the family as something built around traditional gender and sexual identity roles. As part of this, we need to take on and rebut accusations frequently made by anti-rights groups that we are promoting ‘gender ideology’ or asserting rights that harm children and families. We need to reframe the notion of family around a more expansive understanding that acknowledges diversity and positions children as rights-holders rather than the property of parents. We need continually to show the value of universal human rights.

7. We can offer a new **fight against disinformation and hate speech**, including by more effective advocacy towards and collaboration with social media and tech giants.

We need to embrace science, ensure rigorous fact-checking of our own work and undertake fact-checking and offer rapid rebuttal of the false claims and disinformation propagated by anti-rights groups. We can make common cause with trusted public figures, influencers and independent journalists in rebutting disinformation. We also need to ensure that we are transparent and accountable to the public while at the same time taking steps to protect civil society staff from online attacks and the debilitating effects of these. We need to build our connections to social media and new tech companies to push for the deplatforming of anti-rights opinion leaders, stronger protection against online attacks and more rapid takedown of disinformation and hate speech.

8. We can gather more **mass mobilisations** to show our strength in numbers, recruit supporters and offer counter-protests to anti-rights mobilisations.

We need to join up different protest movements, and learn from the tactics and narrative successes of mass civil society movements such as #MeToo and today’s climate justice actions. We need to bring new people into protests, and work to support the young people who in many cases are leading protests and seem to be most resistant to the appeal of anti-rights narratives. We need to develop intergenerational linkages so that



“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.”

- DUMISO GATSHA,  
SUCCESS CAPITAL  
ORGANISATION,  
BOTSWANA



“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.”

– ELIANA CANO,  
CATHOLICS FOR THE  
RIGHT TO DECIDE – PERU

valuable learning from past human rights movements can help to inspire new social movements that can benefit from the lessons learnt.

9. We can commit to greater **international-level engagement** to take on the growing actions of anti-rights groups in international institutions and advocate for universal human rights norms and democratic multilateral reform.

We need to urge international institutions to work with genuine civil society and supportive states to combat the growing power of anti-rights groups, and to defend and promote international human rights norms and agreements. We need to work with international institutions to ensure that their consultations are open to a diverse range of genuine civil society, but that they do not provide platforms for or appear to legitimise anti-rights groups.

10. We can work to **expose anti-rights groups**, including their underlying ideologies and agendas, their contradictions and opportunism and their often murky funding sources, including in collaboration with investigative journalists.

By challenging anti-rights groups, we can expose their uglier and more extremist sides that they may prefer to conceal behind apparently respectable fronts. We can expose their internal contradictions and the incoherence of their positions. We can subject to scrutiny their funding sources, including from political parties and repressive states, that may call into question their claims of independence and ideological purity. More research collaborations are needed here.

Many of these strategies are already being tested and deployed successfully by civil society across a range of contexts. As civil society we are fighting back, defending the gains we have made in the past, standing up for excluded groups and proving our power. But the response needs resourcing, and the many civil society supporters concerned about the rise of anti-rights groups need to join us in the fightback. We need to work together to defend universal human rights, show that we are mainstream and push anti-rights groups back to the fringes where they belong.



Two women look at written notes left on the Savita Halappanavar mural in Dublin, Ireland, as the results of the referendum on abortion laws are announced in May 2018.

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