

MANUFACTURING MORAL PANIC:

Weaponizing Children to Undermine Gender Justice and Human Rights

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The Elevate Children Fundators Group is the leading global network of fundators focused exclusively on the wellbeing and rights of children and youth. We focus on the most marginalized and vulnerable to abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence.

Global Philanthropy Project (GPP) is a collaboration of fundators and philanthropic advisors working to expand global philanthropic support to advance the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people in the Global South and East.

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GLOSSARY

ACRONYMS

CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRIN	Child Rights International Network
CSE	Comprehensive Sexuality Education
CSO	Civil society organization
DMWMK	“Don’t Mess With My Kids” campaign in Peru. In Spanish: “No Te Metas Con Mis Hijos” (NTMCMH) or “Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas” (CMHNTM)
GPP	Global Philanthropy Project
IC	Istanbul Convention
ILGA	International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association
LGBT	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender
LGBTI	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex
NCPHSRFV	National Coalition for Proper Human Sexual Rights and Family Values, an interfaith, gender-restrictive group in Ghana
NGO	nongovernmental organization
OSF	Open Society Foundations
SHRR	Sexual Health and Reproductive Rights
SOGIE	Sexual orientation, gender identity/expression
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
WHO	World Health Organization
USA	United States of America
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

DEFINITIONS

1. Child Rights' Framework

Children In 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, defined “children” as every human being below the age of eighteen years, unless majority is attained earlier under the law applicable to the child (CRC, 1989). However, the UN also uses a statistically oriented definition, which considers children to be people under 14 years (UN, 2021).

In this report, we will use the first definition of children, because the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the group of experts who monitor the implementation of the CRC, clarified that: “all Convention rights apply equally to all children under 18 years, irrespective of age. No explicit distinction is made under international human rights law between children of different ages. However, [...] the implementation of rights must take account of children’s development and their evolving capacities. Approaches required to ensure the realization of rights of adolescents differ significantly from those required for younger children” (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016). Regardless of their age, children are entitled to special care, protection and assistance, because of their vulnerability, and physical, mental and emotional needs (CRC, 1989).

Transition from childhood to adulthood. This process has a biological and a social component and is influenced by the contexts in which children live. Its beginning and end are not clearly identifiable, because “puberty occurs at different ages for boys and girls, and different brain functions mature at different times.” (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016). Because of this, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, often define adolescence as a period of childhood between 10 and 18 years of age.

Youth Persons between the ages 15 to 24 years. It is sometimes referred to as a statistically oriented definition, which might overlap with adolescence and early adulthood (UN, 2021).

Family Sociologists define “family” as a socially recognized group usually joined by blood, marriage, cohabitation, adoption, and/or shared caregiving responsibilities, that forms an emotional connection and serves as a key social and economic unit. The CRC defines it as “the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, [which] should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community” (CRC, 1989). Family structures are highly diverse and vary greatly depending on context. Moreover, families can include single-parent and multigenerational homes, as well as caregivers and members of all genders, sexual orientations and gender identities.

Child rights Human rights of children as defined in the CRC. The minimum entitlements and freedoms that should be afforded to children so that they can live with dignity, while at the same time having the care and protection necessary for their wellbeing (Centre for Child Protection, n.d.). These rights must be ensured to all children, “without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child’s or his or her parent’s or legal guardian’s race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.” (CRC, 1989). “Gender identity” and “sexual orientation” (see definitions below) are among the categories for which children should not be discriminated against.¹ This means that the rights promoted in the CRC also apply to LGBT children (Canavera, 2020).

¹ Several documents by the Committee on the Rights of the Child make this point. For example, article 2 of the CRC proclaims that “States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind,” which means that children are also protected against LGBT discrimination. General Comment 4 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2003) includes “sexual orientation” among the protected categories for which children should not be discriminated against (CRC, 2003). Other documents regard LGBT children as vulnerable to violence, and thus in need of protection. As a case in point, General Comment 13 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2011) states: “Groups of children which are likely to be exposed to violence include, but are not limited to, children ... who are lesbian, gay, transgender or transsexual.”

Best interest of the child Guiding principle on child's rights that refers to the right to have their "best interest" taken as primary consideration in all decisions that concern or affect them (EC, n.d.). "In General Comments 12 and 14, the Committee stresses that when determining best interests, the child's views must be taken into account, consistent with their evolving capacities." In the case of adolescents, their "best interest" cannot be used to justify actions inconsistent with child rights (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016).

Child Protection Measures and structures that seek to prevent and respond to neglect, violence, exploitation and abuse of children in all contexts. Its goal is to promote, protect and fulfill child rights as expressed in the CRC and other human right treaties. It includes the prevention and response to child labor, trafficking, sexual exploitation, female genital mutilation/cutting and child marriage, absence of parental care, armed conflicts and other barriers to child survival and development (Save the Children, 2007; UNICEF, 2006, 2015).²

2. Gender and Sexual Diversity

Sex characteristics Anatomic characteristics upon which biological sex is assigned, and which include genitalia, internal sexual organs, hormones, and chromosomes.

Sex Sex has two meanings: on the one hand, it refers to the **biological sex** or biological composition of a person. Sex is generally assigned based on one or more of three main sex characteristics: chromosomes, internal reproductive organs, and genitalia. On the other hand, it refers to practices that may produce sexual pleasure and/or result in reproduction, i.e., sexual acts (Moore & Reynolds, 2018).

Sex assigned at birth A biomedical category assigned to individuals based mainly on the appearance of their genitals at birth, usually thought of as a binary: male or female (Martínez & Vidal-Ortiz, 2019). People born with sex characteristics that fall outside binary conceptions of male or female bodies are often assigned "intersex" at birth or are subjected to non-consented, often harmful, procedures which align their bodies to the sex binary. It is worth noting that most countries in the world do not assign an intersex status in official documentation, despite evidence of the harms that these practices produce.

Intersex Umbrella term that refers to people who demonstrate variations in sex characteristics that fall outside traditional conceptions of male or female bodies (InterACT & AIS-DSD Support Group, 2020).

Gender "Refers to a social construct which places cultural and social expectations on individuals based on their assigned sex." (ILGA-Europe, 2019).

Gender identity "Each person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex they were assigned at birth" (ILGA-Europe, 2015).

cisgender People for whom assigned sex at birth and gender identity coincide. They are "on the same side" as their assigned sex, as the "cis" prefix suggests (Martínez, 2014).

² It is worth noting the differences between child rights and child protection: "Child rights are a set of principles or ideals. They are entitlements and some of them are justifiable in a court of law, but they are not tangible. Protection is one of these rights. But Child Protection is more than a right. It is a framework or system by which the rights of a child can come to be. The framework consists of various duty bearers such as the departments of the government, police, school, civil society, who all have roles to play to ensure that a child's rights are met, and in the case that a child's rights are violated that the violator be brought to justice and care be provided to the child. Child protection is not only treatment but should also be preventive. Risk management needs to take place to reduce the risk of violation of child rights in any given circumstance or space. Child protection is hence the means through which all other rights of a child can be upheld" (Centre for Child Protection, n.d.).

transgender People for whom there is a “dissonance” between their assigned sex and their gender identity (Martínez & Rojas, 2019). The prefix “trans” refers to the fact that they are “on the other side” or “going through” gender. Transgender people do not have to undergo a hormonal or surgical transition to be called “trans.” In fact, “trans” is an umbrella term; it is currently considered the most inclusive way to name a broad range of identities that share a dissonance between the assigned sex at birth and their gender identity (Martínez & Vidal-Ortiz, 2019).

Gender expression A person’s manifestation of their gender identity through behavior, mannerisms, interests, and appearance (ILGA-Europe, 2015). With no direct or necessary relation to a person’s assigned sex at birth, gender expression can vary through a person’s lifespan and may or may not match societal expectations about gender roles.

Sexual orientation profound affection, emotional and sexual attraction to, and intimate and sexual relations with other people (ILGA-Europe, 2019; Sentiido, 2017).

asexual A person who does not experience sexual attraction.

heterosexual A person who is attracted to a person of a different gender.

homosexual A person who is attracted to a person of the same gender.

bisexual A person who is attracted to people of more than one gender.

pansexual A person who is attracted to people of all genders.

Heteronormativity A belief system that assumes and mandates that all individuals are and should be heterosexual. In heteronormative societies, heterosexuality is socially and/or legally prescribed, and becomes necessary for a person’s wellbeing and physical and economic survival.

Cisnormativity A belief system that assumes and mandates that all individuals are and should be cisgender. In cisnormative societies, being or being perceived as cisgender may also be a matter of survival and wellbeing; cisnormativity rewards those who are—or are perceived to be—cisgender with sociopolitical recognition, legal protection, and economic opportunity while disenfranchising those who are not cisgender or perceived not to be.

Gender normativity A belief system that assumes and mandates that all individuals are and should be both heterosexual and cisgender. Gender-normative societies are highly hierarchical, distributing rights, resources, and opportunities differently and unevenly according to the male/female gender binary. Strictly enforcing the male/female gender binary, as well as the roles and behaviors associated with it, is a key aspect of gender-normative policies, laws, and cultures.

Gender Justice A systemic process of redistribution of power, opportunities, and access for people of all genders through the dismantling of structures of oppression including patriarchy, homophobia, and transphobia (Global Fund For Women, 2021). It encompasses the affirmation and protection of LGBTI rights, including the rights of LGBTI children, as well as (cis)women’s rights, that is, the “ending of—and if necessary the provision of redress for—inequalities between women and men that result in women’s subordination to men.” (Goetz, 2007).

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) “rights-based and gender-focused approach to sexuality education” which provides age-appropriate and scientifically accurate information about human sexuality, as it pertains to reproductive health, childbirth, sexual transmitted diseases, gender equality, and discrimination (UNFPA, n.d.).

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTORS

Today, we invite you to read and explore the findings and specific recommendations of this groundbreaking report - *Manufacturing Moral Panic: Weaponizing Children to Undermine Gender Justice and Human Rights* - commissioned by Elevate Children Funders Group (ECFG) and Global Philanthropy Project (GPP).

How and why did a network of children's rights funders and a network of LGBTI funders come to develop this research together?

About three years ago, the members of ECFG and GPP committed to a process of shared learning and development of new tools and research for a broader set of actors who might join our networks in taking on the complex and intersecting concerns of our communities.

Our process led us to identify an alarming set of trends and similarities across geographies and institutions, and to shared concerns about how a diverse group of actors are distorting and instrumentalizing human rights efforts to advance anti-democratic efforts around the world. Even in those early days, it was evident that these forces were stoking fear and panic about LGBTI communities and children in order to radicalize populations and create conditions that contribute to weakening democratic systems and, in the worst cases, state seizure.

Together, a working group of members from both networks decided that we needed to more fully understand these phenomena and create documentation to enable a better articulated and strategic shared

approach by, generally speaking, two very different networks of donors and stakeholders. We recognized the need to work in concert with others and establish new and sustainable models for broad coalition development that will enable philanthropy to counter dangerous anti-democratic forces harming our communities.

We discovered that human rights and democracy are under attack worldwide, and in this attack, children's and LGBTI people's rights and lives are instrumentalized in disturbing ways to manufacture moral panic. Recent years have seen dramatic escalations of what is frequently termed as a backlash to advances in human rights, particularly those of LGBTIQ+ people and women. An array of conservative, faith-based, and authoritarian forces have mobilized in the name of opposing what they call "gender ideology" - that is, progressive efforts to promote human rights and gender justice - to further restrict or roll back many historically disenfranchised groups' rights. And to do so, they weaponize concern for children - manufacturing threats to children's well-being and safety in order to impose and advocate for gender-restrictive policies, values, and cultural narratives. This 'gender-restrictive' movement's mobilization of moral panic is effective, and it is harming not only women and LGBTIQ+ people, but also children themselves, civil society organizations, other human rights struggles, multilateralism, environmentalism, and democracy (*see the chart on pp. 114-117*).

Despite appearances to the contrary, these forces are not new and are not simply a backlash to recent

progress. As this report details, they are the result of 35+ years of careful organizing by a well-financed global movement. Using three country case studies (Bulgaria, Ghana, and Peru), this report documents how gender-restrictive groups have mobilized as a transnational movement, creating moral panic by leveraging child protection rhetoric. We hope that by unpacking the strategies and tactics of these gender-restrictive movements and documenting the impact of their attacks, this report can help progressive movements, activists, children, and funders - whose work is being undermined - to more effectively counter these harmful narratives and proactively reaffirm a collective vision of the world in which human dignity and all human rights are upheld and protected.

The findings of this report ask each of us to consider not only what we fund but also *how* we do our work. This report asks us to make important pivots in our analysis and to develop a more thoughtful multi-sectoral approach to problems that no institution, program officer, or network could possibly resolve alone. This report and all of our findings make it clear that we must act boldly together.

With this report, and its findings and recommendations, we share a rallying cry to join the nascent community of grantmakers who are shaping and building a response to the anti-rights agenda and personally invite you to join in this collective work.

We invite you to act on the specific recommendations we present here, to share this report with key actors working on the broad range of issues impacted by these gender-restrictive actors, and to participate in designing and rolling out our shared efforts to counter these dangerous forces that exploit misinformation, foster moral panic, and seek to destabilize our democracies.

Finally, we must acknowledge the collective hard work and creative thinking of many, many individuals and

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In solidarity,



Heather Hamilton

Executive Director, Elevate Children Funders Group



Matthew Hart

Director, Global Philanthropy Project

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is about **how faith-based, gender-restrictive groups that work across religious denominations and often operate transnationally are using children and child protection rhetoric to manufacture moral panic and mobilize it against human rights, particularly those related to gender justice:** sexual health and reproductive rights (SHRR); the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people; gender equity; and, ironically, children's rights worldwide.

It also highlights how these groups work towards the enforcement of a gender-restrictive worldview, feeding on and further strengthening the illiberal politics that have seriously undermined democracy in the first two decades of the 21st century.

To offer a more nuanced understanding of how gender-restrictive groups instrumentalize children through the mobilization of moral panic in local contexts, the report presents three case studies, each on in a different region: Peru in Latin America, Bulgaria in East Europe, and Ghana in West Africa. The comparative analysis underscores recurring strategies, narratives, and actors and gives insight into how gender-restrictive groups collaborate and engage in coalitional work across the globe. It also highlights meaningful differences between them, some of which account for their particular success or more notable limitations in specific contexts.

The report is based on a year of desk-top research and analysis, and interviews with scholars, civil society organization members, activists, and other stakeholders. It uses this information to develop a picture of who these gender-restrictive actors are, how they operate, and what strategies account for their significant success.

One of the document's main contributions is the use of "gender-restrictive groups or actors" as an umbrella term to refer to individuals, organizations and institutions that, despite their many differences, work together towards the defense of a gender-restrictive world order. A gender-restrictive order organizes economic, political and social life through the imposition of a restrictive and hierarchical vision of gender, which has two main and interdependent components: the naturalization of the gender binary, and the enforcement of gender-normativity.

The main strategy of gender-restrictive groups is simple: weaponizing children against human rights and gender justice by manufacturing and mobilizing moral panic. They frame gender justice initiatives as detrimental to children, and use child protection rhetoric to mobilize people against laws, policies, and other initiatives that protect and advance women's, LGBT, and even children's rights.

This strategy is particularly effective at broadening their base of support. Gender-restrictive groups

prey on our collective desire to protect children. By presenting themselves as “concerned adults” with children’s wellbeing and safety, they appeal to a more moderate, nonreligious audience. Also, moral panic is especially useful because it rapidly and effectively creates social cohesion.

Indignation, rage, and fear about the wellbeing of children are easily manipulated and translated into social and political support for gender-restrictive initiatives, which increasingly coincide with autocratic and de-democratizing forces. Moral panic does not only—or even mainly—have a “moral” function. Its main role is political, particularly in contexts of economic, social, and political upheaval and anxiety.

Three factors have been essential for the success of the manufacturing of moral panic through child protection rhetoric. First, different political, social, and religious actors have come together to oppose what gender-restrictive groups call “gender ideology.” Originally conceptualized by the Vatican, “gender ideology” is a pejorative term used to undermine human rights and gender justice. By replacing terms like “women’s rights,” “equality,” “the best interest of the child” and “LGBT rights” with “gender ideology,” faith-based, gender-restrictive groups discredit human rights efforts and present them as a neocolonial imposition contrary to local values. The arguments grouped under the opposition to “gender ideology” are used opportunistically, rapidly adapting its meaning to specific contexts, social concerns and political struggles. **Therefore, the most important thing about “gender ideology” is not what the term actually means, but the gender-restrictive worldview it conveys and seeks to impose through disinformation and moral panic.** Comprehensive Sexual Education, same-sex marriage and adoption, trans rights, reproductive rights, and protections against domestic violence are the issues that consistently trigger accusations of peddling “gender ideology,” and mobilize public opposition to gender justice.

Second, framing children and progressive demands as fundamentally opposed. This opposition feeds on misconceptions that portray LGBT people and feminists as a danger to society. Gender-restrictive groups claim that LGBT people are sexual

predators while feminists are likened to “death agents” in their defense of sexual and reproductive rights.

Third, strategic secularization (Vaggione, 2011). That is to say, the conscious decision to de-emphasize religious rhetoric and legitimize their opposition to gender justice through the appropriation and resignification of secular concepts, language and spaces. This has happened in three main realms: the academy, human rights, and gender theory and feminism. For example, gender-restrictive groups are succeeding at using the language and legal tools of the human rights framework to present their anti-rights efforts as right-affirming initiatives. This strategy is highly effective because it expands opposition to gender justice and galvanizes anti-LGBTI sentiment without using religious language or references. **That is to say, it advances a patriarchal, gender-restrictive worldview through secular narratives with broader appeal.**

A key aspect to keep in mind about contemporary faith-based, gender-restrictive groups is that they are heterogenous, but they are also highly motivated and goal-oriented, which makes them excellent at working across differences. Gender-restrictive groups compromise and sacrifice particular details of their political convictions and religious beliefs to establish a social, political, and economic order coherent with their gender-restrictive, patriarchal worldview. By so doing, they have become a multifaceted and heterogeneous—yet highly coordinated and effective—faith-based, gender-restrictive movement capable of working across religious denominations, political parties, and regions. In the last decades, they have formed alliances within different denominations of the same faith (i.e Protestants and Catholics) and, in some cases, particularly in Africa, with representatives of other religions (Muslims and Christians). The term “gender ideology” has been crucial to the coordination of these efforts. **In their shared opposition to “gender ideology” a diverse group of gender-restrictive actors found a common rallying cry that allowed them to expand their support and influence.**

Another important aspect of contemporary gender-restrictive groups is that **the patriarchal and hierarchical worldview they promote resonates**

strongly with nationalist, autocratic parties and movements across the political spectrum. A growing number of left and right-wing authoritarian-leaning politicians are using the rhetoric of “fighting gender ideology” to tap into the deep pockets and expanding influence of gender-restrictive groups, and court their disciplined voters.

The connection between the attack on women’s, children’s, and LGBT rights and current de-democratization efforts across the globe must be recognized. **Contemporary gender-restrictive groups are playing a major role in the advent of autocratic regimes in different regions around the world, with devastating consequences for human rights, gender justice and democracy. It is urgent that philanthropic organizations and grantmakers seeking to uphold gender justice work proactively and consistently with the pro-democracy funding ecosystem.**

Progressive circles commonly refer to this renewed attack on democracy and human rights, particularly gender justice, as a “backlash.” This framework is partially correct. These attacks are indeed a reaction to the important gender mainstreaming efforts and progressive victories of the last three decades. However, the backlash narrative can also hide the fact that contemporary gender-restrictive initiatives are part of a long-term political, social, and cultural strategy. Gender-restrictive groups have a long-term commitment to cultural shift and narrative change. Their theory of change plays out in three temporal dimensions: short-term initiatives that require immediate action; mid-term projects to reshape legislation and other relevant policies; and a teleological or “purpose-oriented” vision of history that seeks to establish a worldview, literally, for eternity.

Gender-restrictive funders, donors, and grantmakers act accordingly. Since they are primarily interested in consolidating a gender-restrictive world order (not in funding a specific program or a single issue), they prioritize block grants, gifts and endowments. This allows gender-restrictive groups to go beyond the short-term, results-oriented projects preferred by many funders of

women’s, children’s, and LGBT rights, and to develop long-term strategies to advance their worldview. It also enables them to take risks and invest in paradigm-shifting messaging campaigns that do not depend on deliverable-driven revenue streams. Another advantage of this type of support is that because the funds come with no or few strings attached and avoid cumbersome reporting requirements, it is easier for organizations to use them according to their shifting priorities, and to quickly adapt to relevant political or social events.

Long-term, sustained investment in cultural shift and narrative change gives gender-restrictive groups another key advantage: **it makes them highly resilient to concrete defeats, securing their ability to continue to work towards the long-term accomplishment of their goals.** In other words, it keeps their eyes on the prize. This is why, even in contexts where gender-restrictive groups have lost all or most legal and policy battles, **they seem to be winning the cultural and communications war, consistently increasing their social, and political influence. Therefore, it is of outmost importance for gender justice and other progressive funders to invest and support sustained, long-term, non-reactive, worldmaking strategic communication campaigns, and formal and informal education efforts.** These initiatives are essential to explain key concepts and build consensus around the need to advance women’s, children’s and LGBTI rights, as well as democratic values.

The crisis caused by the global pandemic has had a devastating effect around the world, but it did not slow down gender-restrictive groups. In the last year, they have amplified and mainstreamed their influence, broadened their audience, and deepened their support within their existing base. In particular, 2020 showed their adaptability, creativity and social media savviness. **In the COVID-19 era, gender-restrictive groups are thriving.** By capitalizing on the anxiety and isolation millions of people are enduring, they are intensifying their disinformation campaigns, and continue to instrumentalize child protection rhetoric to manufacture and mobilize moral panic against human rights and gender justice initiatives.

To summarize, gender-restrictive groups spread the false claim that expanding human rights and advancing

gender justice harms children. Through the use of the term “gender ideology” they weaponize children to cause moral panic and mobilize it against bills and other initiatives that seek to affirm and or expand SHRR and LGBTI rights. However, their crusade is broader than the curtailment of specific rights. It seeks to reinstate a gender-restrictive order that leads to widespread discrimination and violence against cisgender women, LGBTI people and children; and presents a serious threat to human rights and democracy worldwide.

A word of caution before concluding: Equating religiosity with support for a gender-restrictive, patriarchal and authoritarian world order is part of the narrative and goals of gender-restrictive groups, but it is not always a reality on the ground. **It is of utmost importance to identify, support, and amplify the work and voices of religious organizations and regular citizens that uphold their faith while rejecting the gender-restrictive agenda.**

It is our hope that this report **both deepens and broadens our shared understanding** about how the manufacturing of moral panic through child protection rhetoric has become a Trojan horse for immense prejudice against women’s, children’s and LGBT rights and their advocates. We also hope that the **actionable recommendations we offer become a valuable resource** for all those interested in upholding and advancing gender justice; and that our findings encourage child rights and protection donors, grantmakers, philanthropic networks and other stakeholders to denounce the multiple ways in which gender-restrictive groups are weaponizing children and child protection rhetoric to attack human rights, gender justice and democracy. Finally, **we urge progressive funders to come together and commit resources to protect the rights and lives of all people; and create a better future for all children, LGBTI or not.**

REPORT OUTLINE

This report is divided into four chapters, and a list of actionable recommendations.

The first chapter identifies the global characteristics of the contemporary gender-restrictive movement. It begins by presenting a timeline of its development and consolidation, and provides key contextual information to understand the gender-restrictive movement’s rise and expansion. It also outlines its ideological underpinnings, and explains the values at the center of the gender-restrictive worldview these groups are trying to impose. The chapter closes by summarizing their main and most effective strategies.

The next three chapters present the findings of the case studies: Peru, Bulgaria and Ghana. Each one starts with a description of the specific events that illustrate how gender-restrictive groups operate within their regional context. Then, each chapter provides key facts about the local historical, cultural, and religious background to suggest why gender-restrictive groups gained traction and how they achieved their goals. Later, the case studies analyze the messages and strategies used by gender-restrictive groups and identify the main gender-restrictive actors.

Throughout the report, key takeaways appear at the beginning of each section. The light blue boxes correspond to crucial moments in the development and deployment of “gender ideology.” In the case studies, there are also boxes with examples of the strategies used by gender-restrictive groups in local contexts.

The report closes with a list of actionable recommendations for funders, philanthropic organizations, grantmakers, and other members of the progressive funding ecosystem seeking to advance human rights, gender justice and democracy.

MOBILIZING A GENDER-RESTRICTIVE WORLDVIEW³

In the last thirty years, religious groups, politicians, secular researchers, and civil society organizations that actively oppose gender justice, and support authoritarian leaders and regimes have formed powerful alliances to work across religious denominations and operate transnationally towards a common goal. Their most important strategy has been the use of child protection rhetoric to cause moral panic and mobilize it against laws, policies, and other initiatives that challenge the patriarchal worldview and advance a diversity-affirming society.

They have gained significant social capital and political power by claiming to be the guardians of children and uniting under slogans like “¡No te metas con mis hijos!” (“Don’t mess with my kids!” in Peru) and “Marchons enfants!” (“Let’s go, kids” in France). These slogans have been very effective in the curtailment of human rights, particularly those related to gender justice: sexual health and reproductive rights (SHRR); the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people; gender equality; and, ironically, children’s rights worldwide.

Because what binds together these different —and historically warring— groups is their defense of a gender-restrictive world order, in this report we call them “gender-restrictive” groups or actors.

A gender-restrictive order organizes economic, political and social life through the imposition and enforcement of a restrictive and hierarchical vision of gender. It has **two main and interdependent components: the naturalization of the gender binary, and the enforcement of gender-normativity.**

The naturalization of the gender binary.

Gender-restrictive groups claim that the gender binary is natural, ahistorical and universal. That is to say, that, throughout history and across cultures, all people can —and should— be classified as cisgender men or women. Those who do not conform to these two narrow categories see their rights curtailed and their humanity challenged.

Another key aspect of the gender binary is that it assigns different and hierarchical roles to these two gender categories: cisgender men or women. That is to say, the naturalization of the gender binary also normalizes the gender hierarchy and its uneven distribution of rights, opportunities and resources. Furthermore, the gender binary both pathologizes and dehumanizes LGBTI identities and behaviors (including LGBTI children); and normalizes—and even promotes—the subordination and mistreatment of cisgender women and girls. Thus, the naturalization of

³ We want to thank our reviewers: Wiktor Dynarski, Michael Gibbons, Corey Oser, Daniel Parnetti, Emma Stevenson, and Anna Windsor for their thorough reading and helpful suggestions.

the gender binary is the foundation of gender injustice and the many rights' violations that derive from it.

The enforcement of gender-normativity.

Once the gender binary is established as a prerequisite for recognizing a person's rights, dignity and even survival, a belief system called "gender-normativity" is imposed and enforced. Gender-normativity assumes that all individuals are and should be both heterosexual and cisgender, and expects that everyone's identities, roles and behaviors match the cultural expectations of the gender binary.

In gender-normative societies, being or being perceived as cisgender and heterosexual may also be a matter of survival and wellbeing. Gender-normativity rewards those who are—or are perceived to be—cisgender and heterosexual with sociopolitical recognition, legal protection, and economic opportunity while disenfranchising those who are not cisgender and heterosexual—or are perceived not to be.

The strict enforcement and legal codification of the gender binary implies in turn compulsory heterosexuality and cisgender identity, that is to say, gender-normativity.

Therefore, restrictive gender norms are of outmost importance for gender-restrictive actors and societies.

"Gender justice" is a systemic process of redistribution of power, opportunities, and access for people of all genders through the dismantling of structures of oppression including patriarchy, homophobia, and transphobia (Global Fund for Women, 2021). It encompasses the affirmation and protection of LGBTI rights, including the rights of LGBTI children, as well as (cis)women's rights, that is, the "ending of—and if necessary the provision of redress for—inequalities between women and men that result in women's subordination to men." (Goetz, 2007).

It is worth noting that imposing a gender-restrictive worldview negatively impacts the rights and livelihoods of many people, including intersex and even cis and heterosexual individuals and children: by forcing them to fulfill preestablished roles, restrictive gender norms constrain the possibilities and opportunities of cis, trans, and non-binary children. Moreover, gender restriction is devastating for intersex adults and children because it encourages—and even mandates—medically unnecessary, irreversible surgeries on infants, attacking their bodily autonomy and the principle of self-determination. The enforcement of restrictive gender norms also contributes to a hostile social environment for nonbinary adults and children which too often results in psychological, physical, and/or sexual violence.

In other words, intersex and non-binary people's rights are also undermined by the actions of gender-restrictive groups. However, the researchers did not find evidence of gender-restrictive groups instrumentalizing the experiences of intersex persons in their narratives. Therefore, this report will use the acronym LGBT when speaking of the rights explicitly targeted by gender-restrictive groups, and LGBTI to denote the consequences of their actions that also affect intersex and non-binary people.

Gender-restrictive groups and actors are organizations, politicians, researchers and institutions that seek to establish a gender-restrictive world order.

A gender-restrictive order organizes economic, political and social life through the imposition and enforcement of a restrictive and hierarchical vision of gender. It has two main and interdependent components: the naturalization of the gender binary, and the enforcement of gender-normativity.

Most of these groups and actors are faith-based, religiously affiliated or explicitly confessional. These groups attack human rights and gender justice, as well as the principles of self-determination and equity.

The primary strategy of gender-restrictive groups is relatively simple: **Weaponizing children against human rights and gender justice. They use child protection rhetoric to cause moral panic and mobilize it against laws, policies, and other initiatives that protect and advance women’s, LGBT, and even children’s rights.**

The researchers did not find evidence of gender-restrictive groups instrumentalizing the experiences of intersex persons in their narratives. Therefore, this report will use the acronym LGBT when speaking of the rights explicitly targeted by gender-restrictive groups, and LGBTI to denote the consequences of their actions that also affect intersex and non-binary people.

By crafting easy-to-understand narratives based on disinformation⁴ and selective interpretations of human rights and scientific evidence, gender-restrictive groups create a polarized worldview. Those who uphold the restrictive gender norms, the heterosexual, patriarchal family as society’s core and defend parental authority over the principle of the best interest of the child are portrayed as “good.” Their “goodness” supposedly rests in their claim to protect children from the impositions of an alleged “internationally-funded agenda” that seeks to corrupt and harm them. Gender justice defenders are portrayed as part of this “agenda,” and are labeled as “evil” due to the supposed threat they represent to children and society. This rhetoric has been highly effective in stoking social outrage and mobilizing political support for gender-restrictive candidates across parties and regions who help advance their crusade to legally codify and socially enforce the gender binary.

Three factors have been essential for the success of this gender-restrictive transnational strategy. **First, different political, social, and religious actors have come together to oppose what gender-restrictive groups call “gender ideology.”** This term is a pejorative way of naming gender justice initiatives: by replacing terms like “women’s rights,” “equality,” and “LGBT rights” with “gender ideology,” faith-based,

gender-restrictive groups discredit human rights efforts and present them as a dangerous imposition from a (sexual) minority.⁵ This confluence has facilitated collaboration among parties and actors with different interests—including those who had been historical enemies such as Catholic and Evangelical Christians⁶, Christians and Muslims—and promoted widespread social mobilization.

Moral Panic is a widespread social fear centered on the assumption that a stereotyped group of people is threatening the values, safety and interests of a society (Crossman, 2019). When it is related to SOGIE-issues it takes the form of a social eruption characterized by an alarm over —children’s — innocence imperiled (Wypijewski, 2020). Moral panic rapidly and effectively creates social cohesion, channeling outrage into concrete (gender-restrictive) political action. Therefore, moral panic does not only—or even mainly—have a “moral” function. Its main role is political, particularly in contexts of economic, social, and political upheaval and anxiety.

“Gender ideology” is a pejorative term used by faith-based, gender-restrictive groups to undermine human rights and gender justice. By replacing terms like “women’s rights,” “equality,” and “LGBT rights” with “gender ideology,” faith-based, gender-restrictive groups discredit human rights efforts and present them as a dangerous imposition from a (sexual) minority.

The second factor is the framing of children and progressive demands as fundamentally opposed. This opposition feeds on misconceptions that portray LGBT people and feminists as a danger to society. Gender-restrictive groups claim that LGBT people threaten the innocence and vulnerability of children while feminists are likened to “death agents” in their defense of sexual and reproductive rights. Although faith-based, gender-restrictive groups did not create the misconceptions that fuel these narratives, they have widely circulated and amplified them, effectively

⁴ Unlike “misinformation,” which is false information created and spread with no ill intent, “disinformation” is created to be deliberately deceptive (Gebel, 2021).

⁵ “Gender ideology” is the pejorative term given by faith-based, gender-normative groups to efforts to defend and advance human rights and gender justice (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Other terms such as “gender agenda” and “gender theory” are often used interchangeably. In this report, we use “gender ideology” for consistency, except in cases where other terms appear, for which we have included attributions.

⁶ In this report we use “Evangelical,” “Orthodox,” and “Anglican” churches to name non-Catholic Christian denominations. When relevant, specific confessions are mentioned.

curtailing the scope of their actions and responses, as well as coalitional work between them.

Third, gender-restrictive groups are increasingly using the human rights framework to advance their gender-restrictive worldview. One of their most clever, successful and troubling strategies is using the language and legal tools of the human rights framework to present their anti-rights efforts as right-affirming initiatives. They have been particularly successful at resignifying specific rights like the “right to life” and “religious freedom.”

However, the appropriation and instrumentalization of the human rights framework should not be confused with an actual defense of human rights. Gender-restrictive groups do not defend the “right to life,” they restrict sexual and reproductive rights. They do not uphold “religious freedom,” they seek to ensure their prerogative to continue to discriminate LGBTI people and subordinate cisgender women.

Moreover, gender-restrictive groups pit rights against each other, presenting gender justice-related rights as an attack to fundamental rights and as detrimental to society, particularly children. For example, LGBT rights are depicted as a threat to the wellbeing and safety of children, and Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) initiatives are framed as going against parental rights.

Interestingly, gender-restrictive groups rarely speak of children’s rights. Instead, they weaponize the general idea of children wellbeing and protection, spreading and reinforcing the misconception that gender justice efforts put children at risk of emotional, physical, and, particularly, sexual harm. **Throughout this report we highlight the ways in which gender-restrictive groups weaponize children. This is why we will usually speak about children, and the child protection rhetoric, unless explicit references to children’s rights made by gender-restrictive actors.**

Another important aspect of contemporary gender-restrictive groups is that the patriarchal and hierarchical worldview they promote resonates strongly with nationalist, autocratic parties and movements across the political spectrum. Consequently, gender-restrictive groups feed on and further strengthen the “illiberal politics” that have

seriously undermined democracy and human rights in the first two decades of the 21st century.

Progressive circles commonly refer to this renewed attack on human rights as a “backlash.” This framework is partially correct. These attacks are indeed a reaction to the important gender mainstreaming efforts and progressive victories of the last three decades. However, the backlash narrative can also hide the fact that contemporary gender-restrictive initiatives are part of a long-term political, social, and cultural strategy that has been in the making for decades, that feeds on social unrest and cultural anxieties, and that is highly adaptable to different contexts (like the Covid-19 pandemic), and regions (Europe, the Americas, Africa, Asia, etc.).

To summarize, gender-restrictive groups spread the false claim that expanding human rights and advancing gender justice harms children. Through the use of term “gender ideology” they weaponize children to cause moral panic and mobilize it against bills and other initiatives that seek to affirm and/or expand SHRR and LGBTI rights. However, their crusade is both broader and more encompassing than the curtailment of specific rights. It seeks to reinstate a hierarchical and highly unequal world order based on the naturalization of the gender binary and the enforcement of gender-normativity. This gender-restrictive order leads to widespread discrimination and violence against cisgender women, LGBTI people and children; and presents a serious threat to human rights and democracy worldwide.

This chapter identifies the global characteristics of this phenomenon and articulates how the manufacturing of moral panic through child protection rhetoric has become a Trojan horse for immense prejudice against human rights and gender justice. We will first outline some key events in the development of the idea and strategic opposition to “gender ideology.” Second, we explain how the gender-restrictive movement became the coordinated highly achieving movement it is today. Later we identify and describe the “toolkit” strategies of this gender-restrictive crusade. We close this section with some remarks on the adaptability of these groups to the Covid-19 pandemic.

THE MAKING OF THE CONTEMPORARY GENDER-RESTRICTIVE MOVEMENT

TAKEAWAYS

- The development of “gender ideology,” a pejorative term created to group together and delegitimize efforts to advance gender justice, in particular through LGBT, women’s, and children’s rights, was a gradual process, which built on previous efforts against gender justice, and on theological and secular research.
- The Vatican played a key role in the development of “gender ideology” in two main ways. First, it gave the term its initial theological and conceptual foundation. Second, it led the way in creating interfaith and ecumenical alliances with the specific purpose of countering human rights and gender justice.
- Although the term “gender ideology” coalesced around 2003, it only gained widespread recognition, and was successfully mobilized politically a decade later (Fassin, 2020; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

In this section we provide a timeline of key events and actors in the development of “gender ideology”:

1977

The Save our Children (from homosexuality) campaign. It targeted a local ordinance in Dade County, Florida (Miami-Dade County since 1997), which addressed discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment and public accommodations (Fejes, 2008). Led by singer Anita Bryant, this campaign was one of the first initiatives to successfully bring together Catholic and Baptist groups with conservative activists. They claimed the “passage of the law [would] enable homosexuals to ‘recruit’ youths” (Clarke, 1977). The moral panic generated by this narrative led to the retraction of the ordinance.

1980

The Vatican’s response to new understandings of gender and sexuality. In reaction to the paradigm shift regarding gender and sexual mores that took place in the second half of the 20th century, the Vatican started exploring how to modernize their messaging without challenging their gender-restrictive worldview. To do so, the Holy See argued that societal roles were determined by biological differences, which supposedly are complementary. This has been called **the principle of complementarity of the sexes.**⁷ This idea was highly effective because it upheld gender hierarchies while allowing for a more modern sense of “equality among differences” that still maintained compulsory heterosexuality and did not endanger traditional ideas about family and motherhood.

1994 –
1995

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) at Cairo⁸ and the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing.⁹ Both conferences centered international attention on gender equality and sexual and reproductive rights as indicators of wellbeing and development. Faith-based state delegations feared that these rights would become a vehicle for the “recognition of abortion, attacks on traditional motherhood, and a legitimization of homosexuality” (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Led by the Catholic Church, these delegations formed interfaith alliances¹⁰ with the explicit intention of boycotting existing progressive efforts to advance women’s and LGBT rights (Faur & Viveros Vigoya, 2020).

1997

Publication of *The Gender Agenda: Redefining Equality* by Dale O’Leary

The Gender Agenda is a pivotal book for the gender-restrictive movement. Published in 1997, O’Leary used the term “gender agenda” to refer to women’s rights, claiming that their advancement posed a threat to the “moral and natural order” and that it was being orchestrated by obscure international forces. Her stance was defensive, and her arguments were presented through secular rhetoric. Both of these aspects would soon become key elements of the contemporary gender-restrictive crusade.

7 The principle of complementarity of the sexes was one of the main subjects discussed by Pope John Paul II in his *Theology of the Body* lecture series in 1984. The notion of complementarity used the language of (biological) difference to justify women’s supposedly natural caregiving and homemaking responsibilities and men’s breadwinner status and decision-making role. The move was strategic because it invigorated the attacks on what they called, in contrast, “radical feminism,” that is, feminist movements that advocate for sexual and reproductive rights, divorce, and female autonomy beyond men’s authority and childrearing responsibilities, etc. (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Rodríguez Rondón & Rivera-Amarillo, 2020).

8 The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) took place in September 1994 in Cairo, Egypt. The delegates agreed on the necessity of prioritizing gender equality and women’s empowerment in order to eradicate poverty. They issued a Program for Action that stated the importance of sexual and reproductive rights and education for the empowerment of women (Conferencias, Reuniones y Eventos de Las Naciones Unidas, n.d.).

9 The Fourth World Conference on Women took place in Beijing in 1995 and established concrete strategies to promote gender equality and women’s progress. These strategies were consigned in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (ONU Mujeres, n.d.).

10 See, for example: *Evangelicals & Catholics Together: the Christian Mission in the Third Millennium* (Various, 1994).

Five key ideas for contemporary gender-restrictive messaging emerged from these events:

1. The idea that sex is biologically determined, binary, universal, and unchangeable. This biological essentialism portrays gender and sexual diversity as an aberration that is dangerous, undesirable, or, in the best-case scenario, treatable.
2. The belief in the existence of only two sexes that have a hierarchical and “complementary” relation to one another. This concept frames existing inequalities between men and women as the natural result of innate biological differences that cannot—and should not—be changed.
3. The portrayal of the advancement of LGBT rights as a threat to children.
4. The framing of women’s and LGBT rights as sources of political, social, and economic chaos, and as threats to the existence of humanity itself by challenging the reproductive mandate at the core of heteronormativity.
5. The replacement of references to specific religions or sacred texts with a pseudo-secular language that favors terms like “the natural order” and “common sense” over religiously charged notions like “sin.”

These narratives are central to the development and mobilization of “**gender ideology**,” a **pejorative term created to group together and delegitimize efforts to advance human rights and gender justice**. Although the term “gender ideology” coalesced in literature produced by the Vatican around 2003, it only gained widespread recognition and was successfully mobilized politically a decade later (Fassin, 2020; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Why did it take so long?

The term “gender ideology” coalesced in literature produced by the Vatican around 2003, but it wasn’t until a decade later that the concept gained widespread recognition and was successfully mobilized politically.

INSTRUMENTALIZING CULTURAL ANXIETIES

TAKEAWAYS

- The beginning of the 21st century brought a sense of disillusionment with and mistrust of the human rights framework and the multilateral organizations that heralded it during the second half of the twentieth century. In the Global South, the disenchantment was more profound, as it became clear that the emphasis on human rights—particularly those of women, LGBTI people, children, and other historically marginalized populations like ethno-racial minorities—had failed to bring about a more equitable and prosperous society.
- Gender-restrictive groups routinely work with nationalist parties and actors portraying the defense of human rights and gender justice as a form of cultural imperialism which should be rejected to protect a “traditional” moral and cultural order.
- Contemporary gender-restrictive movements are fundamentally de-democratization movements (Biroli, 2020) that feed on and further strengthen the illiberal politics that have emerged in the first two decades of the 21st century by manipulating “cultural anxieties” and forming alliances with nationalist and autocratic parties and movements.
- As a representation of gender-restrictive paradigms and a bulwark against growing anxieties caused by the advancement of women’s, LGBT and children’s rights, “The Family,” capitalized and in singular, became a key social, economic, political, and cultural battleground.

Prior to 2010, some faith-based (mostly Christian), gender-restrictive groups mobilized people with the objective of curtailing women’s and LGBT rights, but their strategy did not yet revolve around the idea of “gender ideology” (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).¹¹ To understand why the narrative of opposition to “gender ideology” gained traction worldwide since 2010, we must revisit four key cultural turning points that took place at the beginning of the 21st century.

1. From Optimism to Disenchantment: the Delegitimization of Multilateral Organizations

Ten years after the Cairo and Beijing conferences, evaluation committees stated that many of the desired changes of the 1990s in human rights were not implemented or did not attain the desired outcomes. In the United States and some European countries, this marked a profound disenchantment with superficial

policies regarding gender equality and the entities enforcing them (Kováts & Poim, 2015). In the Global South and some countries of Eastern Europe, the disillusionment was more profound and mistrust against the UN system began to emerge. This mistrust deepened and became more widespread when these organizations’ contradictions and flaws¹² became increasingly public, and their seeming inability to create enduring systemic change frustrated even their most avid supporters.

Furthermore, the perception that the emphasis on human rights—particularly those of women, LGBT people, children, and other historically marginalized populations like ethnoracial minorities—had failed to bring about a more equitable and prosperous society was propagating rapidly. Despite years of human rights advocacy, welfare policies and services were still insufficient. Socioeconomic inequality and instability kept growing, while many nations struggled with profound political and economic crises.

11 In Europe, Spain, Croatia, Italy, and Slovenia had early gender-restrictive mobilizations: Spain in 2004 against equal marriage, Croatia in 2006 against Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE), Italy in 2007 against a civil partnership, and Slovenia in 2009 against same-sex marriage. Although “gender ideology” was already in use, it had little recognition and traction then (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

12 These flaws include the presence of countries known for systematic violations of human rights in the UN Human Rights Council, like Venezuela who is a member since 2019 (Calamur, 2018; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2020)(Calamur, 2018); as well as cases of sexual exploitation and abuse by employees of different UN agencies, which are addressed by a separate entity in the UN system (Conduct in UN Field Operations, 2021).

This growing disenchantment and economic inequality provided faith-based, gender restrictive groups with an opportunity to bolster their social, cultural, and political influence. Catholic and Evangelical parishes provided key material and emotional support, as well as counseling programs for youth and cisgender women in Africa and Latin America, gaining millions of believers and strengthening their cultural foothold. In addition, Pentecostal Evangelical churches and organizations gained new followers through the “Prosperity Gospel,” which states that true believers will enjoy economic rewards on earth (Kaoma, 2012; Zaremborg, 2020).

2. Framing Human Rights, and Gender Justice as Neocolonialism

Gender-restrictive and/or nationalist groups in several countries, particularly in Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe, started questioning universal human rights and framing multilateral organizations, like the UN, and international human rights organizations as “Western” powers inappropriately interfering in national affairs and attempting to change local culture. This narrative also portrayed the defense of human rights, particularly those related to gender justice, as a form of cultural imperialism (Kováts & Poim, 2015).

Gender-restrictive groups routinely work with nationalist parties and actors to reject this supposed imperialist project and protect “traditional” moral and cultural — gender-restrictive— orders that disregard women’s, children’s and LGBT rights. For example, in all three cases studied (Peru, Bulgaria, and Ghana), progressive reforms for gender justice and human rights were (mis) represented as part of a larger neocolonization project enacted by the UN and other “cultural elites”¹³ inconsistent with local cultural, social, and religious values.

3. Illiberal Politics, and the Manipulation of Cultural Anxieties

“Illiberal politics” have surged during the second decade of the 21st Century, threatening democracy and seriously undermining human rights. The term “Illiberal politics” refers to democratically elected regimes that become increasingly authoritarian by ignoring constitutional limits on their power, quelling dissent and persecuting opposition, and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedoms without formally instituting a dictatorial regime (Zakaria, 1997).

Opposition to “gender ideology” manipulates the cultural anxiety produced by the advancement of gender justice and increasing ethnoracial diversity, as well as the perceived loss of status on the part of historically privileged groups (like heterosexual, cisgender white men) to discredit human rights efforts, particularly those of women, children, and LGBT people. Hence, opposition to “gender ideology” also became “a means of rejecting different facets of the current socioeconomic order” (Grzebalska et al., 2017).

It is common for illiberal politicians to claim democratic legitimacy for their rule by employing “populist” rhetoric (Lürmann & Hellmeier, 2020).¹⁴ Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro and Viktor Orbán are representative of this type of politics in the United States, Brazil and Hungary, respectively.

Growing economic instability is often named as the factor that best explains the rise of this phenomenon (Dion, 2018; Tabellini, 2019). However, recent studies have shown that **racial and ethnocultural anxieties play a more prominent role in the emergence of illiberal politics.** This cultural anxiety is driven by different factors including growing ethnoracial diversity, religious pluralism, and the increasing visibility of cisgender women and LGBTI people in positions of power and

¹³ George Soros, the founder of the Open Society Foundations, is widely named as the leader of this supposed conspiracy. Using Soros’ last name, gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria even created the neologism *sorosig* to pejoratively refer to individuals or organizations that defend and advance the rights of women, children, and the LGBT people.

¹⁴ Populism is an ideology that separates society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” which is believed to be allied with transnational and financial corporations (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Populist politics can be deployed by left wing and right wing political parties, and by both, capitalist and communist regimes (Dion, 2018). Claiming to represent “the people,” populists often appeal to gender-restrictive values, which they oppose to “minoritarian and elitist values,” framed as morally corrupt and contrary to national values.

prestige, as well as the advancement of gender justice (Dion, 2018; Rodrik, 2019).

At the core of this anxiety is the worry that cultural change will come with a loss of social, political, economic and cultural status on the part of those who have historically wielded power, hoarded resources and opportunities, and benefited from gender, racial, sexual and/or other forms of privilege, like heterosexual and cisgender white men in the United States and Europe, and Christians in Eastern Europe (Margalit, 2019; Cox et al., 2018; Dion, 2018).¹⁵

This cultural anxiety and the rise of “illiberal politics” are key factors in the growth and popularity of gender-restrictive groups. On the one hand, their strategic opposition to “gender ideology” manipulates the cultural anxiety and the perceived loss of status felt by historically privileged groups (like heterosexual, cisgender white men) to discredit human rights efforts, particularly those of women, children, and LGBT people. Hence, opposition to “gender ideology” has also become “a means of rejecting different facets of the current socioeconomic order” (Grzebalska et al., 2017), strengthening gender-restrictive groups worldwide.

On the other hand, **the patriarchal and hierarchical world view that gender-restrictive groups promote resonates strongly with nationalist, autocratic ideologies and political parties.** In fact, a growing number of authoritarian-leaning politicians across the political spectrum are using the idea of “fighting gender ideology” to tap into the deep pockets and expanding influence of gender-restrictive groups, and court their disciplined voters (see the Peru Case, p.40).

Consequently, gender-restrictive groups feed on and further strengthen the “illiberal politics” that have emerged in the first two decades of the 21st century. Therefore, the connection between the attack on women’s, children’s, and LGBT rights and current de-democratization efforts across the globe must be recognized. Contemporary gender-

restrictive groups are, in essence, de-democratization movements with devastating consequences for human rights, gender justice and democracy (Biroli, 2020).

Contemporary gender-restrictive movements are fundamentally de-democratization movements (Biroli, 2020) that feed on and further strengthen the illiberal politics that have emerged in the first two decades of the 21st century.

It is urgent that philanthropic organizations and grantmakers seeking to uphold children’s, women’s, and LGBT rights work proactively and consistently with the pro-democracy funding ecosystem.

4. The Family as a Cultural and Economic Battleground.

In the context of growing cultural anxieties and feelings of displacement caused by the advancement of human rights and gender justice, the enforcement of gender-restrictive norms and values became increasingly appealing for growing numbers of the population (Dion, 2018). Gender-restrictive groups capitalized on this social angst, portraying the need to reinstate the heterosexual, patriarchal family as the only socially and morally acceptable one, and as key to reinstating the idealized (patriarchal) social, political and economic order currently under threat. Hence, the heteronormative family came to represent gender-restrictive paradigms and a bulwark against deepening anxieties caused by the advancement of women’s, LGBT and children’s rights.

Another important aspect of the centrality of the family in the current socioeconomic order is that in neoliberal economies it is regarded as society’s core moral unit, and, increasingly, as its main economic building block.¹⁶ Due to the dismantling of the welfare state, families have become the only “antidote to precarity” for millions of people (Biroli, 2020; Fassin, 2020).

¹⁵ The 2020 U.S election is revealing. The majority of voters with the lowest household income voted for Joe Biden (46 to 53 for households under 30,000 dollars; and 55 to 43 percent for those under 50,000 dollars), while 58% voters with an income of 100,000 dollars or more broke for Donald Trump (against 41 % for Biden). (The New York Times, 2021). The siege of the U.S Capitol on January 6th 2021 is another case in point. Forty percent of the capitol rioters are business owners or hold white-collar jobs (Pape & Ruby, 2021). The group included CEOs, state legislators, police officers, active and retired service members, real-estate brokers, stay-at-home mom and dads (Serwer, 2021). See Box 5. In Eastern Europe, a significant number of Christians saw in the rising migration of Muslims a danger to Christianity and their “traditional values” (Dion, 2018; Pickel & Öztürk, 2021).

¹⁶ Because of the growing privatization of basic services, private, for-profit companies are increasingly charged with providing basic services and functions, which means that these resources were not accessible to all. The 2008 global crisis resulted in many people recognizing the precarity of their living conditions, even if they were supposedly part of the middle class in high-income countries (Patomäki, 2009).

In classic neoliberal theory the concept of family is the unit of analysis for “market-based rational choice.”¹⁷ However, it is not necessarily the traditional or nuclear one. Alternative kinship relations are acceptable as long as they “successfully [...] assume the welfare costs of partners and children” (Cooper & Mabie, 2018). The modern insistence on the heterosexual patriarchal family as society’s foundation comes out of pragmatic necessities that are both economic and moral. First, the urgency of meeting the material and caregiving needs that the state is unwilling or unable to provide. Second, the desire to curtail the advancement of feminist and LGBT movements particularly in terms of recognition of non-normative relations and family configurations, like same-sex marriages. These two distinct yet interrelated aspects catalyzed the powerful alliance between neoliberals and gender-restrictive groups (Cooper & Mabie, 2018).

As a representation of gender-restrictive paradigms, a safeguard against economic insecurity and precarity, and a bulwark against growing anxieties caused by the advancement of women’s, LGBT and children’s rights, “The Family,” capitalized and in singular, became a key social, economic, political, and cultural battleground in the opposition to “gender ideology.”

Another key cultural turning point to understand the emergence and effectiveness of the opposition to “gender ideology” strategy is the double role of the heterosexual, patriarchal family. On the one hand, gender-restrictive groups presented the heteronormative family as the main (and even only) safeguard against what they portray as moral corruption and social chaos, which is code for the advancement of gender justice. On the other hand, as safety nets continue to shrink and economic precarity increases, the family is becoming society’s main provider of social services and protection. Gender-restrictive groups fused these two functions, making “The Family,” capitalized and in singular, a critical social, economic, political, and cultural battleground.

¹⁷ “Market-based rational choice” theory argues that instead of being rights that need to be guaranteed by the state, all social goods should be marketized, privatized and subject to “economic choice.” These include free health care, free public education, etc.

CONTEMPORARY FAITH-BASED, GENDER-RESTRICTIVE GROUPS

TAKEAWAYS

- Contemporary faith-based, gender-restrictive groups are heterogenous, but they are also highly motivated and goal-oriented which makes them excellent at working across differences.
- They compromise and prefer to sacrifice particular details of their political convictions and religious beliefs to be able to establish a social, political, and economic order coherent with their gender-restrictive, patriarchal worldview.
- Opposition to “gender ideology” is the symbolic glue that allows gender-restrictive groups to work together (Kováts & Poim, 2015), and has become one of their most successful global strategies.
- International partnerships and networking are key components of their success. Through networking, they share references and strategies, learn how to frame discourses, and organize responses to progressive organizations and initiatives worldwide.
- Time is their ally: unlike progressive forces, **their vision of history is teleological**. This vision positions their work as the fulfillment of God’s plan, which allows them to go beyond the short-term, results-oriented projects preferred by many funders of women’s, children’s, and LGBT rights, and **to work towards the long-term consolidation of their worldview**.
- This understanding of time encourages them to **take risks and invest in paradigm-shifting strategies that do not depend on revenue streams driven by deliverables**.



In the current context of worldwide political and economic crisis, gender-restrictive groups do not simply mobilize religious opposition to women's and LGBT rights. They have now become a multifaceted and heterogeneous—yet highly coordinated and effective—faith-based, gender-restrictive movement capable of working across religious denominations, political parties, and regions.

Gender-restrictive groups share a conservative worldview, but they are not homogenous. Among them are representatives of various political interests and social causes: religious institutions of different faiths (mostly Catholic and Evangelical, but in some cases Muslim and Jewish as well¹⁸), researchers, civil society organizations, media outlets, conservative political representatives, etc. Thinking about them as a unified and homogenous group obscures the understanding of their relationships and tensions and does not accurately reflect local realities.¹⁹

Furthermore, it can obscure the fact that many believers and religious leaders support women's, children and LGBT rights. Equating religiosity with gender normativity is part of the narrative and goals of gender-restrictive groups, but it is not always a reality on the ground. It is of utmost importance to identify and support religious organizations and regular citizens that uphold their faith while rejecting the gender-restrictive agenda.

What is important to note is that faith-based, gender-restrictive groups bypass their differences and historical disputes to work together mostly within different denominations of the same faith (as Protestants and Catholics do) and, in some cases, particularly in Africa, with representatives of other religions (Muslims and

Christians). In their shared opposition to “gender ideology” these faith-based alliances found the rallying cry to work together and to partner with powerful secular international and local allies.

These unusual partnerships give gender-restrictive groups renewed social relevance and political influence. For example, in Peru, well-known and influential politicians like Alberto and Keiko Fujimori actively sought—and obtained—endorsement from prominent religious leaders, in exchange for commitment to gender-restrictive policies and laws.

18 Contemporary gender-restrictive groups are predominantly Christian, although there are also some coalitions with Muslims and Jews. Moreover, these interreligious partnerships have not always succeeded, and are not always widespread (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Interview with Gillian Cane, 2020). In Africa, however, there are more enduring collaborations between Muslims and Christians (see Ghana, pg. 81). In this report, we will focus on the collaborations that have taken place in the case studies, which are mostly between Christian denominations and between Christians and Muslims.

19 Even within religious organizations, there are significant differences. For example, the Vatican had an instrumental role in conceptualizing a framework for understanding the “common enemy,” offering a space where intellectuals and activists could meet and coordinate and providing an extensive network to spread their messaging (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). However, this does not mean that all Catholic groups support anti-equality initiatives, nor that Catholics continue to lead the movement in the same way they did in the '90s. In Latin America, for instance, Evangelical churches are increasingly powerful, and in some areas are more influential than their Catholic counterparts (Biroli, 2020). Also, unlike Catholics, who have a central leader in the Vatican, Evangelical churches do not, which creates more open intergroup differences. There are many denominations (Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Pentecostals, Neo-Pentecostals, etc.) that do not share a unified position towards women's and LGBT rights, although they have started to form alliances. It is troubling that, among these coalitions, the most reactionary positions seem to be gaining the most traction and are accruing significant political, social, and economic power (Zarembek, 2020). There are also differences among Muslims. Although recent political history portrays them as highly conservative regarding sexuality issues, some groups have started to discuss inclusivity politics within Islam. “Muslims for progressive values” (MPV, n.d.) is a case in point. Others hold rigorously conservative views regarding women and LGBT people, very close to traditionalist frameworks in Catholicism and Protestantism. However, institutional connections between these religions (Christians and Muslims) are not widespread. Africa is an interesting exception. “Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa are more likely than their counterparts in other regions to say that Islam and Christianity have a lot in common” (Pew Center, 2013). This common ground found by Muslims and Christians in Africa partly accounts for their effective collaboration (Interview with Kane, Gillian) (see Ghana, 81).

Finally, faith-based gender-restrictive groups show a notable strategic adaptability that makes them highly effective. This strategic adaptability is key to their mobilization and is achieved through six main tactics:

“NGO-ization” International networks such as the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), CitizenGo, and Family Watch International (FWI) present themselves as secular, nonprofit organizations funded by citizens concerned with the “common good.”²⁰ By doing so, they accomplish three main goals:

Transferring the gender-restrictive worldview of organized religion to secular, civic society spaces.

Professionalizing anti-gender advocacy.

Legitimizing their presence in each country as local civil society organizations.

Local Political Alliances Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups have powerful alliances with politicians and other public servants. These partnerships allows them to gain an accurate understanding of a country’s legal system and political culture, which is key for advancing their goals.

However, some political actors make alliances with gender-restrictive groups primarily because the social and political order they promise is “less liberal and democratic” (Paternotte, 2020). In this sense, gender-restrictive movements are fundamentally de-democratization and anti-human rights movements (Biroli, 2020).

International Meetings as Networking Spaces Gender-restrictive groups plan and attend international meetings (e.g., the World Congress of Families’ summits), where they invite international and local politicians often related to far-right movements and right-wing populist parties (Open Democracy, 2019). They share experiences, expand and strengthen their networks, identify regional and local allies and opportunities of intervention, and develop roadmaps to operationalize their strategies in local contexts. These interactions account for their coordination and facilitate mutual learning.

Different Points of Entry into Local Public Debates Gender-restrictive groups use common strategies, but they adapt them to the specificities of local discussions and policy debates. They tend to activate whenever there are election periods or when the public discourse turns to gender-based initiatives (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017) such as:

LGBT rights: decriminalization of homosexuality in Africa; same-sex marriage and adoption rights, and laws recognizing gender self-identification and the depathologization of gender identities.²¹

Reproductive rights: abortion, contraception, reproductive technologies.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE).

Initiatives that use a gender perspective: gender violence, gender mainstreaming in Eastern Europe, etc.

²⁰ These organizations coalesce around and propagate the idea that protecting children from so-called radical forces purportedly seeking to confuse, corrupt, or sexually abuse children is a universal, nonpartisan, and nonreligious duty that should be carried out by civil society in conjunction with government authorities.

²¹ See for example the opposition to the Gender Accordance Act between 2012 and 2015 in Poland, the Integral Law for Trans Equality in Spain (Álvarez, 2021), and the consultation around the Gender Recognition Act in the UK, 2020.

A Different Relationship to Time

Gender-restrictive groups' theory of change plays out in three temporal dimensions: short-term initiatives that require immediate action; mid-term projects to reshape legislation and other relevant policies; and a teleological or "purpose-oriented" vision of history that seeks to establish a worldview, literally, for eternity (as the fulfillment of God's plan). **This ideological and institutional framework encourages risk-taking and allows for potential failures without threatening revenue streams.**

Few Strings Attached Funding Streams

Gender-restrictive groups often receive funding from private sources that are interested in consolidating a gender-restrictive world order, not a specific program. This revenue streams or gifts come with no or few strings attached, which makes it easier for organizations to use them according to their shifting priorities, and to quickly adapt to relevant political or social events.

Moreover, they use different funding mechanisms to sum up efforts towards cultural change. Some of these mechanisms include block grants and endowments aimed at long-term investments like building infrastructure, career development, and intellectual work to influence academia and legitimize their gender-restrictive worldview (Lakoff, 2014).

These donors include religious institutions, private philanthropy, and Russian oligarchs, among others (Global Philanthropy Project, 2020).

MANUFACTURING MORAL PANIC: THE STRATEGIC OPPOSITION TO "GENDER IDEOLOGY"

TAKEAWAYS

- "Gender ideology" is not an academic term, nor a concept. It is a highly versatile "interpretative frame" used mainly to discredit progressive scholarship and activism.
- "Gender ideology" effectively stokes moral panic and allows gender-restrictive groups to achieve concrete political goals, in part by claiming to protect children from sexual deviance and abuse.
- Comprehensive Sexuality Education, same-sex marriage and adoption, one's right to express and live one's own gender identity without facing violence or discrimination, equal political participation, protection from domestic violence, and reproductive rights are some of the main battlegrounds for gender-restrictive groups.
- **The arguments grouped under the opposition to "gender ideology" are malleable, versatile, and tailored to fit specific contexts and political struggles.** Based in religion but defended as secular, they appeal to "common sense" and are hard to contest with scholarly arguments like the ones traditionally used by progressive forces.
- The reliance of progressive actors on academic and theoretical sources makes their arguments difficult to understand. Thus, gender-restrictive groups frame them as contrary to "common sense," and as "ideological" or false. Moreover, traditional counterargument techniques paradoxically strengthen gender-restrictive narratives by further spreading their message.
- "The Family," capitalized and in singular, is an umbrella term that binds together most of their claims about sexual roles, sexual orientation, and parental rights (Martínez, 2019). This social structure not only soothes social anxieties, but has also become a key economic entity to counteract the erosion of public welfare and the increased precariousness of labor conditions under neoliberalism (Biroli, 2020).
- Parental authority is used to deny children their rights to, among other things, bodily autonomy and self-determination, particularly regarding gender and sexual identity. Children's vulnerability and "best interests" are instrumentalized to further undermine human rights and gender justice, which are framed as an inherent threat to their safety and wellbeing.

Despite their differences, faith-based, gender-restrictive groups work together to oppose what they call “gender ideology.” As described above, “gender ideology” is a term used to discredit progressive scholarship and activism and to oppose the advancement of human rights and gender justice.

Scholars define “gender ideology” as an “empty signifier”—that is to say, a term that adapts to different contexts (Kuhar & Zobec, 2017; Serrano Amaya, 2017). These definitions stress a fundamental point: “gender ideology” does not have a single definition; it is constantly modified to adjust to a broad range of local realities and anxieties.

In its versatility lies its effectiveness. To better understand how it works it is useful to think of “gender ideology” not so much as a concept, but as an interpretative frame:

Imagine “gender ideology” as a pair of **3D glasses**: these goggles do not merely let light pass through them, nor do they enhance vision. **Their design distorts the perception of reality, giving the viewer a false sense of clarity and involvement in the action.**²² With 3D glasses, a fictional image that is intentionally blurry acquires a deceptive sense of reality, which can sometimes feel threatening.

The most important thing about “gender ideology” is not what the term actually means, but the worldview it conveys through the distortion of gender-based rights and scholarship.

Similarly, the lens of “gender ideology” presents distorted, decontextualized, and false references to gender justice and turns them into seemingly clear and falsely menacing images. That is to say, the use of “**gender ideology**” **changes a person’s sense of reality**. Through this lens, gender-based rights appear deceptive and dangerous, while “the three Ns” (nature, nation, and normality) are perceived as safeguards to the moral, social, and political order (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

Part of the deceptive force of “gender ideology” is that even though it is not supported by scientific or academic theories, it coopts scientific language and falsifies theoretical premises. This lends credence to

its rhetoric, despite its lack of adherence to scholarly methods and rigor, or even basic logic. The most important thing about “gender ideology” is not what the term actually means, but the worldview it conveys through the distortion of gender-based rights and scholarship. Therefore, “gender ideology” can be used opportunistically, rapidly adapting its meaning to specific contexts (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Martínez, 2019; Serrano Amaya, 2017).

For example, the “gender ideology” debate in Peru in 2016 mainly focused on the opposition to Comprehensive Sexuality Education, while the deployment of the term in Bulgaria successfully blocked the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and a variety of child protection initiatives. In Ghana, gender-restrictive campaigns did not even use the term “gender ideology;” instead, gender-restrictive groups spoke about the dangers of an “LGBT agenda” supposedly imposed by “Western” elites. Their strategies are similar to the ones used in other countries, but through a different expression, or a different brand of 3D glasses.

The arguments grouped under the opposition to “gender ideology” are malleable, versatile, and tailored to fit specific contexts and political struggles.

There are four key elements to understanding how gender-restrictive groups use opposition to “gender ideology” against human rights and gender justice, and why it has been so effective:

THE FORMULA BEHIND THE OPPOSITION TO “GENDER IDEOLOGY”

1. *Strategic secularization of gender normativity*
2. *The appropriation of children’s rights to create moral panic*
3. *The deployment of anticolonial, anticommunist, and nationalist sentiment*
4. *A “direct communication” strategy*

²² There are notable similarities between the framing of “gender ideology” and classic conspiracy theories. This is significant since influential conspiracy theories like QAnon also instrumentalize children protection rhetoric to advance a gender-restrictive worldview and undermine democratic institutions.

1. Strategic Secularization of Gender Normativity

Opposition to “gender ideology” is based on religious ideas. However, instead of using religious discourse, contemporary gender-restrictive groups resort to **the strategic secularization of gender normativity** (Vaggione, 2011).²³ That is to say, **the conscious decision to justify a gender-restrictive worldview through the appropriation and resignification of secular concepts and language.** As part of this strategic secularization of their religious views in the last two decades, gender-restrictive groups’ narratives have increasingly appropriated the language of human rights, and appealed to “common sense,” (pseudo) science, and selective readings of progressive scholarship.

Gender-restrictive groups present “common sense” as a set of natural truths that are self-evident, unchangeable, and universal, instead of the result of concrete historical processes and sociocultural beliefs.

The use of these different conceptual frameworks combined with the blatant spread of disinformation can give the appearance that opposition to “gender ideology” is irrational and random. This is not the case. Even if it does not follow an academic or scientific logic, it does have a dynamic consistency. This internal logic is based on appeals to deeply ingrained worldviews that appear to be “common sense” because they resonate strongly even among people who do not consider themselves religious or conservative. Gender-restrictive groups present “common sense” as a set of natural truths that are self-evident and universal, instead of the result of concrete historical processes and sociocultural beliefs.²⁴

This “common sense” narrative proclaims that the gender binary—and the sociopolitical and economic hierarchies that derive from it—directly stems from the anatomical differences between people, and thus represents it as innate and unchangeable. In contrast, the advancement of human rights and gender justice is

framed as an ideological imposition that is both false and dangerous (Martínez, 2019).²⁵

The strategic appeal to “common sense” is highly effective because it expands opposition to gender justice and galvanizes anti-LGBT sentiment without using religious language or references. That is to say, it advances a patriarchal, gender-restrictive worldview through secular narratives with broader appeal.

The appeal to “common sense” is highly effective because it advances a patriarchal, gender-restrictive worldview through secular narratives with broader appeal.

However, the “secularization” of gender normativity is not limited to “common sense.” It also uses pseudoscience and a manipulative understanding of the human rights framework to:

- “Secular-wash,” or obscure religious ties, by using a pseudoscientific discourse that creates an appearance of rigor and legitimacy that appeals to nonreligious audiences.
- Prevent progressives from utilizing the terms traditionally used to advance their causes. For example, the language of human rights—particularly the right to life, freedom, and a family—is now commonly used to undermine those very rights. Also, as the expression “gender ideology” shows, gender-restrictive groups have effectively appropriated “gender,” giving it pejorative, panic-inducing connotations that are making it a politically toxic and socially inviable term.

This appropriation and resignification of many of the concepts and terms created to advance human rights and gender justice is one of the most worrisome aspects of the strategic secularization of gender normativity. It has occurred in three main realms: the academy, human rights, and gender theory and feminism (see table).

²³ This “strategic secularism” is a term coined by Vaggione (2011) to denote how religious discourses and narratives adapt to current debates in order to find greater resonance in public opinion (Vaggione, 2011; Pecheny et.al, 2017).

²⁴ In this framing, “common sense” is no longer “the sense around which a political community organizes itself” (Rosenberg, 2017). This is a problem because, as Rosenberg notes, denaturalizing common sense “makes a community accountable for its exclusions” (Rosenberg, 2017), which is exactly what gender-restrictive groups are seeking to prevent.

APPROPRIATING AND REWRITING THE LANGUAGE OF RIGHTS AND EQUALITY

Speaking the Language of the Academy

Developing interdisciplinary scholarship in gender-restrictive thinktanks and religiously affiliated universities. These works:

- shift the language through which gender and sexual diversity are stigmatized by using the language of pathologization, instead of “sin.”
- misquote progressive and feminist scholarship, creating widespread confusion about key feminist concepts.²⁶
- are often funded by the same gender-restrictive organizations that seek to have their worldview legitimized through academic credentials (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

Speaking the Language of Human Rights (But Not for All)

Appropriating the human rights framework to uphold a gender-restrictive worldview on three fronts:

- The defense of “children’s rights.” Gender-restrictive groups often pit parental rights against children’s rights. They claim that parents always have the right to choose on behalf of their children, even when this may come into direct conflict with the child’s best interest (UNCRC, 2009).
- The defense of “life.” There is increasing pressure to have the concept of “unborn child or person” recognized as a legal category that would severely limit reproductive rights, particularly abortion (see Box 1).
- The defense of “religious freedom.” The strategic deployment of the liberal principle of religious tolerance to create a “right to discriminate” against those who challenge a gender-restrictive worldview, thus portraying gender-restrictive groups as victims of so-called reverse discrimination.

Speaking the Language of Feminism

Hijacking the most immediate objectives of feminism while delegitimizing its larger transformative goals. Gender-restrictive groups exploit tensions within feminism to claim that:

- there is an **acceptable** strand of feminism, which they support because it doesn’t question gender hierarchies or norms in its efforts to reduce (rather than close) the economic gap between men and women and lessen some forms of violence against women.
- the other strand of feminism is **(mis)represented as extremist and “radical,”** because it challenges patriarchy and cis and heteronormativity (Rodríguez Rondón & Rivera-Amarillo, 2020).

In some countries, gender-restrictive groups are amplifying and instrumentalizing the voices of so called “gender critical” feminists —also known as Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFS)—. These “gender critical” feminists deny the concept of “gender identity” and propose the notion of “sex-based” rights, which disregards the identity of trans and non-binary people, undermines their rights and imperiles their life and wellbeing (see Box 2).

25 A good example of these false analogies is the use of the term “gender.” The narrative goes like this: “if sex is biological and gender is a social construct, then sex is real and natural, and gender is false and unnatural.” As can be seen in the example, apparently simple analogies and appeals to “logic” and “common sense” are at the core of this rationale. This strategy has the advantage that—unlike most feminist and academic conceptualizations of gender—it is easy to understand, to replicate, and to share. Additionally, this faux rationale stokes fear and moral panic, and provokes strong emotional reactions that can then be effectively weaponized: indignation, rage, and panic about the supposed wellbeing of children are translated into political and economic support for gender-restrictive initiatives.

26 For example, they purposefully misrepresent gender as social construct by suggesting that this concept encourages people, particularly children, to change their gender identity capriciously, engage in precocious and promiscuous sexual acts, and disregard (patriarchal) social norms and authority. This misconception then becomes central to gender-restrictive campaigns, as happened in Peru in 2016 (see case study p.40), and Bulgaria in 2019 (see case study p.62).

BOX 1. EMBEDDING HOMOPHOBIA AND THE “RIGHT TO LIFE OF THE UNBORN CHILD” IN THE HONDURAN CONSTITUTION.

On January 21st, 2021, the Honduran Congress approved one of the most aggressively gender-restrictive Constitutional reforms in the world. It embeds in the Constitution the total ban on abortion, which already existed by law, and the prohibition of same-sex marriage.

The reform is known as the “Shield against abortion in Honduras” for two reasons. It bans “any form of interruption on the part of the mother or a third party of **the life of the soon to be born child, whose life must be respected since conception**” (El país, 2021). It also makes it almost impossible to legalize abortion in the future because it raises the number of votes required to make any further amendments (HRW, 2021).

This is one of the most salient examples of the appropriation of human rights and democratic institutions to seriously undermine gender justice. The recognition of the “right to life of the unborn child” creates a false right that has devastating consequences for the right to life, health and bodily autonomy of cisgender women and girls, trans men, and non-binary, intersex and other people who can get pregnant. The numbers regarding ciswomen are overwhelming: Honduras has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Latin America: 1 in 4 women has been pregnant before being 19 years old (HRW, 2021; El País, 2021). It is also worrisome that religious concepts like “conception” are now sanctioned by the constitutional language of a country that declares itself secular (Embajada de Estados Unidos en Honduras, 2016).

The prohibition of gay marriage is another troubling development since it makes homophobia a constitutional principle.

The reform was ratified on January 28th, 2021 (CNN, 2021). It is the first time this kind of prohibitions is enshrined in the Constitution of a Latin American country.

2. Manufacturing Moral Panic through the Appropriation of Child Protection Rhetoric

Opposition to “gender ideology” appropriates child protection rhetoric and preys on our collective desire to protect them. The strategy is simple: children are portrayed as the primary victims of “gender ideology” in order to sow moral panic and mobilize the public towards specific (gender-restrictive) political actions.

***Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)** is a “rights-based and gender-focused approach to sexuality education” which provides age-appropriate and scientifically accurate information about human sexuality, as it pertains to reproductive health, childbirth, sexual transmitted diseases, gender equality, and discrimination (UNFPA, n.d.).*

CSE is essential to fulfill the rights of all children, irrespective of their gender. It aims at providing science-based and age coherent information that will enable them to have accurate knowledge about their bodies, their rights, gender equality, sexual orientation, gender identity and healthy relationships. CSE has proven to be beneficial to combat abuse, violence and discrimination, and to promote respect for diversity (Commissioner for Human Rights, 2020).

According to this framework, the establishment of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in schools, same-sex marriage and adoption, the right to freely express and live according to one’s own gender identity, and gender equality laws threaten the wellbeing and safety of children (Biroli, 2020). Consequently, when one of these ideas gets discussed in legislative debates, court challenges, or curricular reforms, the narrative gets activated,²⁷ mobilizing large numbers of adults who—regardless of religious affiliation—see it as their moral duty to, as Anita Bryant would say, “save the children.”

²⁷ Scholars recently suggested that the “defensive strategy” is now being activated in some countries before specific progressive demands are even discussed. David Paternotte argues that this is what happened in Romania and Bulgaria: “In both countries, anti-gender mobilizations are latecomers, for they did not reach their full speed until 2018. However, if both campaigns happened simultaneously and looked alike, they targeted different issues: the Istanbul Convention on violence against women in Bulgaria and the constitutional definition of marriage in Romania. This observation suggests that the reaction was ready long before any action, with complex interactions between local factors and elements of international diffusion” (Paternotte, 2020).

BOX 2. THE DECLARATION OF WOMEN SEX-BASED RIGHTS

The language of human rights, and specifically women's rights is also being co-opted and weaponized against gender justice, particularly trans and non-binary people's rights, by so-called "gender critical" feminists. Also known as Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFS), they used the framing and language of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to issue the Declaration of Women Sex-based Rights in 2019 (WHRC, 2019).

This document is profoundly cis-normative, gender-restrictive and trans-exclusionary. Using language and arguments that resonate strongly with those of gender-restrictive groups, the document rejects gender identity and claims that anatomical—particularly reproductive—differences between people determine their identity and cannot be changed. Following this flawed reasoning, they refuse to recognize the womanhood of trans women, and demand that women's rights instruments and spaces, as well as policies intended to advance gender equity address exclusively the needs of the people they call "human females" and exclude all who were not assigned female at birth (TheTerfs.com, 2013; WHRC, 2019).

Unfortunately, this position is not new in feminism. It can be traced to at least the 1970s in the U.S. and England. However, the growing visibility of trans people in politics and popular culture, as well as the increasing recognition of trans and non-binary people's rights and scholarship, has reignited this anti-trans stance, particularly in the U.K, Spain and Latin America among young feminists, activists and scholars.

In these places, so called "gender critical" feminists are actively working to curtail trans and non-binary people's rights. Like gender-restrictive groups, they also instrumentalize children to cause moral panic. First, they falsely claim that trans women are male abusers who "wear a dress" to penetrate women-only spaces (like bathrooms and locker rooms) and sexually abuse cisgender women and girls. Second, they present trans children in general as targets of transnational pharmaceutical companies eager to sell more hormones, and trans boys in particular as victims of a "trans lobby" that seeks to "erase women" by pressuring girls to "escape" femininity and womanhood. (Rowling, 2020).

Furthermore, even though the researchers found no evidence of direct collaboration between so called "gender critical" feminists and gender-restrictive groups, there is a troubling and growing number of cases where they have supported each other to halt trans-affirming legislation and other policy efforts.

Spain is a case in point. In 2020, the Equality Ministry drafted a law that would allow transgender people 16 or older to change their gender marker in official documents and seek hormone treatment without a gender dysphoria diagnosis. The bill created a strange bedfellows situation in which "gender critical" feminists of the PSOE, the Spanish Socialist Worker's party, and Vox, a far-right, gender-restrictive party, worked toward the same goal: preventing the bill to become law. In January 2021 a group of eight well-known "historic feminists" continued to fuel the fire by making public statements against it. As in the "The Declaration," they categorically rejected "gender identity," insisting that only sex-based rights should be recognized, and warned that lowering the age requirement to access treatment and correct official documents might amount to "state-sponsored child abuse." The list of signatories is an impressive group of respected scholars and socialist politicians. Vox strategically amplified this messaging to legitimize their own transphobic stance with supposed feminist voices and reasoning (Álvarez, 2021, Asunción, 2020; Maestre, 2021; Ruiz Coll, 2020).

When funding feminist and/or women's organizations, progressive funders should engage in due diligence work to ensure they are not inadvertently supporting trans-exclusionary organizations, groups, collectives or scholars.

Gender-restrictive groups misconstrue efforts seeking to advance human rights and gender justice, making preposterous claims that are nonetheless highly effective in creating moral panic among parents, educators, and society at large. CSE initiatives in different countries are one of the most successful "entry points" of faith-based, gender-restrictive groups into public debate. Discussions that combine children and adolescents and sexuality easily produce moral panic, giving these groups the visibility and political recognition, they crave.

Moral panic rapidly and effectively creates social cohesion, channeling outrage into concrete (gender-restrictive) political action.

For example, in countries like Peru and Ghana, gender-restrictive groups argued that children could be easily "indoctrinated" in schools without their parents' consent or awareness. They claimed that CSE initiatives push "gender ideology" (or an "LGBT Agenda," as it is called in Ghana) and that exposing children to a diversity-affirming vision of sexual orientation and gender identity would

BOX 3. STOP CSE

Family Watch International (FWI), a U.S.-based NGO founded in 1990, has established a network of “concerned adults” who “oppose all efforts to advance autonomous sexual rights for children.” They “believe that children have a right to a childhood, free from political, sexual, or other adult agendas” (FWI, 2018). FWI’s “Protect Child Health Coalition” has a specific agenda against CSE, pornography, obscenity laws, and age of consent laws. In the case of CSE, the drafted action plan is accessible on the website Stop CSE. It includes a “tsunami strategy” and a detailed list of actions to engage parents, spread their message, and effectively curtail the development of CSE programs. The website also shares “informative videos” and a broad range of resources, which include ready-to-print flyers, reports on the supposed dangers of CSE, analyses of UN-drafted CSE programs from all over the world (based on a “harm analysis questionnaire”), “opt-out forms” for “concerned parents,” ready-to-use PowerPoint slides, and legal essays. All these resources make up what they call the “defenders’ toolkit” against CSE.

Something interesting about this website is its domain (www.comprehensivesexualityeducation.org). It has no mention whatsoever to the opposition that it enacts against CSE. Since it looks like an informative webpage, unsuspecting readers may consider it a reliable source.

BOX 4. THE MAP MOVEMENT

A new narrative supporting the opposition to “gender ideology” emerged in the United States and Latin America in 2020. It claims that there is a pedophile group known by the acronym MAP (“Activist Pedophile Movement” or “Minor Attracted Persons”) that has three main objectives that threaten children: 1) the legalization of pedophilia; 2) its removal from the WHO’s list of pathologies; and 3) its recognition as a sexual orientation, and thus as a part of the LGBT movement. **None of this is true.** No such group is part of any LGBT, women’s, children’s, or human rights organizations or movements (Gestarsalud, 2020). However, once again, the strategic appropriation and (mis)use of recognizable language, imagery, and historical references have been highly effective in rapidly spreading moral panic.

Two main narratives have been key in this renewed attack on LGBT rights through the instrumentalization of children: first, the direct references to actual pedophilic groups that were active in the 1980s and ‘90s, like MARTIJN in the Netherlands and NAMBLA in the United States, movements that wanted to be recognized by the ILGA (Paternotte, 2014). Second, the deliberate mirroring and appropriation of the language and symbols of LGBT social movements. For example, disinformation about MAP appeared in social networks in Latin America claiming the existence of a “Pedophilic Pride Day” with pictures of a flag that closely resembles the trans movement’s flag. This content was widely circulated as supposed evidence of the MAP movement (*Las Igualadas*, 2020).

By creating a new narrative that has, at its core, a false but powerful linkage between homosexuality and pedophilia, gender-restrictive groups reinforce the idea that LGBT rights are contrary to the rights and wellbeing of children and that LGBT individuals are a threat to children and society at large.

confuse them,²⁸ hypersexualize them by encouraging practices like masturbation, expose them to “being recruited” into “unnatural lifestyles” (implying that being LGBT is both caused by external factors and wrong), and make them more vulnerable to sexual abuse, all of which is false.

Gender-restrictive groups have employed a nearly identical strategy against CSE worldwide. Simple yet

effective, it relies on the usage of social networks like WhatsApp and Facebook to mobilize parents and other “concerned adults” against concrete CSE curricular reforms or initiatives. The mobilization typically includes large public protests and marches, and the creation of false, moral panic-inducing materials specifically designed to go viral on social media. Family Watch International in the United States outlines this strategy in StopCSE’s website (see Box 3).

28 This conception is based on a profound misunderstanding of the development of gender identity and sexual orientation. It is often thought that these characteristics are exclusive to LGBT adults. However, the latest scholarship suggests that “the development of gender identity and sexual orientation is a process that begins in early childhood and extends until early adulthood” (Martínez & Rojas, 2019). Although this process is inscribed in the sociocultural context and the emotional dynamics of each child, it does not depend on any particular upbringing nor can it be influenced. All children go through this process, but not at the same pace, nor in the same direction. Several important facts are implied:

- Diversity is at the core of human sexual development. Gender identity and sexual orientation are part of the normal development of all people, despite differences in chronology or end “result.”

- The physiological and cognitive changes that occur throughout adolescence make this life stage an important one in the consolidation of a gender identity and a sexual orientation (Martínez & Rojas, 2019).

- Although the development of gender identity and sexual orientation is a process, this does not mean that it can be changed or forced.

- Some children are LGBT, even if they cannot yet name their experience in those terms.

Thus, the development of gender identity and sexual orientation is a part of the normal sexual development of human beings. However, it should not be confused with the sexualization of children, which is related to their engagement with sexual acts or information not appropriate for their emotional or cognitive development. The first process speaks to sexuality in a broader sense, while the latter is related to sexual acts and to possible cases of abuse.

The sexualization of children is not the only idea that faith-based, gender-restrictive groups use to unleash moral panic. More recently, these groups created a perverse and false association between the acronym LGBT and pedophile groups supposedly seeking recognition within the LGBT community (see Box 4).

Furthermore, although not directly related to the LGBT community, the “Save the Children” slogan has been a prevalent part of the QAnon conspiracy theory, whose adherents supported Donald Trump’s unsuccessful reelection campaign in the United States in 2020. This conspiracy theory claims that a supposed network of political, economic, and cultural elites tied to the Democratic Party of the United States operates and controls a pedophile sex-trafficking ring. As can be seen in Box 5, children are once again instrumentalized to mobilize people towards a specific political ideology and a concrete electoral result.

As these examples show, in spite of its name, moral panic does not only—or even mainly—have a “moral” function. Its main role is political, particularly in contexts of economic, social, and political upheaval and anxiety.

For example, the moral panic produced by accusations of “gender ideology” rapidly and effectively creates social cohesion and channels outrage into concrete political actions, such as: the defense of the right to educate children according to parents’ moral and religious beliefs (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017); mobilizations against laws that seek protections or equality for women and/or LGBT people; and wide support for conservative politicians—most of whom are religious themselves or have strong strategic alliances with religious leaders or religiously-affiliated politicians or parties—as happened in Peru, Kenya, Colombia, Brazil, and the United States, among other countries.

Finally, as the case studies will show, there are considerable differences between contexts, but **the political mobilization of moral panic through accusations of “gender ideology” has the concrete goal of advancing a set of common and unifying core values:**

THE WORLDVIEW BEHIND THE PANIC

- *The idea that sex is binary, determined by nature, and unchangeable.*
- *The idea that there are distinct, “complementary,” and hierarchical gender roles derived from the biological differences between the sexes, which are therefore universal, natural, and unchangeable.*
- *The need to restore the bond between sexuality and procreation, which equates to an opposition to sexual and reproductive rights and situates heterosexuality as the only legal and moral sexual orientation.*
- *The prioritizing of parental authority over children’s rights, including the right of parents to decide the content of educational materials that may challenge their hetero- and cisnormative vision of society (see Box 6).*
- *The portrayal of The Family—understood as the heterosexual and patriarchal family, and therefore used in singular, and often capitalized—as the only social unit that guarantees child protection, the continuation of the human species through heterosexual reproductive sexuality, economic stability, and (a gender-restrictive) social and moral order.*

The lack of a diversity-affirming CSE curriculum is harmful to all children because it

- keeps children from having an age-coherent and science-based sexual education, which is key to preventing unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, and sexual abuse
- imposes gender hierarchies and heteronormative standards that may result in gender-based differential educational achievement, and SOGIE-based bullying prevents children from developing and expressing their own thoughts, beliefs, and identities, which is particularly harmful for LGBTI children

BOX 5. PITTING PARENTAL AUTHORITY AGAINST CHILD WELLBEING

Gender-restrictive groups often describe themselves as groups of “concerned adults” trying to protect children, and frame those who advance women’s, LGBT and even child rights as sexual predators and/or individuals seeking to undermine parental authority. These disinformation campaigns are particularly effective at broadening their base of support because they appeal to a more moderate, nonreligious audience, and generate moral panic.

In Peru, Bulgaria and Ghana, gender-restrictive groups pitted parental and child rights against each other, eroding the idea of the universality of human rights, and upholding an antiquated and dangerous paradigm that treats children as their parents’ property, not as independent subjects of rights who need care and guidance to exert those rights.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) initiatives—particularly LGBTI-affirming ones—commonly trigger these reactions. Gender-restrictive groups invoke religious freedom and parental authority to block the implementation and/or drafting of CSE programs.

3. The Deployment of Anticolonial, Anticommunist, and Nationalist Sentiment

The third main strategy that faith-based, gender-restrictive groups use to oppose human rights and gender justice is to frame these issues as neocolonial impositions contrary to national values and sovereignty (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Martínez, 2019). This rhetoric stokes two widespread political fears.

Neocolonial Rhetoric

Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups frame international advocacy for gender justice as a neocolonial imposition supposedly led by “Western” elites who abuse their economic and political power, disregard national sovereignty, and have no respect for local values and religious beliefs. In both Africa and Latin America, the fact that the nation’s Christian social and religious culture is itself the result of a violent colonial process is neither acknowledged nor mentioned. In this context, the “postcolonial church” becomes a paradoxical symbol of cultural resistance and the defense of national sovereignty (Kaoma, 2012; Martínez, 2019).

Anticommunist Sentiment

Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups often equate “gender ideology” to the authoritarianism of communist regimes. Its narrative is tailored to each country’s recent political history.

In **Eastern Europe**, the “gender movement” is equated to a renewed communist invasion. For example, in Poland, gender-restrictive groups portray themselves as democratic because they oppose “gender colonization,” which is framed as a foreign imposition equivalent to Nazism and communism (Kuhar & Zobec, 2017).

In **Latin America**, communism is one of the most powerful specters. Although the majority of the region’s nations have had capitalist economies for most of their recent histories, faith-based, gender-restrictive groups routinely summon the fear of communism to fan the flames of the region’s deep-seated anticommunist sentiment produced by the Cuban Revolution; years of armed conflict with guerrilla organizations in countries like Colombia, Peru, El Salvador, and Nicaragua; and the corruption-ridden governments of the “pink tide.”²⁹

²⁹ The “pink tide” is the name scholars use to name the wave of left-of-center governments that rose to power in Latin America in the beginning of the 21st century. These administrations were established through social equity campaigns and critiques of neoliberalism (Stokke & Törnquist, 2013). Néstor Kirchner, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Evo Morales, Pepe Mujica, and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva are some of the most well-known leaders. Gender-restrictive groups portray these governments as politically, financially, and morally corrupt.

4. A “Direct Communication” Strategy

Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups use highly effective “direct communication” strategies to share their messages. This strategy profits from the wide networking infrastructure of churches (mostly Christian, but in some cases also Muslim) and the political partnerships of conservative NGOs, which provide a consistent influx of resources and capacity building opportunities. Some of the most effective efforts to mobilize support for gender-restrictive initiatives are:

DIRECT COMMUNICATION WITH THE BASE

Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups bypass traditional media to share their messages more directly and effectively with their base through three main channels:

1. By addressing their congregations in religious settings.
2. Through self-owned broadcasting channels (as done by Evangelical and Catholic groups).
3. Through a strategic use of social media, particularly WhatsApp groups, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube.

DIRECT POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Through networks of allied politicians and lobbyists who claim to represent the voice of the “silenced majority” (Serrano Amaya, 2017), gender-restrictive groups use a variety of direct political actions. For example, they often collect signatures and demand democratic popular consultation mechanisms like referendums. They also promote similar legislation in various countries to curtail the advancement of human rights and gender justice. The “anti-gay bills” in Africa are a case in point of this legislative strategy (See Ghana, pg. 81).

SYMBOLIC RAPID-RESPONSE ACTIONS

Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups are quick to organize events that garner media attention, provide people with a direct line of action in support of their views, and show off their cultural influence and political muscle. Some commonly used strategies include fasting events against abortion, marches against progressive legislation, flash mobs (as done in France by La Manif Pour Tous) and internet campaigns (such as those organized by CitizenGo).

A NOTE ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

2020 was the first year of the Covid-19 Pandemic. The virus has had a devastating effect around the world. It brought social and economic life to a standstill, deepening economic, social and ethnoracial disparities,³⁰ and caused 2.4 million deaths worldwide as of February 2021 (WHO, 2021). Also, public health measures like lockdowns have been weaponized as de-democratization and militarization tools. For example, “states of emergency” powers have been used to facilitate coercive state interventions, put restrictions on the press, and limit freedom of expression and association, among others (SPW, 2020).

The crisis has been particularly devastating for cisgender women, children and LGBTI and non-binary people, many of whom have had to face prolonged lockdowns with their abusers³¹ and/or unsupportive family members. The closure of in-person teaching is correlated with an alarming spike in youth suicide (Chatterjee, 2021) and has also deprived many LGBTI and non-binary children and teens of key support services like school counseling and youth groups (Valencia, 2020; The TrevorProject, 2020). Furthermore, some social distancing measures, such as gendered restrictions in Colombia, Peru and Panama also increased violence against trans and non-binary people (Sentiido, 2020).

But the crisis did not stop gender-restrictive groups’ attacks against human rights and gender justice. In fact, they quickly capitalized on the generalized anxiety people were experiencing. They started filling the void left by in-person social spaces and support services with online communities based on gender-restrictive principles and activism, and intensified their disinformation campaigns about women’s and LGBT rights.

The crisis caused by the global pandemic has not slowed down gender-restrictive groups; it has shown their adaptability, creativity and

social media savviness. In the last year, they have amplified and mainstreamed their influence, broadened their audience, and deepened their support within their existing base.

Gender-restrictive groups have thrived during the global crisis through four main strategies:

- Bypassing lockdown measures by communicating directly with their base through social media and a creative use of the digital space. For example, they’ve held smaller gatherings, virtual pro-life marches, livestreaming events, and routinely host capacity building events and forums for gender-restrictive groups via social media platforms (Long-García, 2021).
- Strengthening transnational political networks through digital lobbying strategies and joint public statements against right-affirming initiatives, particularly those related to women’s, children’s and LGBT rights. For example, the Geneva Consensus Declaration, which advocates for traditional family values and the protection of the “right to life since conception.” (Mathers, 2020; SPW, 2020).
- Spreading disinformation about the virus, public health measures and the vaccine in order to sow and deepen polarization and social discord. For example, gender-restrictive groups claimed that the Covid-19 vaccine was made with “aborted baby parts” and therefore portrayed its use as morally reprehensible (Slaver, 2020; Wadman, 2020). This disinformation campaign was so widespread that the Vatican made public statements clarifying that despite using fetal tissue, getting vaccinated did not mean supporting abortion, which continues to be completely banned by the Catholic Church (Vatican News, 2020).
- Instrumentalizing children protection rhetoric to cause moral panic, and mobilize it in support of anti-democratic efforts, particularly against human rights and gender justice. The most notorious case is perhaps the “Save the Children” campaign promoted by QAnon (see Box 5).

³⁰ The World Bank estimates that the pandemic will push 150 million people into extreme poverty by 2021, the majority of them in the Global South (World Bank, 2020a, 2020b). Evidence also suggests that “during the pandemic billionaires became richer and many large corporations significantly increased their profits. Paradoxically, this re-concentration of wealth can in part be attributed to emergency packages that also included incentives to financial markets.” (SPW, 2020). Discussions on universal income and on the need to place taxes on large fortunes became common, as well as on the socioeconomic differences between the Global North and the Global South. In the U.S., the discussion has also included race and ethnicity. The pandemic showed that, because of systemic social inequalities, Black, Latino and Native American communities were disproportionately affected by the virus (both in case and death rates) (CDC, 2021; Wood, 2020).

³¹ Emerging data from UN Women shows that calls to denounce gender violence have dramatically increased during the pandemic (UN Women, 2020)

FINAL TAKEAWAYS

- Contemporary faith-based, gender-restrictive groups are heterogenous, but they are also highly motivated and goal-oriented, which makes them excellent at working across differences. They compromise and sacrifice particular details of their political convictions and religious beliefs to establish a social, political, and economic order coherent with their gender-restrictive, patriarchal worldview.
- Opposition to “gender ideology” is the symbolic glue that allows gender-restrictive groups to work together (Kováts & Poim, 2015), and has become one of their most successful global strategies. “Gender ideology” effectively stokes moral panic and allows these groups to achieve concrete political goals, in part by claiming to protect children from sexual deviance and abuse. Comprehensive Sexual Education, same-sex marriage and adoption, one’s right to express and live one’s own gender identity without facing violence or discrimination, equal political participation, domestic violence, and reproductive rights are some of the main battlegrounds for gender-restrictive groups (Biroli, 2020).
- The most important thing about “gender ideology” is not what the term means. It is the gender-restrictive worldview it conveys through the strategic appropriation and resignification of women’s, children, and LGBT rights.
- The arguments grouped under the opposition to “gender ideology” are malleable, versatile, and tailored to fit specific contexts and political struggles. Based in religion but defended as secular, they appeal to “common sense” and are also hard to contest with scholarly arguments like the ones traditionally used by progressive forces. The reliance of progressive actors on academic and theoretical sources makes their arguments difficult to understand. Thus, gender-restrictive groups frame them as contrary to “common sense,” and as “ideological” or false. Moreover, traditional counterargument techniques paradoxically strengthen gender-restrictive narratives by further spreading their message.
- International partnerships and networking are key components of the success of gender-restrictive groups. Through networking, they secure financial resources, share references and strategies, learn how to frame discourses, and organize responses to progressive organizations and initiatives worldwide.
- Time is their ally: unlike progressive forces, their vision of history is teleological. This vision positions their work as the fulfillment of God’s plan, which allows them to go beyond the short-term, result-oriented projects preferred by many human rights, women’s, and LGBT funders; and to work towards the long-term consolidation of their worldview. This encourages them to take risks and invest in paradigm-shifting strategies that do not depend on deliverable-driven revenue streams.
- “The Family,” capitalized and in singular, is an umbrella term that binds together most of their claims about sexual roles, sexual orientation, and parental rights (Martínez, 2019). This social structure soothes social anxieties and has become a key economic entity to counteract the erosion of public welfare and the increased precariousness of labor conditions under neoliberalism (Biroli, 2020).
- Parental authority and rights are used to deny children their rights to, among other things, bodily autonomy and self-determination, particularly regarding gender and sexual identity. Their vulnerability and “best interests” are instrumentalized to further undermine LGBT and women’s rights, which are framed as an inherent threat to their safety and wellbeing.
- Contemporary gender-normative movements are fundamentally de-democratization movements (Biroli, 2020) that feed on and further strengthen the “illiberal politics” that have emerged in the first two decades of the 21st century. It is urgent that philanthropic organizations and grantmakers seeking to uphold gender justice to work proactively and consistently with the pro-democracy funding ecosystem.
- The global pandemic has effectively proven gender-restrictive groups adaptability. They continue to profit from disinformation, cultural anxiety and political unrest to manufacture and mobilize moral panic related to children against human rights and gender justice initiatives. However, more information is needed to assess their immediate and long-term impact.

In what follows we provide in-depth analyses of three case studies in three different regions: Peru (Latin America), Bulgaria (Eastern Europe), and Ghana (West Africa). The case studies give a more nuanced understanding of how gender-restrictive groups instrumentalize children to manufacture moral panic and mobilize this sentiment towards the imposition and enforcement of a gender-restrictive worldview.

The comparative analysis underscores recurring strategies, narratives, and actors in order to better understand how gender-restrictive groups collaborate and engage in coalitional work across the globe. It also highlights meaningful differences between them, some of which account for their particular success or more notable limitations in specific contexts. These insights are key in order to identify potential opportunities for intervention.

It is our hope that this report both deepens and broadens our shared understanding about how gender-restrictive actors operate under the children protection rhetoric and becomes a valuable resource for progressive funders, grantmakers, and philanthropic networks. It is urgent that we come together to develop multisectoral progressive responses to the gender-restrictive attack on the lives, rights, and wellbeing of millions of people across the world, and on democracy itself. It is time that we reclaim child protection, human rights and gender-based advocacy and cocreate alternative narratives to construct a more equitable world for all, including children, women, and LGBTI people.

BOX 6. "SAVE THE CHILDREN" AS THE SLOGAN OF A POLITICALLY CHARGED AND VIOLENT CONSPIRACY THEORY

In 2020, the "Save the Children" slogan became a fundamental part of QAnon. This internet-based conspiracy theory feeds on previous antisemitic tropes (Greenspan, 2020), and claims to fight against a cabal of "child-eating Satanic pedophiles" that have supposedly infiltrated U.S. politics and the entertainment industry (Roose, 2020). Donald Trump, then president of the United States, was portrayed as the nominal leader of this movement and the only person with the power to expose and destroy this imaginary network of pedophiles.

At first, the community lived on 4chan and 8chan message boards, but eventually migrated to Facebook when these forums disappeared. Its groups and pages gained millions of members and followers (Zadrozny & Sen, 2020). Despite the digital platforms' efforts to shut down QAnon-related groups, the lockdowns initiated during the Covid-19 pandemic and the polarized discourse of the 2020 U.S. presidential election ultimately attracted more people to this conspiracy theory, which has touted its supposed mission to protect children. QAnon has been particularly appealing to women and mothers, who are very active in parenting groups and are concerned about their own children (Kelly, 2020). It has also reached Evangelicals, who found in online communities the emotional support provided by pastors and religious services before social distancing measures were enacted (Ohlheiser, 2020).

The "Save the Children" campaign has now migrated from the internet to the streets. In 2020, Trump supporters carried "Save the Children" banners at public events and demonstrations (Zadrozny & Collins, 2020); and later that year two QAnon supporters—Lauren Boetbert from Colorado and Majorie Taylor Greene from Georgia—were elected to the U.S. Congress (Brewster, 2020).

This conspiracy theory is not harmless. The FBI labeled QAnon and its community of supporters as a "dangerous extremist group" in August 2019 (O. Rubin et al., 2021). Its violent nature was revealed on January 6th 2021 in the U.S. Capitol Siege. A mob of Trump supporters, which included White supremacists, far-right militias, avid anti-abortion activists, and many QAnon followers stormed the building in a failed attempt to overturn Donald Trump's defeat to Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election. Five people died and more than a dozen were wounded. (Gonzalez, 2021; Mazzetti et al., 2021).

QAnon followers played a key and very visible role in the Siege. They proudly filmed themselves during the attack wearing or displaying QAnon symbols, and they inundated social media with hundreds of videos and photos depicting the raid.

The insurrection showed the dangerous link between political leaders, anti-democratic efforts and these conspiracy theories. These events show how QAnon aptly hijacked the "Save the children" slogan for concrete antidemocratic purposes, and demonstrate the enormous appeal and potential for political violence these panic inducing narratives have.

CASE STUDY 1.

PERU:

“HOW GENDER-RESTRICTIVE GROUPS MAY LOSE THE LEGAL BATTLE, BUT WIN THE COMMUNICATIONS AND CULTURAL WAR”

OVERVIEW

Peru is the birthplace of one of Latin America’s strongest transnational *gender-restrictive movements*. Understanding its sociocultural and political context sheds light on the operation of gender-restrictive groups and the rise of neoconservative politics in the region. Lima is geopolitically and strategically important because it hosts the headquarters for various gender-restrictive organizations in the region, including Ceprofarena, the Office for Latin America of the Population Research Institute, Latin American Alliance for the Family, Opus Dei, and Sodalicio de la Vida Cristiana (interview with George Hale, 2020). Therefore, many strategies that instrumentalize children³² to manufacture moral panic and oppose “gender ideology” in countries such as Colombia, Argentina, Mexico, and Chile are oftentimes planned

or tested in Peru, or implemented in the country after their success elsewhere.

Concretely, the Don’t Mess With My Kids (DMWMK) movement³³ in Peru is representative of how gender-restrictive groups instrumentalize children to threaten children’s rights, along with gender-justice, in a country with disturbing evidence of gender-based violence and intense sexism. The Peruvian case also illuminates the ways in which gender-restrictive groups identify key battlefields related to women’s and children’s issues—such as Comprehensive Sexuality Education—that they use as a toehold to advance gender-restrictive initiatives in many policy areas and at several political levels.

³² Throughout this report we highlight the ways in which gender-restrictive groups weaponize children. This is why we will usually speak about children, and the child protection rhetoric, unless explicit references to children’s rights were made by gender-restrictive actors.

³³ DMWMK is much more than a communications campaign or a slogan. It is a movement with recognizable leaders and a stable configuration aimed at mobilizing a collective to change government policies and social values, as evidenced by their official webpage and the systematic nature of their appearances in public debate.

Gender-restrictive groups and actors are organizations, politicians, researchers and institutions that seek to establish a gender-restrictive world order.

A gender-restrictive order organizes economic, political and social life through the imposition and enforcement of a restrictive and hierarchical vision of gender. It has two main and interdependent components: the naturalization of the gender binary, and the enforcement of gender-normativity.

Most of these groups and actors are faith-based, religiously affiliated or explicitly confessional. These groups attack human rights and gender justice, as well as the principles of self-determination and equity.”

Additionally, the case of Peru shows how, despite losing key legal battles, gender-restrictive groups benefit from widespread public exposure and deepen a dangerous rift between law and policy, where rights are officially recognized; and social and cultural spaces, where heteronormative values are reinforced, disinformation³⁴ abounds, and where, ultimately gender justice³⁵ needs to operate.

This case study begins by **I**) describing the events that gave rise to the DMWMK movement. Then, **II**) it explains religious, cultural, and political factors that made the movement’s messages appealing to many Peruvians. Later, it **III**) describes the messaging strategy of the movement and how this instrumentalized widespread — and often misinformed — ideas about children and women against several policies attempting to promote diversity, equity, and justice in Peru. It continues by **IV**) describing how the messages were strategically disseminated. Finally, **V**) the document provides general conclusions about the case.

³⁴ While misinformation is false information that is created and spread regardless of an intent to harm or deceive, disinformation is a type of misinformation that is created to be deliberately deceptive (Gebel, 2021).

³⁵ “Gender justice” is a systemic process of redistribution of power, opportunities, and access for people of all genders through the dismantling of structures of oppression including patriarchy, homophobia, and transphobia (Global Fund for Women, 2021). It encompasses the affirmation and protection of LGBTI rights, including the rights of LGBTI children and (cis)women’s rights, that is, the “ending of—and if necessary the provision of redress for—inequalities between women and men that result in women’s subordination to men.” (Goetz, 2007).

I. KEY EVENTS: FROM CSE CURRICULAR REFORM TO OBJECTIONS TO “GENDER”

TAKEAWAYS

- The curricular reform seeking to introduce Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) into Peru’s national curriculum was the official catalyzer of the DMWMK movement.
- However, movement leaders and other gender-restrictive groups had been actively organizing for years.
- After the controversy around the curricular reform, the agenda of faith-based, gender-restrictive groups in Peru expanded and became more ambitious. It went from the initial opposition to CSE to a larger project of defining the meaning of “gender” for public policy and the general public.
- The DMWMK movement lost the main legal battles in Peru, but succeeded in other perhaps more important ways:
- It created powerful alliances between the Evangelical Church, the Catholic Church, and key political actors.
- It mainstreamed its misinterpretation of and opposition to the term “gender.”

It garnered significant public support for its attacks on women’s and LGBT rights through the instrumentalization of children.

Against the backdrop of Peruvian schoolchildren’s poor performance in international standardized testing,³⁶ and in response to data showing the profound vulnerability of children, LGBT people, and women in the country, the administrations of Presidents Ollanta Humala (2011-2016), Pedro Pablo Kuczynski (2016-2018), and Martín Vizcarra (2018-2020) made a series of policy reforms, including the introduction of a new national curriculum for basic and secondary education. The curriculum was met with strong opposition from faith-based, gender-restrictive groups that presented themselves as a secular movement under the name Don’t Mess With My Kids (DMWMK).³⁷

The curricular reform was the official catalyst of the movement, but leaders had been actively organizing for years. Following the mobilizations around the curricular reform, the agenda of gender-restrictive groups in Peru expanded and became more ambitious, **shifting from initial opposition to CSE to embrace a larger project to define the meaning of “gender” for public policy and discourse** (Rousseau, 2020).

The following timeline highlights the key moments in this process:

FAITH-BASED AND GENDER-RESTRICTIVE GROUPS’ ACTIONS	GOVERNMENT ACTIONS AND POLITICAL CONTEXT
	<p>The Ministry of Education (MINEDU) convenes working groups for the discussion of the curricular reform. “Gender,” one of the core values of the new curriculum, is not part of the discussion at that time. Religious groups, such as the Opus Dei and some Evangelical³⁸ Churches, participate in the conversations and advocate for the reincorporation of “Family Education”—which was removed from public education in the ‘90s—into the national curriculum (interview with Angela Bravo, 2020).</p>
<p>The leaders of several churches and religious communities convene in Lima to sign the Compromise for Peru declaration.³⁹ They agree on four key points that undermine children’s, women’s, and LGBTI⁴⁰ rights despite their positive rhetorical framing: respect for life, signifying opposition to reproductive rights, particularly abortion; respect for religious freedom, meaning the imposition of faith-based, gender-restrictive values on legislation, public policy, and public life; the defense and promotion of heteronormative and patriarchal marriage and family; and the right to education, indicating opposition to CSE and other initiatives that promote gender justice and respect for LGBT people.</p>	<p>2013 — 2014</p> <p>July 2014</p>

36 Between 2008 and 2018, Peru was the fastest growing economy in Latin America (ECLAC, 2018). Despite this growth, Peru ranked last in the PISA test in 2012, which was conducted across the 34 members of the OECD, as well as in 31 affiliated countries. The results revealed wide gaps between boys and girls and across income levels (OECD, 2014). In 2015, despite some improvement, Peru was ranked among the last countries in Science, Language, and Mathematics once again (OECD, 2018).

37 There is an important regional precedent. In 2011, under the administration of President Fernando Lugo (2008-2012), Paraguay’s Ministry of Education created a CSE Framework. Gender-restrictive groups criticized it and defended a patriarchal and heteronormative understanding of the family (Tabbush & Caminotti, 2020). A few days after the framework was published, the National Council on Education and Culture, a public institution, declared that the document went against educational freedom. The Council argued that “The Family” had sole authority in the education of children. The Catholic and Evangelical Churches rejected the Framework because they claimed it promoted debauchery by teaching children that there are more than two sexes (“Organizaciones repudian la no implementación del ‘Marco Rector,’ 2011). As a result of the opposition, the Ministry of Education did not implement the Framework.

38 In this report we use “Evangelical,” “Orthodox,” and “Anglican” to name non-Catholic Christian denominations. When relevant, specific denominations are mentioned.

39 Signatories included: Cardinal Juan Luis Cipriani, Salvador Piñero (Peruvian Episcopal Conference), Enrique Alva (National Evangelical Council of Peru), William Godfrey (Peruvian Anglican Church), Daniel Vallejos (Seventh Day Adventist Church), Manuel Gutiérrez (Union of Peruvian Christian Evangelical Churches), Iosif Bosch (Peruvian Orthodox Church), and representatives of the Jewish and Buddhist communities; on the political side, Jorge del Castillo (APRA), Luis Bedoya Reyes (PPC), Jorge Morelli and Julio Rosas (Fuerza Popular), Fabiola Morales (Solidaridad Nacional), Humberto Lay (Restauración Nacional), Ántero Flores Aráoz (Orden), and José Vega (Unión por el Perú).

40 Intersex and non-binary people’s rights are also undermined by the actions of gender-restrictive groups. However, the researchers did not find evidence of gender-restrictive groups instrumentalizing the experiences of intersex persons in their narratives. Therefore, throughout this report we use the acronym LGBT when speaking of the rights explicitly targeted by

The Catholic Church organizes the first annual **March for Life** with support from the Global Missionary Movement Church, the Pentecostal Church of Peru, the Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church (*Redacción Diario El Correo*, 2015).

**Mar.
2015**

Pedro Pablo Kuczynski wins a tight presidential election against the social conservative Keiko Fujimori, daughter of former president Alberto Fujimori (1993-2000), who was supported by a coalition of Evangelical leaders. Despite the defeat, Fujimori's party wins the majority in Congress and leads the opposition to Kuczynski's government.

**June
2016**

Soon after the inauguration of the new government, **MINEDU fast-tracks and approves the new national curriculum** through a ministerial resolution. Seven guiding principles crisscross the curriculum, including rights, inclusion, attention to diversity, and gender equality.

Gender-restrictive groups, with political support from Fujimori and Congressman Christian Rosas, son of Evangelical pastor Julio Rosas, establish the **DMWMK movement** to protest the new curriculum.

**Nov.
2016**

Disinformation about the new curriculum and MINEDU fill the walls, bus stops, and pedestrian bridges of the main streets in Lima and other important cities in Peru. The billboards claim that the new curriculum is based on "gender ideology" and has the intention to "homosexualize" children (González et al., 2018). Gender-restrictive groups portray these actions as spontaneous, resulting from grassroots gatherings of parents concerned for the wellbeing of their children (González et al., 2018). This use of public space **sets the stage for DMWMK's first national rally** in March 2017.

The national government, particularly Education Minister Jaime Saavedra, avoids directly debunking the arguments and disinformation presented by DMWMK. Instead, the government tries to defend the need to include gender equality as a core value of the new curriculum with **technical arguments and data** (interview with Ángela Bravo, 2020).

**Dec.
2016**

Congress removes Minister Saavedra due to alleged corruption charges (*Redacción rpp*, 2016). For many, this was a façade to cover up the real reason for his removal, namely the educational reform he promoted (interview with George Hale, 2020; interview with Ángela Bravo). The new Minister of Education, Marilú Martens, continues endorsing the new curriculum.

gender-restrictive groups, and LGBTI to denote the consequences of their actions that also affect intersex and non-binary people.

The gender-restrictive collective **Padres en Acción** (PEA) presents a **Constitutional Popular Action** to the Primera Sala Civil of the Superior Court of Lima seeking to halt the implementation of the National Curriculum, and to eliminate the term “gender” from the curriculum (Campaña Latinoamericana por el Derecho a la Educación, 2019).

**Feb.
2017**

Gender-restrictive groups supporting the DMWMK movement promote a **national rally that gathers approximately 68,000 people in Peru**, including 25,000 in Lima (Redacción El Comercio, 2017a). The rally was organized by local and national gender-restrictive groups with deep ties to the Evangelical and the Catholic Churches (González et al., 2018).

**March
2017**

Under pressure after the march, **MINEDU makes some reforms to the curriculum**, arguing that these modifications are not concessions to DMWMK, but rather clarifications to key terms and concepts (Alaya, 2017; Meneses, 2019).

The Primera Sala Civil of the Superior Court of Lima nullifies the Ministerial Resolution that introduced the curricular reform. Lima’s tribunal argues that the text regarding the definition of gender did not properly consult parents, and thus violated the General Law on Education’s Articles 7 and 22, which state that strategic decisions regarding education should be the result of consensus between the state and civil society. The resolution is then elevated to the Supreme Court (Primera Sala Civil de la Corte Superior de Lima, 2017).

**July
2017**

**March
2018**

President Kuczynski presents his letter of resignation to Congress in the midst of a corruption investigation. **Martín Vizcarra, Kuczynski’s vice president, assumes the presidency**, with Daniel Alfaro Paredes as Minister of Education.

DMWMK organizes **another national protest** after Vizcarra's actions. Among other things, demonstrators ask the president to "avoid using the term gender" (*Redacción Aciprensa*, 2018), and to "stop interfering with other branches of democratic power to force them to accept the demeaning idea of gender parity, which underestimates women's natural capacity to compete on equal terms with men." (#ConMisHijosNoTeMetas, 2018).

In response to the government's policies, the Fuerza Popular party presents **Bill 3610-2018** to Congress. The bill, which has yet to be discussed at the time of writing this report, seeks to define gender as meaning "woman and man" in all documents, forms, and public policies of the Peruvian state. It also intends to replace a number of expressions containing gender in state documents—such as "gender perspective" or "gender violence"—with the concept of "equality of opportunities for women and men." Finally, it seeks to modify the name and scope of the ministry in charge of women's affairs from the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations to the Ministry of The Family, Women, and Vulnerable Populations (Rousseau, 2020).

The DMWMK movement is reignited when **gender-restrictive groups denounce a high school textbook** for a class called Personal Development, Citizenship, and Civics (DPSC), printed and distributed by MINEDU, with the term "sexual conduct" included in its glossary. The entry has a link to a Cuban online encyclopedia, EcuRed, with information about anal and oral sex. Some schools burn the books.

President Vizcarra does three things that enrage gender-restrictive groups:

- 1) Introduces the **National Public Policy on Gender Equality**.
- 2) **Objects to a law approved by Congress that omits gender parity** from a reform to their bicameral system.
- 3) **Repeals the Law for the Strengthening of the Family**, which was approved in 2005 and described the family as the foundation of society and the fundamental space for human development (Peruvian Congress Ley No. 28452, 2005). The new decree on the protection of families, describes the family as "democratic, egalitarian, inclusive, respectful, and violence-free" (Decreto Legislativo No. 1408, 2018).

**Nov.
2018**

The Peruvian Supreme Court withdraws the Superior Court's decision, approves the Ministerial Resolution's definition of gender equality, and recognizes the gender approach in the curriculum as constitutional. The Supreme Court argues that deleting that definition of gender from the curriculum, and with it, the idea that gender roles are socially constructed, would make the eradication of discriminatory behavior impossible, which is unconstitutional.

**April
2019**

Sep.
2019
–
March
2020

President **Vizcarra dissolves Congress**. In the new Congress, convened in March 2020, Fujimorismo loses its majority and gender-restrictive groups also lose seats, which diminishes their direct political influence (interview with George Hale, 2020; interview with Ángela Bravo, 2020).

March
–
Oct. 2020

Throughout 2020, gender-restrictive groups take advantage of different policies adopted during the pandemic to reinvigorate their attack on gender justice and LGBT rights: they object to the use of gender as a criterion for restrictions of movement⁴¹ and a decree to safeguard sexual and reproductive health during the pandemic. On May 15^t, gender-restrictive groups commemorate the **Day of the Family**, a celebration of the heterosexual patriarchal family (*Ojo Público*, 2020).

Congress removes President Vizcarra from office for “permanent moral incapacity” after reviewing corruption charges related to his tenure in a previous position. Manuel Merino assumes the presidency for a week, after which he is forced to resign by thousands of Peruvians who protest against his government and its agenda, which supports DMWMK⁴² (*El Hilo*, 2020).

Nov.
2020

What initially seems to be one of many political crises of recent years has turned into an **unprecedented movement of young Peruvians**. More than half of all Peruvians between 18 and 24 years of age participate in the protests against Merino’s government either in person or virtually, with women playing a key role (Arroyo, L., Fowks, J., & de Miguel, T. 2020).

Francisco Sagasti Hochhausler is elected president after Merino’s resignation. He is expected to remain in power until new elections take place in 2021.

41 The government established mandatory “stay at home” orders to combat the pandemic and allowed people to go outside on specific days during the month of April to tend to basic needs based on their gender. On paper, the policy recognized gender identity, granting trans people mobility according to their identity. However, in practice, trans and gender nonconforming individuals suffered discrimination and violence. Eighteen transphobic attacks—including cases of police brutality—were reported during the eight days the measure was enforced (*Ojo Público*, 2020). Gender-restrictive groups also opposed the measure, criticizing its recognition of gender identity. Christian Rosas, son of Congressman Julio Rosas and one of the leaders of DMWMK, appeared on national television denouncing the policy. After pushback from both LGBT and gender-restrictive groups, the government revoked the gender-based lockdown (Bitterly, 2020).

42 His most important minister, Antero Florez Araos, had previously expressed his opposition to equal marriage, arguing that “homosexuals could not procreate,” and had claimed that “killing a woman as a response to infidelity did not qualify as femicide” (*El Hilo*, 2020).

Legally speaking, gender-restrictive groups did not accomplish any of their goals in Peru. However, they made significant and long-lasting gains. This seeming contradiction illuminates the long-term vision, undeterred character, and adaptability of gender-restrictive groups.

According to a survey conducted after the curriculum controversy by El Comercio-IPSOS, 82% of Peruvians are in favor of the curricular reform. However, when asked what they understand by "gender perspective," 21% indicate that it "confused children with being man or woman" and 9% think that it "fostered homosexuality" (Alayo Orbegozo, 2019b).

Though the DMWMK movement lost its primary legal battles in Peru, it succeeded in three important ways:

- It created powerful alliances between Evangelical Churches, the Catholic Church, and key political actors. It mainstreamed its misinterpretation of and opposition to the term "gender."
- It mainstreamed its misinterpretation of and opposition to the term "gender."
- It garnered significant public support for its attacks on women's and LGBT rights through the instrumentalization of children and the language of human rights.

The progressive cause in Peru has not been able to fully counter these messages, with various actors still trying to articulate the importance of CSE to diminish gender-based violence, sexual violence against children, sexually transmitted infections, and unwanted teenage pregnancies while promoting gender equality (González et al., 2018).

ELIMINATING "GENDER" IN THE BATTLE FOR LANGUAGE

*A key element in the modern attack to women's, and LGBT rights is the appropriation and resignification of the term "gender." Following this strategy, **gender-restrictive groups in Peru have repeatedly tried to ban the use of the term "gender" in all public policy documents and laws in the country.** Instead, they propose a return to the binary terms "women" and "men," objecting to any reference to gender justice with the notion of "complementarity between the sexes" and "free competition between individuals."*

Their legal efforts have failed, but their communications strategy has been extremely successful.

The term "gender" was introduced by feminist scholarship and activism to differentiate between anatomical differences (designated by the term "sex") and the inequitable distribution of rights, resources, and opportunities based on the social meaning attributed to those differences ("gender").

For decades, the use of the term "gender" has been key to raising awareness of and mobilizing support for the rights of girls, women, and LGBT children and adults.

*However, as the term "gender ideology" shows, **gender-restrictive groups in Peru and elsewhere have effectively appropriated this term, giving it pejorative, panic-inducing connotations.***

Regardless of legal outcomes, for millions of people in Peru, Latin America, and across the globe, "gender" now signifies 1) the moral and sexual corruption of children; and 2) an attack on life, parental authority, and religion.

II. CONTEXT

A. The Shifting Religious Landscape in Peru

TAKEAWAYS

- The attack on women's, children's, and LGBT rights under the banner of opposition to "gender ideology" in Latin America must be understood in relation to the shifting religious landscape in the region. For example, mired in sexual abuse scandals and struggling with an exodus of believers, the Catholic Church is attempting to remain relevant and recuperate influence through alliances with emerging religious and political actors, such as Evangelical Churches.
- Evangelical Christians are a growing and particularly disciplined voting bloc in the region and in Peru.
- The growth of Evangelical communities in Latin America has encouraged multiple alliances between prominent pastors and politicians who commit to sponsoring gender-restrictive legislation and policies in exchange for electoral support.
- The Catholic Church remains influential in the region and continues to have a strong foothold on Peru's education system.
- Gender-restrictive groups have tried to equate being a Christian with gender normativity in the social and political imaginary.

At least 90% of Latin America's population self-described as Catholic for most of the 20th century, but the number of Catholics has been shrinking over the last decades. Despite representing almost 40% of Catholics worldwide in 2014, data from that year also showed that the number of Catholics in Latin America had dropped to 69% of the total population. **This exodus from the Catholic Church did not mean a move away from faith, but a shift in religious affiliation:** Latin Americans were joining Evangelical Protestant churches in droves. **While just one in ten Latin Americans (9%) were raised in Protestant churches, nearly one in five (19%) described themselves as Protestants** (Pew Research Center, 2014). By 2018, the number of Catholics further diminished to 59% while Evangelical churches continued to grow and thrive (Latinbarometer, 2018). Peru is a case in point of this trend. In 1993, 89% of Peruvians were Catholic, while 6.8% were Evangelical

(National Institute of Statistics and Informatics, n.d.). By 2017, the percentage of Catholics had dropped to 76% and the number of Evangelicals had climbed to 14% (Compañía peruana de estudios de mercado y opinión pública SAC, 2014). Evangelical churches are mushrooming in the country, with growth projected to continue, especially in the Amazonian and Andean regions (CLACAI, 2020).

Due to this shift, and because Evangelicals have proven to be a particularly disciplined voting bloc, the political relevance of Evangelical churches in Peru and in the region has increased. As a result, **many politicians, including Alberto and Keiko Fujimori, have actively sought endorsement from prominent pastors,⁴³ which often translates to explicit commitment to policies, laws, and initiatives that curtail the rights of women, LGBTI people, and children and adolescents.⁴⁴**

43 In 1990, with Alberto Fujimori's presidential election, the political activities of Evangelicals started to intensify. Back then, a new form of "Evangelical Fujimorism" emerged and served as a link between the government and Evangelical churches (CLACAI, 2020). Although there was not a fundamentalist emphasis in this movement, as became evident with the DMWMK movement later, Fujimori's government was "a very ambivalent, if not detrimental, force for women's sexual and reproductive rights. [...] His government introduced the right to life from conception onwards in the 1993 Constitution, and while his government promoted the first Peruvian family planning policy to provide free public access to a range of modern contraception techniques, it also implemented forced sterilization campaigns in rural areas in the mid-1990s" (Rousseau, 2020). In the 2000s, pastors such as Humberto Lay, Alda Lazo, and Julio Rosas consolidated a more fundamentalist vision for an openly gender-restrictive Evangelical political platform (CLACAI, 2020).

44 For example, Guatemala's president between 2016 and 2020, Jimmy Morales, is Evangelical; and in Brazil, Evangelicals were a key voting bloc in Jair Bolsonaro's successful presidential bid

The Catholic Church is still powerful across the region and in Peru,⁴⁵ exerting a strong influence on education, even within (supposedly) secular public schools.⁴⁶ However, the exodus to more conservative denominations has forced the Catholic Church into alliances and coalitional work with churches they had historically disdained or even attacked, like Evangelical churches. Although there are differences in belief systems, operational structures, and financial sources, these organizations have joined forces in recent years to advance a gender-restrictive agenda that seeks to reinstate patriarchal authority over women and children, and heteronormativity both within the household and the nation.

While just one in ten Latin Americans (9%) were raised in Protestant churches, nearly one in five (19%) described themselves as Protestants in 2014. (Pew Research Center, 2014).

This interfaith alliance successfully strengthened the political power and influence of Catholics and Evangelicals alike.⁴⁷ Due to the power and visibility of this alliance, there is an increasing tendency to associate Catholicism and Evangelism with gender normativity. However, even though gender normativity has been and continues to be at the core of these religions, it

is key to recognize that this is not always the case.

Equating religiosity with gender normativity is part of the narrative of gender-restrictive groups and one of its main goals, but it is not always the reality on the ground.⁴⁸ Many believers and religious leaders support women's, children's, and LGBT rights. **It is of utmost importance to identify and support religious organizations and regular citizens that uphold their faith while rejecting the anti-rights agenda promoted by groups like DMWMK.**

(Passarinho, 2019).

45 Many Peruvians believe that the Church should voice opinions on abortion (76.9%), sexuality (75.3%), education (83%), and the civil union of same-sex couples (6.4%) (Compañía peruana de estudios de mercado y opinión pública SAC, 2014).

46 The law mandates that all public and private schools provide Catholic education through the primary and secondary levels (U.S. Department of State, 2018). Additionally, MINEDU requires the presiding Catholic bishop of an area to approve public schools' religious education teachers. Parents may request the school principal to exempt their children from mandatory religion classes, and the government may grant exemptions from the religious education requirement to secular private schools and non-Catholic religious schools (U.S. Department of State, 2018:3), but these provisions are seldom used.

47 Since the Cairo Conference in 1994, a global alliance between Catholics and Evangelicals has been consolidated. This alliance seeks to stop the advancement of women's and LGBT rights. In the Americas, the alliance materialized in the declaration "Evangélicos y católicos juntos: la misión Cristiana en el Tercer Milenio" (Vicioso, 2007). The declaration promoted collaboration and joint action between Evangelicals and Catholics based on a unified Christian mission (Vicioso, 2007). This conservative alliance later expanded to include secular groups, political leaders (Faur & Viveros, 2020), and gender-restrictive scholars and activists (Rodríguez-Rondón & Rivera-Amarillo, 2020).

48 For example, a recent report from CONICET shows that 22.3% of Catholics in Argentina believe that abortion should not be criminalized, and 57.7% say it should be allowed in at least some cases; 50.3% of Evangelicals also agree that abortion should be legal in at least some cases (Baran et al., 2020). For more, see: <http://www.ceil-conicet.gov.ar/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/ii27-ive.pdf>.

B. Anti-LGBT and Anti-Women Sentiment and Behavior in Latin America and Peru

TAKEAWAYS

- Despite legal protections and state policies that address systemic inequalities and gender injustice, data shows that LGBT and women's rights are often violated in Peru and Latin America.
- Gender-restrictive narratives feed on and nurture widespread and socially accepted expressions of homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny.

In recent decades, Latin America has advanced pro-LGBT legislation and policies protecting cisgender and transgender women's rights. These include pro-LGBT court rulings, nondiscrimination statutes, legalized equal marriage, and expansion of health services (Corrales, 2015).⁴⁹ Unfortunately, in many cases, these protections are not always enforced. Across the region, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia lead to violence and death at a worrisome rate. **More than half of the countries with the highest rates of femicide in the world are located in the Americas (Voces, 2015); the region also has the highest rate of violence against LGBT people in the world (Brochetto, 2017).**

In Peru, neither same-sex unions nor equal marriage are legal, and there is no gender identity law protecting the rights of trans people. Surveys indicate that social attitudes towards LGBT rights have been improving in recent years, but discrimination, homophobia, and transphobia are still pervasive.

In terms of women's rights, the Criminal Code in Peru specifically includes sexual violence under the umbrella of domestic violence, while street harassment is also a prosecutable offense (Gurmendi, 2015). However, abortion is forbidden except when the life or health of the woman is at stake and, in 2009, the Constitutional Tribunal banned the free distribution of the morning-after pill.

Peruvian children experience physical, psychological, and sexual violence at alarming rates. According to the National Survey on Social Relations in 2013 and 2015 (Encuesta Nacional de Relaciones Sociales del Perú in Spanish), more than 80% of children and adolescents were victims of physical or psychological violence in their homes or schools (UNICEF, 2019). Data from the Ministry of Women revealed that a child is raped in the country every two hours (rpp Noticias, 2019). Likewise, 45% of teenagers have experienced some kind of sexual violence at least once in their life (UNICEF, 2019). Despite these worrisome statistics, **Comprehensive Sexuality Education (cross reference to the intro) is mostly absent from Peruvian schools.**

⁴⁹ Several international agreements protect women's rights in Latin America, including the Belem do Pará Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women; the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man; and the American Convention on Human Rights. There is also jurisprudence from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights that protects women from violence and femicide (see: Campo Algodonero vs. Mexico). In the cases of *Atala Riffo v. Chile*, *Flor Freire v. Ecuador*, and *Duque v. Colombia*, the Inter-American Commission explained that sexual orientation and gender identity are protected categories (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2018). The Inter-American Court has also considered that the Belem do Pará Convention protects people from discrimination based on SOGIE (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2018). In January 2018, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights mandated the signatory countries of the American Convention on Human Rights to legalize equal marriage.

BELIEFS ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY AND ANTI-LGBT BEHAVIOR IN PERU

- Three quarters of Peruvians were against same-sex unions in 2014 (IPSOS, 2014).
- In 2019, only 23% of Peruvians agreed that homosexuals should be allowed to run for public office, and only 17% were in favor of equal marriage (Carrión et al., 2019).
- Over 16% of Peruvians agreed with the statement “homosexuality should be a crime,” compared with an average of 11% across the Latin American region (ILGA 2016).
- Sixty-two point seven percent of LGBT in Peru people have suffered some type of violence and discrimination (Sauza, 2018).

THE HIGH PREVALENCE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN PERU

- In 2000, the percentage of adult women reporting sexual assault by an intimate partner was 22.5% in Lima and a shocking 46.7% in Cusco (World Health Organization, 2000).
- In 2012 Peru ranked third in the world for cases of sexual assault against women (World Health Organization, 2012).
- In 2013, more than 70% of married Peruvian women reported suffering some type of physical or psychological violence; 8% of women between the ages of 15 and 49 reported being raped by their partners (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2013).

C. Between Political Disaffection and Turmoil

TAKEAWAYS

- Corruption and tension between the executive and legislative branches characterize Peru’s recent political history.
- Very few Peruvians are interested in politics, but most of them are concerned about corruption.
- Demonstrators in Peru are usually over 25 years old, have several years of formal education, and reside in rural areas or medium size cities.
- Gender-restrictive groups have mobilized the idea of “gender ideology” as a political weapon that promises a return to order and security.

Peru has witnessed several crises of governance in the last decades. **The last six presidents**—Alberto Fujimori, Alejandro Toledo, Alan García, Ollanta Humala, Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, and Martín Vizcarra—**have all been indicted or convicted of a crime.**⁵⁰

Additionally, **Congress and the executive branch have regularly been in fierce opposition to each other**, which has led to the **dissolution of Congress twice in the last 30 years**: Fujimori did it in 1992, and Vizcarra in 2019. Meanwhile, Congress has enacted several impeachment processes seeking to undermine the president. For example, Kuczynski was put on trial twice between 2016 and 2018; he resigned from the presidency in 2018. Congress also impeached Vizcarra and removed him from office in November 2020 on grounds of “moral incapacity.”

These **multiple scandals have led to massive political disaffection**. Only 29.2% of Peruvians claim to have any interest in politics, much lower than any other country in the region. Citizens who skew older, more educated, wealthier, and urban tend to be the ones who report some interest in politics. Nonetheless, according to the Barómetro de las Américas, Peruvians are the most worried about corruption in the region (Carrión et al., 2019).

⁵⁰ Fujimori (1990-2000) was condemned for corruption and human rights violations, which prompted Congress to remove him from office in 2000. Toledo (2001-2006) is currently under house arrest in the United States for charges of influence peddling and money laundering. Hounded by multiple corruption charges, García (1985-1990, 2006-2011) committed suicide in 2019. Humala (2011-2016) is currently in preventive detention for money laundering and corruption. Kuczynski (2016-2018) resigned from the presidency after being accused of receiving money from the Brazilian firm Odebrecht in exchange for infrastructure contracts. And Vizcarra (2018-2020) was accused of influence peddling and accepting bribes.

Peru also has **one of the highest rates of participation in protests in the Americas**. In 2019, 14.3% of the population participated in at least one protest, which puts Peru, together with Argentina and Bolivia, at the top of the list in the region. In contrast to other countries around the world, 18- to 24-year-olds have the lowest rates of participation in protests. Residents of Lima's metropolitan area also have lower rates of participation in protests compared to smaller cities. This, too, is uncommon compared with global statistics that show protestors usually hailing from urban centers. In general, people who protest in Peru are older, with more years of formal education, and reside in rural areas or medium size cities.⁵¹

Gender-restrictive groups closely monitor the political situation of Latin American countries to identify opportunities for mobilization. They pay particular attention to protests and political unrest to define specific goals for each country and collaborate to meet their agendas. Currently, gender-restrictive groups have their eyes set on countries such as Peru and Chile, where there are democratic movements pushing for new and more progressive constitutions with an explicit focus on gender justice.

An important takeaway from this political landscape is that, as Carrión et al. note in their report, **intolerance of sexual minorities correlates with dissatisfaction over the country's democratic institutions**. Preoccupation with corruption and general insecurity feed a feeling of unrest, especially when it comes to changes that society regards as out of their control. This uncertainty and political dissatisfaction encourage the growth of demagogic discourses that promise a return to an idyllic past of law, order, and safety (Carrión et al., 2019). **Groups trying to maintain or attain political power are increasingly using the notion of "fighting gender ideology" as a critical component of their campaigns, supporting authoritative, nationalist, and anti-rights political platforms (Serrano Amaya, 2019).**⁵²

Gender-restrictive groups closely monitor the political situation of Latin American countries⁵³ to identify opportunities for mobilization. They define specific goals for each country and collaborate to meet their agendas.

51 In November 2020, there was a different wave of protests after Congress removed President Vizcarra from office and designated Manuel Merino as president. In this case, the protesters were mostly young Peruvians, the "Generation of the Bicentenary." They used social media platforms like TikTok to organize massive peaceful marches in the streets of Lima and other cities to protest against the new government (*El Hilo*, 2020).

52 The opposition to the Peace Agreement Plebiscite in Colombia is one of the most dramatic cases of this dangerous relation. Through disinformation, gender-restrictive groups successfully connected two entirely different events and mobilized opposition to the historic peace agreement between the government of Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). The agreements incorporated a groundbreaking gender perspective that recognized women and LGBT people as victims of specific forms of gender and SOGIE-based violence, and as key political actors in the construction of peace. Gender-restrictive groups rejected this framework, connecting it to an unrelated CSE controversy and claiming that the government was seeking to "homosexualize" Colombian children and hand the country over to communist guerrillas. The CSE controversy was related to revised handbooks issued by the Ministry of Education in response to a Constitutional Court's mandate. In 2015, the Constitutional Court decided the case of a teenager who died by suicide after experiencing homophobic bullying from his school's administration. The Court mandated that the Ministry of Education revise all educational community handbooks in the Colombian school system. The revision would ensure that schools respect students' sexual orientation and gender identity and include new mechanisms to promote students' human rights, SHRR, and gender justice. In 2016, the same year the peace process came to a successful end and the plebiscite to ratify the agreement was taking place, the (lesbian) Minister of Education issued the CSE handouts, sparking protests from gender-restrictive groups. The plebiscite to support or reject the agreements took place in October. Gender-restrictive groups deployed massive disinformation campaigns that went as far as to say that if CSE and the agreements were accepted, the state could take children from their parents' custody (Gil, 2020), a false claim also used to mobilize opposition against the Social Services Act and the National Strategy for the Child in Bulgaria (see Bulgaria, p.62). Those who voted against the agreement won by a slim margin. Two years later, Iván Duque (2018-2022) from the Centro Democrático, a right-wing political party, was elected president with the explicit mandate to thwart the implementation of the accords and curtail "the advancement of gender ideology." Several Evangelical churches and the Catholic Church were important supporters of his campaign.

53 Transcripts from the Ibero-American Congress for the Life and the Family reveal that during these transnational meetings country representatives shared their domestic politics and set concrete goals for the advancement of a gender-restrictive agenda. For instance, when Jeanine Áñez, a participant in the 2019 Ibero-American Congress for the Life and the Family, was declared interim president of Bolivia, gender-restrictive groups attributed her ascent to their efforts. (It is worth noting that Áñez's party was later soundly defeated by the MAS party, affiliated to former president Evo Morales, ousted in 2019). Gender-restrictive groups also decided to "guide Chile's youth" after the country's historic protests against inequality, corruption, and human rights violations. These efforts should be carefully monitored as the country is currently in the process of drafting a new constitution.

III. THE MESSAGING STRATEGY BEHIND THE DON'T MESS WITH MY KIDS MOVEMENT

The most incisive campaigns of gender-restrictive groups in Peru were against rights-centered educational initiatives that questioned traditional hierarchical gender relations and denounced gender-based violence and discrimination against LGBT people (Motta, 2016). Gender-restrictive groups **claimed that the new curriculum's focus on gender equality, its affirming vision on sexual and gender diversity, and its push for gender justice challenged their worldview and faith, threatening key institutions such as the heterosexual, patriarchal family, the constitution, and the nation.**

DMWMK deployed five interrelated messaging strategies to combat the implementation of the new curriculum and halt other progressive initiatives.

1. Presenting patriarchal gender hierarchies, the gender binary, heteronormative relations, and cisgender identities as part of a universal and unchangeable natural order set by God.
2. Establishing a false causal relationship between CSE and deviant sexual behavior.
3. Claiming that the constitution favored parental authority over educational mandates.
4. Coopting the discourse of human rights by framing anti-rights discourse as pro-rights discourse.
5. Stoking nationalist sentiment by presenting women's and LGBT rights, and CSE as a neocolonial imposition supposedly led by "Western elites" and international organizations.

Furthermore, DMWMK used a segmented communications strategy to tailor these five messages to different audiences. One key aspect of this audience segmentation was that it allowed gender-restrictive groups to **appeal to a more moderate base of citizens.** The messaging for this segment of the population used pseudoscientific and supposedly rights-affirming language, presenting more sophisticated arguments than what could be seen in posters on the streets and memes circulating on social media. These arguments were effective in persuading more educated segments of the population (González et al., 2018).

From the name of their movement, gender-restrictive groups in Peru also appealed to a distorted idea of common sense to mobilize moderate, nonreligious audiences. In contrast to the complicated, jargon-filled rhetoric of many women's and LGBTI organizations, the phrase "Don't Mess With My Kids" resonated strongly with many people who intuitively wanted to protect children and defend their "rights as parents." The use of pseudoscientific and rights-affirming language, along with a manipulative notion of "common sense," were highly effective in provoking moral panic in a broad and diverse set of actors grouped under the banner of "concerned parents."

Finally, **the fact that most of these strategies coincide with the ones deployed in Bulgaria and Ghana indicates the existence of sharing mechanisms among gender-restrictive groups and points to their capacity to adapt narratives to local realities.**

In what follows, we explain the five key messaging strategies used by gender-restrictive groups in Peru more fully:

1. The Existence of a “Divine Order”

TAKEAWAYS

- In religious contexts and for more conservative audiences, gender-restrictive groups used religious terminology and references to justify their heteronormative and patriarchal worldview as stemming directly from God. They carefully avoided this language with more moderate, secular audiences.
- Gender-restrictive messaging strategies took on a “positive” tone that called for communities to come together to “save” children and LGBT people from damnation, rather than condemn them overtly.

The ideas of “natural order” and “salvation” were essential to building a community around traditional Christian values linked to “The Family” in Peru. In response to the definition of gender introduced in the new national curriculum, gender-restrictive groups insisted that **The Family was not a social institution but a divine one**, which meant that it was **universal, ahistorical, and could not be changed without unleashing devastating consequences on individuals, societies, and nations.**

As elsewhere, DMWMK argued that The Family, as an institution derived directly from God, was necessarily heteronormative and patriarchal, and could only be comprised of one man, one woman, and their children. This configuration, in turn, implies that there are only two sexes, that they are inherently different (and therefore hierarchical and complementary), and that sexuality—reduced to sexual acts—should be limited to procreation within a heterosexual marriage.



SEQ Ilustración\ *ARABIC ISource: RPP Noticias
Photographer: Rolando Gonzales

Despite the clear religious underpinnings of this strategy, DMWMK did not often use literal quotes from the Bible or rely too heavily on nuanced theological elaborations. Instead, **they deployed easily recognizable visual cues, such as the use of pink and blue to reinforce the supposedly universal differences between the sexes, and shareable images or memes** that allegedly made “God’s word” more understandable and less intimidating than the “Big Book” (Meneses, 2019)

*“We [the leaders of DMWMK movement are] committed to defending the truth of the family because The Family was not instituted by the State, The Family didn’t come after the State, it was the other way around: God created the human being, man and woman, Adam and Eve. The first institution established on Earth was The Family; much earlier than the State, much earlier than religion. It was the first institution established by God himself. Everyone comes from a family, from a father and a mother. **That is an objective reality, invariable, universal, and permanent.** That is why we united to protect this that is holy.” Christian Rosas, 2019*

The imposition of the heterosexual, patriarchal family as the only socially and legally viable configuration of family is a direct attack on LGBT rights and gender justice. The lack of legal and social recognition of same-sex marriage denies LGBT people full citizenship, undermines their dignity by denying the value and commitment of their relationships, and seriously hinders their ability to care for their loved ones.

2. CSE as “Causing Gender Dysphoria” and “Imposing Deviant Behavior” on Children

TAKEAWAYS

- Gender-restrictive messaging strategies in Peru used discredited and misleading medical, psychiatric, and psychological terms to substantiate their claims with pseudoscientific language.
- Gender-restrictive messaging strategies cherry-picked and misrepresented data, often **showing correlations** (e.g. there are more adolescents who self-identify as LGBT in Peru **and** CSE is being implemented) **as causality** (e.g. there are more adolescents who self-identify as LGBT in Peru **because** CSE is being implemented).

A vital element of the DMWMK movement’s success was their claim that the implementation of CSE was putting children at risk. Gender-restrictive groups manufactured moral panic through messages **claiming that CSE encouraged sexual activity and promiscuity in children, leading them to become sexual deviants and/or gay or trans, with the implication that being LGBT is both caused by external factors and undesirable** (Trome, 2019).

To support their claims, gender-restrictive groups used “strategic secularization” (Pecheny et al., 2017) by resorting to scientific-sounding messaging.

For instance, Beatriz Mejía, a spokesperson for the National Lawyer Network for the Defense of Family, created a **false causal link between CSE and homosexuality**. She argued that the rising number of teenagers who self-identify as LGBT in Peru was the result of the “homosexual indoctrination” in the nation’s schools (*Redacción La Mula*, 2017).

Though it is true that the number of adolescents who self-identify as LGBT in Peru is on the rise, as is the case worldwide, this is not the result of “indoctrination,” but of increasingly positive views on gender and sexual diversity. A diversity-affirming curriculum does not encourage children and adolescents to become LGBT—since that is impossible—but it does make it easier for LGBT children and teens to share their gender and/or sexual identity with their families, peers, or teachers. In other words, **there are not more LGBT teens now, there are simply more LGBT teens who are out of the closet**.

Additionally, gender-restrictive groups **presented nonnormative gender and sexual identities as pathological, that is to say, as psychiatric or hormonal disorders that could—and should—be cured**. For example, Mejía claimed that CSE produces “gender dysphoria”⁵⁴ in children. According to her: “instead of identifying with their biological

sex, children are inverting it, and they are becoming confused” (Trome, 2019). An immediate consequence of this misleading use of psychological terms is that trans children are being further stigmatized and discriminated against. Another detrimental consequence is that it assumes that LGBT people can and should be “converted” or “healed,” undermining one of the key efforts of gender justice, which is the recognition and celebration of diverse identities and orientations.

The misleading use of psychological and scientific language further stigmatizes trans and gender expansive people, particularly children. Furthermore, the lack of CSE has a detrimental effect on all students, but can be particularly devastating for LGBTI students who, in schools with no CSE, experience more bullying, social exclusion, and significant truancy which affects their right to education (Promsex et al., 2016).

In 2008, the Ministry of Education issued guidelines on CSE for schools, but only 9% of Peruvian students were receiving instruction of this sort almost a decade later (Motta et al., 2017). The absence of CSE can result in higher risk situations for children and teenagers, including unwanted pregnancies, sexual abuse, sexually transmitted infections, and dropping out of school (Bright, 2008; Plan International, n.d.; Santelli et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2009).

Gender-restrictive groups also **cherry-picked data meant to advance children’s and LGBT rights to use against those very rights**. Mejía misleadingly quoted the findings of a national study that highlighted

54 The current scientific consensus in the DSM-5 of the American Psychiatric Association defines gender dysphoria as distress stemming from “physical sex characteristics or [an] ascribed social gender role that is incongruent with persistent gender identity” (Fraser, Karasic, Meyer & Wylie, 2010; emphasis [added? Or in original]).

the constant harassment that LGBT students suffered, both from their peers and school authorities. She argued that these findings were evidence that there was no space for LGBT children at schools, and that addressing LGBT issues prompted more harassment (*Redacción La Mula*, 2017). Contrary to this, the national study was actually aimed at illuminating how the lack of CSE has a detrimental effect on all students, but can be especially detrimental for LGBT students who, in schools with no CSE, experience more bullying, social exclusion, and significant truancy which affects their right to education (Promsex et al., 2016).

Gender-restrictive groups **portrayed themselves as concerned adults acting on scientific evidence**. This strategy was particularly effective to **broaden their support because it resonated with many parents who did not necessarily hold strong religious beliefs**.

3. A Threat to Parental Authority from an Overreaching State

TAKEAWAYS

- Gender-restrictive messaging strategies in Peru promoted the idea that the new curriculum threatened parental authority and violated the law.
- Gender-restrictive groups framed the opposition to CSE as a conflict between concerned citizens and an overreaching state.
- Presenting their claims as a vindication of parental authority helped gender-restrictive groups widen their base of support to include more moderate, nonreligiously affiliated Peruvians.

DMWMK promoted the idea that the new curriculum would diminish parental authority. Among the loudest messages from DMWMK were: “Gender ideology not only damages our children, it also violates our rights;” “Sexual education for my children? No, thank you. I will speak to them about sex,” and “Don’t be fooled, as parents we have the right to educate

our children according to our values and beliefs” (#ConMisHijosNoTeMetas, n.d.). According to these messages, sexual education is a private matter that families should resolve on their own.

The DMWMK movement also claimed that the new curriculum violated the law. They cited Article 13 of the General Education Law (No. 28044), which states that parents have the right to choose their children’s school and participate in their education, arguing that they had not been consulted in the CSE strategy that the government was promoting (Vitón, 2019).

According to a curriculum specialist who worked at the Ministry of Education at that time, this was the most successful part of the strategy: **presenting the issue as a conflict between an overreaching state and civil society allowed gender-restrictive groups to appeal to a more moderate group of the population**. While discourse about a natural order and sexual deviance appealed to the more conservative citizens, the suggestion of a “police state” that could dictate how families should raise their children appealed to a wider audience (interview with Ángela Bravo, 2020).

This strategy used the “slippery slope” model to create more panic and concern: if the state were allowed to interfere with private affairs, such as decisions about children’s education, how else might it encroach upon the personal domain?

4. Anti-Rights Discourse as Pro-Rights Discourse

TAKEAWAYS

- Instead of directly attacking women’s or LGBT rights, gender-restrictive messaging strategies claimed to defend family and children.
- Gender-restrictive groups appropriated the language of human rights and claimed to be defending the right to life, education, and freedom of speech and religion.
- Co-opting the discourse of human rights and dignity gave DMWMK’s supporters a positive sense of the movement and of themselves.
- This positive framing gave thousands of people purpose and affirmation because they saw themselves as actively defending—instead of attacking—democracy and rights, particularly those of the most vulnerable: children and women.

One of the most successful strategies of gender-restrictive groups in Peru was to link their anti-rights discourse to democratic values and, in the case of women and children, frame their movement as an initiative to protect the populations whose rights it sought to undermine.

Instead of directly attacking women’s, children’s, or LGBT rights, their messaging claimed to defend life, family, and children.

For instance, gender-restrictive groups strategically avoided direct attacks on women’s rights. Instead, they committed to the protection and dignification of life from the moment of conception (which was established as a right in the Peruvian constitution written under Fujimori’s government). To defend their opposition to abortion, even in cases of rape, they used the language of universal human dignity. In the words of one of the leaders of DMWMK, Christian Rosas: “Even in cases of rape, the life of the child-in-formation is dignified, because dignity is something intrinsic in every human being. If tomorrow you learn that your father is a rapist, that does not make your life less dignified” (*Redacción Lucidez*, 2018).

Similarly, DMWMK did not present itself as opposed to LGBT rights. Instead, it claimed to defend the Constitution’s definition of education, which includes parental participation and input in the school curriculum.

Finally, when it came to gender equality and justice, gender-restrictive groups in Peru claimed to be defending “[cisgender] women’s value and dignity” against attempts to undermine it through gender-parity norms that, according to them, treated women as inferior by claiming that they could not compete on equal terms with men.

In addition to presenting gender-restrictive groups as protectors of the very rights they were seeking to undermine, this kind of strategy provided DMWMK’s supporters with a positive sense of the movement and of themselves. This framing gave thousands of people purpose and affirmation because they saw themselves as actively defending—instead of attacking—democracy and rights, particularly those of the most vulnerable: children and women.

Co-opting the discourse of rights and dignity gave DMWMK’s supporters purpose and affirmation because they saw themselves as actively defending—instead of attacking—democracy and rights, particularly those of the most vulnerable: children and women.

5. International Development and Human Rights Agencies as Neocolonial Organizations

TAKEAWAYS

- Gender-restrictive messaging strategies in Peru presented international organizations such as the UN, the OEA, UNESCO, and the World Bank as neocolonial entities seeking to “impose gender ideology” in Peru and the region.
- This alleged imposition was framed by gender-restrictive groups as a violation of national sovereignty, and as part of a globalist agenda represented by the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals.
- Under this strategy, environmental activists emerge as key allies in the region.

Because international organizations such as the UN, the OEA (Organization for American States), and the World Bank defend women’s, children’s, and LGBT rights, gender-restrictive groups presented them as trying to impose “gender ideology” in Peru, without regard for local values and national sovereignty.

More specifically, gender-restrictive groups in Peru advanced a **conspiracy theory** around the UN’s It’s All One Curriculum, a set of guidelines and activities for a unified approach to sexuality, gender, HIV, and human rights education developed by the Population Council. According to the misleading narrative espoused by gender-restrictive groups, the It’s All One Curriculum was orchestrated by Planned Parenthood in an attempt to impose a unified curriculum on sexuality across the globe. The conspiracy theory also stated that the curriculum was authored by Hillary Clinton and would be introduced in the region as part of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (CLACAI, 2020).

This conspiracy theory allowed gender-restrictive groups to align their **anti-LGBT and anti-women’s rights agenda with opposition to environmental policies, as well**. Given the region’s privileged geographical location, its colonial history of extractivism by foreign powers, and the problematic relation between land ownership, displacement, and deforestation, environmental issues are becoming increasingly relevant and controversial in countries like Peru.

Additionally, connecting their anti-environmental stance to the SDGs gave gender-restrictive groups a **concrete timeframe to advance their agenda**. “The battle will last until 2030,” Christian Rosas said. “We still have 10 years.”

Under the false premise that the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals are part of a neocolonial agenda, gender-restrictive groups in the region are seeking to act against them and oppose environmental policies. Through this kind of messaging, gender-restrictive groups align themselves with powerful actors who have political or economic reasons to oppose environmental regulations in general, and the SDGs in particular. Jair Bolsonaro’s government in Brazil is a case in point.

IV. SPREADING AND MOBILIZING DISINFORMATION

Gender-restrictive groups in Peru disseminated the five key messages described in Section III through the following strategies:

Coalitional Work

Gender-restrictive, interfaith groups in Peru **leveraged the different strengths and expertise of their robust network to organize street protests, carry out impact litigation, deepen political alliances, and lobby within multilateral organizations.**

For example, while DMWMK used street protests as the primary and most visible venue to communicate their messages, Padres en Acción (Parents in Action), an organization of Catholic activists, brought the fight into the courtroom (Rousseau, 2020).

Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups also took advantage of their direct connections to political actors in Congress and/or other government positions (Grande, Brunner & Esglobal, 2017) and gained considerable ground in international human rights systems, like the OAS, that have traditionally been dominated by human rights advocates (interview with George Hale, 2020).⁵⁵ This is part of a broader strategy of intense lobbying to counter some of the initiatives from international development and human rights agencies.

For example, at the Ibero-American Congress for the Family, gender-restrictive groups shared a detailed plan to attend and influence the next OAS meeting. Part of the plan asked gender-restrictive organizations to register for the dialogues with civil society under five different organizations, all of which had secular names.⁵⁶ The preparations for the participation in this meeting included a detailed presentation on how the OAS works (CLACAI, 2020).

“Never Use the Same Strategy Twice”: Diversifying Platforms and Actions

Gender-restrictive groups in Peru used a **variety of actions and platforms to i) reach their audience directly, ii) give visibility to their claims and, iii) showcase their capacity for mobilization.**

Gender-restrictive groups used all means at their disposal to communicate their message: social media, television shows, radio programs, magazines, advertisement, rallies, petitions, and direct addresses in religious services (González et al., 2018).

Gender-restrictive groups are planning a Continental DMWMK mobilization “from Canada to Tierra del Fuego, thousands, millions of Christians protesting the same day, with the same slogans, in all the capital cities of America” (CLACAI, 2020).

DMWMK created the Facebook group Con mis hijos no te metas Perú- Oficial, which had 150,000 members by mid-2017. The publications in this group garnered thousands of likes and were used to spread disinformation about the new curriculum and to coordinate activities and protests (Meneses, 2019). The movement also has an official webpage where protestors can find resources and encouragement for participating in national rallies. The webpage broadcasts the national rallies live and also hosts a repository of previous marches and events. In addition, some churches own large venues, including soccer stadiums, where they can congregate thousands of followers and address these issues directly.⁵⁷

Christian Rosas, one of the spokespersons of DMWMK, explained that the combination of media messages, which are strategically deployed at different moments, is part of a general strategy of **not repeating themselves**: “One of the characteristics that has made DMWMK different is that we’ve never used the same strategy twice. For instance, the first march happened

⁵⁵ The appointment of former Colombian Attorney General Alejandro Ordoñez, a highly conservative Lefebriest Catholic who was demoted for corruption, as the country’s ambassador to the Organization of American States in Washington, DC in 2018 is a case in point.

⁵⁶ The names of the organizations were: Ibero-American Evangelical Congress, Coalition for the Progress of Society, Opportunities for Contemporary Social Structuring, Coalition for the Education and Culture for Democracy, and Building New Horizons (CLACAI, 2020).

⁵⁷ In March 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic was just beginning, some churches created an option to virtually attend services and events led by national and international pastors (*Ojo Público*, 2020).

on a Saturday, the second time we marched on a weekday. Sometimes our marches are directed against MINEDU [and] their buildings; other times we do it in a decentralized way. For the next protest, we are hoping that it can last for several days. But I can't tell you right now what the concrete strategy is going to be, it is yet to be seen" (UCI, 2019).

Training and Educational Programming

Gender-restrictive groups **invest heavily in training and educational programming.** They combine traditional evangelization strategies and religious services—which are not necessarily anti-rights—with disinformation about children's, women's, and LGBT rights and what child protection entails according to their perspective, making these initiatives hard to identify and track.

The number of workshops, conferences, books, and other venues that spread disinformation about children's, women's, and LGBT rights has exploded in recent years (CLACAI, 2020). Some of these events take place in churches, but gender-restrictive groups have taken advantage of the pandemic to offer online alternatives that range from certifications on family counseling—offered by organizations with no academic or pedagogical certification, such as Salvemos a la Familia and Centro para el Desarrollo de la Familia—to online activities and clubs for children and adolescents (the Sunday Online School and Club of Explorers of the Bible created by MMM, for instance) (*Ojo Público*, 2020).

First-Person Narratives

Gender-restrictive groups in Peru used a wide range of first-person narratives to highlight the stories of “real people” opposing CSE and to build trust among supporters.

For instance, the DMWMK movement's YouTube channel has hundreds of videos of “concerned” **mothers and fathers—mostly fathers—explaining their personal reasons for protesting against the new curriculum** and other human rights-affirming initiatives and laws.

Gender-restrictive groups also **manufactured flagship cases** exploiting the testimonies of children who “had been saved from gender ideology.” In reality, these children and adolescents had been submitted to conversion therapy, a clear violation of their rights.⁵⁸

58 Some Evangelical churches in Peru perform conversion therapies in which they employ methods of psychological and even physical violence to convince children that nonnormative sexual orientations and gender identities are pathologies that can be cured. In 2019 alone, It Gets Better Peru provided support to 65 adolescents who were considering suicide after being subjected to these “therapies.” This practice is not forbidden in Peru (Goytizolo & Torres, 2019).

V. CONCLUSION

The Peruvian case is illustrative of how gender-restrictive groups weaponize children to manufacture moral panic and mobilize it against SHRR, LGBT rights, and gender justice. **It also highlights how gender-restrictive groups can win the cultural and communications war, even when they lose key legal battles.**

Gender-restrictive groups in Peru used a pedagogical tool designed to protect children and expand gender justice, and mobilized it to oppose the rights of those very children, in addition to women and LGBT people. To do so, they created the DMWMK movement.

The movement's opposition to Comprehensive Sexuality Education is particularly worrisome considering Peru's high rates of sexual violence against and rape of children and women, unwanted teenage pregnancies that result in girls dropping out of school, and SOGIE-based bullying.

In spite of DMWMK's aggressive messaging strategies and mobilization campaigns opposing CSE, the Supreme Court upheld the National Curriculum on Basic Education. After losing this battle, **gender-restrictive groups shifted their attention to the use of the term "gender" in several initiatives that sought to protect women's rights and promote gender justice.** Disregarding their fierce opposition, Vizcarra's government issued the National Policy on Gender Equality in 2019.

Despite losing key legal and policy battles in Peru around the curriculum and Vizcarra's reforms, gender-restrictive groups seem to be winning the communications and cultural war.

Gender-restrictive groups in Peru lost key legal and policy battles (for now), but they seem to be winning the communications and cultural war. Despite the positive legal outcomes, the DMWMK movement had significant negative impact in Peru and the region. This movement and its messages spread to Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay, Ecuador, Colombia, Mexico, and Uruguay, threatening the rights of women, children, and LGBT people across Latin America.

Teachers are currently scared to teach CSE, and support for progressive groups and causes has waned (interview with George Hale, 2020). Furthermore, the moral panic caused by the supposed corruption of children, the claim that the state would diminish parental authority, the alleged neocolonial threat that international human rights organizations represent, and, above all, the fragmentation of the language of human rights has had a profound influence on Peruvian society and the region.⁵⁹

The Peruvian case reminds us that, in the fight for human rights and gender justice, winning hearts and minds is as significant—if not even more so—than advancing legislation and policies.

Therefore, it is of paramount importance to **support sustained, long-term, non-reactive, worldmaking strategic communication campaigns and formal and informal education efforts** that explain key concepts and build consensus around the need to simultaneously advance women's, children's, and LGBT rights, environmental protections, and democratic values.

⁵⁹ For example, the National Front for the Family (Frente Nacional para la Familia) in Mexico used similar strategies and messages to question "the nondiscriminatory marriage" initiative aimed at promoting equal marriage in every state of the Republic (Tabbush & Caminotti, 2020).

CASE STUDY 2. BULGARIA:

HOW CHILDREN'S, WOMEN'S, AND LGBT RIGHTS GOT LOST IN TRANSLATION; THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MOST EFFECTIVE GENDER-RESTRICTIVE MOVEMENT IN EASTERN EUROPE

OVERVIEW

The Istanbul Convention (IC) was the first European treaty to provide a comprehensive framework to address all forms of violence against women and girls. With wide support from across the political spectrum, the EU presented it to member states for ratification in 2011. Despite the endorsement of 18 European countries, Bulgaria became the first country to decide against ratifying it in 2018. Furthermore, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court declared the treaty unconstitutional. Though this decision took many by surprise, it was the culmination of years of work by *gender-restrictive groups* in the country.

As a member of the European Union since 2007, Bulgaria is a signatory of multiple international declarations that protect LGBT,⁶⁰ women's, children's, and human rights. However, over the last decade—and particularly since 2018—the country has also seen the rise of well-organized gender-restrictive groups that have successfully worked to curtail the advancement of human rights and gender justice.⁶¹ Bulgaria's rejection of the IC was the first of a series of events that jeopardized human rights by directly undermining LGBT, women's, and children's rights.

⁶⁰ Intersex and non-binary people's rights are also undermined by the actions of gender-restrictive groups. However, the researchers did not find evidence of gender-restrictive groups instrumentalizing the experiences of intersex persons in their narratives. Therefore, throughout this report we use the acronym LGBT when speaking of the rights explicitly targeted by gender-restrictive groups, and LGBTI to denote the consequences of their actions that also affect intersex and non-binary people.

⁶¹ "Gender justice" is a systemic process of redistribution of power, opportunities, and access for people of all genders through the dismantling of structures of oppression including patriarchy, homophobia, and transphobia (Global Fund for Women, 2021). It encompasses the affirmation and protection of LGBTI rights, including the rights of LGBTI children and (cis)women's rights, that is, the "ending of—and if necessary the provision of redress for—inequalities between women and men that result in women's subordination to men." (Goetz, 2007).

Gender-restrictive groups and actors are organizations, politicians, researchers and institutions that seek to establish a gender-restrictive world order.

A gender-restrictive order organizes economic, political and social life through the imposition and enforcement of a restrictive and hierarchical vision of gender. It has two main and interdependent components: the naturalization of the gender binary, and the enforcement of gender-normativity.

Most of these groups and actors are faith-based, religiously affiliated or explicitly confessional. These groups attack human rights and gender justice, as well as the principles of self-determination and equity.”

Unlike any other country in the region, **gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria have been 100% effective in accomplishing their goals:** they have successfully blocked the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, several Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE) initiatives, and the implementation of the Social Services Act. **The country is a case in point of how former political, economic, religious, cultural, and ideological opponents found in gender normativity a powerful unifier and a common rallying cry.**

The effectiveness of the narratives deployed by gender-restrictive groups, as well as the complex interplay between Eastern Orthodoxy, Islam, Evangelical forces,⁶² and communism in the country make Bulgaria a cautionary tale for progressive funders, advocates, and organizations.

An in-depth look at the Bulgarian case provides valuable insights about how gender-restrictive movements instrumentalize children⁶³ to curtail LGBT,

women’s, children’s, and human rights in Eastern Europe and across the globe.

The following case study begins by **I)** describing how gender-restrictive groups successfully blocked initiatives that sought to protect women, children, and LGBT people. It then **II)** provides context to understand some of the cultural, historical, religious, and political underpinnings of these campaigns. Later, it **III)** analyzes the types of messages and communication strategies employed by gender-restrictive groups, **IV)** and takes a look at how these messages were spread and mobilized. Finally, the document **V)** provides general conclusions.

⁶² In this report we use “Evangelical,” “Orthodox,” and “Anglican” to name non-Catholic Christian denominations. When relevant, specific denominations are mentioned.

⁶³ Throughout this report we highlight the ways in which gender-restrictive groups weaponize children. This is why we will usually speak about children, and the child protection rhetoric, unless explicit references to children’s rights are made by gender-restrictive actors.

KEY EVENTS: TRACKING THE SUCCESS OF GENDER-RESTRICTIVE GROUPS

TAKEAWAYS

- Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria were highly effective in both the cultural and political realms: they blocked initiatives to advance women’s, children’s, and LGBT rights and mainstreamed their narrative regarding gender, gender justice, gender-based rights, and gender and sexual diversity in judicial, legislative, policy, and public spaces in Bulgaria. For example, the Constitutional Court’s majority used their (mis)translation of “gender” in its ruling to declare the unconstitutionality of the Istanbul Convention.
- In addition, gender-restrictive groups successfully campaigned against Comprehensive Sexuality Education initiatives in Bulgarian schools.
- Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria also targeted the regulation for the provision of Social Services initiatives (including child welfare and protection). By spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories, gender-restrictive groups blocked the implementation of the National Strategy for the Child and the Social Services Act.
- Finally, as part of their misinformation campaigns, gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria smeared civil society organizations and lobbied to undermine their financial sustainability.

The following events exemplify the successful mobilization of gender-restrictive groups against human rights and gender justice in Bulgaria. One of the key triggers of these mobilizations was the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, which took place against the backdrop of Bulgaria’s alarming data on domestic violence against women.⁶⁴ Schools and child protection social services have also incrementally become a battleground for gender-restrictive movements in the country.⁶⁵ More recently, gender-restrictive groups are seeking to jeopardize the financial sustainability of civil society organizations that defend human rights, including children’s, women’s and LGBT rights, by promoting regulation to curtail their funding streams, particularly from international sources.

Actions and Policies That Aim to Protect LGBT, Women’s, or Children’s rights

Actions Against LGBT, Women’s, or Children’s rights

Bulgaria joins the EU.

**Jan.
2007**

The EU presents the **Istanbul Convention** (IC) for ratification to its member states. The IC is the first European treaty providing a comprehensive framework to address all forms of violence against women and girls (Council of Europe, 2011). Across Eastern Europe, opposition to what gender-restrictive groups call “genderism”—supposedly codified in the Convention—intensifies and expands.

**Nov.
2011**

⁶⁴ The ratification later became controversial in other Eastern European countries. In Poland, for example, gender-restrictive groups decried what they saw as the undue influence of transnational organizations in the IC.

⁶⁵ This also happened in other Eastern European countries. In 2015, Romanian gender-restrictive groups protested against a bill that mandated CSE in schools, denouncing the move as undue interference by foreign interests who were imposing their ideology and comparing efforts to provide CSE in the nation’s schools to communist indoctrination (Kovatz & Poim, 2015). In Poland, the idea that children were in danger and needed to be saved from sexual predators was central to gender-restrictive mobilizations (Kovatz & Poim, 2015). Marek Jurek, a prominent Polish political leader, opposed CSE in schools arguing that it sexualized children and encouraged what he saw as immoral sexual behavior, such as masturbation (Jurek, 2013).

Turkey is the first country to ratify the IC.

**Dec.
2012**

Proposal to the Bulgarian Parliament to ratify the IC.

**Jan.
2018**

Gender-restrictive groups and religious organizations such as The Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Society and Values Association (SVA) and the Grand Mufti's Office of Muslim Denomination fiercely oppose the IC's ratification. The active social and political discussion that ensues put "genderism" (not women's or human rights) at the center of the debate about the ratification of the IC. As a result, 75 members of Parliament, mostly from the ruling GERB party, ask the Constitutional Court to determine the constitutionality of the IC (Balkan Insight, 2018).

The **Constitutional Court declares the IC unconstitutional**. Bulgaria becomes the first country to decide against ratifying the IC after 18 European countries have already signed. The Court's majority endorses a problematic definition of gender (see Messaging Strategy #1 in this case study, p. 73 and, in an eight to four ruling, determines that the IC threatens women's rights and is thus unconstitutional.

**July
2018**

The Court's majority argues that the IC's definition of gender "relativizes the borderline between the two sexes, male and female, as biologically determined," making it difficult, if not impossible, to fight against domestic violence (Gotev, 2018).

The ruling has additional repercussions for LGBTI rights. A pending law that would have allowed trans individuals to change their name and sex in official documents is declared unconstitutional, as well (Eurochild, 2019b).

According to a Gallup poll, **55% of Bulgarians support the declaration of the IC's unconstitutionality** (Darakchi, 2019: 1209). Public figures from the ruling party and the opposition alike increasingly make statements against LGBT rights and gender justice (Radosveta, 2018).

Aug.
2018

The Ministry of Education and the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences block the **Forum for a Gender Balanced Model in Schools: The Bulgarian Case** after its proposal document is leaked. The Forum followed the principles outlined in UNESCO's Gender Equality Action Plan 2014-2021 (Margolis, 2018), but gender-restrictive groups accuse it of peddling "genderism." Its primary goal was to research school teachers' competence and motivation to instill gender justice in their students (Monova et al., 2018). The initiative would have also conducted a school-based survey to collect data on gender violence and stereotypes.

The government submits a draft of the **National Strategy for the Child 2019-2030**. The strategy seeks to introduce "a holistic approach for family policy, oriented not only towards vulnerable children but also towards family support, including non-violent parenting" (CIVICUS, 2019). The proposal follows UNICEF's goal of ensuring that "all children and adolescents, especially the most disadvantaged, enjoy their rights and develop their full potential in an inclusive and protective society respectful of their voice" (UNICEF, 2018).

Jan.
2019

Organizations such as **the SVA and the Association of Parents United for Children (ROD) campaign against the Strategy**. Initially, the debate revolves around the fact that the Strategy introduces a total ban on corporal punishment, which is surprising since Bulgarian law already banned this practice (Eurochild, 2019b). Gender-restrictive groups use this alleged introduction of the prohibition to reject the Strategy by promoting the idea that its "totalitarian approach" gives the state undue power over individuals, families, and children (interview with Nadejda Dermendjieva, 2020; SVA, 2019). This campaign triggers heated debates and public protests, with more than 1,000 people protesting outside government buildings in Sofia, Bulgaria's capital (Eurochild, 2019a).

The Ministry of Health creates a brochure for Bulgarian high school students called **“Love Without Consequences”** and charges the Regional Health Inspectorate in the city of Yambol with distributing it. The brochure aims at preventing sexually transmitted infections.

**Feb.
2019**

Because it includes photos of young men in sexually charged situations (dne.dir.bg, 2019) the brochure “Love Without Consequences” galvanizes gender-restrictive opposition. To make matters worse, the brochure is mistakenly delivered to young children (ILGA Europe, 2019). The Ministry of Education withdraws the brochure after a letter from the Regional Inspectorate demands its removal on account of “scandalous” content (dne.dir.bg, 2019).

**Mar.
2019**

The **SELFIE survey is suspended**. The survey, distributed in SELFIE schools⁶⁶ across Europe to help embed digital technologies in teaching, learning, and student assessment, includes a question that asks students about their gender, giving the options “boy,” “girl,” “other,” and “prefer not to say” (novinite, 2019). This question enrages gender-restrictive groups who claim it introduces (and promotes) a third sex. Rising pressure from gender-restrictive groups and civil society drives the Minister of Education, Krassimir Valchev, to unsuccessfully request that the European Commission eliminate the “other” option within the category “gender” in the survey. Bulgaria then suspends the SELFIE survey (novinite, 2019).

The Parliament adopts the **Social Services Act**, enabling the state to provide social services to improve the quality of life of vulnerable populations (Bodganov & Zahariev, 2019). Children at risk are among the people this act seeks to protect.

Gender-restrictive groups campaign against the Social Services Act, arguing it delegates social services to foreign NGOs that follow “the Norwegian model” and that it makes social services compulsory, threatening parental authority. The **“Norwegian model” is a conspiracy theory that claims children will be taken from their families and given to same-sex couples in Norway**. The Act is supposed to enter into effect in January 2020, but the government concedes to mounting political and social pressure and postpones its implementation (interview with Lilly Dragoeva, 2020).

**Apr.
2019**

The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and the State Agency for Child Protection fail (or refuse) to explain the main policies outlined by the National Strategy for the Child 2019-2030 and why they are important (Eurochild, 2019a). Conceding to mounting pressure from gender-restrictive groups, **Prime Minister Boyko Borisov halts the Strategy’s implementation**.

⁶⁶ SELFIE is the acronym for “Self-reflection on Effective Learning by Fostering the use of Innovative Educational Technologies.” SELFIE schools use the SELFIE survey as a tool to embed digital technologies into teaching, learning, and student assessment. The survey is currently available in the 24 languages of the EU (European Commission, n.d.).

**Oct.
2019**

The Socialist Party asks the Constitutional Court to review the constitutionality of the **Not-for-Profit Legal Entities Act or Civil Society Organizations (CSO) Law**. One of the arguments put forth is that CSOs represent and advance foreign interests (National Network for the Children, n.d.).

**July
2020**

Fifty-four deputies from the Bulgarian Socialist Party challenge several provisions in the Social Services Act.

Three provisions of the Social Services Act, but not the law as a whole, are declared unconstitutional (Radio Bulgaria, 2020).

Representatives from the United Patriots Party, a member of the ruling coalition, put forth a package of amendments to the Civil Society Organizations Law. The amendments include proposals to **eliminate state funding for projects of CSOs and obligations to report income from foreign sources. According to the National Network for the Children, the measures would officially label CSOs as “foreign agents” and give authorities the power to subject these organizations to financial inspections**—without any specific violation of the law—simply for receiving foreign funding (National Network for the Children, n.d.).

**Dec.
2020**

VMRO, the government’s party, submits a **proposal to the National Assembly to amend the Child Protection Act**. The proposal’s understanding of child rights is inconsistent with the one found in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and in other internationally recognized European instruments (National Network for Children, 2020). According to a letter signed by 70 civil society organizations, if passed and adopted, the law would set back progress on the Bulgarian child protection system by 20 years.

As a result of these events, today **Bulgaria does not have a national policy for child welfare, state-funded programs to support initiatives against domestic violence, nor programs to assist teachers and schools in addressing gender inequality and SOGIE-based bullying and discrimination.**

This situation is further aggravated **because funding mechanisms for local civil society organizations are also seriously endangered**, limiting their ability to continue to advocate for gender justice and human rights.

II. CONTEXT

Gender-restrictive groups across Europe have successfully instrumentalized children to curtail women's, LGBT, and, also, children's rights primarily by causing moral panic through disinformation⁶⁷ about the meaning of "gender," and the creation of related neologisms like "genderism." However, they have had a different impact in each country. Central and Eastern European countries like Bulgaria, which generally have a shorter history of democratic governance, relatively fragile institutions, newer civil society movements, worrisome gender-based violence indicators, and culturally entrenched anti-LGBT sentiment, have been more vulnerable to misinformation campaigns (European Parliament, 2018).

1) The Increasing Power of Religious Forces

TAKEAWAYS

- Organized religion has had a formidable return to Bulgaria and other Eastern European countries after its repression during the communist era ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall.
- Organized religion is increasingly central to the lives of many individuals and communities in Bulgaria.
- As in other regions of the world, Evangelical Churches are expanding in Bulgaria, and some of their political representatives are now in positions of power.
- Despite historical frictions, the Orthodox, Catholic, and Evangelical churches, along with the Grand Mufti of the Muslim Denomination, worked together to prevent the ratification of the IC and to block other rights-affirming initiatives in Bulgaria.

Over the last 30 years, most of Eastern Europe has experienced a shift in its religious landscape.⁶⁸ The communist regimes that were previously in power repressed religious worship and encouraged secularism (Pew Research Center, 2017). After the end of the Cold War, most national constitutions were revised to guarantee freedom of religion and spirituality. As such, the transition to capitalism also signified a drastic transformation of the role of religion in public life. **Organized religion became a key source of individual, communal, and national identity; an effective social cohesion mechanism; and a source of relief from poverty and other social ailments** (Gerlach & Topfer, 2015). Interestingly, demographic data also indicates a greater shift to religiosity in countries where communism promoted secularism more forcefully, compared with those where religious repression was less severe.⁶⁹

As of 2018, 76% of Bulgarians identified as Christian Orthodox, 10% as Muslim, and 1.1% as Evangelical (U.S. Department of State).

Bulgaria is a case in point of the increasing power of religion in postsocialist Eastern Europe. Since the postsocialist constitution recognized freedom of religion and thought, a steady rise in the number of adherents and scope of influence of the Christian Orthodox Church has become evident in the country.⁷⁰ According to the 2011 census, 76% of the population identifies as Eastern Orthodox Christian, Muslims make up approximately 10% of the population, Protestants are 1.1%, and 0.8% are Roman Catholic (U.S. Department of State, 2018).

Although Evangelicals account for only 1% of Bulgarians, they are a fast-growing community, primarily concentrated in areas with large Romani populations

⁶⁷ While misinformation is false information that is created and spread regardless of an intent to harm or deceive, disinformation is a type of misinformation that is created to be deliberately deceptive (Gebel, 2021).

⁶⁸ Comparing data from 1991 and 2017, the proportion of survey respondents who self-identified as Orthodox Christian grew significantly in Bulgaria, Russia, and Ukraine (Pew Research Center, 2017).

⁶⁹ The degree to which religion was absent from public life in these countries differed as a function of their religious histories and their association with the Soviet Union. Therefore, the current dominance of specific religions or denominations and the religiosity of citizens varies from country to country. For instance, in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, Catholicism continued to be a feature of life during the communist years. Nowadays, in both the Czech Republic and Hungary, the population has become more secular and Catholicism has lost influence (Pew Research Center, 2017).

⁷⁰ Since 1990, religious groups have been allowed to worship without formal registration, but registered groups receive government benefits. The Constitution identifies Eastern Orthodox Christianity as Bulgaria's "traditional" religion and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church receives government benefits without needing to register (U.S. Department of State, 2018).

(U.S. Department of State, 2018), and **have been able to attain positions of political power. Prominent Evangelicals include the current Minister of Defense, Krasimir Donchev Karakachanov, and his head of communications, Alexander Urumov** (interview with Krasimira Velichkova, 2020). Both opposed the IC and are vocal supporters of other gender-restrictive campaigns and initiatives.

Specific churches and denominations exerted great influence in the public perception of the IC and other policies seeking to protect human rights, particularly those of children, women and LGBT population. For example, during the protests against the National Strategy for the Child 2019-2030, the Orthodox Church made an official statement condoning the liberty of parents to slap their children as a form of discipline. The statement, widely covered by the Bulgarian media, also reinforced the Church's opposition to abortion, contraception, and CSE in the nation's schools (*The Sofia Globe*, 2019).

Furthermore, despite their historical antagonism, the Orthodox, Catholic, and Evangelical Churches, along with the Grand Mufti's Office of the Muslim Denomination, worked together to prevent the ratification of the IC and block other rights-affirming initiatives in Bulgaria (Darakchi, 2019: 1210).

2) Growing Anticolonial Sentiment

TAKEAWAYS

- At the beginning of the 21st century, Bulgaria became a member of the EU, which required the implementation of international legal frameworks that protect and advance human rights and gender-justice.
- At the same time, gender-normative, religious, and nationalist sentiments—which had remained mostly absent from public life in the previous decades—reemerged with force.
- Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria recognized and instrumentalized the tension between progressive international legal frameworks that protect human rights and gender justice and gender-normative and nationalist worldviews that promote a patriarchal and less democratic sociopolitical order.

In the first decade of the new millennium most Eastern European countries became members of the European Union (EU). Among other required reforms, this meant ratifying and implementing a liberal international legal framework that protected women's rights and was increasingly—and rapidly—advancing LGBT rights. Two worldviews collided: a conservative one that sought to reinstate a patriarchal, hetero/cis-normative, and nationalist order; and an international, progressive one that, at least on paper, proclaimed equality as one of its core values and regarded diversity—in terms of race, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, etc.—as a decisive marker of modern democracies.

Gender-restrictive groups recognized and instrumentalized this dichotomy, mainly through strategic messaging and mobilization against so-called “genderism.” Consistent with what has happened in other contexts like Africa and Latin America, gender-restrictive groups in Eastern Europe framed the defense of women's, children's and LGBT rights as a neocolonial project of “Western” countries that are trying to impose what they call a “gender delusion” on the rest of the world (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018).

The anticolonial narrative was highly effective in Bulgaria due in part to the long history of foreign invasions the country has endured. Gender-restrictive groups successfully instrumentalized nationalist sentiment to portray the protection of LGBT, women's, and children's rights as a foreign imposition contrary to national values and interests.

In this sense, **Bulgaria is a prime example of how legislative or court-mandated human rights protections and initiatives—particularly those with origins in international bodies—can backfire if they are not implemented in tandem with sustained cultural dialogue, or if they disregard a country's social, cultural, and political context.**

3) Normalized Anti-LGBT and Anti-Women Sentiment and Behavior

TAKEAWAYS

- At the beginning of the 21st century, Bulgaria became a member of the EU, which required the implementation of international legal frameworks that protect and advance human rights and gender-justice.
- At the same time, gender-normative, religious, and nationalist sentiments—which had remained mostly absent from public life in the previous decades—reemerged with force.
- Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria recognized and instrumentalized the tension between progressive international legal frameworks that protect human rights and gender justice and gender-normative and nationalist worldviews that promote a patriarchal and less democratic sociopolitical order.

Like other Eastern European countries, Bulgaria has historically struggled to guarantee the rights and freedoms of women and the LGBT community (Radosveta, 2018). The primacy of the heterosexual and patriarchal family, with its attendant gender-restrictive values, cannot be solely explained by the surge of organized religion and interfaith alliances. Before the events of 2018-2019, Bulgaria had only achieved minor reforms affirming and protecting LGBT and women's

rights. According to the U.S. Department of State, Bulgaria has **no laws that protect against hate crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and authorities often refuse to investigate and prosecute cases of homophobia and transphobia because they are not recognized by the law as crimes** (U.S. Department of State, 2019).

Additionally, homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny were identified by international monitoring organizations as worrisome trends in the country. The 2018 Rainbow Europe Index, which ranks countries based on policies and laws that have a direct impact on the human rights of LGBTI people, ranked Bulgaria 34th out of the 49 European countries it monitors. According to a 2018 Open Society Institute Study, the number of Bulgarian respondents who witnessed hate-speech incidents directed at LGBT people had doubled from 21% to 42% within two years (U.S. Department of State, 2019).

Regarding women's rights, the European Institute of Gender Equality's composite measure of violence against women placed Bulgaria as the country with the highest prevalence of violence against women and the greatest severity of such incidents compared to other EU countries in 2018. Civil society organizations also point out that domestic violence is normalized and considered a private matter in the country, which partly explains some of the reaction against the Istanbul Convention (interview with Yana Buhrer, 2020).⁷¹ Finally, the Special Eurobarometer survey on gender equality in 2017 shows that Bulgaria maintains considerably more patriarchal beliefs on the role of women compared to other EU member states: 81% of respondents agreed that the role of women was to take care of the home and the family (Radosveta, 2018).

The declaration of unconstitutionality of the Istanbul Convention leaves Bulgarian women, both cisgender and transgender, at heightened risk of domestic violence. This is even more troubling since gender-restrictive groups have also weakened state-funded programs that combat domestic violence and provide services for survivors.

⁷¹ Fine Acts, a collective in Bulgaria that seeks to combat "activist burnout," did an experiment in Sofia to illustrate this point. In 2017, a woman in Bulgaria was beaten for over 50 minutes before she died. The morning after, the neighbors told the press that they heard her screams, but they did not intervene. Fine Acts rented an apartment right below the murdered woman's apartment and started beating a drum set. It took the neighbors one minute and 52 seconds to react in this case (interview with Yana Buhrer, 2020).

4) Corruption and Political Unrest

TAKEAWAYS

- Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Bulgarian politicians have been mired in corruption scandals and the country has experienced political repression.
- Political turmoil and social unrest provided gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria an avenue for gaining support from a broad spectrum of Bulgarian society.
- **Unpopular governments with little political capital are more likely to yield to pressure from gender-restrictive groups** that portray themselves as restorers of moral and national values, as well as sociopolitical order.

As in other post-socialist Eastern European countries, Bulgaria's transition to democracy and capitalism has not always been smooth. In the last decade, the country has faced economic and political turmoil, as well as social unrest. Its entrance to the EU in 2007 brought unprecedented international scrutiny and criticism of the government's failure to take effective action against corruption and organized crime (BBC, n.d.).

After several years in which the Socialist Party (BSP) and the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) alternated power, Boyko Borisov—from the center-right, populist Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) party—was elected prime minister in 2009. Borisov has now been in power for three consecutive terms. But his administration has been tainted by multiple scandals and corruption allegations, including connections to organized crime, political use of the prosecutor's office, and the persecution of journalists (Euronews, 2020). These charges weakened his political capital and strengthened that of his adversaries. Most notably, Rumen Radev, the current president of Bulgaria who was elected with the Socialist Party's support, initiated five votes of no-confidence against Borisov in Parliament, all of which the prime minister survived. However, his reputation and popularity have suffered as a result of these accusations.

In August 2020, there were more than 50 days of protests across Bulgaria. Protestors, mostly young people, stood up against what they see as the endemic corruption of the country's government and political system.

*Transparency International has ranked Bulgaria as the **most corrupt** of the 27 nations in the EU for seven consecutive years.*

III. MESSAGING AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria used communication and mobilization strategies similar to those used by other gender-restrictive movements around the world. **One of their primary and most successful tactics was the deployment of the term “gender,” and other neologisms derived from it, like “genderism,” to stoke moral panic and turn it into effective political action** (Squire, 2018).

Like “gender ideology” in other contexts, gender-restrictive groups used both “gender” and “genderism” as umbrella terms that gave cohesion to three distinct yet interrelated strategies that sought to prevent the implementation of rights-affirming policies and instruments:

- (Mis)translating the term “gender”
- Framing the “best interest of the child” as contrary to parental authority
- Presenting the “Norwegian Model” as a neocolonial and moral threat

Through the use of “gender” and “genderism,” Bulgarian gender-restrictive groups successfully crafted **a common language to pejoratively describe organizations, individuals, policies, laws, instruments, and initiatives that seek to protect and/or advance women’s, children’s, and LGBT rights.**

In this section, we unpack how gender-restrictive groups used these three messaging strategies to successfully block initiatives seeking to advance human rights and gender justice by politically mobilizing moral panic through the instrumentalization of children.

1) The (Mis)translation of “Gender”

TAKEAWAYS

- Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria are increasingly coopting the language of feminism and gender theory, turning it into a powerful weapon against human rights and gender justice.
- The (mis)translation of the term gender, and the creation of neologisms derived from it, like “genderism,” effectively brought together different issues that gender-restrictive movements were seeking to highlight in order to organize sociopolitical opposition to the advancement of LGBT and women’s rights (Mayer & Sauer, 2017).
- The strategic (mis)translation of “gender” and the use of related terms like “genderism” successfully amplified the misconception of LGBT rights as contrary to children’s and women’s rights, causing moral panic and preventing or stalling collaboration between women’s, children’s, and LGBT groups and advocates.
- The resignification of “gender” has been so productive that all anti-gender campaigns that have mobilized the term for concrete political outcomes in Bulgaria have succeeded.

The communications strategy deployed by Bulgarian gender-restrictive groups to instrumentalize the language of human rights begins with the idea of gender itself. To talk about gender theory, Bulgarian feminists in the 1990s did not use the English transliteration of the term. Instead, they used the existing Bulgarian word for speaking about gender in a biological—and taxonomical—way (род).

However, gender-restrictive groups started using the English transliteration of “gender” (джендър) and creating neologisms like “genderism” from it, intentionally shifting the definitions of these terms depending on context, always with negative connotations. For example, the English transliteration

of “gender” was—and still is—used as a homophobic slur similar to the term *f***t* in English, while it also functioned as a pejorative term to describe feminists, LGBT activists, and, more recently, anyone supporting the IC (Darakchi, 2019: 1210; National Network for Children, 2019).⁷²

TRANSLATING “GENDER” IN THE BATTLE FOR LANGUAGE

A key element in the modern attack on women’s and LGBT rights is the appropriation and resignification of the term “gender.” For decades, the use of the term “gender” has been key to raising awareness of and mobilizing support for the rights of cisgender girls, women, and LGBT children and adults. However, as the expressions “gender ideology” or “genderism” show, gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria have effectively appropriated this term, giving it pejorative, panic-inducing connotations.

In addition to the legal outcomes of the resignification of the term, millions of people in Bulgaria now see “gender” as a belief system that 1) promotes the moral and sexual corruption of children; 2) attacks life, parental authority, and religion; and 3) disregards national sovereignty and culture.

The campaign against the IC was partially based on these difficulties of translating the term “gender,” as well as a misrepresentation of the idea of gender as a social construct, which was at the core of the IC. Gender-restrictive groups argued that accepting the use of the term in any context, but particularly in legislation or other binding documents and state programs or initiatives, posed a grave threat and would lead to what they called “genderism.” With this expression, gender-

restrictive groups meant the supposed imposition of a belief and legal system that 1) promotes the moral and sexual corruption of children; 2) attacks life, parental authority, and religion; and 3) disregards national sovereignty and culture. This messaging was used during the debates around the ratification of the IC and the National Strategy for the Child.⁷³

Concretely, gender-restrictive groups argued that **replacing “sex”—a supposedly binary category determined by biology and assigned at birth—with “gender”—understood as a socially-constructed identity category that could be freely determined by individuals, without essential traits or abilities attached to it—would lead to moral, social, and political chaos.**⁷⁴

In particular, they claimed two disastrous outcomes would follow the ratification of the IC: **a)** increased violence against cisgender women, and **b)** the destruction of the heterosexual family, which would in turn have catastrophic consequences for Bulgarian children.

a) Increased violence against cisgender women:

According to the slippery slope logic advanced by gender-restrictive groups, since the IC uses gender as an identity category that can be self-determined, not an unchangeable biological essence revealed at birth, then the state can no longer accurately differentiate between men and women. This would make cisgender women more vulnerable since they could become targets of men who, by pretending to be women, could enter women-only spaces with the intent to attack and defile women and girls. In consequence, ratifying the IC would make it impossible for the Bulgarian government to protect the rights of cisgender women, particularly concerning domestic violence (the argument upheld by the Constitutional Court).

72 Something similar happens in Bulgarian with a term that gender-restrictive groups have adapted to be used as an adjective: *sorosig*. The term, which refers to George Soros, describes a person who supports initiatives to advance the rights of women and the LGBT population (interview with Krasimira Velichkova, 2020).

73 For instance, the Grand Mufti’s Office of Muslim Denomination in Bulgaria offered the following comment about the term “gender” introduced in the Convention: “Article 3 of the Convention determines the biological sex and the new for us phenomenon ‘gender.’ An English word from the American vocabulary, it is one of the many new terms that have recently entered the Bulgarian language in the last 30 years. According to the first explanation, ‘gender’ is a woman of ‘social gender,’ that is, a ‘third gender.’ In this sense, the foreign word does not have meaning in Bulgarian life and literature. The clarification on the case came from the scientific circles.” In the same document, they also claim: “‘Gender’ was the name of the ritual for the circumcision of the female genitals in Yemen” (2018).

74 It is worth noting that the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights stated that the translation of gender by Bulgarian gender-restrictive groups is inconsistent with the translation of the term in other international documents (2019).

b) The destruction of the heterosexual family: The reasoning behind this theory was relatively simple. If a person could self-identify according to their gender identity instead of their assigned sex at birth, then it would be impossible to ensure that marriage remained restricted to opposite-sex partners, de facto legalizing equal marriage and hence same-sex adoption (Darakchi, 2019: 1209). According to gender-restrictive groups, equal marriage and adoption would, in turn, have three devastating consequences:

- It would put vulnerable children at substantial risk of sexual abuse by same-sex couples (due to the conflation of nonnormative gender identities and sexual orientations with pedophilia and sexual deviance).
- It would put children at risk of becoming sexual deviants themselves.
- It would threaten the continuation of humankind by disrupting the link between sexuality and reproduction, only possible within normative heterosexual relations.

Through the mistranslation of the term “gender” and the creation of neologisms derived from it, like “genderism,” gender-restrictive groups succeeded in framing key elements of gender justice, such as LGBT rights and equal marriage and adoption, as contrary to children’s and cisgender women’s rights (particularly related to matters of protection from domestic violence).

2) Framing the “Best Interest of the Child” as Contrary to Parental Authority

TAKEAWAYS

- Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria claimed that those who advance women’s and LGBT rights seek to undermine parental authority.
- Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria intentionally misinterpreted the principle of “the best interest of the child” to claim that women’s and LGBT rights advocates wanted to remove children from the patriarchal, heterosexual home.
- Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria created confusion about the legal concept of “juvenile justice,” which does not exist in the country, to claim that women’s, children’s, LGBT rights advocates wanted to introduce this mechanism in order to remove children from the patriarchal, heterosexual home.

Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria successfully framed parental rights and children’s rights, including those of LGBT children, as oppositional to each other.

One of the most widespread and pernicious arguments of gender-restrictive groups in Eastern Europe claims that those who advance women’s and LGBT rights seek to undermine parental authority, and to deprive children of their supposedly natural site of care and wellbeing: the patriarchal, heterosexual home. The recent messaging in Bulgaria has gone so far as to assert that the ultimate goal of these groups is to give the state total control over children, even facilitating “abductions” of children from their homes by civil servants (Eurochild, 2019b).

An intentional misinterpretation of the principle of “the best interest of the child” supports these statements. According to gender-restrictive groups, the state could invoke this principle to remove children from the care of parents or guardians on the most superficial of bases, such as denying a toy to a child or missing an immunization.

Another aspect of this strategy, and the most visible evidence of the of Russia’s contribution to the disinformation campaign, also misinterprets a legal concept: “ювенална юстиция,” or “juvenile justice.” Bulgaria does not have a juvenile justice system, nor was there a bill to create one. Regardless, gender-restrictive groups built on previous events in Russia and Ukraine⁷⁵ and successfully claimed that the National Strategy for the Child wanted to introduce a juvenile justice system that would give the state enormous powers to take children and adolescents from their homes (National Network for Children, 2019b).

*As a consequence of the moral panic manufactured by gender-normative groups, **today Bulgaria does not have a comprehensive national policy for child welfare.** This puts all Bulgarian children at risk, particularly those who are more likely to suffer discrimination and violence, like LGBT children and adolescents.*

Finally, gender-restrictive groups presented the ban on physical punishment and efforts to implement CSE in all schools as examples of undue intervention of the state in family affairs. This argument has an extremely pernicious effect: **by framing “the best interest of the child” as an attack on parental authority, gender-restrictive groups pitted children’s and parental rights against each other, eroding the idea of the universality of human rights.** Additionally, this logic upholds an antiquated and dangerous paradigm that treats children as their parents’ property, not as independent subjects of rights who need care and guidance to exert those rights.

3) Presenting the “Norwegian Model” as a Neocolonial and Moral Threat

TAKEAWAYS

- Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria created moral panic through a misinformation campaign that claimed that the National Strategy for the Child and the Social Services Act allowed the undue interference of the Norwegian state in Bulgarian affairs.
- This misinformation campaign is known as the “imposition of the Norwegian Model.”
- As a conspiracy theory, the “Norwegian Model” combines nationalist sentiments with other strategies, including the conflation of homosexuality with sexual corruption and abuse of children, and the idea that the recognition of non-heterosexual couples and families will necessarily result in moral and societal decomposition.
- **The conspiracy theory around the “Norwegian Model” presented civil society organizations, social workers, and state child-serving agencies as contrary to children and parental rights.**
- Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria successfully framed LGBT and women’s rights as detrimental to national sovereignty and society at large.

⁷⁵ In Russia, the moral panic about “juvenile justice” erupted in 2011 with the rumor that, through this system, foreign powers would be able to take away Russian children. The panic then swept Ukraine, where Orthodox and Evangelical churches united against the “strategy of juvenile justice in Ukraine” (National Network for Children, 2019b).

One of the most effective forms of the instrumentalization of children to attack the rights of women and the LGBT people in Bulgaria was the moral panic produced by the supposed imposition of the “Norwegian Model,” purportedly hidden in the fine print of the IC, the National Strategy for the Child 2019-2030, and the Social Services Act.

The “Norwegian Model” refers to a disinformation campaign about the supposed undue interference of the Norwegian state in Bulgarian affairs. According to this conspiracy theory, the Norwegian state was financing progressive NGOs in Bulgaria to lobby to diminish parental authority so that the Bulgarian government could more readily remove children from their own homes for minor parental misconduct (interview with Nadejda Dermendjieva, 2020).⁷⁶ Once these children were in state custody, they could then be adopted by international—mostly Norwegian—same-sex couples.

The conspiracy theory around the “Norwegian Model” alleged that civic society organizations, social workers, and state child protection agencies were contrary to children’s rights. It claimed that “social workers in countries such as Norway [Barnevernet, the Norwegian Child Welfare Services], Sweden, and Germany [have] become a means of controlling parents” (SVA, 2019). The disinformation campaign was even presented on national television, using misleading data to imply that one out of every two children in Norway is taken away by social services (National Network for Children, 2019b). The speculation went so far as to say that Norwegians would transport Bulgarian children by train to give them to same-sex couples in Norway and the Netherlands, where, they contended, pedophilia is sanctioned and protected by law (Dragoeva, 2019).

The “Norwegian Model” combines nationalist sentiments with some of the most effective and common strategies of gender-restrictive movements against “gender ideology,” including the conflation of homosexuality with sexual

corruption and child abuse, and the idea that the recognition of nonheterosexual couples and families will necessarily result in moral and societal decomposition.⁷⁷

By placing Norway at the center of the controversy about the IC, the National Strategy for the Child, and the Social Services Act⁷⁸ and insisting on the supposedly devastating impact such intervention(ism) would have in Bulgarian society and political life, gender-restrictive groups successfully reinforced the idea that gender justice and human rights, including those of LGBT people, women, and children, are a neocolonial imposition that threatens national values. **Hence, opposing the IC, the Strategy, and the Act became a matter of protecting children and defending Bulgarian sovereignty from foreign intervention.** Despite the baselessness of these accusations, the strategy was highly effective.

⁷⁶ In their words: “As concerned parents and with the support of reputable lawyers, we oppose the ideology financed by Norway’s Child Protection Services, the Barnevernet, that undermines the traditional family and gives the CPS and dubious NGOs wrong powers to interfere in normal family life” (To Save the Children of Bulgaria, 2019).

⁷⁷ The following text from the SVA highlights the anticolonial underpinnings of this rhetoric: “[The National Strategy for the Child] is extremely far from Bulgarian reality, identity, and history, for which the family institution has played a key role in preserving the self-consciousness and survival of the Bulgarian people over the centuries. For the Bulgarian nation, the role of parents and family is of fundamental importance. With the possible implementation of this Strategy, dubious European practices leading to the destruction, control, and separation of children from their families will be legitimized.”

⁷⁸ For some, the fact that Norway was put at the center of this conspiracy theory points to Russian influence. Norway is a convenient enemy for Moscow for many reasons: its firm stance in favor of progressive principles, the role it plays in the NATO, and the fact that it is Russia’s direct competitor in the oil and gas market, especially for resources from the Arctic region (National Network for Children, 2019b).

IV. SPREADING AND MOBILIZING DISINFORMATION

Deceitful Use of Social Media

Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria use social media, particularly Facebook, to accomplish four main goals:

- Share their (mis)information campaigns and organize events during key political junctures.
- Make their messaging and support appear more grassroots than it actually is.
- Make the number of active supporters appear much larger than it actually is.
- Obscure the networks, organizations, and individuals behind these gender-restrictive messaging and organizing efforts.

The main channel of communication used by Bulgarian gender-restrictive groups is social media, specifically Facebook. There are various Facebook groups that supposedly congregate thousands of “concerned parents.” However, many of the participants’ profiles are fake (interview with Krasimira Velichkova, 2020) and the administrators of the groups are usually unknown.

No to the Strategy for the Child 2019-2030 (He на Стратегията за детето 2019–2030 г.), Bulgaria’s most important gender-restrictive Facebook group, is a case in point of this deceitful use of social media.

The group was created in 2019 by a profile called Hristina Runtova, whose first social networking activity was logged only two days prior to the establishment of the group. The group has over 202,000 members, but only 10 profiles are responsible for over 15% of all posts.⁷⁹ One of them, Runtova, is the most prolific and posts as much as the next five most active members

combined (Yurukov, 2019). Messages shared in the group commonly send users directly to other spaces of the gender-restrictive e virtual ecosystem, primarily YouTube, where there is an abundance of gender-restrictive materials (Yurukov, 2019).

The activity of the group peaked during the elections for the European Parliament in April 2019, after which time it waned considerably. In notable contrast to the impressive number of followers, only a few hundred people actually attended the protests advertised on the page, which indicates that **the number of followers does not necessarily translate to active supporters.**

In 2019, after some of the administrators were blocked, the group was renamed National Group – Parents United for Children [Национална група – Родители обединени за децата]. The current administrators are no longer individuals, but two Facebook pages registered as Community and Cause. This label obscures almost all information about who is actually managing the page⁸⁰ (National Network for Children, 2019b).

Few but Powerful Evangelical “Warriors”

Evangelicals in Bulgaria represent less than 1.1% of the population. However, in the last years, Evangelicals who vocally express their gender-restrictive views have reached important positions of power and achieved considerable visibility and public recognition. These include Krasimir Karakachanov, current Minister of Defense; Alexander Urumov,⁸¹ press secretary to the Ministry of Defense; Ivaylo Tinchev, the organizer of the March for the Family, a demonstration against the Sofia Pride Parade; and pastor Encho Georgiev Enchev, whose videos of himself preaching from his car are extremely popular (his Facebook profile is called driver.evangelist).

79 In 2019, Boyan Yurukov analyzed the behavior of the 158,000 participants that the group had at the time. He found that, of the 158,000 members, 2,518 had published a total of 7,827 posts. Of these, 1,526 people had posted only once, while 23.4% of all posts came from less than 1% of posters and an additional 16% came from only 10 people. Similarly, there were 280,493 comments from 22,961 people: 1% of the commenters were responsible for 27.8% of the comments, and 18% were made by only 100 individuals. Seven members had made over 1,000 comments in less than a year (Yurukov, 2019).

80 Other Facebook groups include: Let’s protect the Bulgarian Family [Да запазим българското семейство], a public group created in 2019 with over 11,000 members; Bulgaria’s Children [Децата на България], a public group with over 10,000 followers linked to a law firm’s webpage; and Join the Fight Against Child Trafficking [Включете се в борбата против трафика на деца].

81 Urumov has been an active evangelist since the 1990s, and his sermons can be seen on YouTube. He has long been popular on social networks as a vocal warrior against liberal values and especially against what gender-normative groups call “genderism” (National Network for Children, 2019b).

Attacking Local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria have succeeded at repealing progressive policies and legal frameworks through disinformation and conspiracy theories. However, their actions are not merely “defensive,” as they do not just react against regulation or policy efforts.

As part of their strategy to advance a gender-restrictive worldview in Bulgaria, they are now seeking to “**clear the field**” by attacking the reputation and the international funding streams of Bulgarian CSOs. This strategy takes advantage of the fact that, due to the Soviet legacy, the Bulgarian CSO ecosystem is relatively new, historically stigmatized, and largely grant-dependent (interview with Krasimira Velichkova, 2020).

Representatives from the United Patriots Party, a member of the ruling coalition, proposed a package of amendments to the CSO law. The amendments

included proposals to eliminate state funding for projects presented by CSOs and obligations to report income from foreign sources. According to the National Network for the Children, if adopted, the measures would lead to the official labelling of CSOs as “foreign agents” and give authorities broad powers to subject them to financial inspections without any specific violation of the law, simply for receiving foreign funding (National Network for the Children, n.d.).

This attack on much-needed funding streams for local CSOs that are already under-resourced is a serious threat to their sustainability and to human rights and gender justice in the country. This is particularly worrisome taking into consideration the notable influx of resources that gender-restrictive and de-democratization organizations have been receiving in the last years from both local and foreign sources.

Division of Labor

Gender-restrictive groups in Eastern Europe are well-organized and their **coordination efforts are supported by individuals and organizations with different skillsets and roles.**⁸²

Organizers Institutions, usually religious groups, that play a central role in convening large events.

Insiders Sympathizers of the gender-restrictive agenda who do not occupy official positions in gender-restrictive organizations or institutions, but who nonetheless attend their meetings or conventions. These individuals usually hold roles in government, serving as senators, deputy foreign ministers, or members and leaders of parties or of the European Parliamentary Assembly.

Ideologues Those who set the agenda, develop key arguments, and create slogans. These individuals and/or organizations also adapt international strategies to national contexts and specific political or social circumstances.⁸³

Sponsors Experts with decades of experience in gender-restrictive work in the United States. They provide financial resources, technical expertise, and strategic knowhow to Eastern Europeans.⁸⁴

Implementers Loose and vast network of smaller organizations and individuals who attend marches and replicate messages in social media and other venues.

⁸² The following chart has been modified from the report on a recent Agenda Europe meeting written by the European Parliamentary Forum on Reproductive and Gender Rights (EPF) (Datta, 2019).

⁸³ For example, the five main strategies presented at the 2015 Agenda Europe Summit were related to euthanasia, religious freedom, marriage and the family, anti-discrimination, and anti-surrogacy (Datta, 2019).

⁸⁴ Sponsors include individuals such as Brian Brown of the National Marriage Organization, Laila Rose of Live Action, Marie Smith of Priests for Life, and Sharon Slater of Family Watch International. In the case of Bulgaria, the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) advised national organizations on how to campaign against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention.

V. CONCLUSION

Bulgarian gender-restrictive forces have been particularly successful at curtailing the advancement of LGBT and women's rights in part through the instrumentalization of children and the language of human rights.

Their messaging strategies have effectively halted public policies seeking to advance gender justice, particularly, CSE, gender equality, and LGBT rights. As in many other countries, these groups have mobilized the idea of "gender" and used it to seed moral panic and mobilize the public for concrete legislative or political outcomes.

In Bulgaria's case, these groups have benefited from the increasing importance of organized religion in the public sphere, particularities of the Bulgarian language, strong patriarchal beliefs—even when compared to other Eastern European countries—and negative connotations of the communist legacy, including the forced institutionalization of children.

The consequences of the instrumentalization of children and the framework of human rights for LGBTI people, women, and children in Bulgaria are tangible and troubling. The declaration of unconstitutionality of the Istanbul Convention leaves Bulgarian women at heightened risk of domestic violence and gender-based violence. Trans rights have also been undermined: a law that would have allowed trans individuals to change their name and sex in official documents was also declared unconstitutional soon after.

Furthermore, most of **the consequences of the lost battles in the educational and child welfare landscape have yet to be seen.** The lack of a comprehensive child welfare state policy will affect the most vulnerable children and families, including many LGBTI children and adolescents. Also, the fact that the Ministry of Education and Science is no longer collecting school-level data about gender, or gender and/or LGBT-based bullying will directly impact children who suffer this type of violence and discrimination. Defunding or blocking programs that support teachers and schools in addressing gender injustices could further hinder children's rights, especially those of girls and LGBT children of all genders.

Most notably, human rights civil society organizations that advocate for a wide range of issues, ranging from the protection of children's, women's, and LGBT rights to promotion of education and the defense of the environment, are **battling against efforts that seek to curtail their funding streams and compromise their long-term sustainability.**

- *Religious groups in Bulgaria, including the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Christian Orthodox Church, the Grand Mufti's Office of Muslim Denomination, and emerging Evangelical churches, have worked together against initiatives that protect and advance children's, women's, and LGBT rights.*
- *Gender-restrictive groups have exerted **notable influence on both right-wing and left-wing political parties.** As is the case for interfaith alliances, **gender normativity has become a powerful coalition-builder among former political enemies,** which makes them increasingly influential and harder to challenge.*
- *Most local gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria don't publicly identify with specific religious denominations. They present themselves as members of civil society—parents, citizens, lawyers, etc.—and speak the language of rights and patriotism.*
- *Gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria don't have many publicly recognizable faces.*
- *For the most part, gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria operate under the anonymity of "secular" organizations. This gives them a broader reach among nonreligiously affiliated people who may be easier to mobilize under banners like "concerned parents" or "citizens."*

In sum, gender-restrictive groups in Bulgaria have not only been extremely effective at the legal and policy level. They also seem to be winning the cultural war. Rooted in the successful framing of LGBT and cisgender women's rights as oppositional to each other, contrary to children's rights and wellbeing, and against national interests, the embrace of gender normativity by the most influential political and religious actors, as well by the Constitutional Court, will continue to negatively impact the lives of millions of women, LGBTI people, and children in Bulgaria for decades to come.

CASE STUDY 3.

GHANA:

HOW FAITH-BASED, GENDER-RESTRICTIVE GROUPS SOWED HOMOPHOBIA AND REAPED POLITICAL AND SOCIAL POWER

OVERVIEW

The actions of faith-based, gender-restrictive groups⁸⁵ in Ghana gained international attention in 2019 due to two main events: the World Congress of Families (WCF), which convened in Accra, and the opposition to the Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) program proposed by the government. Though the two were not originally related, faith-based, gender-restrictive groups used the WCF as a platform to amplify their message against the CSE program, as well as LGBT⁸⁶ rights more broadly.

The Ghanaian case illustrates how faith-based, gender-restrictive groups use the rhetoric of protecting children and leverage entrenched anti-LGBT sentiment in many English-speaking countries in Africa to manufacture moral panic. This strategy both effectively advances a gender-restrictive worldview and strengthens the social capital and political power of these groups. Furthermore, the anti-LGBT cause allowed these groups to work across denominations and religions—for example, Evangelicals with Catholics⁸⁷ or Christians with Muslims—to create a powerful interfaith alliance that constitutes a serious threat to gender justice⁸⁸ in Ghana.

85 This chapter will use the expression “interfaith, gender-restrictive groups” when there is an explicit alliance between faith-based, gender-restrictive groups, like the National Coalition of Proper Human Sexual Rights and Family Values (NCPHSRFV).

86 Intersex and non-binary people’s rights are also undermined by the actions of gender-restrictive groups. However, the researchers did not find evidence of gender-restrictive groups instrumentalizing the experiences of intersex persons in their narratives: in the case of Ghana, even if the NCPHSRFV sometimes speaks about LGBTIQ people, they rarely speak of the needs of, trans, intersex or queer people. Therefore, throughout this report we use the acronym LGBT when speaking of the rights explicitly targeted by gender-restrictive groups, and LGBTI to denote the consequences of their actions that also affect intersex and non-binary people.

87 In this report we use “Evangelical,” “Orthodox,” and “Anglican” churches to name non-Catholic Christian denominations. When relevant, specific confessions are mentioned.

88 Gender justice is a systemic process of redistribution of power, opportunities, and access for people of all genders through the dismantling of structures of oppression including patriarchy, homophobia, and transphobia (Global Fund for Women, 2021). It encompasses the affirmation and protection of LGBTI rights, including the rights of LGBTI children, as well as (cis)women’s rights, that is, the “ending of—and if necessary the provision of redress for—inequalities between women and men that result in women’s subordination to men.” (Goetz, 2007).

Gender-restrictive groups and actors are organizations, politicians, researchers and institutions that seek to establish a gender-restrictive world order.

A gender-restrictive order organizes economic, political and social life through the imposition and enforcement of a restrictive and hierarchical vision of gender. It has two main and interdependent components: the naturalization of the gender binary, and the enforcement of gender-normativity.

Most of these groups and actors are faith-based, religiously affiliated or explicitly confessional. These groups attack human rights and gender justice, as well as the principles of self-determination and equity.

despite strong anti-LGBT sentiment, considerably close relations between politics and religion, and intense lobbying on the part of faith-based, gender-restrictive groups.

The following case study starts by **I)** presenting the most recent gender-restrictive initiatives in the country and their anti-LGBT crusade. It then **II)** provides key contextual information that will explain why the messages of these faith-based, gender-restrictive groups were so appealing. Later it **III)** analyzes the framing strategy of the anti-CSE campaign. Finally, this chapter **IV)** provides conclusions about the Ghanaian case.

During what was called the “CSE controversy,” influential politicians and faith-based, gender-restrictive groups ignored the actual rights violations Ghanaian children experience every day⁸⁹ to portray CSE as the biggest threat to their health and wellbeing. By creating moral and homophobic panic and mobilizing nationalist and pan-African sentiment, these groups successfully presented themselves as concerned with the wellbeing of children,⁹⁰ while characterizing their gender-restrictive and patriarchal ideas as synonymous with African culture and values.

As was the case in many other countries, the discourse, actions, and lobbying strategies of faith-based, gender-restrictive groups started long before these public demonstrations and events. These sustained “silent” actions allowed them to wield considerable political influence by the time the “controversy” started.⁹¹

However, in contrast to what has happened in other English-speaking countries in Africa, **these groups have not succeeded in passing anti-LGBT laws further criminalizing homosexuality in Ghana**

⁸⁹ Teenage pregnancy is very high in the country: 14% of teenage girls (aged 15-19) have already had a live birth or are pregnant with their first child, compared with 1.6% in developed countries and 0.7% in China (Asiedu, 2020); 36% of 19-year-olds were already mothers as of 2017 (GHS, 2017). Furthermore, in 2017, 21% of girls under the age of 18 were married (Addo, 2019). Also, despite Ghana having signed the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1990, “in Ghanaian secondary schools, students who are suspected of homosexual conduct are often taken through psychological counselling by the school authorities or are dismissed for allegedly engaging in homosexual activity” (Atuguba, 2019).

⁹⁰ Throughout this report we highlight the ways in which gender-restrictive groups weaponize children. This is why we will usually speak about children, and the child protection rhetoric, unless explicit references to children’s rights made by gender-restrictive actors.

⁹¹ Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups have a long history in Ghana. For example, the Christian Council of Ghana, perhaps the country’s first faith-based, gender-restrictive organization, was founded in 1929 and has been spreading the idea of “proper sexual behaviors” since at least 1961. That same year, they established the Committee on Christian Marriage and Family Life (CCMFL) “to promote positive Christian teaching on sex, marriage and family life” and to introduce Ghanaian youth to “proper sexual behaviors” (Otu, 2019).

1) KEY EVENTS: THE MAKING OF THE “CSE CONTROVERSY”

TAKEAWAYS

- Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups in Ghana have been framing the protection and advancement of human rights and gender justice as a colonization effort on the part of “Western organizations” and using reactive pan-African rhetoric since at least 2013.
- The World Congress of Families (WCF) Regional Summit that took place in Accra in 2019 was a pivotal moment that i) provided opportunities for multiple faith-based, gender-restrictive groups to come together and amplify their gender-restrictive messaging against CSE and ii) raise their national and international profile.
- The “CSE controversy” in Ghana was opportunistic: it i) used the connections provided by the WCF to amplify gender-restrictive messaging, and ii) demonstrated the effectiveness of instrumentalizing children against LGBT rights (Andams, 2020; interview with Fuller, 2020).

Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups have had a public role in Ghana since the early 20th century. However, since 2013 many of them work together in the National Coalition for Proper Human Sexual Rights and Family Values (NCPHSRFV, see box below) to pass bills that attack the human rights of LGBT people, claiming that homosexuality is a “Western import.”

Despite these efforts, it was not until 2019 when the NCPHSRFV gained national and international notoriety by manufacturing moral panic about the government-mandated CSE program. The Coalition claimed that CSE was a grave threat to children and a vehicle for the imposition of an internationally orchestrated “LGBT agenda.” President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo intervened swiftly and clarified that there was no such agenda in the CSE program. His statements were effective in calming moral panic and preventing social unrest, but they did not settle the controversy because he neither supported CSE nor rejected it entirely.

THE NATIONAL COALITION FOR PROPER HUMAN SEXUAL RIGHTS AND FAMILY VALUES (NCPHSRFV)

Coalition between Ghana’s most important religious leaders and faith-based organizations: the Christian Council of Ghana, the Catholic Secretariat, the Scripture Union, the Catholic Bishops Conference, Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Council, Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship, Ghana Muslims Council, Child Evangelism Fellowship, Ghana Federation of Evangelical Students (GAFES), Traditional Councils, and Regional and National Houses of Chiefs (NCPHSRFV, n.d.).

Founded in December 2013, it has been a platform for these religious institutions to come together in opposition to the human rights of LGBT people (Marwei & Frempong, 2019; Otu, 2019). They define their “sole purpose” as “providing a focused and researched intellectual response to the growing menace of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Rights activities in the world” (NCPHSRFV, 2018b). Its founder and executive secretary, Moses Foh-Amoaning, is a lawyer and well-known anti-LGBT spokesperson.

FAMILY RENAISSANCE INTERNATIONAL

Founded in 2012, it was formerly called Women in the Gap International (WIG). It is a “nonprofit, nondenominational Christian organization dedicated to teaching, intercessory, mentoring and evangelistic functions for spiritual and social development of families.” Their core values include heterosexual marriage, which they claim was instituted by God.

The World Congress of Families (WCF) Regional Summit took place in Accra in 2019. The event was hosted by the NCPHSRFV and Family Renaissance International (FRI), a nondenominational Christian group that seeks to promote development through Christian values (see box above). The conference brought together local politicians and faith-based, gender-restrictive groups with international representatives of gender-restrictive initiatives against human rights, bolstering efforts against CSE and nonnormative family configurations with strong anti-LGBT rhetoric.

THE MAKING OF THE "CSE CONTROVERSY" IN GHANA

Actions and Statements That Aim to Protect
Human Rights and Gender Justice

Actions and Statements Against Human Rights
and Gender Justice

Aug.
2015

Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference organizes "pro-life" march. The Conference declares their willingness to work with other faith-based organizations and the government to promote faith and family in human development. The Bishops also rehearse a narrative that would eventually be used against CSE: they call on the African people to resist the supposed "attempts to impose population control on Africa" on the part of international organizations advocating for the "agenda" of Sexual Health and Reproductive Rights (SHRR) (Catholic News Agency, 2015).

The national guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education in Ghana are issued

as part of a UNFPA, UNICEF and UNESCO-led effort to "harmonize sexual and reproductive health education in Ghana" and to empower girls (Adogla-Bessa, 2018).⁹²

2018

Theresa May's speech to the Commonwealth Heads of Nations. The former prime minister states her regret about Britain's role in the criminalization of same-sex relations in its former colonies and offers support to change this discriminatory legislation (Jain, 2018). Her speech is interpreted by the NCPHSRFV as a recolonization project (NCPHSRFV, 2018b).⁹³ The organization threatens "to cause trouble if the Ghanaian government softened its anti-gay laws" (Sadi, 2018).

Apr.
2018

Aug.
2018

The NCPHSRFV claims to have "voluntary camps" in Ghana to "cure homosexuality." Allegedly, 400 volunteers signed up to "receive 'counseling' and 'reformation' at an antigay conference" (Sadi, 2018).⁹⁴

⁹² The guidelines were produced by Ghana Education Service (GES), an agency of the Ministry of Education (MoE), to help young people "acquire accurate and reliable information on sexual rights and reproductive health, develop skills for self-development and decision making, [...] and nurture positive attitudes and values including [a] sense of responsibility concerning their sexual and reproductive health issues" (Ghana Education Service, n.d.). The guidelines did not recommend any specific textbook, a fact that gender-restrictive groups would manipulate in 2019. There was no mention of gender and sexual diversity either, but the guidelines nonetheless alluded to "gender norms" and "femaleness and maleness," terms which were also implicated in the "CSE controversy" (interview with Fuller, 2020).

⁹³ This was not the first time that public statements on homosexuality by the British prime minister triggered anticolonialist sentiment. In October 2011, Prime Minister David Cameron threatened to cut economic aid to African countries that banned homosexuality (*Press Association*, 2011). A couple of days later, then-Ghanaian president John Atta-Mills rejected the threat and proclaimed that the UK could not bully African countries into accepting practices that violated their religious and cultural beliefs (AFP, 2011).

⁹⁴ The NCPHSRFV still claims to have these camps in undisclosed locations, but their actual existence has not been confirmed (interview with Fuller, 2020; interview with Andam, 2020).

**Sep.
2018**

The NCPHSRFV allegedly presents an anti-LGBT bill titled *A Comprehensive Solution Based Legislative Framework for Dealing with the Lesbianism Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Phenomenon* to Parliament. It provides guidelines on how to “help” LGBT people or prosecute them, depending on whether they are “penitent” or “irredeemable” (Ghana Web, 2018; McCabe, 2018). The “helping mechanisms” closely resemble “conversion therapies.”⁹⁵ Parliament does not approve the bill (interview with Otu, 2020).

The U.S. embassy in Ghana announces the program **Our Rights, Our Lives, Our Futures in Ghana**, jointly organized by the government and UNESCO. The program aims to scale up CSE in six African countries and is supported by Sweden and Ireland (Ferdinand, 2019; U.S. Embassy, 2019).

**Jan.
2019**

The Minister of Education suggests the CSE program will begin in **September 2019**.

The program is based on the guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education in Ghana (Occupy Ghana, 2019). His statements are later used as proof of the presence of the “malignant CSE” in Ghana (FWI, 2019).

**Feb.
2019**

**Sep.
2019**

The “CSE brouhaha”⁹⁶ or “the CSE controversy” begins.

**Sep.
26,
2019**

Inaugural address of the World Congress of Families Regional Summit. Moses Foh-Amoaning, spokesperson of the NCPHSRFV, claims that the introduction of CSE in the national curriculum will undermine the “cultural and moral values of the country.” He emphasizes that “safeguarding the country’s indigenous traditional, cultural, sexual rights and family values [is] critical to addressing the threat of Lesbianism, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender rights (LGBT) of the people” (Noshie, 2019).

⁹⁵ The project included the creation of a Holistic Sexual Therapy Unit at the Korle Bu Teaching Hospital (KBTH). The “comprehensive unit” would have “psychiatric, psychologist, medical personnel, surgical team, guidance and counsellors or Gospel Ministers, etc.” (Equal Eyes, 2018; Sadi, 2018). The language in which these “helping mechanisms” was presented closely resembles that of “conversion therapies.” Conversion therapies are “interventions of a wide-ranging nature, aimed at effecting a change from nonheterosexual to heterosexual and from trans or gender diverse to cisgender.” Such practices are considered a form of torture by the UN (Fitzsimons, 2020).

⁹⁶ This is what the controversy was called in the media.

<p>Sep. 30, 2019</p>	<p>The scandal about CSE grows on social and mainstream media. Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups spread fake news claiming that children are at risk of being exposed to sexually charged content in textbooks, and that they would thus be encouraged to “become” gay. The heads of the most powerful churches in Ghana, as well as prominent politicians, demand the immediate withdrawal of the program.⁹⁷</p>
<p>Oct. 1, 2019</p>	<p>Ghana’s Education Service (GES) backtracks. It claims the Ministry did not approve any document on CSE and that the curriculum does not include gender and sexual diversity (GES, 2019).⁹⁸ However, there is no clarity on whether the program is already being implemented, and the controversy continues with few references to the actual guidelines for CSE.</p>
<p>Oct. 6, 2019</p>	<p>President Nana Akufo-Addo’s speech about the CSE program. He debunks the idea that his government is introducing “foreign practices into the Ghanaian society” through CSE and clarifies that children would not be taught inappropriate concepts and content, by which he means teaching students a rights-based and diversity-affirming curriculum (Asamoah, 2019). The president’s response calms the controversy but does not settle the matter because he seems to neither support CSE nor reject it entirely.⁹⁹</p>
<p>Oct. 2019</p>	<p>NCPHSRFV passes a resolution against CSE. The resolution asks the government to keep CSE out of Ghanaian society (Marwei & Frempong, 2019).</p>
<p>Oct. 30- Nov. 1, 2019</p>	<p>World Congress of Family’s African Family and Sustainable Development Summit (see box).</p>
<p>Oct. 30, 2019</p>	<p>Sharon Slater, president of FWI, is invited to a prayer breakfast held by the Ghanaian president. As part of the WCF conference, influential politicians, gender-restrictive civil society organizations, and interfaith organizations like the NCPHSRFV attend the breakfast (Kuukuwa Andam, 2020). “Top on the prayer list was the introduction of Comprehensive Sexuality Education in the Ghanaian educational system and the need to resist it” (Parliament of Ghana, 2019).¹⁰⁰</p>

97 The Pentecostal and Charismatic Council, the Islamic Community, the Catholic Bishops, etc., are some of the faith-based, gender-restrictive groups that reacted to the controversy. All of them are part of the NCPHSRFV. Among the politicians that issued public declarations are the Speaker of Parliament, who is a Baptist Minister, and former presidents John Kufuor and John Mahama, who was also a presidential candidate in the 2020 election (adomonline, 2019; *Don’t Impose Your Cultures on Us – Mahama*, n.d.; General News, 2019; starrfm.com.gh, 2019).

98 The declarations of the Ministry contradicted previous statements from Ghana’s Education Service (GES), specifically one that read: “The new Standard Based Curriculum being implemented has nothing to do with LGBT issues, masturbation or explicit display/labelling of intimate body parts. [...] The CSE does not seek to throw out the advocacy for sexual abstinence, but rather seeks to reinforce it. [...] It further seeks to help students to make informed decisions about their health, with emphasis on Ghanaian cultural values and norms” (GhanaWeb, 2019).

99 The ambiguity of this statement might be due to Akufo-Addo’s desire to run for reelection in 2020. “He didn’t want to be seen as the LGBT president.” This ambiguity allowed both faith-based, gender-restrictive groups and progressive organizations to claim some degree of success, since neither felt completely invalidated by the president (interview with Fuller, 2020), which highlights Akufo-Addo’s political skill.

100 Slater and Seyoum Antonios, the Ethiopian director of FWI Africa, also participated in nationally televised discussions on CSE, some of which were shared on the NCPHSRFV’s Face-

Ghana's Education Service (GES) issues an invitation to a **one-day stakeholder meeting on Reproductive Health Education in Schools** (GES, 2020). It does not mention CSE.

**Nov. 6,
2019**

Slater is interviewed about the CSE program in *Hot Issues*, a talk show on TV3 Ghana. Slater repeats false claims about the CSE program and reinforces the idea that it is evidence of a supposed neocolonization project enacted by "Western" powers in Africa (Faalong, 2019).

**Jan.
2020**

**Mar.
2020**

Fifth Pan-African ILGA Conference in Ghana. The conference is scheduled for July 2020, but is cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic (Pan Africa ILGA, 2020). Disinformation¹⁰¹ campaigns report that the cancellation is due to the successful opposition of religious groups.

"THE AFRICAN FAMILY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: STRONG FAMILIES, STRONG NATION"

THE WORLD CONGRESS OF FAMILIES SUMMIT IN ACCRA

The World Congress of Families Regional Summit in Accra was hosted by the NCHPSRFV and FRI, with support from CitizenGo (Kenya) and Family Watch International (FWI) (Emenusiobi, 2019). It was a platform for African gender-restrictive actors (see actor typology in pg. 123) to gather, share experiences, and plan actions.

Through "collaborations with government officials, the media, academia, religious and [cultural] bodies, civil societies, [and] NGOs and interest groups" (Montgomery, 2019), the Conference wished to position Ghana as a key actor in the global movement to reinstate the heterosexual patriarchal family as the core of society (Ghoshal, 2019). As part of this effort, the NCHPSRFV paid courtesy calls to many politicians, former presidents, and members of the opposition to invite them to the conference, advocating against the CSE program and in favor of more repressive laws against LGBT rights (Koomson, 2019; Open Democracy Investigations, 2019; Sekyiamah, 2019).

The core message of the WCF conference was that "strong families create strong nations." Despite the use of the plural for "families," this rhetoric allows for only one model of family: the heterosexual, patriarchal archetype. The conference went even further by proposing that upholding the (heterosexual and patriarchal) family was not only the antidote to corruption in Africa, but also the only road to the nation's (and the continent's) economic development (Nketiah, 2019).

The WCF Regional Summit was guided by a strong anti-LGBT sentiment, which focused on four points, also central to the messaging against CSE in Ghana:

The idea that nonnormative sexual orientations and gender identities are disorders that can be cured through "holistic therapies."

The idea that there is an "LGBT agenda" that is being imposed on the country and the region by European colonizers as a plan to depopulate Africa and "wreak havoc."

The idea that CSE is part of a sinful "war on children" that destroys the (heterosexual, patriarchal) family and mocks "God's natural law."

The centrality of Ghana in the plan to contain the spread of homosexuality in the continent.

Progressive organizations such as Out Right International regard this event as a clear demonstration of the WCF's "right-wing fundamentalist agenda in West Africa" and their desire to further spread anti-LGBT sentiment in Ghana (Rudusa, 2019). The WCF has supported other anti-LGBT laws in Africa, like the anti-gay laws in Nigeria (Ghoshal, 2019; Open Democracy Investigations, 2019), and has links to Islamophobic, far-right, anti-migrant, white supremacist movements in both the U.S. and Europe (Open Democracy Investigations, 2019).

book page (*Good Evening Ghana*, 2019).

101 While misinformation is false information that is created and spread regardless of an intent to harm or deceive, disinformation is a type of misinformation that is created to be deliberately deceptive (Gebel, 2021).

II. CONTEXT

1) The Power of Interfaith Alliances: The Rise of Religious Influence on Ghanaian Politics

TAKEAWAYS

- In the last 20 years, a number of Ghanaian presidents and politicians have become affiliated with the major Charismatic or Pentecostal churches in the country (Acheampong, 2018). This deepening relationship between politics and religion is a sign of a “Christianization” of the Ghanaian political system.
- Christian gender-restrictive groups often present Christian values as the religious and cultural core of Ghanaian society despite significant religious diversity in the country, as well as important interdenominational and interreligious differences.
- Faith-based, gender-restrictive organizations have successfully leveraged the historic relation between religion and education in Ghana to actively participate in the development of educational policies to the detriment of LGBT rights.
- Ghana’s dominant religious institutions found a common cause in anti-LGBT sentiment that allowed them to set aside their disagreements and establish a powerful interfaith alliance that constitutes a serious threat to the rights and dignity of LGBT people in Ghana.
- Close relations between members of the NCPHSRFV and political elites have intensified state-sponsored homophobic policy and rhetoric.

Ghana is a deeply religious country: as of 2020, 96% of the population reported some religious affiliation (Pew Center, 2020). However, Ghana’s religious landscape is not homogenous. According to a study by the Pew Center, 73.6% of Ghanaians identify as Christians, 17.5% as Muslims, and 4.9% are said to belong to traditional African religions (Pew Center, 2020).

As of 2020, 96% of Ghanaians reported some religious affiliation: among them, 73.6% identify as Christians, 17.5% as Muslims, and 4.9% belong to traditional African religions (Pew Center, 2020). Within the Christian demographic, 60.8% were Protestant and 12.9% Catholic based on a 2010 survey.

The Constitution defines the Ghanaian state as both secular and religiously plural (Quasigah, 2015), but this religious diversity is often erased by politicians who

speak of Christianity as if it were the national religion (Otu, 2019). For example, in 2011, President John Evans Atta-Mills said that “Christ is the president of Ghana,” and that he owed no one an apology for that statement (Otu, 2019; *The Ghana Herald*, 2011). Six years later, in the midst of Ghana’s 60th anniversary celebrations, President Akufo-Addo launched a plan to build a national cathedral. This project created concern among other spiritual communities because it prioritized Christianity over all other religions (Bob-Milliar & Lauterbach, 2018).¹⁰²

President Atta-Mills’s statements and the construction of the cathedral are signs of a worrisome **“Christianization” of Ghana that is threatening the country’s religious pluralism and the secularity of the Ghanaian state** (Bob-Milliar & Lauterbach, 2018; Otu, 2019).

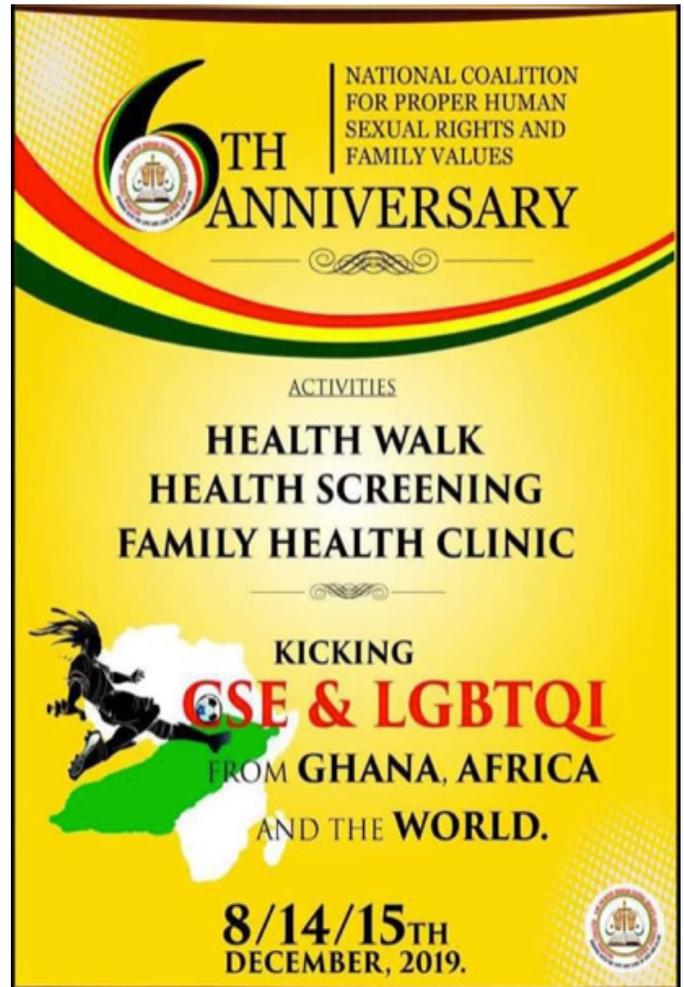
¹⁰² Despite these critiques, the government and Christian leaders—mostly Pentecostal and Charismatic—continue to maintain an intimate relationship. Both Christian and political elites “see advantages in drawing on each other’s capital and legitimacy.” For example, the project of the national cathedral was perceived as a way to court Christian votes for Akufo-Addo’s successful 2020 reelection campaign (BBC News Pidgin, 2020). This is not the first time Akufo-Addo used religion for political purposes. His 2016 presidential campaign also appealed to religious sentiment through its slogan: “The Battle is the Lord’s.” Since then, Akufo-Addo has strengthened his ties to preachers and religious leaders. His strategy reveals the emergence of a “theocratic-political elite” which blurs the boundaries between culture, politics, and religion (Bob-Milliar & Lauterbach, 2018).

The “Christianization” of Ghanaian politics is threatening the country’s religious pluralism and the secularity of the state (Bob-Milliar & Lauterbach, 2018), while also further ingraining gender-restrictive views into Ghanaian society and law.

Furthermore, this “Christianization” has coincided with the rise of Pentecostal Churches in Ghana and of Pentecostals in politics, a process that has been in the making at least since the 1990s (Acheampong, 2018). In 2005, Pentecostals were the second largest Christian denomination in Ghana, after Roman Catholics (Crook, 2005). By 2010, they were the largest Christian denomination in the country. Of the 71.2% of people who defined themselves as Christians, 28.3% self-reported as Pentecostal, 18.4% as Protestant; 13.1% as Catholic, and 11.4% as other denominations (Benyah, 2018). These numbers are consistent with the growth of Pentecostal churches in other African nations.

Pentecostals and other religious denominations organize via faith-based civil society organizations that work with the government, but retain considerable autonomy (Crook, 2005; Sumaila Nlasia, 2020). This status grants them an important political role because they can **support or criticize the government in key moments of political change or social unrest**. This influence is based on faith-based, gender-restrictive groups’ salient role in the consolidation of democracy¹⁰³ and economic development in Ghana. The last role was achieved through actions in the education, health,¹⁰⁴ and agricultural sectors (Adamtey et al., 2020).

Faith-based, gender-restrictive organizations have played a particularly salient role in Ghanaian education. Almost 50% of schools in Ghana were set up by religious groups (Avevor, 2012). In some parts of the country, they own the buildings where schools operate and oversee their administration and functioning, although the teachers themselves are hired by Ghana Education Service (GES) (Auwah-Nyamekye, 2010, interview with Fuller). Also, traditional elders are still in charge of reproductive health education in some regions (Ghana Education Service, n.



Poster of the celebration of the NCPHSRFV’s sixth anniversary.

“The Catholic Church alone, as at 2012 [sic], owned 15% of Basic Schools, 10% of Senior High Schools, 21% of Colleges of Education and 39% of Technical and Vocational schools in the country while the Methodist Church of Ghana as at 2015 had 744 Kindergartens, 1,042 Primary Schools, 519 Junior Secondary Schools, 21 Senior High Schools and 3 Teacher Training Colleges.” (Adamtey et al., 2020).

In the last two decades, these organizations have successfully leveraged the historic relationship between religion and education in Ghana to actively participate in the development of gender-restrictive educational policies (Crook, 2005).

103 For example, both the Christian Council of Ghana and the Catholic Church advocated for the constitutional government back in the ‘90s (Crook, 2005). Religious leaders of different faiths “educated the electorate on democratic principles and voting and acted as the moral consciousness of society,” which meant, at the time, addressing human rights violations and social injustice (Bob-Milliar & Lauterbach, 2018).

104 “The endorsement [by] influential religious leaders [of] new ideas on demographic dividend[s], family planning, HIV and AIDS, gender equality, and [the] empowerment of women have helped communities to accept and adopt these approaches” (Addo, 2019). However, some of the most influential religious leaders and faith-based, gender-restrictive groups oppose family planning methods such as contraceptives and an age-appropriate CSE program (Asiedu, 2020).

Finally, since at least 2013, the leaders of all major faith-based organizations in Ghana (see actor typology) have been members of the National Coalition for Proper Human Sexual Rights and Family Values (NCPHSRFV).

Led by Evangelicals and Pentecostals, this interfaith, gender-restrictive organization presents its members as defenders of African traditions against “foreign cultural and moral influence.” A key part of their mission is the “eradication” of “CSE and LGBTQI from Ghana, Africa, and the World” (NCPHSRFV, 2019).¹⁰⁵

These very different religious institutions found a common cause in anti-LGBT sentiment that allowed them to set aside their disagreements and establish a powerful interfaith alliance that constitutes a serious threat to gender justice, particularly the rights and dignity of LGBTI people in Ghana.

In addition, close relations between members of the NCPHSRFV and Ghanaian political elites further promote institutional homophobia and embed a gender-restrictive worldview in the social, political, and legal culture of the country.

2) Criminalization of Same-Sex Relations Provides Legal Backing to Anti-LGBT Sentiment

TAKEAWAYS

- The Ghanaian criminal code retained a British-era law that criminalizes male same-sex sexual acts, punishable by up to three years in prison.
- **The main impact of the law has been cultural:** it has been used to “naturalize” anti-LGBT sentiment and to frame homosexuality as foreign to Ghanaian values. However, it is rarely enforced.
- “Anti-LGBTI rhetoric from government figures, as well as from religious groups magnifies existing societal homophobia” (IAGCI, 2020).
- LGBT people are subject to physical, sexual, and psychological violence in their families and communities.
- The acronym “LGBT” is used mainly as a pejorative term for (male) homosexuality, while a strategic silence is maintained regarding trans people.
- The Ghanaian Parliament has played a key role in the rejection of more restrictive anti-homosexuality laws.

As is the case in 32 other African countries, male same-sex intercourse is illegal in Ghana. According to the Criminal Code, men who engage in “unnatural carnal knowledge” can be sentenced to up to three years in prison (Carroll, 2016). This prohibition has been inherited from colonial laws enacted in the country from the Victorian era until Ghana’s independence in 1957 (Fröhlich, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2018).

Despite the law’s specification of male same-sex intercourse, or sexual acts between men, it has had wider consequences for the LGBTI community. **The law is rarely enforced, but it “is often seen as tacit state approval of discrimination, and even**

¹⁰⁵ Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups in Ghana regard the protection and advancement of LGBT rights as contrary to their values and morals. U.S. Christians (mainly Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Methodists) have capitalized on this sentiment to further advance a gender-restrictive world order. According to Kapya John Kaoma, a Zambian pastor and researcher, “U.S. conservatives mobilized African clergy in their domestic culture wars at a time when the demographic center of Christianity is shifting from the global North to the global South, increasing Africa’s influence on Christianity worldwide” (K. Kaoma, 2009). The paradigm shift against homosexuality and reproductive rights has transformed the religious landscape in Africa causing congregations, like the African Protestant Churches on the Anglican Communion and the Presbyterian Church, to lose influence. The void left by these churches was filled by more conservative U.S. gender-restrictive congregations (K. Kaoma, 2018).

violence, on the basis of real or imputed sexual orientation and gender identity” (HRW, 2018).

For example, although female same-sex relations are not illegal, women who engage in them are violently reprimanded and heavily policed. Whether they are lesbian, bisexual, or trans, they are often also subjected to domestic violence as a way to exercise control over their bodies and to “cure them of their deviation.”¹⁰⁶ These hate crimes are rarely monitored or prosecuted (Nketiah, 2019).

Moreover, anti-LGBT sentiment is strong and pervasive in Ghana. It is common for LGBT people to suffer attacks in their homes and communities. In a 2018 report on the lives of LGBT people *“No Chance but to Deny Who I Am,”* interviewees reported being beaten up, sexually assaulted, intimidated, arbitrarily arrested, blackmailed, or extorted because of their gender expressions, identities, and/or sexual orientations (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

Furthermore, although there is great variety within gender and sexual identities and relations in Ghana, this diversity is often erased by public discourse, which uses the acronym “LGBT” mainly to refer to (male) homosexuality while maintaining a strategic silence regarding trans people.¹⁰⁷

Undermining the rights and dignity of LGBT people in the public sphere is also common in Ghana. **Local and national government officials, along with traditional elders and senior religious leaders, routinely make public homophobic statements** (Butcher, 2018; McCabe, 2018). By calling for further criminalization through religious and sometimes pseudoscientific arguments, their rhetoric legitimizes homophobic and transphobic stigma and violence, curtailing the rights of LGBTI people in Ghana and endangering their lives (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

Also, even though slightly more progressive stances have been voiced from time to time, fear of social and political pushback quickly leads people to backtrack. For example, in 2017, President Nana Akufo-Addo said that the country needed to be more liberal and that change was inevitable (Moore, 2018), but “that the law criminalizing homosexuality in Ghana remained because he did not believe there was a ‘sufficiently strong coalition’ across public opinion calling for a change” (Butcher, 2018). Shortly after this moderate statement, which did not support LGBT rights directly, the president clarified that he opposed the decriminalization of homosexuality and described himself as a “politician deeply influenced by Christian values” (Moore, 2018).

Nana Akufo-Addo’s attitude is indicative of a tension at the core of Ghanaian law. Ghanaian law condemns sexual relations between men, but it is ambiguous about the criminalization of LGBT identities per se.¹⁰⁸ Also, the country is a signatory to international treaties that urge states to recognize LGBT rights (Atuguba, 2019). This tension and ambiguity are reflected in the statements of many politicians who, like Akufo-Addo, do not explicitly oppose LGBT rights, but do not support them either out of fear of the political fallout.

Despite this adverse climate for LGBT people, **anti-LGBT laws in Ghana are not as restrictive as in other African countries (see box below). This is in great part thanks to the Ghanaian Parliament, which has not approved harsher or more expansive laws against homosexuality** (interview with Otu, 2020).

106 Ghana’s “politics of sexuality is male-centered: there is a hypervisibility of gay men that renders women and trans people invisible” (interview with Otu, 2020). Because of this, queer women or lesbians are usually violently disciplined by family members and/or by their communities (interview with Andam, 2020). “Transgender men are also reportedly frequently victims of domestic violence and coerced marriage” (IAGCI, 2020).

107 “LG and B persons who are open about their sexual orientation, or who are known to be perceived to be LGBTI, are likely to face stigma, discrimination, violence and mistreatment from family members and the wider community which, by its nature and frequency, amounts to persecution. [...] There is limited information about the treatment of T and I persons but there is no indication that such groups are treated differently by societal actors than L, G and B persons” (IAGCI, 2020).

108 An explanation of the complexity of the law can be found in the Country Policy and Information Note on Ghana published by the Independent Advisory Group for the UK government: “The criminal code under section 104 criminalises consensual ‘unnatural carnal knowledge’ with somebody over 16. It is categorised as a misdemeanour, with a sentence of up to [three] years’ imprisonment. Non-consensual ‘unnatural carnal knowledge’ with a person over 16, i.e. rape, is punishable with a term of imprisonment ‘of not less than five and not more than [25] years’. The law does not explicitly refer to same-sex activity between men or women but ‘unnatural carnal knowledge’ is interpreted to apply to males only. However, some source[s] suggest because the law’s wording is vague it is not consistently interpreted and may be applied to and used to target women, and trans, and intersex persons too” (IAGCI, 2020). Also, “it is argued that Ghana’s criminal statute does not outlaw ‘homosexuality’ or ‘homosexual expression’ in general. Homosexuality could mean the mere sexual attraction to a person of the same gender, and not necessarily unnatural carnal knowledge or sodomy. This implies that a person who identifies as ‘gay,’ but does not engage in same-sex sexual relations would not be punished by Ghana’s criminal laws. Nevertheless, a heterosexual person who engages in ‘unnatural carnal knowledge’ commits an offence, although (s)he may not [be] homosexual” (Atuguba, 2019).

EXPORTING HOMOPHOBIA THROUGH THE SUPPORT OF “ANTI-GAY BILLS”

Like in other places around the world, gender-restrictive groups’ strategy in Africa has had a domino effect, from its start in Kenya, moving on to Uganda and Zambia, and then to Nigeria and Malawi (Kaoma, 2012).

Well-known international gender-restrictive groups as WCF, FWI, and the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) lobby English-speaking African countries to “take Christian views into consideration as they draft legislation and policies.” They recommend actions to further criminalize LGBT identities and relations while upholding the heterosexual and patriarchal family as the only legally recognized configuration of family (Sneed & Welsh, 2014).

Furthermore, through local representatives of large NGOs, gender-restrictive groups have infiltrated local politics to pass even more restrictive laws for LGBT people. For example, some bills seek the expansion of anti-LGBT legislation to include female same-sex relations, as was the case in Malawi in 2011, when the parliament amended the penal code to “provide that any female person who, in public or private, commits ‘any act of gross indecency with another female,’ shall be guilty of an offence and liable to a prison term of five years” (Kaoma, 2012).

Another more violent type of “anti-homosexuality bill” seeks to make existing penalties against homosexuality more severe. The first bill of this kind, commonly known as the “Kill the Gays Bill,” was introduced in Uganda’s Parliament and sought to harden existing penalties against homosexual relations to include the death penalty. Although the bill was ultimately rejected, it was reintroduced in 2012, 2014, and yet again in 2019 (AP, 2019).

Similar legislation to further criminalize homosexuality was passed in Burundi (2009), Malawi (2010), and Nigeria (2011) (Kaoma, 2012: 8), but the death penalty was not approved in any of these countries. As of 2018, same-sex relations were only illegal under penalty of death in northern Nigeria because of Sharia law (Amnesty International UK, 2018; Carroll, 2016).

III. THE MESSAGING STRATEGY: G.H.A.N.A. AGAINST THE “LGBT AGENDA”

During the “CSE controversy,” faith-based, gender-restrictive groups in Ghana used strategies common to other gender-restrictive groups around the world, such as the mobilization of anti-LGBT sentiment to sow moral panic and the framing of the CSE proposal as a Western neocolonial imposition. However, as is the case in other contexts, the groups in Ghana also tailored their messaging and strategies to the country’s history, culture, and concerns.

In particular, in 2019, faith-based, gender-restrictive groups used the WCF Regional Summit to both consolidate and expand their opposition to the CSE program, their anti-LGBT stance, and their political connections.

Traditional and social media were key to amplify the reach of gender-restrictive messages. Traditional media provided a powerful platform to the leaders of national faith-based, gender-restrictive groups and associated politicians, enhancing their profile and influence. Social media, particularly WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube, were used to spread a disinformation campaign that included fake news, videos, and links to FWI material (interview with Fuller, 2020).

Six ideas were key to generate the moral panic which ultimately led the government to rescind its CSE program:

- Using the term “LGBT agenda” (instead of “gender ideology”) to manufacture moral panic about a supposed plot hidden in the CSE program to sexually corrupt children.
- Pathologizing LGBT relations and identities.
- Presenting the human rights of LGBT people as a neocolonial imposition that contradicted Ghana’s culture and sovereignty.
- Presenting the CSE program as an initiative that would encourage children to have sex at an early age and “become gay.”
- Framing the CSE program as a form of satanism.
- Presenting the heterosexual, patriarchal family as the main institution for the protection of children and for economic development.

i) Using the Term “LGBT Agenda” to Manufacture Moral Panic

TAKEAWAYS

- Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups in Ghana do not use the term “gender ideology” partly because the term “gender” was already positioned to refer to a more conservative stance on women’s rights that was not perceived as threatening to the patriarchal order, and thus is not perceived to be related to LGBT rights.
- The use of “LGBT agenda” instead of “gender ideology” speaks of the adaptability of faith-based, gender-restrictive groups.

Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups rarely use the term “gender ideology” to mobilize people against LGBT rights in Ghana. There are two main reasons for this. First, by the time the term “gender ideology” was introduced in the country, the term “gender” was already well-positioned to refer to a more conservative stance on women’s rights that was not perceived as threatening to the patriarchal order.¹⁰⁹ Second, cisgender women’s movements in Ghana do not usually defend LGBT issues (interview with Otu, 2020) and some renowned leaders have even spoken publicly against CSE and LGBT rights (interview with Kuukuwa Andam, 2020).¹¹⁰

The use of “LGBT agenda” instead of “gender ideology” speaks to the adaptability of faith-based, gender-restrictive groups and their rhetoric. Furthermore, it also speaks about how their rhetoric builds on silos between women and LGBT organizations. Since anti-LGBT sentiment has more traction in Ghana than the uproar against the idea of gender as a social construct—as happened in Bulgaria, for example—faith-based, gender-restrictive groups mobilized the term “LGBT agenda” instead to cause moral panic and form a unified front against LGBT rights.

DIFFERENT WORDING, SAME STRATEGIES

Despite the change in terminology, faith-based, gender-restrictive groups used many of the same strategies employed in other contexts within the framework of opposition to “gender ideology.”

ii) Pathologizing LGBT Relations and Identities

TAKEAWAYS

- Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups in Ghana used discredited scientific language and concepts to frame LGBT relations and identities as deviations and disorders that can and need to be cured.
- These pseudoscientific arguments are used to delegitimize LGBT rights and to promote “conversion therapies.”
- Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups argue that so-called “conversion therapies” are holistic and corrective, not violent. However, these “therapies” are considered torture by the UN and their ineffectiveness and devastating consequences have been widely recognized by the medical and psychiatric community.
- The use of (discredited) scientific language and concepts allowed faith-based, gender-restrictive groups to frame their anti-LGBT arguments in a more positive light. By speaking of “care,” “support,” and “cure,” faith-based, gender-restrictive groups presented themselves as “helping” instead of attacking LGBT people and rights.

¹⁰⁹ The policies enacted by the Ministry for Gender, Children and Social Protection are a case in point. This office was founded in 2013 to achieve “gender equality, equity, the empowerment of women and girls, promoting the survival and development of children, thus ensuring their rights” (MoGCSP, 2020). However, its programs and initiatives uphold hetero- and cisnormative values (interview with Fuller, 2020; interview with Otu, 2020), its gender-based actions and strategies are not LGBT-inclusive, and it does not have and specific LGBT programs.

¹¹⁰ See, for example, the online campaign of “Ghana Diaspora Women” against CSE in [change.org: https://www.change.org/p/government-of-ghana-we-don-t-need-cse-in-ghana-education-curriculum?use_react=false](https://www.change.org/p/government-of-ghana-we-don-t-need-cse-in-ghana-education-curriculum?use_react=false)

One of the most effective messaging strategies of faith-based, gender-restrictive groups in Ghana was to frame LGBT relations and identities as “unnatural,” “deviant conduct,” and/or as “curable disorders.”¹¹¹

This framing draws from two main sources: the Criminal Code inherited from British rule, which legally condemns same-sex intercourse because it is regarded as “unnatural carnal knowledge”; and outdated medical and psychiatric concepts that did consider gender and sexual diversity pathologies.¹¹²

This approach, which appropriates and revitalizes discredited frameworks to refer to LGBT people as individuals suffering from regrettable yet curable disorders, allowed faith-based, gender-restrictive groups to present themselves as well-meaning actors offering “holistic sexual therapy systems” that include “a range of counselling methods and spiritual solutions” (Ghana Web, 2018; Marwei & Frempong, 2019) to “bring healing and comfort to Africans and other persons with LGBTQI disorders” (Nketiah, 2019).

This pseudoscientific narrative has been front and center for the NCPHSRFV since 2018, when they claimed to have voluntary anti-gay camps in the country and declared their intention to make these “treatments” mandatory (Dunne, 2018; McCabe, 2018). Religious and gender-restrictive leaders routinely ignore the fact that conversion therapy is a form of torture and falsely promote the idea that gender and sexual diversity is a “redeemable condition” (Sadi, 2018).

The use of discredited and misleading medical and psychiatric references to frame LGBT identities and relations further stigmatizes LGBT people in Ghana and puts them at risk by legitimizing “conversion therapies”—a form of torture—under the guise of medical or a spiritual “treatment.”

The NCPHSRFV has also used this argument to deny the existence of LGBT rights and discredit LGBT activism as foreign propaganda based on “false human rights issues.”

The following statements made by the Speaker of Parliament, Aaron Michael Oquaye, during a prayer breakfast associated with the WCF in 2019, demonstrate how influential these ideas have become in Ghana:

You cannot have a right as gay [sic] apart from the fact that you are also a human being; it is a deviant conduct, but of course, it does not mean they must be killed, or their hands must be amputated. We do not do any of [sic] such things here in Ghana. We try to handle our matter. Either we treat you medically if you say you have a problem with your genes or we handle it psychologically if it is a psychological issue. (Humanists International, 2019; Konadu Agyeman, 2019).

These arguments have devastating consequences for LGBTI people in Ghana. **However, the pseudoscientific framing allowed faith-based, gender-restrictive groups to speak a secular language that complements their religious narrative and positions their anti-LGBT rhetoric in a positive light.** By speaking of “care,” “support,” and “cure,” faith-based, gender-restrictive groups present themselves as “helping” instead of attacking LGBT people and rights—unlike other African countries with harsher laws and penalties—and give their supporters a positive sense of the movement and of themselves.

111 For example, Foh-Amoaning, spokesperson for the NCPHSRFV, said that “nobody was born gay and even if such a gene is found, it’s an abnormality just as the hermaphrodite gene and albinism, [which are] defective genes and several treatments have come out which can help rectify such conditions” (Class FM, 2019).

112 Homosexuality was considered a pathology in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) until 1973, and in the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD) of the World Health Organization until 1990. Gender dysphoria was considered a pathology in the ICD until 2018.

"PRAY THE GAY AWAY": FAITH-BASED, GENDER-RESTRICTIVE GROUPS PROPOSE "HOLISTIC CONVERSION THERAPIES" FOR LGBT PEOPLE INSPIRED BY "PRAYER CAMPS"

In a 2018 HRW report, some LGBT people said they were interned in "prayer camps" that were privately owned by Christian, Evangelical, or Pentecostal institutions. However, LGBT people are not the only ones these camps. They hold a wide array of individuals seeking "spiritual healing" for multiple "conditions," most of which are "mental health disorders" that are considered undesirable by their faith and community (Human Rights Watch, 2018, interview with Andam, 2020).

People who attend these camps are routinely chained and beaten. There have been appeals to the Ghanaian government to improve the living conditions of the people interned in these institutions, but despite a ban on chaining and efforts to train personnel, the abuse continues (HRW, 2019). In the case of LGBT people, the "treatment" these camps offer is a form of "conversion therapy," and thus torture (Fitzsimons, 2020).

These efforts are complemented by other religious initiatives. For example, in 2011, the Presbyterian Church announced plans to set up "prayer and exorcism counselling centers for gays around Ghana" (Throckmorton, 2012). In addition, faith-based, gender-restrictive groups commonly organize annual "festivals" that seek to "pray the gay away" from Ghana (McCabe, 2018).

*More recently, the NCPHSRFV claimed to have set up an anti-gay camp to "reform" gay people through counselling and medical and psychiatric treatment (Sadi, 2018). The shift to a more secular and pseudoscientific language was also critical for Foh-Amoaning, spokesperson of the NCPHSRFV, to present a project titled *A Comprehensive Solution Based Legislative Framework for Dealing with the Lesbianism Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Phenomenon*. Based on discredited scientific information, the project sought to institutionalize LGBT people so that they could undergo "treatment" (Dunne, 2018; Equal Eyes, 2018; Sadi, 2018). This attack on gender and sexual diversity was framed as an "Afrocentric response to Western European and LGBT groups, who were pushing this act onto African [countries]" (Equal Eyes, 2018).*

iii) Presenting the Human Rights of LGBT People as a Neocolonial Imposition Contrary to Ghana's Culture and Religious Traditions

TAKEAWAYS

- The idea of homosexuality as un-African is not new in Sub-Saharan Africa, but faith-based, gender-restrictive groups strategically and successfully deployed it to further stigmatize LGBT people and to oppose the implementation of the CSE program.
- This narrative presents the UN and other international NGOs, like IPPF and UNFPA, as leaders of a recolonization project that seeks to undermine Ghana's culture, religious traditions, and sovereignty.
- Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups often ignore the racist and white supremacist underpinnings of their international partners, as well as the fact that former colonial laws actually played a key role in the criminalization of homosexuality and the legitimization of homophobia in the first place.

Despite notable contradictions at the core of this argument, gender-restrictive politicians and religious leaders often claim that heterosexuality is a key component of Ghana's and Africa's cultural traditions. Therefore, they present the recognition and advancement of LGBT rights as part of a neocolonization project.¹¹³ By saying that homosexuality is a "Western import" and a mediatic trend "contrary to the religious and cultural backbone of the country" (Konadu Agyeman, 2019), faith-based, gender-restrictive groups promote the supposed "un-Africanness" of gender and sexual diversity, while reinforcing hetero- and cisnormativity.

Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups also frame homosexuality as contrary to "proper family values" (Otu, 2019), and as part of a wider plan to "depopulate the world" and exterminate African traditions. This framing has conspiracy undertones, as can be seen in Foh-Amoaning's 2018 statements: "[the] LGBT agenda" is the "deliberate propaganda hatched mainly by Europe and America to depopulate Africa and other rising populations, owing to their failure to sustain their population growth rates over the years" (Ghana News Agency, 2018). International organizations that support CSE, such as the UNFPA, the IPPF, the Planned Parenthood Association of Ghana (PPAG), and Family Health International (FHI), are consistently cited as some of the main actors in this supposed depopulation plot (Marwei & Frempong, 2019).

Moreover, during the WCF Summit in Accra, a Parliament member went so far as to compare the implementation of CSE to slavery, arguing that, as in the times of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Europeans wanted to "wreak havoc" in Ghana with the CSE program (Nketiah, 2019).

Finally, faith-based, gender-restrictive groups used the idea of a neocolonial attack on Africa to raise

Ghana's profile and influence in the region, positioning the country as the leader of a coalition of African nations that can coordinate a united response to the "LGBT agenda." Theresa Okafor, African regional representative of the WCF, used a new acronym to symbolize this role: "**God Has a New Africa**" or "**G.H.A.N.A.**" (Nketiah, 2019).

113 This idea has been further ingrained in the country as a reaction to the declarations of David Cameron in 2011 and Theresa May in 2018 regarding the criminalization of homosexuality in Africa. There are three main contradictions at the core of the neocolonial argument that faith-based, gender-restrictive groups strategically ignore:

- ➔ Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups, particularly the NCPHSRFV and FRI, work with the World Congress of Families, an international network that has "numerous links to Islamophobic, far-right, and white supremacist movements" (Nketiah, 2019; Open Democracy Investigations, 2019; Otu, 2019).
- ➔ There is indeed a link between colonization and LGBT criminalization, but not the one faith-based, gender-restrictive groups claim. The "laws criminalizing homosexuality come straight from the British Empire (though they were retained after independence)" (Nketiah, 2019). Activists and scholars say same-sex love was tolerated before the colonial era (Fröhlich, 2019): "Homophobia in Ghana is very colonial. Homophobia in Africa is not African, it is really the result of colonial Christianity. Before the introduction of colonization, Africans had fluid gender understandings. The introduction of colonization and Christianity disciplined Africans into embracing gender identity as limited to male/female and forced them to embrace monogamy as the only way to become civilized or modern" (interview with Otu 2020).
- ➔ Gender-restrictive groups use the fact that Ghanaian families traditionally have many children to create resentment against family planning. However, population growth has been publicly recognized as a problem for the country's economy (Ghana Education Service, n.d.). The National Population Council in Ghana even organized free family planning sessions and tried to limit the national birth rate to three children per household to slow down the current trend in population growth (Asiedu, 2020b).

iv) Presenting the CSE Program as an Initiative That Would Encourage Children to Have Sex at an Early Age and “Become Gay”

TAKEAWAYS

- Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups used false information and out-of-context quotes from the guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education to claim that CSE is harmful for children because:
 - It supposedly encourages young kids to engage in inappropriate sexual behavior.
 - It supposedly “legitimizes” LGBT identification,” implying that being LGBT is both caused by external factors and wrong.
- The NCPHSRFV also claimed that the CSE was the proof of the existence of an “LGBT agenda” against Ghanaian children. His declarations show that by using the term “LGBT agenda,” interfaith, gender-restrictive groups instrumentalized children to produce a moral panic to further curtail children’s, women’s, and LGBT rights.

One of the more popular and effective narratives promulgated by faith-based, gender-restrictive groups is that CSE harms children by supposedly teaching age-inappropriate sexual content, and/or by “facilitating recruitment to unnatural practices.” Presenting children as supposed victims of sexual harm unleashes moral panic, which lends itself easily to political manipulation.

In Ghana, faith-based, gender-restrictive groups used decontextualized quotes from the guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education to make two main false claims:

- That the guidelines had a module for preschoolers was proof there was a plan to teach young children about sexual acts and promote inappropriate sexual behavior (ModernGhana, 2019).
- That the modules on gender stereotypes and norms, and the emphasis on children and adolescents getting to “know themselves,” was coded language for promoting LGBT identification (Otu, 2019; Sekyiamah, 2019).

Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups shared these false narratives through disinformation in social and traditional media. They spread fake news claiming that young children were going to be exposed to sexually explicit material and activities, which were allegedly part of the CSE curriculum (GhanaWeb, 2019).

The “CSE controversy” effectively halted the implementation of comprehensive sexual education in Ghanaian schools. It thus discarded the mandate to provide age-appropriate and accurate information to children and adolescents so they can make informed and autonomous decisions regarding their sexual health and exercise their sexual and reproductive rights.

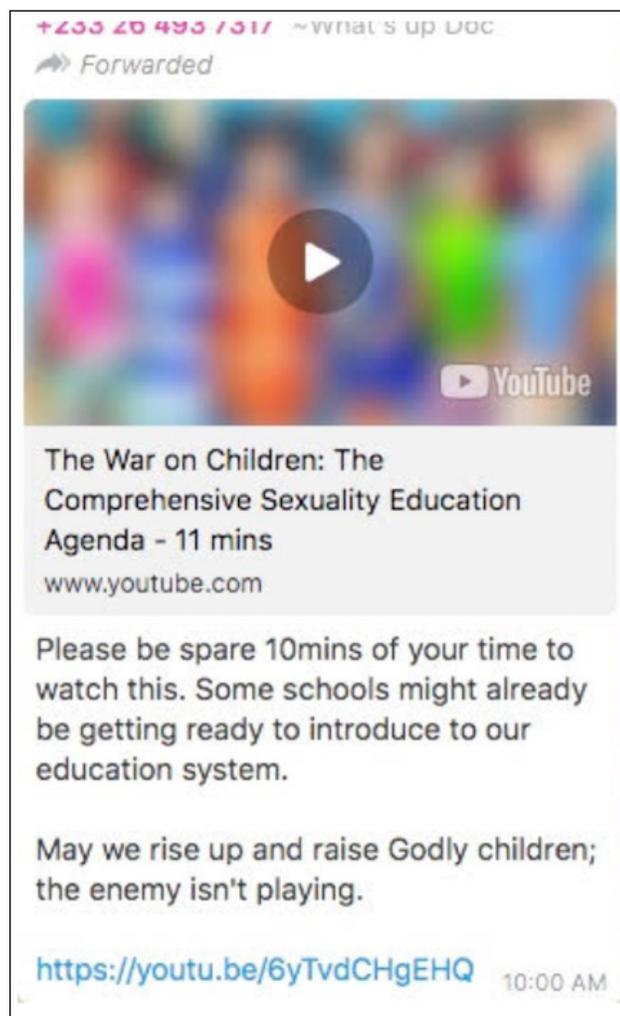
There are other sexuality education programs in the country, but they are not nationally enforced. Also, these programs do not address gender and sexual diversity, which is particularly devastating for LGBT children and adolescents, who are often bullied and harassed by school administrators (Atuguba, 2019).

Finally, “the general approach [to sexuality education] is still fear-based and abstinence-focused” (Awusabo-Asare et al. 2017).

For example, some WhatsApp publications had links to Sharon Slater’s documentary *War on Children*, which warns about these supposed dangers of CSE (interview with Fuller, 2020). Other materials used half-truths using decontextualized quotes from the CSE guidelines to suggest that acquiring “accurate information on sexual rights and reproductive health” was actually a source of sexual perversion promoted by “foreign entities” (Ghana News, 2019). Similarly, there was a petition against CSE on the Protect Children-Kenya website arguing that CSE would violate the “prior”

right of parents to educate their children (FWI, 2019; see examples below).

Paradoxically, the NCPHSRFV acknowledges the need for a sexual education program in the country, but argues religious institutions should be in charge of providing it. ¹¹⁴ Foh-Amoaning, spokesperson for the coalition, said in October 2019 that it was time “to engage in broad consultation with faith-based organizations, parents, and teacher unions in the development of a new holistic, vibrant, indigenous Ghanaian curriculum that would be anchored [in] the cultural values of Ghanaians” (Markwei & Frempong, 2019). In this curriculum, abstinence is presented as the only way of preserving sexual and reproductive health for teenagers.



Messages Spread Through WhatsApp (Fuller, 2020).

¹¹⁴ The NCPHSRFV offers a sexual evangelism program through their website that seems more concerned with spreading disinformation about sexual and gender diversity than with actual reproductive sexual health. The program aims at “disabusing young people’s minds from the unnatural vices of homosexuality” by giving “up-to-date” information on LGBT issues, training institutional personnel and other stakeholders (parents, teachers, ministers, etc.) in order to “[help] raise the moral fibers that prevent these vices,” and providing “assistance, Love and Spiritual care to students and youth engaged in Homosexual and other unnatural sexual relationships” (NCPHSRFV, n.d.).

Protect Ghana Children Petition



We, as concerned citizens including parents, grandparents, teachers, doctors, counselors, youth, and business, religious, and civil society leaders, hereby petition our Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, our Parliament, and our Prime Minister to take the following urgent actions:

1. **Withdraw from the deceptive Ministerial Commitment on Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)** that committed Ghana’s schools to teach highly controversial and harmful CSE programs to children in 75 percent of Ghana’s schools. This commitment was signed without proper consultation with parliament, parents or religious leaders. Every Ghanaian parent has the “prior right” to direct the education of their children (see UDHR Article 26.3), and this ministerial commitment violates this critical right.
2. **End any and all agreements, plans, or projects with UN agencies, foreign governments or foreign-funded NGOs to implement CSE programs**, including those which normalize extramarital sexual conduct, especially between children of minor age (whether heterosexual or homosexual), or that include graphic or pornographic materials, that teach children they have “sexual rights” or how to “consent” to sexual acts, or that teach unscientific gender identity theories (i.e., claiming genders or sexes exist other than male or female or that sex is fluid and can be changed).
3. **Conduct a comprehensive review of sex and sexuality education programs in Ghanaian public schools, universities, and teacher training initiatives**, including those being implemented under the guise of sexual or reproductive health education or preventing HIV, pregnancy, sexual abuse, violence, using formal, non-formal, or peer-to-peer modalities, both inside and outside of schools, and remove all those that contain any of the common 15 harmful CSE elements.

We warn that these ineffective and highly controversial CSE programs pushed by foreign entities are harming Ghana’s children and must be stopped immediately! (See failure rates at SexEdReport.org)

Petition Against CSE Hosted by the Protect Children in Kenya Coalition Shown on the StopCSE website (FWI, 2019).

v) Framing the CSE Program as a Form of Satanism

TAKEAWAYS

- Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups presented CSE as part of a “demonic,” “satanic,” and “malignant” plan.
- Framing CSE as part of a “satanic” plan allowed faith-based, gender-restrictive groups to position themselves at the center of a crusade against evil, as well as saviors of children and of Ghanaian religion, culture, and values.
- Equating CSE with an “LGBT agenda”—and conflating the “LGBT agenda” with a “satanic agenda”—also allowed faith-based, gender-restrictive groups to portray CSE, and the advancement of LGBT rights more broadly, not only as a “war on children,” but also as a “war on religion.”

The NCPHSRFV and other religious leaders presented the CSE program as proof of a “satanic agenda,” and as a site of “malignancy” contrary to the “good Christian faith” and to Islamic jurisprudence (starrfm.com.gh, 2019). Some religious leaders like Paul Yaw Frimpong-Manso, the president of the Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Council (GPCC), went as far as calling the program “Comprehensive Satanic Engagement” (Otu, 2019).

This language resonates deeply across denominations, bolstering interfaith alliances between different religions and denominations.

For example, during the WCF, Foh-Amoaning, leader of the NCPHSRFV, asked for support so that what he called the “Holy Trinity of Christian, Muslim and Traditionalist leaders in Ghana [could] fight Comprehensive Sexuality Education” (Nketiah, 2019).

Also, equating CSE with an “LGBT agenda”—and conflating the “LGBT Agenda” with a “satanic agenda”—allowed faith-based, gender-restrictive groups to portray CSE, and the advancement of LGBT rights more broadly, not only as a “war on children,” but also a “war on religion” to which they are poised to react collectively.

By literally demonizing gender and sexual diversity, faith-based, gender-restrictive groups leveraged the strong anti-LGBT sentiments in the country to successfully portray themselves as the only possible saviors of Ghanaian children, religions, culture, and society.

vi) Presenting the Heterosexual, Patriarchal Family as the Main Institution for the Protection of Children and Economic Development

TAKEAWAYS

- Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups have been promoting the idea of the heterosexual, patriarchal family as an African institution at least since the 1960s.
- Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups used the WCF Regional Summit in Accra to amplify their messaging about the heterosexual, patriarchal family as the only socially and legally viable family configuration, despite the increasing diversity of actual Ghanaian families.
- The 2019 WCF Regional Summit that took place in Accra identified an additional role for the heterosexual, patriarchal family: its supposed relation to national economic development.

The Christian Council of Ghana (CCG) has been trying to position the heterosexual, patriarchal family as the only socially and morally acceptable configuration of family since at least 1961. That year, the CCG established the Committee on Christian Marriage and Family Life (CCMFL) to achieve two main objectives:

1. “to promote positive Christian teaching on sex, marriage, and family life” (Otu, 2019), and
2. to introduce Ghanaian youth to “proper sexual behaviors” (Otu, 2019), which is coded language for heterosexuality and abstinence.

More recently, faith-based, gender-restrictive organizations in Ghana have worked towards this gender-restrictive ideal through alliances with international missionaries, regional religious leaders, local politicians, and even some women’s rights activists.

The speakers at the WCF in 2019 built on these efforts. Catherine Onwiodukoit, pastor and founder of FRI reinforced the idea of the patriarchal, heterosexual family as stemming directly from God (Noshie, 2019) and Brian Brown, president of the WCF, said that other kinds of families are “a denial of who we are as human beings” (Sekyiamah, 2019). None of these speakers acknowledged the actual diversity of Ghanaian families (Andams, 2020).¹¹⁵

115 Ghana has a broad range of family structures and kinship arrangements, which include extended and polygamous configurations, and women-led and same-sex families (Kuukuwa

The idea of the heterosexual, patriarchal family as society's main moral bulwark, and as essential to the continuation of the human species through sanctified heterosexual intercourse, is not new. However, **the 2019 WCF Regional Summit that took place in Accra identified a new role for this configuration of the family: its supposed relation to national economic development.** This message was aptly captured in the summit's title: "The African Family and Sustainable Development: Strong Families, Strong Nation." Despite the use of the plural for "families," this rhetoric allows for only one model of family: the heterosexual, patriarchal one, which is then presented as the key to a prosperous Ghana (Nketiah, 2019; Noshie, 2019).

IV. CONCLUSION

The Ghanaian case is illustrative of the ways in which faith-based, gender-restrictive groups instrumentalize children to curtail gender justice and human rights, in particular those of LGBT people.

This instrumentalization feeds on and fuels entrenched anti-LGBT and anticolonial sentiments. It also leverages colonial-era laws that criminalize (male) homosexuality to legitimize an aggressive anti-LGBT stance, promoting disinformation about gender and sexual diversity through religious discourse and discredited medical and psychiatric concepts.

The 2019 WCF Regional Summit in Accra was a pivotal moment for faith-based, gender-restrictive groups to amplify their messages against the CSE program; strengthen their local, regional, and international networks; and showcase their cultural influence and political muscle.

The CSE scandal in Ghana is a case in point of how the "Christianization of society" and the public role of faith-based organizations are shifting the political landscape in the country towards increasingly gender-restrictive views that pose a serious threat to children, women, and LGBT people.

Faith-based, gender-restrictive groups with political ties have yet to be successful in further criminalizing male homosexuality and other LGBT relationships and identities in Ghana. However, their messaging has been highly effective in making pro-LGBT initiatives a politically toxic issue, stigmatizing LGBTI people even more, and condoning or explicitly promoting physical, sexual, and psychological violence against them.

Andam, 2020; interview with Otu, 2020; Sekyiamah, 2019). Civil society organizations, such as the Coalition for African Family Values of Love, Unity and Tolerance, claim that "African traditions" encourage people "to live peacefully together as a family" and to "accord privacy to issues of sexuality" (Open Democracy Investigations, 2019), which implies that African families and values are "based [...] on love and compassion" (Open Democracy Investigations, 2019; Samanga, 2019).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations in this report are organized into two categories: **How to Fund** and **What to Fund**. In the first category, we offer recommendations regarding fund allocation processes and structures. In the second category, we suggest specific areas for intervention. It is important to note that in order to fully leverage the changemaking potential of their grantmaking craft, funders, philanthropic networks, and other members of the progressive ecosystem should try **to engage with both sets of recommendations simultaneously** as much as possible.

By pointing out these general differences we do not imply that gender justice and other progressive funders should emulate these strategies uncritically, or that some or all of them are not already part of the grantmaking craft. Our hope is to provide a tool for a comparative analysis to continue to defend and advance women's, children's and LGBT rights.

HOW TO FUND

George Lakoff argues that the success gender-restrictive groups have had in expanding their influence and mainstreaming their worldview is not only due to the amount of funding they get, but, more significantly, to how they are funded. It is not only a numbers game (although of course funding is important). It is a matter of how the money is allocated, for what purposes, through which processes, with what requirements, and for how long.

The strategies and mechanisms gender-restrictive funders use and the worldview that informs their decision-making process are different from those of most gender-justice and other progressive funders (Lakoff, 2004).

The following chart summarizes the main differences between funding approaches, strategies and rationale that Lakoff outlines, as well as our own findings in this study.

Aspect	How Gender-Restrictive Organizations tend to Fund	How Gender Justice and Other Progressive Organizations tend to Fund
Time-frame	Long-term (40-50 years)	Short-term projects (1-5 years)
Funding Mechanisms	Block grants, endowments, trust funds	Project-based grants, capacity building, service procurement
Distribution of Funds	Duplication as a worldmaking strategy. Allows for several organizations to be working on the same thing at the same time; reinforces key messages in different contexts and through different media; contributes to long-term development of the gender-restrictive organizational ecosystem	Duplication as wasteful. Organizations must differentiate themselves from others; spreads money thinly, narrowing scope and diminishing impact of work; may promote competition instead of collaboration
Funding Constraints	Few constraints. Freedom to decide how to spend the money; encourages risk-taking and provides rapid response capabilities, flexibility and adaptability	Project-based, deliverable-driven and impact-evaluation-contingent. Cumbersome reporting procedures to donors; little flexibility, stymies creativity because it has little room for failure
Use of the Funds	Worldmaking strategies. Career development, cohorts of policymakers and analysts, media organizations, funding scholars to conceptualize and frame key issues	Reactive strategies. Expenses and personnel tied to specific projects and service provision programs, narrow set of deliverables
Issues Funded	Interconnected, worldmaking issues. Broad campaigns and slogans (e.g., "gender ideology") that simultaneously engage with all or several issues considered key for their gender-restrictive worldview, including women's, children's and LGBT rights, as well as anti-democracy efforts and environmental deregulation	Specialized and targeted funding that creates silos and makes cross-issue, cross-sectoral, transnational, and intersectional collaboration difficult

Crafting a More Diverse, Risk Tolerant, and Flexible Funding Ecosystem

In order to shift from a reactive funding approach to a worldmaking one regarding women's, children's and LGBT rights, progressive funders should:

- **Ensure grantees have access to long-term unrestricted funding.** If you are unable to support this type of funding directly, work with grantees to identify who else is funding grantees and work with other funders to identify which specific gaps you might be able to fill with restricted funding (such as funding advocacy and narrative framing capacity building, wellbeing and security etc.)
 - Cultivate a **diverse ecosystem of funding opportunities** for your grantees. Including direct,

project, general operating and core support to create stable projects.

- Fund **more flexibly** to allow grantees to adapt to the changing, malleable tactics of gender-restrictive groups. Provide more unrestricted support to allow grantees to react.
- Actively and repeatedly **communicate to grantees working in this space that you understand and acknowledge the long-term nature of this work** and that change will likely be incremental.
 - Remain accessible to grantee partners and actively harvest non-monetary foundation support and communicate scope of commitment clearly and honestly.

- Work with partners to develop **alternative mechanisms to measure and/or understand the impact** along the way of long-term cultural change.
- Consider expanding funding **beyond individual organizations and key actors** to consider funding cohorts, networks, collective impact, etc. at the national and local levels.
 - Resource the ecosystem- work with other funders to ensure a robust and diverse civil society (cohorts, networks, collectives) at national and regional levels.
- Ensure **diversity of actors/voices** in these models and set expectations that the backbone of organizations will prioritize inclusivity and practices that prevent gatekeeping.
 - When funding feminist and/or women’s organizations do due diligence work to ensure they are not trans-exclusionary.
- Be conscious of **limiting donor influence**, agenda-setting, and credit-taking considering the neocolonial sensitivities in the gender-restrictive narrative.
 - Actively work to decolonize your grantee / foundation relationships within the parameters of the existing model.

Leadership for Coordinated Collaboration

Additionally, funders should consider **investing resources in leadership and coordinated collaboration** to maximize the conditions for cooperation, coordination, co-learning, and identification of action steps,

- Identify and begin to build **cross-issue, cross-national, and intersectional alliances** with key groups in the development and humanitarian sector who don’t necessarily see themselves as rights-based.
 - If their language isn’t rights-based, you could use resources like this report to identify aspects or concerns that would resonate to open communication channels.
 - If you don’t know who those actors are in the context in which you work, map them (ideally in partnership with other funders).

- **Identify potential pathways for collaboration within your own foundation**, whether that’s between geographic and issue-focused teams or across different issue-focused teams whose key populations are affected. Collaboration could span from ensuring these other teams are aware of this issue/research and sharing how it is affecting grantees to more intentional co-funding.
 - Fund to the edge of your grantmaking mandate.
 - Join funding collaboratives and co-funding tables to reduce risk, increase opportunity for shared learning and increase impact.
 - Build intra team initiatives at your foundation to strengthen institutional knowledge and strategic confidence.
 - Encourage thematic teams in foundations to work with the geographic teams in co funding and learning/knowledge development.
- When opportunities for collaboration with other funders emerge, make sure you know and are being **clear about what comparative advantage/ strength you bring to the table** and what you are and are not able to do/tolerate in terms of risk.
 - Leverage your institution’s strengths and know the limits to risk tolerance and mandate when entering partnerships and co funding agreements.
 - **Identify your organization’s tolerance for taking risk and committing to long-term funding** of an issue that may be perceived as “too risky.” Where are the hard lines and where are the opportunities to nudge towards the edge? If possible, do so in partnership with other teams internally, working to create an internal “advocacy” strategy that supports shifts towards the type of funding and strategy that will help move the needle.

WHAT TO FUND

A GUIDE TO HOPE-BASED COMMUNICATIONS

- *Talk about solutions, not problems*
- *Highlight what we stand for, not what we oppose*
- *Create opportunities, drop threats*
- *Emphasize support for heroes, not pity for victims*
- *Show that “we got this”!*

Source: [“Open Global Rights”](#)

Narrative Change, Framing, Worldmaking Strategies, and Creative Communications

Commit to and invest in **long-term work towards cultural shift and narrative change**.

- Support the creation and dissemination of **alternative, all-encompassing narratives** that creatively frame human rights values, take into consideration local histories and values, remain sensitive to the root causes of the anxieties and resistance mobilized by gender-restrictive groups, and reclaim the language of human rights and family values.
 - Emphasize and highlight **opportunities, solutions, heroes, and creative work** around key issues, not (only) problems or what gender justice or human rights advocates are reacting against.
 - Work with partners to **rethink the visual language and narrative** of human rights. Include storytelling, art, imagery, play, and interactivity in the communication process.
 - “Humanize the data.” Support work to **frame scientific research and evidence** in a way that connects with, and is meaningful and easy to understand for **the “movable middle”** in order to maximize its impact.
 - Amplify and distribute **narratives that do not equate religiosity with gender normativity**.
 - Work with partners to shift communication strategies to change perceptions that consider

human rights, whether children’s, women’s or LGBTI, as a very professionalized area that people don’t understand.

- Fund the creation of an ecosystem that allows the **collaborative creation of resources** that both acknowledge and address the damage done by disinformation campaigns about women’s, children’s, and LGBT rights.
 - Support the creation of **open-source resources** for everyone to use and adapt.
 - Focus on creating **targeted, youth-centered messaging** that presents an affirming and positive view of gender justice and human rights.
 - Consider funding **cross-sectoral problem definition and messaging workshops** with movement leaders and communications professionals.
- Support initiatives that aim to maintain the pace of **increasing communications training** and capacity development at the national level in **key/contested countries**.
 - Identify and fund **investigative journalism** with the intent of bringing visibility both to the issue and the actors. In particular, consider journalists and organizations who adopt creative, effective approaches to the format and distribution of these stories.
 - Fund a robust, diverse journalistic and documentation ecosystem that is disruptive, innovative and promises broad distribution.

Support Collaboration between Diverse Stakeholders and Frontline Organizations

- In collaboration with other funders, create space and fund **diverse groups of actors within key countries (and across key countries) to come together** to build alliances, learn from each other, and identify opportunities and who is doing what.
 - Do ensure these spaces are not donor-driven or designed around donor agendas.
 - Do ensure youth and communities are supported to participate authentically.
 - Support training and convenings to strengthen movement cohesion, cross regional learning and cohort leadership development.
 - Support training and convenings to strengthen

movement cohesion, cross regional learning and cohort leadership development.

- Prioritize working and engaging with **local governments and institutions**. Do not always—or exclusively—engage at the national level.
 - Support efforts to **monitor the particular political and economic situations in each country or region**, and consider providing resources to define country-specific strategies that involve local stakeholders, and funding initiatives beyond children’s, women’s, or LGBT rights.
 - Provide grantees with funds to **access communities and advocacy training** and capacity building at the local level. If possible, do so with cohorts of grantees and with other funders working in the same country.
- Prioritize working and engaging with youth. Partner with existing participatory funds who are already experienced and well-practiced in resourcing and **engaging youth** (including girls and LGBTI youth) authentically.
 - Ensure they are aware of this issue/research.
 - Generate strategies for youth participation and community participation where the needs of women and LGBTI people emerge organically, as opposed to importing international curricula, discourses, or best practices.
 - Bring children and LGBTI people into philanthropic spaces as advisors, contributors and participants.
 - Support work at the school level to articulate CSE and progressive values more deeply into the classrooms and in such a way that it acknowledges the cultural diversity and contextual differences.
- Provide grantees with resources to identify and **amplify the voices of local, regional, and international churches, religious leaders, and interfaith organizations** that uphold their faith while affirming LGBT, women’s, and children’s rights and rejecting gender-restrictive agendas.
- Do ensure that grantees are supporting **trans-inclusive feminist work**.
- **Make any financial support for security (personal, infrastructure, physical, etc.) explicit and accessible** in grant agreement letters, reporting requirements, and other formal structures.
- Partner with existing organizations to **devise participation mechanisms to communicate and**

negotiate with the general population when progressive initiatives and policies, such as CSE, are being discussed.

Promote Shifts in Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes in Progressive Organizations

- If you are going to provide capacity building and training to support grantees working in gender justice and human rights, consider whether you are able and willing to **support grantees in identifying their own priorities and consultants they would like to engage**.
- **Cultivate a culture of learning**; fund actionable research that does not duplicate existing efforts.
 - As much as possible, try to fund the consolidation/synthesis/analysis of existing research on related issues (effective approaches to public mobilization, narrative-framing, etc.) before commissioning new research.
 - Consider whether the existing evidence base already adequately captures the work of activists, youth leaders, and truly community-led organizations.
 - Support efforts to monitor political and economic situations in each country or region that can help in the definition of country-specific strategies that involve the collaboration with local stakeholders.
 - Consider funding local or regional data monitoring centers and initiatives.
- Commission a **mapping of non-rights based (potentially humanitarian) development and foundations who fund children** to identify key potential partnership and/or leverage opportunities and actively engage in non-rights-based donor spaces.
 - Share resources, build learning tables and produce accessible materials to build authentic relationships.
- As much as possible, consider funding research to understand **concrete grant craft** for these issues: skills, tools, approaches, models, innovations, and lessons learned from previous projects.

ANNEX:

KEY GENDER-RESTRICTIVE PLAYERS

I. KEY GENDER-RESTRICTIVE PLAYERS: PERÚ

TYPE OF ACTOR	EXAMPLES IN THE COUNTRY
Religious Groups	<p>Organizations or individuals that appear in other case studies will be preceded by an *.</p> <p><u>The Peruvian Catholic Church</u>. In 2018, the Peruvian Catholic hierarchy included five bishops who were Opus Dei members (including Lima’s Archbishop, Juan Luis C</p>
Local Civil Society Organizations	<p><u>Parents in Action [Padres en Acción (PEA)]</u>. The organization that started a judicial process against the national curriculum’s ratification in 2017. They claim to be a nonpolitical and nonreligious small group of parents who simply want to have a say in their children’s education.</p> <p><u>National Coordination for the Family [Coordinadora Nacional Pro Familia (CONAPFAM)]</u>. Founded in 2011 by Pastor Christian Rosas, son of ex-congressman Julio Rosas, this group is a leading voice in the DMWMK movement.</p> <p><u>Center for the Promotion of the Family and Natural Recognition of Fertility [Centro de Promoción Familiar y Reconocimiento Natural de la Fertilidad (CEPROFARENA)]</u>. Organization that focuses on children and youth. It supports the “reproductive nature of sex” and abstinence-based sexual education while opposing sexual health and reproductive rights. With campaigns such as “Spiritual adoption of an unborn child,” teenage girls are encouraged to “adopt” and “care” for an embryo until its virtual birth. “Through campaigns like this one, gender-restrictive groups promote their ideas against reproductive rights in girls and teenagers” (Promsex, 2007: 15).</p> <p><u>Let’s Save the Family [Salvemos a la Familia]</u>. Founded in 2005 by Guillermo and Milagros Aguayo, pastors of Casa del Padre, an Evangelical church. Its stated mission is the “[recovery] and [maintenance of] the validity of the family, the only entity that has been the pillar for sustaining healthy societies.” Its Facebook group has over 43,000 followers.</p> <p><u>National Lawyer Network for the Defense of Family [Red Nacional para la Defensa de la Familia (RENAFAM)]</u>. Nonprofit organization with a Facebook page that states they are “made up of professionals with values and principles who seek to defend the family as a natural institution and life since conception” (RENAFAM, n.d.). Led by Alejandro Muñante, they have almost 8,000 followers.</p> <p><u>Family Matters [La Familia Importa (AFI)]</u>. Facebook group that defines itself as a “collective of specialists and parents who came together so that children’s rights are not violated.” Has over 30,000 followers.</p>

International Gender-Restrictive Groups or Individuals

- Population Research Institute. U.S.-based organization present in over 80 countries (headquarters in Virginia). It has its Latin American office in Lima. It opposes abortion and birth control, and lobbies against pro-rights groups and their funders (Example: “Defund Planned Parenthood”). Directed by Polo Samaniego in Peru.
- *CITIZENGO. Worldwide Catholic organization that protested the new curriculum in Peru. Defines itself as a “community of active citizens that seek to promote societal participation in politics.”
- Christian Center for Public Life. Nonprofit Christian organization based in Washington, DC. Dedicated to “[providing] high-level training to leaders with sound values who actively participate in Latin America’s public life.” Mentioned by Christian Rosas as allies in their lobbying efforts in the UN and other international organizations.
- *Family Watch International (FWI). Founded in the United States in 1999. Directed by Sharon Slater. “Works with communities around the world educating and affecting policies and programs that will strengthen the family, serve the interest of children, and provide the best outcome for women and men.” Mentioned by Christian Rosas as allies in their lobbying efforts in the UN and other international organizations.
- Family Research Council. “Pro Marriage” and “Pro Life” organization based in Washington, DC. Founded in 1983. Mentioned by Christian Rosas as allies in their lobbying efforts in the UN and other international organizations.
- Human Life International. U.S.-based Catholic anti-abortion organization.
- Opus Dei. Conservative Catholic institution founded in 1928 and with presence all around the world.
- Missionary World Movement [Movimiento Misionero Mundial] (MMM). Christian church that originated in 1983 in Puerto Rico. It has a presence in 52 countries and is led in Peru by Reverend Rodolfo González Cruz, a Cuban pastor who was naturalized in Peru and owns Bethel TV, a network that broadcasts the rallies of the DMWMK movement. The church “blessed” Keiko Fujimori when she was running for president and González Cruz is known for remarks such as, “If you find two women having sex, kill them both” (*Redacción El Comercio*, 2017b). Rodolfo González Cruz, the Church’s pastor in Peru, manages a network of 164 churches, 133 properties, 21 schools, a publishing house, and a radio and television network. He was investigated in 2017 for instigating violence against LGBT people and money laundering (*Ojo Público*, 2020).
- Ibero-American Congress for Life and Family [Congreso Iberoamericano por la Vida y la Familia]. Group of Evangelical pastors, politicians, and lawmakers that has been active since 2017. They are seeking to become an articulated movement of Evangelicals in Latin America in order to lobby for a gender-restrictive agenda in international organizations (OEA, UN, WHO, IMF, UNESCO). It has a very aggressive discourse against international law, multilateral organizations, and the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals.

Political Representatives and Parties

- Popular Force [Fuerza Popular]. Right-wing party led by Keiko Fujimori.
- Keiko Fujimori. Former presidential candidate (2011, 2016), leader of Fuerza Popular, and daughter of former president Alberto Fujimori. Fortified the alliance between the party and the religious sector (Bazán, 2018). Through a pact with Evangelical pastor Alberto Santana, she publicly stated that if she were elected president, she would honor the following agenda: 1) assume the defense of the concept of family as constituted by a man and a woman, 2) reject same-sex civil unions, as well as equal marriage and adoption; and 3) defend the “life of the unborn” (*Redacción El Comercio*, 2016).
- Alliance for Progress [Alianza para el Progreso]. Center-right political party. Representatives of the party signed the Compromise for Peru.
- Julio and Cristian Rosas. Evangelical pastors from Alianza Cristiana y Misionera. Julio, Cristian’s father, has been a congressman since 2011 and was the main voice of the DMWMK movement. Christian, who was trained in international law and politics at the Virginia-based Evangelical Liberty University, frequently tours Latin America. As a result, the movement has extended to countries such as Bolivia, Argentina, Ecuador, Colombia, and Mexico (Rousseau, 2020).
- American Revolutionary Popular Alliance [Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (APRA)]. Social Democratic party founded in Mexico in 1924. Alan García’s political party. Representatives of the party signed the Compromise for Peru.
- The Christian People’s Party [Partido Popular Cristiano (PPC)]. Conservative party based on the principles of Christian democracy. Founded in 1966, it became part of a coalition with APRA in 2016. It did not hold any seats in Congress between 2016 and 2021. Representatives of the party signed the Compromise for Peru.
- National Solidarity [Solidaridad Nacional]. Representatives of the party signed the Compromise for Peru.
- National Restoration [Restauración Nacional]. Representatives of the party signed the Compromise for Peru.
- Order [Orden]. Representatives of the party signed the Compromise for Peru.
- Union for Peru [Unión por el Perú]. Representatives of the party signed the Compromise for Peru.

Conservative Media Outlets

- Aciprensa. Catholic news agency based in Lima disseminating information on “the Catholic Doctrine, news about the Catholic Church, and current issues from a Catholic point of view.”
- Bethel TV, YouTube, and Radio. Peruvian open-source Evangelical communications network. Calls itself “the channel that unites us for the family.” Owned by MMM.
- Evangélico Digital. Online Evangelical media outlet based in Spain.
- Agustín Laje. Argentinian “influencer.” Author of *The Black Book of the New Left* and YouTube creator with thousands of followers.

Secular Researchers

- Beatriz Mejía Mori. Lawyer. President of the Educa Bien Institute.
- Kelly Gamboa and Nelly Izaguirre. Psychologists from La Reina clinic, where they perform so-called conversion therapy to “cure” people of homosexuality. The UN has said that these practices amount to torture and should be banned.

II. KEY GENDER-RESTRICTIVE PLAYERS: BULGARIA

TYPE OF ACTOR	EXAMPLES IN THE COUNTRY
Religious Groups	<p style="text-align: center;">Organizations or individuals that appear in other case studies will be preceded by an *.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <u>Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Christian Orthodox Church</u>. Group of bishops that comprises the highest clerical, judicial, and administrative authority in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Initially backed the IC, then turned against it, urging lawmakers not to ratify it. - <u>Bulgarian Grand Mufti of the Muslim Denomination</u>. Head of Islamic jurists who is qualified to issue nonbinding opinions on matters of Islamic law. The Office was created in 1878 after the Treaty of Berlin guaranteed freedom of thought and religion for Muslims in Bulgaria. The current Bulgarian Grand Mufti is Mustafa Hadzhi. The Office officially rejected the IC because of its use of the term “gender.” - <u>Bulgarian Evangelical Alliance</u>. Nonprofit organization that coordinates the relations between Evangelical churches in Bulgaria, “[working] to promote Christian values and regulate the relations between the Evangelical churches, and the Evangelical churches with society and the state.” Successor to the <u>United Evangelical Churches Association</u> (OEC, according to the initials in Bulgarian), founded in 1909 and terminated by repressive measures in 1949. All members of the OEC executive committee were convicted and served severe sentences in prisons and concentration camps.
Local Civil Society Organizations and Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <u>Society and Values Association (SVA)</u> [Асоциация общество и ценности]. According to their webpage, they are a group of “like-minded citizens actively protecting human dignity and freedom, marriage, and family since 2007.” Led by Mihaeela Djorgova and her husband, Alexander Djorgov. In addition to the policies mentioned in this case study, in the last 10 years, the SVA has been responsible for rescinding the right to cohabitation from the Family Code draft, blocking compulsory preschool education from the age of four, and preventing surrogate motherhood (National Network for the Children, 2019b). - <u>Association of Parents United for Children (ROD)</u>. Founded to represent “parental rights” as a response to the National Strategy of the Child 2019-2030. Aims to “protect the traditional Bulgarian family.” Their leadership team comprises well-known lawyers, including Vladimir Sheytanov, former member of the Strategic Council of President Rumen Radev; Petar Nikolov, who handles cases of children who have been “institutionalized”; and Dinko Valev, from Yambol and part of the Bulgarian Legal Committee for the Protection of Citizens by Legal Means (National Network for the Children, 2019b). - <u>Freedom for All</u>. Partners with ROD. They present themselves as a group of professionals defending the Christian faith and the traditional family in the public arena. Since 2004, the group has participated in court cases and public debates “protecting basic human rights, such as the right of freedom of thought, religion, and speech, and the traditional family.” Viktor Kostov and Nevesta Stefanova work for Freedom for All and argue cases before the European Court of Human Rights.

International Gender-Restrictive Groups or Individuals

- Agenda Europe. A network of over 100-150 Christian individuals and organizations from more than 30 countries in Europe. Formally established in 2013 with support from individuals professionally associated with the Vatican and conservative Protestant and Orthodox circles. It is committed to the “restoration of the natural order” and convenes at an annual secret summit (Datta, 2019).
- St. Basil the Great Charitable Foundation. Russia’s largest private foundation, directed by Alexei Komov and funded by Konstantin Malofeev. Malofeev is a Russian oligarch who supports Orthodox causes and media, including the Tsargrad TV channel and the Katehon thinktank. Malofeev has been banned from entering Bulgaria for 10 years on charges of espionage and money laundering.
- *World Congress of Families. U.S.-based Christian organization active across the globe. It “opposes same-sex marriage, pornography, and abortion, while supporting a society built on the voluntary union of a man and a woman in a lifelong covenant of marriage.” Works in Eastern Europe in coordination with St. Basil the Great Charitable Foundation.
- Alliance Defending Freedom International (ADF). Vienna-based organization chaired by Paul Coleman. Since 1994, it has “provided lawyers with over 40 million euros through thousands of grants, which have helped to finance individual cases and projects around the world” (Marginalia, 2019). They work internationally and have offices in Europe, among other places. Its goal is to “protect fundamental freedoms and promote the dignity inherent in every person.” They lobby at institutions of strategic international importance such as the European Parliament and the EU’s Agency for Fundamental Rights.
- Haggai International. A Christian program that trains and equips leaders in business, government, and other areas for evangelism and discipleship.
- Patriarchal Commission on Family Affairs. Russian organization. Chaired by archpriest Dmitry Smirnov.

Local Political Representatives and Parties

- Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB). Ruling party in Bulgaria. Established in 2006, it is a conservative and populist party currently led by Boyko Borisov.
- The United Patriots [Обединени патриоти]. Conservative, populist, and nationalist (anti-EU, Russia, and Islam) coalition of political parties. Currently aligned with the ruling GERB party, the coalition includes the Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO), the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB), and Attack.
- Political Party Vazrazhdane [ПП, Възраждане] (means “Renewal” or “Revival”). Led by Kostadin Kostadinov, this party is a nationalist challenger to VMRO. It was one of the first organizations to express solidarity with the “concerns of parents” and recognize its political potential (National Network for Children, 2019b).
- Krasimir Karakachanov. Minister of Defense. Affiliated with the United Patriots. Evangelical Christian. Led the opposition to the IC (interview with Krasimira Velichkova, 2020).
- Alexander Urumov. Evangelical Christian. Spokesperson for the Ministry of Defense in Bulgaria. Led the opposition to the IC (interview with Krasimira Velichkova, 2020).
- Boyko Borisov. Prime Minister since 2009. After protests against the IC, the National Strategy for the Child, and the Social Services Act, Borisov’s government withdrew these initiatives. He also made public remarks that replicated gender-restrictive messaging. In 2020, Bulgarians protested against him and demanded his resignation in response to allegations of corruption and abuse of power.
- Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). Initially backed the IC, then turned against it.
- Rumen Radev. Current President of Bulgaria, independent. Elected with the support of the Socialist Party.

Conservative Media Outlets

- Evangelical Focus. Launched in 2015. News website “with a Christian perspective on current issues in Europe to help build bridges between evangelical churches and all of society.” Evangelical Focus, Protestante Digital (Spain), and Evangélico Digital (Latin America) are members of Areópago Protestante.
- Freedom for Everyone. A publishing group that defends “the values of the traditional family.” The group described the National Strategy for the Child 2019-2030 as “the fruit of totalitarian thinking.”
- Tsargrad TV. Russian TV channel owned by Konstantin Malofeev. Launched in 2015, it is known for its gender-restrictive stances, espousing Orthodox Christianity, and supporting Russian president Vladimir Putin. In 2020, YouTube blocked their account after the United States imposed sanctions against Malofeev.

III. KEY GENDER-RESTRICTIVE PLAYERS: GHANA

Type of Actor

Examples in the Country

Organizations or individuals that appear in other case studies will be preceded by an *.

Religious Institutions and Organizations

- The following are the most important religious groups in Ghana, all of which belong to the NCPHSRFV:
- Ghana Catholic Bishops’ Conference. Religious organization that brings together all Catholic Bishops of Ghana under the Canon Law of the Catholic Church. The National Catholic Secretariat, which is also considered part of the NCPHSRFV, is its executive branch. Its objective is to implement the decisions of the Bishops’ Conference through its departments and commissions (CBC-Ghana, 2010).
- Christian Council of Ghana (CCG). Founded in 1929, it brings together six churches and three Christian Organizations within the Methodist, Anglican, and Presbyterian denominations. They are traditional missionary churches (CCG, 2016).
- Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Council (GPCC). “Faith-based organization and the umbrella body of over 200 Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian church denominations” (Ghana Pentecostal and Charismatic Council, 2020).
- Coalition of Muslim Organizations of Ghana (COMOG). Islamic organization.
- Traditional Councils. Councils of Chiefs and members of traditional Ghanaian religions (Government of Ghana, 2008).
- Regional and National Houses of Chiefs. The National House of Chiefs (NHC) was established by the 1969 Constitution. It unites all traditional rulers, chiefs, and kings of Ghana and provides advisory functions to all chiefs (National House of Chiefs, 2020).

Local Civil Society Organizations

- **National Coalition for Proper Human Sexual Rights and Family Values (NCPHSRFV)**. **Most active interfaith, gender-restrictive group in Ghana**. Uniting different social, religious, and political groups, this coalition has spearheaded the modern anti-LGBT crusade in Ghana as the most important interfaith, gender-restrictive organization in the country. It also has “multiple links with Christian evangelical and Catholic groups famous for furthering their particular brand of anti-LGBT+ hatred throughout Africa” (McCabe, 2018).
- Family Renaissance International (FRI). Ghana-based group led by Nigerian reverend Catherine Onwioduokit. Advocate for the *Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act* passed in 2014 in Nigeria. Co-host of the WCF Regional Summit held in Accra.
- Advocates for Christ Ghana. Group of professionals, parents, and pastors, seeking to “provide a permanent and proactive voice on national issues in Ghana” (Advocates for Christ Ghana, n.d.).
- Atta Mills Institute. Foundation in memory of deceased president John Evans Atta-Mills. One of its principles is “to serve humanity” by “caring for life” (Atta Mills Institute, 2019). They have anti-CSE statements on their website.
- Counselling and Care for Humanity Centre (CCHC), formerly Christ Centered Counselling Network (CCCN). Has worked with the NCPHSRFV in workshops on “Proper Human Sexual Practices” (CCHC, n.d.; NCPHSRFV, 2018a).
- Child Evangelism Fellowship (CEF). “Bible-centered organization composed of born-again believers whose purpose is to evangelize boys and girls with the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and to establish (disciple) them in the Word of God and in a local church for Christian living” (Child Evangelism Fellowship, 2020). Member of the NCPHSRFV.
- Scripture Union (SU). Organization which promotes missions in schools for “making disciples of Christ” (Scripture Union, 2020).
- Ghana Fellowship of Evangelical Students (GHAFES). Inter- and nondenominational fellowship of Christian students. Member of the NCPHSRFV (GHAFES, n.d.).

International Gender-Restrictive Groups or individuals

- *World Congress of Families. Gender-restrictive network with links to Islamophobic, far-right, and white supremacist movements. “Its European allies have called African migrants ‘slaves’ and ‘poison’” (Nketiah, 2019). They are organizers and sponsors of the WCF Regional Summit. Theresa Okafor, who attended the Regional Summit, is WCF’s representative in Africa.
- *Family Watch International (USA). Participants and sponsors of the WCF Regional Summit.
- *Sharon Slater. President of FWI
- *CitizenGo. Catholic organization that seeks to participate in politics through online campaigning. The Kenyan Office was the sponsor of the WCF Regional Summit (Open Democracy Investigations, 2019).
- *International Organization of the Family. Attended the WCF regional summit.
- The Family and Human Life Unit (FHLU) of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria. Attended the WCF regional summit.
- Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship International. Largest organization for Christian businessmen. The regional organization in Ghana was launched in 1977, and “was formally incorporated [in] 1984” (FGBMFI, 2016).

Local Political Parties and Representatives

- National Democratic Party (NDC). The current opposition party. It is the party of former president John Mahama, who has been very critical of the CSE program.
- Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa. Member of Parliament from the opposition National Democratic Party. While attending the WCF Summit, he called on his fellow political leaders to declare the country a “no-go area for the LGBT agenda” (Nketiah, 2019).
- Professor Aaron Mike Oquaye. Baptist Minister, current Speaker of Parliament.
- John Mahama. Former Ghanaian president and unsuccessful candidate in the 2020 election.
- Dr. Justice Appiah-Kubi. Member of the NCPHSRFV. Theologian, church administrator, and politician. He was the facilitator of an outreach program developed by the NCPHSRFV with the Counselling and Care for Humanity Centre (CCHC, n.d.; NCPHSRFV, 2018a).

THE CONSEQUENCES

Contemporary gender-restrictive groups have prompted significant shifts in narrative and public understanding of human rights, gender justice and democracy, leading the following troubling consequences:

AREA	SPECIFIC CONSEQUENCE	EVIDENCE IN THE REPORT
Civil Society Organizations	Dividing the funding, organizational, and advocacy landscapes of women’s rights, LGBTI rights and child rights, preventing or stalling collaborations and coalitional work between them.	<p>-In Bulgaria, gender-restrictive forces framed “the best interest of the child” as an attack on parental authority, pitting children’s and parental rights against each other (See: p. 75, Bulgaria).</p> <p>-In Bulgaria, the Constitutional Court framed women’s rights and LGBT rights as oppositional to each other (See: p. 73, Bulgaria).</p> <p>-In Peru, gender-restrictive groups framed the right to education as oppositional to women and LGBT rights (See: p. 57, Peru).</p> <p>-In Ghana, some renowned feminist leaders have spoken against CSE, and against LGBT rights (See: p. 93, Ghana).</p>
	Preventing progressives from utilizing the terms and concepts traditionally used to advance their causes.	<p>-The language of human rights—particularly the right to life, freedom, and a family—is now commonly used to undermine those very rights in Bulgaria, Peru, and Ghana (See: p. 30).</p> <p>-The language of rights was used in Honduras to enshrine the prohibition of abortion and equal marriage in the constitution (See: p. 31).</p> <p>-So called “gender-critical” feminists crafted the “Declaration of sex-based rights” to exclude trans women from women spaces and deny them legal protections and rights (See: p. 32).</p>
	Attacking progressive organizations’ funding streams and regulatory status.	<p>-In Bulgaria, gender-restrictive groups are promoting regulation seeking to jeopardize the financial sustainability of civil society organizations that defend women and LGBT rights, particularly by blocking funding streams from international sources. (See: p.78, Bulgaria)</p>

- Groups trying to maintain or attain political power, especially in contexts of unstable democratic institutions, are increasingly using the notion of “fighting gender ideology” as a critical component of their campaigns, supporting authoritative, nationalist, and anti-rights political platforms.
- Exchanging political support for commitment to a gender-restrictive agenda
- Undermining support for SDGs and international human rights norms, laws, and institutions as neo-colonial impositions
- Undermining support for environmental policies
- Promoting and strengthening alliances among historically opposing faith-based and political actors.
- The Catholic Church in Peru has used the “anti-gender” discourse as a way to remain relevant in the country’s shifting religious landscape **(See: p. 49, Peru)**.
- In 2016, a coalition of gender-restrictive and far-rights forces successfully mobilized “gender ideology” to create moral panic and oppose the plebiscite to ratify the peace process between the FARC and the government in Colombia **(See: p. 52 , Peru)**.
- To widen their political bases, Ghanaian politicians affirm their anti-LGBT stance through a rhetoric that portrays LGBT rights as “un-African” and against their religious values **(See: p. 95, Ghana)**.
- Politicians, including Alberto and Keiko Fujimori in Peru and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, have actively sought endorsement from prominent pastors, which often translates to explicit commitment to policies, laws, and initiatives that curtail the rights of women, LGBT people, and children and adolescents **(See: p. 48, Peru)**.
- In Bulgaria, public figures from the ruling party and the opposition alike increasingly make statements against LGBT rights and gender equity **(See: pp. 65-68, Bulgaria)**.
- Close relations between gender-restrictive groups and Ghanaian political elites promote institutional homophobia and embed a gender-normative worldview in the social, political, and legal culture of the country **(See: p. 88, Ghana)**.
- Gender-restrictive groups describe policies and legal frameworks promoted by organizations like the UN or the EU as neocolonial impositions contrary to national sovereignty and values **(See: p. 58 Peru; p. 76, Bulgaria)**.
- Homosexuality is framed in Ghana as Un-African. Therefore, gender and sexual diversity affirming organizations and initiatives, such as the SDG, are portrayed as neocolonial impositions **(See: p. 95 Ghana)**.
- In Latin America, there is an alignment of anti-LGBT and anti-women’s rights agenda with opposition to environmental policies, undermining support for environmental protection in general and the SDGs in particular **(See: p. 58, Peru)**.
- Increasingly stronger alliances between the Evangelical and Catholic Churches make them more influential and harder to challenge **(See: p. 58, Peru)**
- In Ghana, very different religious institutions found a common cause in anti-LGBT sentiment that allowed them to set aside their disagreements and establish a powerful alliance that constitutes a serious threat to the rights and dignity of LGBT people in Ghana **(See: p. 90, Ghana)**.

Politics and
Public
Discourse
(continued)

Amplifying and
disseminating
disinformation.

-In Bulgaria, child services and foreign governments have been stigmatized through the use of disinformation related to an alleged juvenile justice system and the possibility of interference in national affairs, among others (See: p. 76, Bulgaria).

-During the pandemic, disinformation on health services, treatments and vaccines has been used by gender-restrictive groups to sow and deepen social discord (Chap1. p. 37).

-In Ghana and Peru, gender-restrictive groups stigmatize—and re-pathologize—LGBT relations and identities through the use of outdated medical and psychiatric concepts and misinformation (See: Peru, p. 55; Ghana, p. 93).

-In the U.S. and Latin America, gender-restrictive groups created a new narrative that has, at its core, a false but powerful linkage between homosexuality and pedophilia, reinforcing the idea that LGBT individuals are a threat to children and society at large (Chap1. p. 33).

Policy &
Services

Halting or reversing
public policies intended
to advance gender
equality and LGBT
rights.

-After the Istanbul Convention on VAW was defeated, VAW services for women were weakened in Bulgaria (See: p. 65, Bulgaria).

-Trans rights have also been undermined: a law in Bulgaria that would have allowed trans individuals to change their name and sex in official documents was declared unconstitutional soon after the ruling that declared the Istanbul Convention unconstitutional. (See: p. 65, Bulgaria;).

-In Bulgaria, the Ministry of Education and Science is no longer collecting school-level data about gender, or gender and/or LGBT-based bullying will directly impact children who suffer this type of violence and discrimination (See: p. 66, Bulgaria).

-Continued attempts in Ghana to discuss laws further criminalizing homosexuality (See: p. 91, Ghana).

-Opposition to the Gender Accordance Act in Poland (2012-2015), to the Integral Law for Trans Equality in Spain (Álvarez, 2021), and the consultation around the Gender Recognition Act in the UK, 2020. (See: p. 21).

Reduction in CSE & SRH
services.

-CSE have been blocked in Bulgaria, Ghana and USA (See: pp. 65-67, Bulgaria; p. 97, Ghana).

-Teachers are afraid to teach CSE in Peru despite failure of gender-restrictive forces in policy and law (See: p. 47, Peru).

-The “CSE controversy” effectively halted the implementation of comprehensive nationally enforced sexual education in Ghanaian schools. The term CSE is not so widely used because of gender-restrictive groups’ actions (Ghana, p. 87, 97).

Policy & Services (continued)

Undermining child protection institutions and services undermined, affecting the life of the most vulnerable children (LGBTI, immigrants, poor, etc.).

-Blocked implementation of child welfare and social services act Bulgaria, where there is currently no comprehensive national policy for child welfare (See: p. 67, Bulgaria).

LGBTI people, women or children

Lack of access to SHRR services, including contraception and CSE, impact on women and children, particularly girls. The impacts include unwanted pregnancies, increases in sexual violence, lack of knowledge about sexuality (particularly LGBTI youth), and increased vulnerability to sexual abuse.

-Decreased funding for organizations doing work on women and children in Bulgaria (See: p. 78, Bulgaria).

-Defunding or blocking programs that support teachers and schools in addressing gender inequality could further hinder children's rights, especially those of girls and LGBT children of all genders in Bulgaria (See: p. 75, Bulgaria).

-In Ghana, the halting of the implementation of the national comprehensive sexual education program has maintained the fear-based and abstinence-focused sexuality programs, which have not been effective in addressing teenage pregnancy (See Ghana, p. 97).

Increased violence and lack of protection for LGBTI people, especially youth.

-A pending law that would have allowed trans individuals in Bulgaria to change their name and sex in official documents is declared unconstitutional (See: p. 65, Bulgaria).

-In Ghana, anti-LGBTI rhetoric from government figures, religious leaders and gender-restrictive groups magnifies state sponsored homophobia, which promotes violence towards LGBT people (See Ghana, p. 90).

Putting women's lives at risk.

-The Bulgarian Constitutional Court's decision on gender in relation to Istanbul convention makes "it difficult, if not impossible, to fight against domestic violence" (See: p. 65, Bulgaria).

Avoidance of work with and for children by LGBTI organizations & failure to reach LGBTI children who need support.

-In Ghana, there are no national programs for LGBTI children. Because of the criminalization of (male) same-sex intercourse and the strong anti-LGBT feelings LGBT activists, including LGBT youth organizations, have a hard time advocating for their rights (Frontline AIDS, 2017; Interview with Fuller, 2020)

THE TEAM

sentiido

Sentiido is a Colombian non-profit organization that works to reduce prejudice and discrimination against LGBT people and women through creative and rigorous journalism and research, education, and capacity building. Sentiido produces research-based, creative, collaborative and strategic content to advance sexual and gender diversity and equity in Latin America.

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CASE STUDY 1. PERU: HOW GENDER-RESTRICTIVE GROUPS MAY LOSE THE LEGAL BATTLE, BUT WIN THE COMMUNICATIONS AND CULTURAL WAR

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CASE STUDY 2. BULGARIA: HOW CHILDREN'S, WOMEN'S, AND LGBT RIGHTS GOT LOST IN TRANSLATION; THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MOST EFFECTIVE GENDER-RESTRICTIVE MOVEMENT IN EASTERN EUROPE

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RECOMMENDATIONS

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