

# RIGHTS at RISK

Time for Action

Observatory on the Universality of Rights Trends Report  
2021



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## Chapter 3: Anti-Rights Discourses

### Gender Ideology

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– Fernando D’Elio and Maria Luisa Peralta  
**AKAHATÁ – WORKING TEAM ON  
SEXUALITIES AND GENDERS**

The concept of “gender ideology” emerged from the rhetoric of the Vatican two decades ago and was used initially in Europe by the Catholic hierarchy and a few affiliated groups. The concept emerged as a tool to defend dogmas related to sexuality and gender and to oppose the advances made in the United Nations conferences of the 1990s. The reaction was particularly to the Cairo and Beijing conferences, where crucial advances in sexual and reproductive rights were achieved and gender was first placed on the global human rights agenda.

The crux of the “gender ideology” narrative is that radical LGBT and feminist activists are conspiring to impose a worldview that subverts the natural, moral, and social order. In this discourse, the very notion of gender – as something socially constructed rather than something biologically determined by sex – is presented as a threat to society. Pope Francis, for instance, has stated that the notion of gender “endangers mankind” by erasing sexual differences and “complementarity of the sexes,” thus “eliminating the anthropological basis of the family.”<sup>169</sup>

A key element of the narrative is that this radical gender lobby is authoritarian and dictatorial, and seeks to indoctrinate others,

including children. Protesters opposing LGBTQI equality and defending the “natural family” in Italy and Slovenia, for example, have fashioned themselves as “guards” of free speech, holding silent vigils in public squares and claiming to be under attack from “gender theorists.”<sup>170</sup>

### How the Discourse is Being Used

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From its inception, “gender ideology” became a powerful discursive weapon to counteract feminist and gender studies – and later queer theory – to delegitimize and hold back advancement in the recognition of the rights of women and LGBTQI people.

The rapid proliferation of this concept across different regions, societal spheres and institutions, caught many feminist and sexual rights activists off guard, at first. **Today this concept is used across the world to attack a broad range of progressive initiatives, not solely related to sexuality and gender, but also other struggles such as social justice or environmental issues.**

**GENDER IDEOLOGY IS ALSO INVOKED TO OPPOSE STRUGGLES THAT CHALLENGE NEOLIBERAL POLICIES, CAPITALISM, NATIONALISM, MILITARISM, XENOPHOBIA OR RACISM, TO NAME A FEW**

“Gender ideology” is employed by a range of actors – from high government and

diplomatic spheres, to the pulpits of different religions, print and social media, conferences and seminars of conservative secular groups, and even in street demonstrations. The most significant characteristics of the discourse are: its extraordinary flexibility and versatility; its ability to bring together diverse and sometimes otherwise divided anti-rights actors; and its objective of delegitimizing academic concepts, studies and productions, scientific theories, and gender-centred approaches.

“This is the genius of the anti-gender ideology formula. Its plasticity to be secular and anti-Muslim in Europe, and unapologetically Christian in Latin America. The term is no longer part of the Catholic rightwing vernacular, but that of a transnational conservative movement dedicated to preventing, and even undoing, progress on women’s and LGBT rights.” – Gillian Kane, *Ipas*<sup>171</sup>

It has become commonplace to see the concept of “gender ideology” invoked against comprehensive sexuality education, the rights of LGBTQI people and their families, violence against women, and sexual and reproductive rights. However, as the concept takes aim more broadly at “the Left,” it is also invoked to oppose struggles that challenge neoliberal policies, capitalism, nationalism, militarism, xenophobia or racism, to name a few.

It is striking that a fear-based campaign around “gender ideology” played a

significant role in the outcome of a 2016 referendum on a proposed peace accord between the Colombian government and the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC). Colombian voters narrowly rejected the peace agreement after a campaign by ultra-conservative organizations, the Catholic church, and Evangelical groups which claimed the agreement had been “contaminated” by “gender ideology,” on the basis that the text recognized the differentiated impact the conflict had had on women and LGBTQI people.<sup>172</sup>

**The concept of “gender ideology” is underpinned by a wealth of strategies aimed to produce uncertainty and fear in audiences, often combined with misinformation, data manipulation, and sensationalism to portray “the family” or “children” as “victims.”** In combining “gender” with “ideology,” the discourse aims to place feminism and LGBTQI movements – and the very existence of LGBTQI people and their families – in the field of falsehood or propaganda, painting them as a nefarious agenda threatening the “natural order.” Meanwhile, those that wield this concept strategically claim “common sense,” employing pseudo-science and reducing the rich human experience to their own subjective perception of nature and the body.

The proponents of “gender ideology” have generally been identified with ultraconservative religious and secular groups, anti-rights, and fundamentalist actors. Critically, however,

the anti-rights agenda behind this discourse must also be understood within its broader context. It is intrinsically linked – ideologically, politically, and financially – to right and far-right actors and their economic interests. For this reason, it is not uncommon to see “gender ideology” discourse proponents vilifying social justice movements that challenge neoliberal capitalism and unjust economic policies.

**GENDER IDEOLOGY IS ALSO INVOKED TO OPPOSE STRUGGLES THAT CHALLENGE NEOLIBERAL POLICIES, CAPITALISM, NATIONALISM, MILITARISM, XENOPHOBIA OR RACISM**

Another alarming trend is that in recent years anti- “gender ideology” discourse and activism has also increased dramatically from within some parts of feminist and women’s rights movements. This segment of feminists adhere to the idea that women are defined by binary biological sex rather than gender, and promote an agenda of “rights of women based on sex.” Their main targets of attack are trans people, their families and communities.



Read more on the links between trans-exclusionary feminists and Christian fundamentalists in Chapter 4

## Debunking the Discourse

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**Anti-rights actors claim to oppose “gender ideology,” but it is important to understand that they themselves invented this concept, in order to oppose it.** The developments of the 20th century – such as the women’s liberation movements, LGBTQI rights, and de-colonization – have fundamentally challenged the patriarchal order of society. It is no longer the absolute “common sense” that a woman’s natural place is in the kitchen, or that a woman’s primary function in society is reproduction. The idea that a family can only be a patriarchal unit of a man and a woman or that the only moral existence is heterosexual and that sex is binary, or that the sole legitimate purpose of sex is reproduction are being challenged.

**ANTI-RIGHTS ACTORS PRESERVE CENTURIES-OLD NORMS AS “COMMON SENSE” AND STRATEGICALLY PAINT OTHER IDEAS AS A DANGEROUS CONSPIRATIVE “IDEOLOGY”**

Anti-rights actors seek to preserve these centuries-old norms as “common sense,” or the natural order of society. **As such, they strategically paint all other ideas, cultural norms, and forms of social life as a dangerous conspirative “ideology.”** Ideas, laws and practices asserting that women can have autonomy over their bodies, that people deserve sexual and reproductive

rights, or that they can live safely in a diversity of gender identities, expressions and sexual orientations, even that young people should receive sexual education, are construed as an existential threat to society. In truth, **rights related to gender and sexuality are not a threat to society; they are a threat to the patriarchal order, and the violence and discrimination inherent to it.**

The concept of gender exposes social norms of masculinity and femininity as what they are – social norms embedded in a political and economic power structure – rather than the God-given natural order of things. In reality, **gender – as articulated by feminist, trans and queer scholars and movements – threatens anti-rights actors not because it constitutes an ideology, but because it exposes *patriarchy* as an ideology of oppressive gender roles.**

The proponents of the “gender ideology” discourse may cast themselves as victims and cloak their arguments in human rights terms, but their project of preserving a patriarchal, homophobic, and transphobic order of society remains fundamentally opposed to the universality of human rights.

## Cultural Imperialism and Ideological Colonization

– Naureen Shameem  
AWID

Anti-rights narratives on ideological colonization and cultural imperialism assert that human rights frameworks, reproductive health services, and advancements on gender and sexuality are being imposed on certain countries, particularly those who were previously colonized. These discourses label universal rights as “Western” or “secular.” They are particularly canny because they take real issues – stemming from the ongoing global neo-colonial dynamics of power – and spin them to serve an anti-rights agenda.

### ANTI-RIGHTS ACTORS TAKE REAL ISSUES – STEMMING FROM GLOBAL NEO-COLONIAL DYNAMICS OF POWER – AND SPIN THEM TO SERVE AN ANTI-RIGHTS AGENDA

These linked discourses are grounded in a misleading presentation of culture as monolithic, static, and immutable – and as a characteristic of non-Western persons and communities rather than a universal phenomenon. In order to “preserve” culture, it must be represented as something fixed and rigid. This claim to speak in the name of a culture whose parameters one defines (for instance, as patriarchal and heteronormative)

is an intentional move by anti-rights actors to gain, retain, or consolidate power

Along with its links to deceptive anti-rights discourses on the right to culture,<sup>173</sup> the narratives of cultural imperialism and ideological colonization pull on ultraconservative narratives around national sovereignty and anti-imperialism.<sup>174</sup>



Read more about **anti-rights use of national sovereignty and anti-imperialism discourses** in the first edition of this report

### How the Discourses are Being Used

As with other anti-rights discourses, the language of ideological colonization and cultural imperialism is at play in several spaces, highlighting the ways in which these arguments are transferred, diffused, and adopted across regions and spaces.

The Vatican is a primary advocate of this narrative. For instance, Pope Francis has repeatedly spoken about “cultural and ideological colonization,” which he argues “sins against God the Creator because it wants to change Creation as it was made by Him.”<sup>175</sup> In the same commentary he claimed, “with this attitude of making everyone equal and cancelling out differences...they make a particularly ugly blasphemy against God,”<sup>176</sup> and in another statement has described equal rights agendas related to gender and sexuality as a “world war...not with weapons but with ideas.”<sup>177</sup>

CitizenGo Africa spokespersons use this discourse in their advocacy, including campaigns against access to abortion. Campaigns Director Ann Kioko has argued that all African countries (aside from South Africa) have “pro-family and pro-life laws,” but that they are facing “cultural imperialism and colonialism – people who are coming to Africa and trying to change what we believe in.”<sup>178</sup>

US-based anti-rights group Family Watch International (FWI) employs the language of “cultural imperialism” in service of its anti-sexual rights advocacy.<sup>179</sup> In 2020, for example, FWI released a video entitled “Cultural Imperialism: The Sexual Rights Agenda.” FWI claims that the video exposes “how wealthy countries and the UN, under the guise of preventing AIDS, are actually spreading AIDS.” It also claims some countries “are blackmailing poor countries by withholding aid unless these developing nations implement laws and policies to advance lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights.”<sup>180</sup> Undoubtedly, global power imbalances have repeatedly played out in some approaches to the advancement of LGBTQI rights. But in FWI’s narrative, this is misappropriated – by a Global North-based actor – in service of an agenda against LGBTQI people across the board and mixed in with disinformation regarding HIV/AIDS.

Several states at the UN employ a discourse of cultural imperialism more implicitly when making reservations to human rights agreements and instruments,<sup>181</sup> and to amend or develop resolutions to reflect anti-

rights agendas. Several of the leading nations influential in the work of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), for instance, appropriate anti-imperialist language while claiming to represent the values of “the Muslim world” in an attempt to erode their human rights obligations.<sup>182</sup>

### **THE GOAL IS TO FRAME RIGHTS RELATED TO GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND REPRODUCTION AS “NEW”, FOREIGN, COERCIVE, AND DANGEROUS**

What does this discourse tap into? It may appeal partly because it is emotive and designed to play on fears – as we can see from the references to war, blasphemy, blackmail, and sovereignty – and taps into feelings of powerlessness and defensiveness. Given the pervasiveness of colonial dynamics in geopolitics – including in multilateral spaces – and in continuing economic disparities worldwide, the discourse also works by tapping into and appropriating the urgent concerns that fuel anti-imperialist movements across the Global South.

The goal of this discourse is to frame rights related to gender, sexuality, and reproduction as “new,” foreign, coercive, and dangerous. By doing so, anti-rights actors can then argue that allowing children to learn about gender identity, expression, and relations will harm them and harm society. It also argues that women and girls worldwide are harmed by having access to abortion, that there are



no persons who are non-conforming in their gender identity, expression and/or sexual orientation, and that human rights do not apply to everyone equally.

### Debunking the Discourse

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Historically and across regions and religious contexts, fundamentalisms have fixated on and sought to use the bodies of women, girls and persons with non-conforming gender identities or sexual orientations – those who this discourse says do not deserve equal rights or do not exist – as a battlefield in their struggles to attain or retain dominance.

**THESE ORGANIZATIONS ARE THEMSELVES IMPERIALIST ACTORS, ACTIVELY EXPORTING THEIR ANTI-RIGHTS IDEOLOGIES WORLDWIDE**

Through this discourse, anti-rights actors are trying to present themselves as the ultimate authority on what culture is and is not, presenting whole societies, communities, and populations as monolithic, static, and homogenous. Whereas culture is always hybrid, contested, and dynamic, a core strategy for cultural and religious fundamentalists is to describe their favoured representation of a culture as ahistorical and uniquely “authentic” to their context – and to attempt to proscribe or suppress any internal diversity.

So, this discourse serves as a smokescreen – it operates in bad faith and it represents a

cynical attempt by anti-rights actors to co-opt the work of progressive movements globally. While it aims to appropriate the language and important work of anti-imperialist and decolonial movements, it often originates from Western-based organizations and actors who are speaking about “other” countries. **These organizations are themselves imperialist actors, actively exporting their anti-rights ideologies worldwide.**<sup>183</sup>

This discourse also seeks to act as a cover for religious fundamentalist ideologies emphasizing fixed gender roles and “traditional values.” This is apparent when we examine who is actually propagating these discourses. This shift on the part of the Holy See and other anti-rights actors to language that is not openly religious is part of a common tactic that has been described as “strategic secularism.”<sup>184</sup> **By framing fundamentalist opposition to the equal human rights of women, girls and persons with non-conforming gender and sexuality without actually evoking religion, this discourse can gain much greater traction in global and regional multilateral spaces.**

**As the scholar Chandra Mohanty highlights, colonization both implies a relation of structural domination, as well as a “suppression...of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question.”**<sup>185</sup> In their rhetoric and their activities exporting their ideologies internationally, these Global North anti-rights actors aim to present themselves as saviors, and their arguments are based on flattening

the subjects in question into an essentialist and static idea of culture and its values.

Further, when it comes to rights related to sexuality, what anti-rights actors describe as “authentic” culture under threat from ideological colonization in many cases is in fact linked to laws dating to the colonial era. A significant number of laws criminalizing same-sex sexual relations worldwide were imposed through British colonialism.<sup>186</sup> Meanwhile, diversity in sexuality, gender identity, expression, and relations has been a feature of cultures the world over throughout history – a fact these actors seek to erase.

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**DIVERSITY IN SEXUALITY, GENDER IDENTITY, EXPRESSION, AND RELATIONS HAS BEEN A FEATURE OF CULTURES THE WORLD OVER THROUGHOUT HISTORY**

At the global level, this discourse attempts to shift the focus of human rights from protecting the rights of marginalized communities and individuals to maintaining the dominance of the powerful and regressive institutions or states who cultivate this narrative. The goal of these discourses, ultimately, is to serve as a justification for dehumanization, discrimination, and impunity.

## Abortion

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– Naureen Shameem  
**AWID**

Anti-rights actors worldwide continue to mobilize against abortion. A number of national and state leaders took advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to try to carve away at abortion rights. In Poland, a radical ban on abortion was debated by the government in April 2020<sup>187</sup> – as Polish feminists took to the streets to protest. In the US in 2019, pressure built to close abortion services in a number of states, with draft bills being introduced to ban abortion.<sup>188</sup>

In global and regional spaces, and across a number of national contexts, anti-abortion agendas continue to be pushed through several key discourses. In the first OURS trends report, we discussed the misleading appropriation of the idea of the right to life to promote an anti-abortion agenda by the Vatican and allied anti-rights actors,<sup>189</sup> along with key ultra-conservative narratives around reproductive rights and health, such as “population control.”<sup>190</sup> Here we will examine two additional discourses that anti-rights movements increasingly call on to challenge rights to abortion: conscientious objection and “prenatal genocide.”

### Conscientious Objection

The discourse of conscientious objection has been gaining traction in recent years. Currently, more than 70 jurisdictions around the world

have provisions that allow health care providers to refuse reproductive services like abortion.<sup>191</sup>

In Italy, for instance, the percentage of gynecologists who made objections to the provision of abortion on the grounds of conscience was 70 percent in 2018, up from 59 percent in 2005.<sup>192</sup> In Croatia, now an estimated 60 percent of gynecologists refuse to perform abortions on the grounds of conscientious objection.<sup>193</sup> In 2019, LifePetitions, an anti-abortion online campaigning site, even posted a petition that targeted Uber, demanding that the company “respect their drivers’ conscientious objection to abortion and other activities which end human life.” This was in response to a case where a driver stopped a ride mid-way when he learned the passenger was on her way to obtain an abortion.<sup>194</sup>

### How the Discourse is Being Used

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Both in global and regional spaces – and in a number of countries<sup>195</sup> – Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF),<sup>196</sup> a US-based strategic litigation organization, and other anti-rights allies are a strong proponent of this discourse. ADF argues that there exists a human right for health care professionals to conscientiously object to participation in abortion and forms of contraception, as well as in “embryo-destructive research,” and “prescribing cross-sex hormones” due to their convictions grounded in “human dignity.”<sup>197</sup>

ADF and other anti-rights actors generally try to justify this discourse by referencing the human

right to conscience. The UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that “everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.”<sup>198</sup> Freedom of conscience covers all ethics and values a human being cherishes – their moral compass – whether of religious nature or not.<sup>199</sup>

What is this discourse trying to achieve, and how? **The narrative on conscientious objection aims to chip away at abortion protections in circumstances where direct opposition to abortion access is less likely to be successful.** The discourse is framed to seem innocuous – especially due to the way it is often presented as being a personal matter of individual conscience – but has cumulative impact on women’s access to reproductive services, with a disproportionate impact on women and adolescents who are poor, or from rural areas and small towns.<sup>200</sup> Conscientious objection is then argued to apply to a widening circle of health care providers – nurses and midwives, in addition to doctors and surgeons – and then to institutions.<sup>201</sup>

### Debunking the Discourse

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Ultimately, the goal of this discourse is to progressively limit access to abortion. This is particularly apparent given that the narrative of “conscientious objection for doctors” has broadened over time to cover institutions like hospitals. Anti-rights actors manipulate human rights language to suggest that institutions can be rights-holders, when this is not the case.

There exists no right to conscientious objection for health professionals in international human rights law. In fact, binding human rights law only recognizes a right to conscientious objection for individuals who object to performing military service. **While individuals may act according to their own moral beliefs, they do not have the right to prevent the fulfilment of others’ right to health, which includes the provision of these health care services.**

**WHILE INDIVIDUALS MAY ACT ACCORDING TO THEIR OWN MORAL BELIEFS, THEY DO NOT HAVE THE RIGHT TO PREVENT THE FULFILMENT OF OTHERS’ RIGHT TO HEALTH**

The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion has clearly held that the right to conscience cannot be invoked by health care providers and personnel to refuse to perform abortions, or to make referrals for the health service.<sup>202</sup> Human rights treaty monitoring bodies have called out states’ insufficient regulation of the use of “conscientious objection” and have directed states to guarantee patients’ access to services.<sup>203</sup>

In an example of anti-rights actors’ contortions to peddle this misinformation, C-Fam and FWI recently attempted to argue that the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights guarantees a right to conscientious objection for health care providers and professionals. However, the treaty does not

include any such reference, and the Human Rights Committee governing its interpretation has clearly stated that a right to conscientious objection can only be conferred for military service.<sup>204</sup> They do admit that many UN treaty bodies, and UN Special Procedures, have repeatedly stated that no right to conscientious objection for health care workers exists – yet they continue to tout this discourse.<sup>205</sup>

This is another example of anti-rights actors' purposeful misinterpretation of the right to conscience and freedom of belief,<sup>206</sup> and is also a means by which regressive actors seek to institutionalize their revisionist narrative around the right to life applying before birth.

## Prenatal Genocide

Another discourse that has been increasingly circulated by anti-rights actors in recent years is the idea of “prenatal genocide.” It co-opts a number of progressive themes in service of an anti-abortion agenda, including: feminist concerns around sex-selective abortion; disability justice advocates' activism around ableism and discussions of pre-natal testing; and racial justice advocates' critiques of medical racism.

### How the Discourse is Being Used

Anti-rights actors like CitizenGo evoke prenatal sex selection in their campaigns. In May 2018, the group put up a series of billboards in advance of a “March for Life” planned in Rome, declaring, “abortion is the prime cause of femicide in the world.”<sup>207</sup> The

group said that this campaign was intended to make reference to “the hundreds of thousands of women no longer alive because they were aborted because they were women – for example, in China.”<sup>208</sup> ADF also propagates this discourse, for instance in ADF India's “Vanishing Girls” campaign.<sup>209</sup>

## THE IDEA OF “PRENATAL GENOCIDE” CO-OPTS A NUMBER OF PROGRESSIVE THEMES IN SERVICE OF AN ANTI-ABORTION AGENDA

At the UN, C-Fam and the Vatican are also prominent in spreading this discourse, with particular reference to prenatal testing for Down's Syndrome.<sup>210</sup> In 2018, the Vatican held a side event with C-Fam during the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) on prenatal testing and Down's syndrome, describing it as the “prenatal genocide” of children with disabilities.<sup>211</sup> At the CSW in 2019 on World Down's Syndrome Day, the Vatican again hosted a side event on “social protections for women, girls, and all those with Down's Syndrome.” During the event, Tomasz Grysa of the Holy See described women choosing to end their pregnancies following prenatal testing for Down's Syndrome as “a genocide” and called out “member states who are abetting that genocide.”

A number of anti-rights groups with a focus on abortion – including CitizenGo Canada, the Campaign Life coalition and its youth affiliate – coordinated to tweet out

related messages during the CSW using hashtags like #WorldDownSyndromeDay, #ProLife, #ChangetheNarrative, and #LeaveNoOneBehind.<sup>212</sup> The groups also included Lila Rose of Live Action, the anti-abortion group behind the undercover “exposé” videos targeting Planned Parenthood. During the event CitizenGo Canada tweeted, “There is a eugenic genocide perpetuated against those with Down syndrome – they are not being allowed to be born.” In another example, in 2018 a writer associated with the anti-abortion Witherspoon Initiative also stated, “Hitler wanted Europe to be judenrein, scrubbed clean of Jews. It seems that today Europe aspires to be ‘DownSyndromerein’.”<sup>213</sup>

## THE LANGUAGE, IMAGERY, AND FOCI CHOSEN BY ANTI-ABORTION ACTIVISTS AIM TO ELICIT A RESPONSE OF HORROR, FEAR, AND A SENSE OF INJUSTICE

In their “prenatal genocide” discourse – particularly in North America – anti-rights activists also argue that abortion poses a unique threat to Black lives and that the “abortion industry” disproportionately targets Black women, causing “black genocide.”<sup>214</sup> One anti-abortion billboard campaign hosted by the Radiance Foundation<sup>215</sup> in the US stated: “Black children are an endangered species.”<sup>216</sup> Another said: “The most dangerous place for an African-American woman is in the womb,”<sup>217</sup> and the president

of the evangelical anti-abortion ministry Life Education and Resource Network (LEARN) refers to abortion as “womb lynchings.”<sup>218</sup>

What is the discourse of “prenatal genocide” trying to achieve, and how does it seek to appeal? The language, imagery, narratives, and foci chosen by anti-abortion activists aim to elicit a response of horror, fear, and a sense of injustice. The discourse also seeks to present two forces in opposition to each other – the members of communities who experience deep discrimination, and the so-called “abortion industry.” This is intended to suggest that opposition to the latter is necessary for solidarity with the former.

### Debunking the Discourse

“To say that women can and should decide on their own bodies and that the social barriers imposed on disabled bodies must be overcome are not incompatible agendas. The right to abortion and for broad social protection for children with disabilities are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, both are necessary to ensure that women have the possibility of a truly autonomous and informed decision about whether or not to be a mother. It is in the struggle for the protection of concrete conditions for an autonomous life that the demands of the feminist movement and demands of the disability rights movement find their common ground.” – Anahi Guedes de Mello, feminist disability scholar

Discourses on “prenatal genocide” are used to cloak the real objective: restricting or eliminating access to abortion. **These discourses operate in bad faith, instrumentalizing the important work of racial justice, disability justice, and feminist movements.** They call on critical concerns about historical and current ableism, medical racism, and patriarchy – but **rather than seeking to address the structural and systemic issues that prop up these forms of oppression, anti-rights actors seek only to limit everyone’s access to reproductive health and rights.**

It is telling that the actors propagating the concept of “prenatal genocide” only speak out on the issues affecting Black people, people with disabilities, and on gender discrimination when it serves this anti-rights agenda – otherwise the concerns of these communities are absent from their work.

These actors’ claims of concern for Black communities is shown to be merely a veneer when we see the colonial dynamics they perpetuate, as outlined in the section on cultural imperialism and ideological colonization. It becomes even more clear when their links with far-right racist movements and actors is known, as outlined above in the chapter on ultra-nationalism. Regarding sex-selective abortion, it is also not hard to see through the claims of the staunchest defenders of patriarchy to suddenly care about gender discrimination. When it comes to disability justice, the lack

of policy proposals or campaigns from these groups to improve the lives of disabled people or affirm their autonomy is a good indication of whether their concern for these groups is real.

**Fundamentally, these groups only claim concern for the lives of Black and disabled people, and the lives of women *before* birth – their value for such lives disappears once these people are actually born.**

**THESE GROUPS ONLY CLAIM CONCERN FOR THE LIVES OF BLACK AND DISABLED PEOPLE, AND THE LIVES OF WOMEN BEFORE BIRTH – THIS DISAPPEARS ONCE THESE PEOPLE ARE ACTUALLY BORN**

While anti-rights actors pitch reproductive rights as being in opposition to the interests of these marginalized groups – attempting to open or expand rifts between progressive movements – these causes are not in opposition. **A comprehensive framework of reproductive justice affirms the right to bodily autonomy and encompasses racial and disability justice. It gives us the right to have or not have children, and to parent the children we do have in safe and sustainable communities – and necessarily encompasses racial justice and disability justice.**

## Question

# Let's Take Back the Narrative



Are these discourses present in your country?  
What other anti-rights discourses are gaining ground?  
What successful strategies have movements found to debunk or disrupt these discourses? What else could you try?

## Role Play Game

This role playing game is designed to strengthen our ability to debunk and disrupt anti-rights discourses. Developing our ability to disempower the arguments of anti-rights groups is essential for undermining their influence. It works to reveal their true agendas and interests, and can create stronger alliances for social justice. **We invite you to come together with your collective or colleagues and play! Please share with us the insights the game revealed...**

### Materials

Write down on cards a set of anti-rights discourses you will focus on. You may want to use some of the discourses in this report, for example “conscientious objection” to abortion or “cultural imperialism and ideological colonization.” Or you may want to focus on what is most pressing in your area of work, for example arguments used by trans-exclusionary feminists to curtail trans rights.

### Game Instructions

1. Divide the group into two teams. In the first round, group 1 will play the role of anti-rights groups and group 2 will play the role of the feminist activists.
2. Group 1 picks a card and will read the anti-rights discourse for everybody to hear.
3. Both groups gather for 15 minutes.

- a. **Group 1** will play the role of the anti-rights activists. They will build on the discourse, adapting it to the references of their local contexts, and will prepare a way to present it to the activists (Group 2).
- b. **Group 2** will play the role of the feminist activists. They will build arguments to debunk the discourse.

Both groups are encouraged to present their perspectives in a creative way: using dramatization, making a poster or campaign, or any other creative expression!

For those impersonating the anti-rights activists, the challenge is to go beyond the obvious narratives. Be bold. The more refined your arguments are, the more effort the feminist activists will have to make to respond effectively.



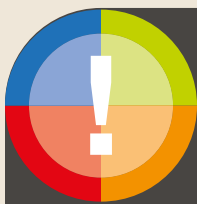
4. Group 1 makes their initial presentation. Then, Group 2 responds based on both what they prepared and in response to Group 1's presentation. Whatever format has been chosen, it is important to allow space for the two groups to express their positions. Group 1 then has an opportunity to respond to Group 2's arguments, and Group 2 concludes the round with their last intervention.
5. The whole group gathers to reflect:
  - a. How is everyone feeling?
  - b. Complementing the responses constructed in the groups, what other elements can you identify to counter the anti-rights discourses?
  - c. What impact have these discourses had on your contexts?
  - d. Who is likely to be convinced by these anti-rights discourses and why? How are our responses tailored to reach those people?
  - e. Anti-rights actors have been co-opting progressive issues and discourses, and exploiting rifts between social movements. Identify movements whose issues are being co-opted in this discourse, and identify where stronger solidarity needs to be built to present a united front against anti-rights agendas.

You can play this game many times, using different discourses and changing roles between groups. It is important to take into account that this could be a very intense exercise, so you may want to meet another day for a second round.

**Tip:** Remember that humour is a great learning and strategy building tool. This is an invitation to have fun! But it is also important to take seriously the invitation to play the assigned roles in ways that are not a caricature. Part of the purpose of this exercise is for you to experience the anti-rights logic from inside and build your arguments within that logic.

**To take into account:** anti-rights discourses and actors have likely caused real harm to many people in the room. It is important to be mindful of individuals' experiences and take care of each other while playing this game. You might even want to create a space afterwards to debrief on how the experience felt.

**Going virtual:** If needed, you can adjust this game into a virtual environment. You can make it happen using platforms that allow you to do breakout sessions (like Zoom), and even using complementary participatory platforms to co-create your responses, campaigns, etc (like Google Drive Slides, Mentimeter, Padlet, or Jamboard.)



Please share your reflections with us at [rightsatrisk@awid.org](mailto:rightsatrisk@awid.org)  
or via OURs members' social media platforms using  
**#RightsAtRisk**

**We want to hear what you found out!**

## Movement Resistance Stories

### The Nairobi Principles: Cross-Movement Commitments on Disability and SRHR

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In 2018, the feminist human rights organization CREA convened representatives from feminist organizations, women with disabilities, and organizations working on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in Nairobi, Kenya. The outcome of this meeting was the creation of the *Nairobi Principles on Abortion, Prenatal Testing, and Disability*, launched in March 2019.<sup>219</sup>

The meeting was convened to address tensions between disability rights and abortion rights, which are often exploited by fundamentalists to push anti-abortion agendas. More specifically, the meeting addressed the apparent conflict between the right to safe abortion, a fundamental aspect of SRHR, and the issue of disability-selective abortion, which both reflects and contributes to a world in which disabled lives are positioned as less valuable than those of able-bodied people.

In the resulting principles, feminists and women with disabilities reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening SRHR, alongside the principles of autonomy and self-determination. As the principles state: “there is no incompatibility between guaranteeing access to safe abortion and protecting disability rights, given that gender and disability-sensitive debates on autonomy, equality, and access to health care benefit all people.”

The principles, among other things, recognize the harmful legacy of eugenics enacted on disabled people, affirm that providers should offer evidence-based information to pregnant people without bias during the prenatal screening and diagnostic process, and call for SRHR policies that do not perpetuate ableist stigma and discrimination. They affirm that all people who can become pregnant have the right to decide whether to continue a pregnancy and that: “Individual choices about one’s own pregnancy are not eugenics, and nobody exercises discrimination when making choices about their own pregnancies.”

They emphasize that prospective parents can only make informed decisions about their pregnancies through affirmative measures such as combating ableism in testing and counselling processes, creating an environment where parents have the social and economic supports to raise any child – including a child with disabilities – and promoting the rights of persons with disabilities in all spheres of public and private life.

Importantly, this document provides a strong cross-movement framework for rights and justice in the context of anti-rights co-optation. Over 55 women’s rights, SRHR, and disability rights organizations have now endorsed the principles.<sup>220</sup> Alongside the principles, CREA produced reports focusing on specific countries and relevant advocacy contexts regarding abortion, prenatal testing, and disability. The principles, together with this additional information, have informed key international advocacy spaces, including meetings held by the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the UN Population Fund.

## Endnotes – Chapter 3: Anti-Rights Discourses

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- 171 Gillian Kane, 'Gender ideology': big, bogus, and coming to a fear campaign near you, *The Guardian*, March 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/mar/30/gender-ideology-big-bogus-and-coming-to-a-fear-campaign-near-you>
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- 178 CitizenGo: Cyberactivism confronting the radical left, WCF Verona session, March 30, 2019.
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- 180 Documentary available at: <https://familywatch.org/2020/01/23/cultural-imperialism-the-sexual-rights-agenda/#.X1foHmdKhsM>. Other non-state anti-rights actors who employ this discourse include C-Fam, Human Life International, and the American Center for Law and Justice.
- 181 States and state blocs have historically sought to undermine international consensus or national accountability under international human rights norms through reservations to human rights agreements, directly threatening the universal applicability of human rights. This practice is particularly common with respect to binding treaties or covenants, as a state reservation from the text is intended to remove the state party from binding human rights responsibilities under the specified section. For more on this anti-rights tactic, see Naureen Shameem, *Rights at Risk: Observatory on the Universality of Rights Trends Report 2017*, AWID, pp.94. Available at: <http://oursplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/Rights-At-Risk-OURs-Trends-Report-2017.pdf>
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- 189 See Naureen Shameem, *Rights at Risk: Observatory on the Universality of Rights Trends Report 2017*, AWID, p.63. Available at: <https://www.oursplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/Rights-At-Risk-OURs-Trends-Report-2017.pdf>

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