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International Feminist Journal of Politics

ISSN: 1461-6742 (Print) 1468-4470 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rfjp20

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To cite this article: Martijn Mos (he/him), Jelena Cupać (she/her), Naureem Shameem (she/her) & Neil Datta (he/him) (16 Jun 2025): A practitioner's perspective on resisting anti-gender politics in international organizations: an interview with Naureen Shameem and Neil Datta, International Feminist Journal of Politics, DOI: 10.1080/14616742.2025.2509590

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2025.2509590

Published online: 16 Jun 2025.

INTERNATIONAL FEMINIST JOURNAL OF POLITICS
https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2025.2509590

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

CONVERSATIONS

A practitioner's perspective on resisting anti-gender politics in international organizations: an interview with Naureen Shameem and Neil Datta

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KEYWORDS International organizations; gender; LGBTI+ rights; advocacy; anti-gender activism

HISTORY Received 26 January 2024; Accepted 13 June 2024

Introduction

Across the globe, a constellation of socially conservative actors have interpreted the alleged diffusion of "gender ideology" – in actuality an ambiguous and ersatz concept – as a call to arms. This network, which scholars and practitioners alike refer to as a transnational anti-gender movement (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024; Butler 2024; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; McEwen and Narayanaswamy 2023), targets a wide range of international norms and values concerning gender and sexuality. The bugbears include, but are by no means limited to, reproductive justice; comprehensive sexuality education; inclusive understandings of the family and marriage; gender-based violence; initiatives to combat discrimination and hate speech; and, arguably most significantly, the recognition of non-heteronormative gender identities. This arch-conservative movement devotes much of its time and resources to domestic initiatives. Evidence of its global reach, to name but a few examples, can be found in Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act (Sanderson 2023), the creation of so-called "LGBT-free zones" in Poland (Rafałowski 2023), the intensification of anti-abortion mobilization in Latin America (Rodriguez de Assis Machado, Peñas-Defago, and Malca 2022), and the spread of anti-drag bills across the United States (US) (Cerrentano 2023). Anti-gender activists from around the world, while taking care to adapt it to their domestic context, employ the same playbook.

Crucially, however, the anti-gender movement's global relevance extends well beyond the cross-national diffusion of discourse and tactics.

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Conservative forces now have international organizations in their crosshairs. They see these multilateral venues – including the European Union (EU), the Organization of American States (OAS), and various organs of the United Nations (UN), such as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and the World Health Organization (WHO) – as hotbeds of feminism and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex (LGBTI+) advocacy. Anti-gender activists have therefore launched a counter-attack. This backlash against gender and sexuality within international organizations is a subject of growing scholarly inquiry (see for example Chappell 2006; Cupać and Ebetürk 2020, 2021, 2022; Mos 2018).[1] It is also an important concern of progressive actors. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which have long relied on multilateralism to advance the human rights of women and sexual minorities, have suddenly had to contend with the rapid coordination and professionalization of a transnational anti-gender network. Forced to go on the defense, they have altered their strategies and reallocated their resources. Many feminist organizations are now preoccupied with holding the fort instead of advocating for new policy gains.

Academics and activists have thus both recognized that anti-gender actors are increasingly present, vocal, and influential within international organizations. Too often, however, these two communities speak past each other. Researchers may draw on materials published by advocacy groups in their analyses of anti-gender politics. Activists, in turn, may cite academic output to make sense of the backlash that they encounter in their everyday work. However, a genuine dialogue that bridges the academic and activist worlds seldom takes place.[2] Scholars, in particular, have been preoccupied with the study of anti-gender politics, which has led them to neglect how activists have responded to this backlash. This lack of communication hinders collective action. If the two communities could find common ground, they would be better positioned to jointly understand *and* challenge the anti-gender movement.

This contribution is a first step in this direction. It sets up such a conversation between two scholars of anti-gender politics and two activists who encounter such resistance in their work at international organizations. Jelena Cupać is a Research Fellow at the WZB/Berlin Social Science Center. Martijn Mos is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at Leiden University. Both have extensively studied how the anti-gender movement operates and thrives within international environments, with a respective focus on the UN and the EU.

In this Conversations piece, Cupać and Mos speak to two of the leading advocates for gender and sexual equality. Naureen Shameem is presently the Executive Director of the Noor Network. This feminist and movement-driven think-cum-do-tank was explicitly created to monitor and challenge the anti-feminist far right in the name of gender justice. Shameem previously

led the initiative for Advancing Universal Rights and Justice at the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), which focused on anti-democratic forces at the global level, and at the UN in particular. She coordinated the Observatory on the Universality of Rights (OURs), a multi-organizational project focused on challenging threats to an inclusive conception of the universality of rights at the UN. Shameem has also been involved with Women Living Under Muslim Laws, a feminist solidarity network that likewise challenges fundamentalist and racist actors at the international level. Shameem is based in New York City.

Neil Datta is the co-founder and Executive Director of the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF). He previously coordinated the Parliamentary Programme of the International Planned Parenthood Federation European Network (IPPF-EN). The EPF was founded in 2000 as an offshoot of this network and is composed of working groups of parliamentarians from democratic parties who want to improve sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). This includes access to modern contraception, maternal health services, cervical cancer prevention, and abortion rights. The main targets of the EPF's advocacy are the European Parliament (EP) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (CoE). In addition, the EPF works closely with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the WHO. To a lesser extent, the organization is active in other global spaces, such as various parliamentary assemblies in Africa and the Americas. Datta has also played an indispensable role in exposing the transnational connections behind much of the resistance to reproductive justice and LGBTI+ equality in Europe. He is based in Brussels.

Both activists regularly encounter anti-gender activism in their work. Shameem recalls how the OURs, as far back as 2013, identified international spaces such as the UN as areas where anti-feminist and anti-rights coordination and resources had increased. She and her colleagues observed the emergence of so-called "unholy alliances" that engaged with global spaces as a form of reactive politicization. The CSW is often even overrun by anti-gender activists, whose side events can dictate a large part of the proceedings. Importantly, Shameem and her colleagues felt that the backlash by anti-feminist actors, and their overwhelming presence in global spaces, affected the extent to which they were able to do feminist advocacy. They also saw that a deeper feminist and progressive analysis of these actors and movements was missing. The OURs therefore tried to understand these phenomena at the international and global levels to be able to respond to them. Staff members attended anti-gender organizations' events and training spaces, such as the World Congress of Families (WCF). This allowed them to see how these actors organized and built power, how they conceptualized their tactics, and what their long-term strategies were.

According to Datta, the EPF became aware of anti-gender activists more than ten years ago, when they began to emerge as a movement in Europe. As these actors were starting to be successful in different countries, the EPF's members at the national level began contacting the Brussels office. Datta explains that he was suddenly getting appeals for assistance and support on a more frequent basis: "Neil, we have this anti-abortion campaign in Latvia" or "This is what's happening in Lisbon." The EPF was therefore among the first feminist NGOs in Europe to see that the names of the same organizations and individuals were appearing in different contexts. It realized early on that this was not a result of local or domestic conservative mobilization, but that there was a clear transnational component to it.

In the following pages, Cupać and Mos speak to the two activists in more detail about why the rise of the anti-gender movement matters, how this movement operates, and how progressive actors should respond to the global resistance to gender and sexual equality.

Why does the rise of the anti-gender movement matter?

Shameem and Datta offer four different reasons why we should see the rise of the anti-gender movement as a profoundly worrying development. To begin with, anti-gender activism often results in human rights violations. Shameem remarks that over the years the movement has chipped away at various rights at the local and national levels. Multiple surveys conducted by women human rights defenders have documented a global reduction in the right to bodily autonomy and SRHR, increases in gender-based violence, and the closure of civic spaces. The overall aim, according to Shameem, seems to be to establish greater impunity for governments and non-state actors regarding these human rights violations. Datta concurs. He argues that the anti-gender movement risks undermining the human rights of millions of people in Europe. The most compelling proof can be found in Poland, where in recent years women have died as a result of an abortion ban. Datta therefore reasons that deaths can be attributed to specific anti-gender policies. He also offers a less dramatic, but nonetheless painful, example: the inability of same-sex female couples in Italy to register their children. The anti-gender movement thus has a tangible impact on people's daily lives.

A second reason for concern about the rise of the anti-gender movement, as Shameem explains, is the "double game" played by its proponents in international spaces. On the one hand, they aim to weaken these spaces by delegitimizing and defunding progressive voices. On the other hand, they seek to infiltrate these spaces by institutionalizing an anti-feminist and anti-rights agenda and by watering down and changing previously agreed-upon language. Their objective is to reframe the human rights apparatus

and norms, ultimately getting rid of international laws and frameworks that recognize gender- and sexuality-based violations as human rights violations. While Shameem admits that international law is imperfect – being inherently political and challenging to enforce – she emphasizes that it still matters because it provides mechanisms to hold state and non-state actors accountable for human rights violations. In her view, by trying to modify the international institutional and normative edifice, anti-gender actors seek greater impunity or a reduced capacity to ensure responsibility for themselves and their allies.

Third, Shameem warns that international spaces can be used as testing laboratories; many of the moves that anti-feminist activists make at the international level – in terms of norms, discourse, and tactics – are replicated at the national level. This provides us with either a real-time or a predictive sense of how anti-feminist groups will mobilize at the national level and the kinds of impact that they might have.

Finally, Datta sees anti-gender politics as an attempt to distract from other policy issues. He revisits the example of Italy, where lesbians having children has long been accepted. Yet, by problematizing this issue, anti-gender actors can avoid dealing with other matters. This strategy is adeptly used by political actors who have ambitions of seizing power and are not necessarily concerned with respecting democracy and human rights. Such issues allow them to agitate and divide the public, and thus to achieve their ambitions. Datta believes that contestation around gender issues was originally borne out of a genuine religious concern that society was heading in the wrong direction, but that we now see a significant number of actors who use it purely for political gain. He therefore urges us to make a mental adjustment: to shift the conversation from accommodating Christian communities who may have some reservations to addressing the broader political exploitation of gender issues.

What explains the rise of the anti-gender movement?

To formulate a response to anti-gender politics, it is imperative to understand where it has come from and why it targets international arenas. Shameem and Datta both agree that anti-gender activism within international organizations is a form of reactive politicization. Conservative forces object to the expansion and growing inclusiveness of the international human rights edifice. Shameem points out that feminist movements in the 1990s saw the UN as a key space where they could achieve policy gains across the board, especially in relation to sexual and reproductive rights and reproductive justice. However, starting with the Cairo Conference on Population and Development in 1994 and the Beijing World Conference on Women in 1995, there was a swift reaction and counter-mobilization to these feminist

gains. Initially led by the Vatican (or the Holy See), anti-feminist actors saw such gains as contradicting their dogmas and political aims. The Vatican was soon joined by a number of states from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and other conservative-leaning blocs, giving rise to an "unholy alliance."

Referring to the European context, Datta traces the history of LGBTI+ rights, highlighting the role of the CoE and the EP in expanding these rights and ensuring that they are equally applicable to LGBTI+ communities. In his opinion, anti-gender actors have correctly identified these international organizations as threatening for their agenda, leading them to contest both the actions and the legitimacy of the organizations. For a deeper understanding of these processes, including how they also connect to domestic politics, Datta refers us to one of the EPF's first reports on the issue, *Restoring the Natural Order: The Religious Extremists' Vision to Mobilize European Societies against Human Rights on Sexuality and Reproduction* (Datta 2018), which explains how the movement began to coalesce in 2013 during its first Agenda Europe meeting. The meeting's program emphasized a sense of urgency as a reaction to France and the United Kingdom moving toward marriage equality that same year. In Agenda Europe's eyes, Datta asserts, equal marriage was no longer a Nordic eccentricity but was becoming a mainstream issue. Consequently, during the Agenda Europe meetings, anti-gender actors started devising strategies to identify priority areas and stop losing ground. They also launched initiatives in different countries, such as the petitions that led to referenda on traditional marriage in Croatia and Romania.

That said, Datta contends that there is not a constant and upward trend in anti-gender mobilization at the international level, at least not in Europe. He notes that some organizations have even retreated to the domestic arena in recent years. Initially, anti-gender activists from different countries realized that they could benefit from transnational networking. The next logical step was therefore to become better represented in Brussels and at the international level. From 2013 up until 2018, they had some success in increasing their European representation. Datta recalls how the European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) mobilized around the CoE, while the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) set up its office two streets away from the EPF. In 2018, however, the television channel ARTE aired a documentary that, along with an EPF report (Datta 2018), exposed the anti-gender movement. Datta believes that anti-gender activists are now less present in Brussels and in Strasbourg. He also sees a noticeable change in how they act and organize themselves. Datta notes how Sophia Kuby of the ADF, whom he would sometimes encounter at the coffee shop, left Brussels and moved to Vienna. Nonetheless, anti-gender actors have not disappeared altogether. They may have left Brussels and Strasbourg, but in turn they have retreated to

their national bastions. They are much more present in Warsaw and Budapest, in Madrid and London, and increasingly also in Rome. From the safety of their home turf, they then try to project their influence via the member states onto European and global political arenas, blurring the distinction between domestic and international activism. Ordo Iuris, a prominent anti-gender actor, provides a good example of this. This organization developed a fake convention on family rights and then used it to persuade the Polish government to approach different Central European countries to jointly exit the Istanbul Convention. As these actors now try to project their power onto the European level via the national level, the distinction between domestic politics and international organizations becomes blurred.

In addition to viewing the rise of the anti-gender movement as a reaction to progressive gains in international organizations and domestic settings, Shameem also encourages us to situate this phenomenon within a broader context. To begin with, she emphasizes the ongoing erosion of democracy and the pervasive rise of far-right groups. These groups, she argues, engage with gender and sexuality in two ways that are central to their ideological projects. First, they present cisnormative and heteronormative ideas as one true culture and morality, and place them at the heart of how they conceptualize gender roles and the state. Second, and similarly to Datta's earlier observations, they do not shy away from using gender and sexuality instrumentally. At the UN, for example, they use these topics as a vehicle for gaining more political power and control. We see this with all of the campaigns and discourses around "gender ideology" that they have initiated in different UN spaces.

The second contextual factor that Shameem highlights as driving the rise of anti-feminist actors and movements is their ability to co-opt crises, and economic crises in particular. The rise of corporate power and the role of neoliberalism in hollowing out democracy have left a space for anti-gender actors to walk into. The rise of theocratic or fundamentalist movements matters as well. They provide a strong base, a sense of community, and a hierarchical structure that is conducive to anti-gender politics. In summary, while the anti-gender backlash is in many ways a continued response to feminist gains, it is also strongly connected to the rise of anti-democratic movements more generally.

Who are the most prominent anti-gender actors?

While an increasingly large number of anti-gender actors operate within the UN and in the European context, several of these actors stand out as particularly active. Referring to the UN context, Shameem singles out the Vatican (or Holy See), Family Watch International (FWI), the ADF, and the Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam). FWI has a large delegation that puts a

significant amount of time and energy into the CSW, both to attend events organized by other delegations and to organize its own side events. It also actively tracks the development of the CSW's agreed conclusions. The Vatican, which holds an observer status within the UN, is its frequent collaborator. Together, they have organized a series of side events at the CSW, where they attempt to co-opt disability rights arguments by focusing on prenatal testing for Down syndrome, aiming to undermine abortion rights by advancing a discourse of "prenatal genocide." The ADF is one of the most visible groups at the Human Rights Council. It always hosts one or two side events and are involved in negotiations and developing talking points. For instance, a few years ago, it organized a side event where it sought to reframe conscientious objection, a norm traditionally associated with the military and a non-violent peace approach, toward the context of abortion. The last example is C-Fam. Several years ago, it organized a side event at the CSW that developed a very robust anti-trans narrative that it linked to concepts such as "cultural Marxism" and "totalitarianism." Shameem argues that we can track how this narrative has since taken off and has been translated into enormous amounts of policy on trans issues in some regions.

In the European context, Datta lists several prominent organizations, including some already mentioned by Shameem and himself, such as the ADF. He insists that the ADF, which is staffed by a group of lawyers who look deceivingly respectful, is among the most strategic and dangerous actors. Additionally, he mentions the ECLJ, CitizenGO, and a Dutch group of organizations that seems to be a pool in and of itself: the European Christian Political Movement, which is centered around the Christian Union (ChristenUnie) and the Reformed Political Party (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij). The group also includes Henk Jan van Schothorst, who created Christian Council International. Prominent Russians such as Konstantin Malofeev and Vladimir Yakunin are also on Datta's list, but he notes that they are not as visible as they were before the invasion of Crimea.

The case of FWI and the Holy See demonstrates that anti-gender actors do not work in isolation but instead often build strategic alliances and networks. Shameem particularly emphasizes their close collaboration with sympathetic UN member states, which she believes is crucial for their successes at the international level. She refers back to FWI and the yearly training sessions that it has organized for state representatives and activists in UN bodies. FWI also produces and regularly updates a manual on lobbying tactics and argumentation on different UN issues, and offers specific suggestions for how to engage with UN resolution processes to reframe or block human rights.

For its part, the ADF has a cohort of Geneva-based representatives entirely devoted to lobbying work: meeting and developing relationships with state representatives, and providing them with talking points. Shameem

underscores that this is particularly effective with states that do not have a large delegation at these bodies. Lacking the capacity to develop pre-existing talking points, they find it helpful to be provided with a full set of tactics regarding, for example, the Universal Periodic Review process. Besides training and lobbying, Shameem also gives an example of events whose explicit purpose is coalition building and networking: World Conferences. Organized regularly by the WCF, these events bring together anti-gender organizations with conservative and authoritarian states, who also often act as hosts, such as Hungary and Italy in recent years. There have also been regional convenings in Africa. The primary purpose of these events, Shameem contends, is to create a sense of global engagement.

In terms of European anti-gender networks, Datta notes the importance of Agenda Europe, though this collective seems to have reorganized and has become less effective. A newly emerging actor is the Political Network for Values (PNfV). Originally a transatlantic network, it is now based in Budapest. It recently organized a meeting at the UN to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, hosted by the Guatemalan mission. In the past, it was presided over by Katalin Novák, who was until recently the President of Hungary, which, Datta notes, points to the geopolitical dimension of its anti-gender objectives. As a particularly interesting network, Datta signals out Tradition, Family, and Property (TFP). Founded by Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira, the network is known for using a lot of medieval imagery. Today it is extremely influential in Poland, but also in Estonia and even in the Netherlands, where it has been behind some of the campaigns against comprehensive sexuality education and for Black Pete (*Zwarte Piet*).[3]

What arguments do anti-gender actors use in their activism?

Commenting on the types of arguments that anti-gender actors use in their activism at the UN, Shameem points to the centrality of life and the family. She contends that anti-gender actors are actively trying to reframe and misuse the right to life. For example, when the Human Rights Committee was developing its general comment on the right to life, far-right and ultra-nationalist groups such as FWI quickly mobilized around the issue of abortion. They lobbied vigorously to include in the general comment the idea that life begins at conception. In this way, the right to life could be interpreted as an anti-abortion norm, creating within international law a bedrock on which to build future anti-abortion stances. The strategy, however, was unsuccessful.

Regarding family, anti-gender actors advocate for the so-called "traditional" or "natural" family, which they define as a heteronormative and patriarchal unit consisting of a mother, a father, and their children.

Shameem highlights a series of resolutions at the Human Rights Council that support the protection of this type of family. Most were spearheaded by Russia, Egypt, and, more recently, Saudi Arabia, and proved surprisingly successful; they all passed. As such, these resolutions exemplify how anti-gender actors can be effective at the UN by using the language of the traditional family that far-right and nationalist actors use at the local and national levels to galvanize popular support. While the adoption of these resolutions occurred several years ago, there is talk of reviving them. According to Shameem, the objective behind the resolutions is twofold: to bring together a broad coalition of different actors, and to rewrite human rights standards and language to prioritize the protection of "the family" over the rights of individuals within a particular family structure. Family resolutions are closely associated with resolutions on the defamation of religion proposed by several states from the OIC, as well as with resolutions on traditional values introduced by Russia. Shameem interprets the stream of these resolutions as an attempt to alter human rights norms via a specific kind of ideological colonization.

By contrast, Datta focuses more on the nature than the substance of the arguments that anti-gender actors put forth. He first emphasizes the Vatican's deliberate secularization of language as a strategy to make its arguments sound as though they are defending human rights. However, Datta immediately qualifies this observation by arguing that the use of religious arguments is context specific; it is more acceptable to use openly religious arguments in some national settings than in international settings where anti-gender actors may encounter representatives from countries such as Sweden or the Netherlands who would not be swayed by such language. Here, however, Datta points to an ambiguity. When anti-gender actors are called out for using secularized religious arguments, they often become defensive and openly embrace their religious stances, asserting that Christians also have the right to participate in international spaces. One area in which they have heavily invested is religious freedom, arguing that it is a higher order of human rights. This allows them to use religious language very flexibly and opportunistically. Datta thus argues that these actors are not necessarily moving away from religious discourse but are instead adding new layers to it. Their anti-gender or anti-rights arguments, while rooted in religious ideas, are also becoming increasingly normative, political, and geopolitical. They operate on all of these levels simultaneously.

To further illustrate this point, Datta recalls an article by Sonia Corrêa, David Paternotte, and Claire House (2024), in which the authors discuss whether anti-gender language is like Frankenstein's monster or a hydra. Like Frankenstein's monster escaping its creator's control, the anti-gender language devised by religious actors has now been adopted by a wide range of actors, with or without the blessing of the Church. However, this

language is also a hydra, in that it can be a whole range of different things. It can be religious, political, or geopolitical. A range of different people may be using this language, but they may be doing so independently of each other and in different ways. In other words, there may be some common ideas, but this does not necessarily constitute a concerted and unified stance.

Which patterns can we discern in anti-gender activism?

Anti-gender activists have a rich repertoire of activist strategies at their disposal. When asked about the most pronounced patterns that they see in this regard, both Shameem and Datta referred back to the secularization of language. For Shameem, this kind of secularism is key to understanding the shifting tactics employed by anti-gender actors and the influence that they have achieved. Secularized language, she maintains, has allowed them to reinterpret human rights in line with their agenda and thus accumulate social power and, in some cases, even political power. Similarly, Datta observes that moving the idea of "anti-gender" from its religious origins into the realm of civil society has allowed anti-gender actors to establish it as a political project taken up by some political parties. In some cases when these parties succeed in gaining state power, it even becomes a geopolitical project.

Shameem emphasizes two other key and interconnected trends in anti-gender activism: a strong focus on shaping the narrative and discourse, and entry into international and global arenas. She compares the former approach to the French New Right's focus on a Gramscian metapolitical lens aimed at achieving cultural hegemony. This long-term strategy seeks to shape narratives and discourses, and to embed them within societies as "common sense." The expected result is an ideological colonization of the ways in which we think about gender, accompanied by varied strategies of norm diffusion and norm tainting. As for the latter trend, Shameem notes that though anti-gender actors are rhetorically anti-globalist and nationalist, they are nonetheless increasingly engaging in global coordination. Here, she gives the example of the WCF, whose main tactics concern the global diffusion of anti-gender discourses, policies, and norms.

With an eye on the European context, Datta identifies three additional patterns in anti-gender activism: shifts in political alliances, new sources of funding, and new forms of organizing. Ten years ago, political allies of anti-gender activists could be found within the EPP (European People's Party), a group of respectable Christian democrats that included figures such as Gudrun Kugler from Austria, Jaime Mayor Oreja from Spain, and Carlo Casini from Italy. However, anti-gender activists have since moved away from the EPP, something that Datta attributes to the EPP not being sufficiently ambitious on anti-gender issues. While it was willing to block

some measures, it lacked the nerve to initiate new actions and effectively roll back rights. Anti-gender actors therefore sought out more ambitious allies, finding them in the emerging far-right and ultra-right parties. Consequently, their center of gravity now lies with the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). It is also supported by the Identity and Democracy (ID) group, though the latter is not particularly well regarded at present. The ECR, by contrast, has gained some legitimacy and has become the new anti-gender voice.

Regarding new sources of funding and new forms of organizing, Datta refers to an updated and upcoming version of his organization's report *Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe* (Datta 2021). His working theory is that these groups have been able to tap into a new source of funding – namely, state funding to create new institutes or entities that will generate ideas. He contends that we are witnessing the beginning of a process of establishing a series of far-right think tanks in Europe, similar to the ecosystem that exists in the US. Examples include the Collegium Intermarium in Poland and the Mathias Corvinus Collegium in Hungary, and similar initiatives in Slovakia. Some of these organizations are linked to political parties, such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany and Vox in Spain. There is also the training institute linked to Marion Maréchal-Le Pen in France: Institut de Sciences Sociales, Économiques et Politiques. Datta concludes that there is now a developed ecosystem of far-right entities, think tanks, and foundations that produce anti-gender ideas that then go out into the world in a way described by Shameem.

What strategies have anti-gender actors used successfully?

Shifting our discussion from the general trends and patterns of anti-gender activism to activists' most successful tactics in specific settings, Shameem once more highlights their strategies around language, especially within the UN. She is notably worried about their success in deleting and diluting progressive terminology. This strategy, she notes, spans a wide range of resolutions, from those addressing safe abortion to the annual resolutions on gender-based violence and discrimination against women and girls. The blocs around Russia, Egypt, and the OIC are particularly visible when it comes to chipping away at women's rights protections in this way. In recent years, they have justified deleting specific mentions of issues such as abortion and intimate partner violence by arguing that these concepts are foreign to a particular state's culture and therefore should not be included in international documents. Using similar arguments, they have also attempted to remove the term "gender" from many UN resolutions, claiming that gender is a made-up concept with no correspondence to reality. Another

blatant example is their effort to excise or dilute references to women human rights defenders, with states such as Russia questioning the legitimacy and validity of such actors altogether.

Shameem also highlights the intense mobilization around the struggles concerning the UN's agreed language. Anti-gender actors have not only succeeded in making the agreed conclusions of the CSW meetings some of the weakest final documents across all UN mechanisms, but have also managed to enshrine anti-rights, regressive, or watered-down language in these conclusions. They then claim this as agreed language, using it to strike down progressive passages in resolutions at the Human Rights Council by arguing that they go beyond the agreed language and should therefore be deleted.

Finally, Shameem points out that anti-gender actors also use state reservations to prevent resolutions from achieving customary status in international law, such as in relation to family and marriage at treaty bodies such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. There is also significant mobilization around, and efforts to delegitimize, the work of UN Special Rapporteurs, not only those working on violence against women but also those dealing with freedom of religion or belief and cultural rights.

Datta also underscores language strategies as some of the most successful tools used by anti-gender actors. He notes that they have learned that a straightforward assault on abortion does not yield results, prompting them to look for alternative approaches. One of the options that they are exploring is discourse around demography and shrinking populations, a genuine and legitimate concern for many countries in Europe. Accordingly, they talk about demographic decline as a way to indirectly address the issue of abortion. For example, Hungary has hosted demographic summits that included speakers from One of Us and FWI.

Datta also discusses a strategy that he has personally experienced, one that targets progressive advocates rather than public and advocacy arenas: strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), typically based on defamation claims. These lawsuits are used particularly extensively in Poland, and Datta gives the example of Marta Lempart, who organized a women's strike and is facing over 100 lawsuits. A good number of them have been filed by Ordo Iuris. Datta himself is facing a lawsuit from the same organization and another from CitizenGO. In Spain, local abortion clinics and providers are facing legal action from a group called Christian Lawyers (Abogados Cristianos).

The challenge with these lawsuits is that even if they are not successful – and Datta is not aware of any instances in Poland where they have been – they still have an impact. They act as a scare tactic; if you see someone in your community being sued, then you may think twice about saying or doing something. They also exhaust the financial and intellectual resources of the sued

individuals and organizations. For Ordo Iuris, for example, this is all beneficial. It announces lawsuits on social media, accompanied by fundraising campaigns. Datta recalls what one friend told him: "Neil, they are fundraising zlotys for the lawsuit against you!" Moreover, the lawyers that it hires are linked to the same organization, so the money stays in the "family." By the time a case is actually adjudicated, which can take several years, everyone will have forgotten what it was about. However, Ordo Iuris will have achieved its intermediate objectives of generating visibility and funding. In that sense, it does not even need to win.

How have the activists responded to the anti-gender movement?

Gender and women's rights organizations are not merely passive observers of anti-gender actors and their progress; they are actively responding to the ongoing backlash. Shameem and Datta both emphasize that the first step that they and their organizations have taken is building knowledge and raising awareness to better understand the anti-gender movement. In this process, they have sought to answer questions similar to those that we asked them in this interview: who are the anti-gender actors, what are their tactics, what discourses are they using, and what impacts are they having? Shameem and Datta and their organizations are also invested in increasing coordination and network building with their partners at the national, transnational, and international levels, as well as quickly sharing gathered information across this network.

Shameem and Datta also highlight several more specific counter-measures. Shameem emphasizes in particular the importance of debunking anti-feminist and anti-rights discourses. She points to the second OURs report, *Rights at Risk: Time for Action* (AWID 2021), which includes a section on unpacking this discourse and highlighting the bad-faith arguments behind it. Another crucial counter-measure for her is increasing the set of feminist and progressive actors engaged with international mechanisms, not only to monitor anti-feminist actors but also to mobilize in service of their own goals. In this way, gender and women's rights organizations are both reactive and proactive, being mindful of the ways in which anti-feminist actors are trying to undermine the system and mobilizing in response.

Datta tells us that his organization's deep commitment to responding to anti-gender actors is encapsulated in its fivefold strategy, each starting with the letter "D": discovering, disarming, dislocating, demonetizing, and defending. Discovering is linked to already mentioned knowledge building. When describing anti-gender actors, Datta likes to use the analogy of fast-food chains. Burger King, McDonald's, KFC, and Pizza Hut, he notes, may all seem like they are selling the same thing: junk food. However, a friend of his, who works at the European Modern Restaurant Association, has

reminded him that they are, in fact, different. When we go to McDonald's, we have a completely different experience than when we go to Pizza Hut. Similarly, though anti-gender actors may look the same from the outside (that is, they are all against human rights for women and sexual minorities), on closer inspection we see that they all have their own specificities, their own ways of thinking, and their own areas of expertise. Once we know this, we can make an educated guess as to how they will respond in certain situations, allowing us to disarm them. As an illustration, Datta gives an example of the report on SRHR prepared by Predrag Matić, a Croatian center-left member of the EP (MEP), that was considered by the EP in June 2021. Before the report was presented, Datta and his team sat down with Matić to inform him about what to expect from specific anti-gender organizations. They knew that CitizenGO would organize mass petitions; that the ADF would come up with legal argumentation or even a legal paper; and that the Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe (FAFCE), because of its link with the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE), would reach out to MEPs who are inclined to listen to the Church. On the petition from CitizenGO, for example, they were able to advise Matić to speak to the information technology (IT) department of the EP to make sure that the proper filters were in place so that he would not get spammed by 40,000 emails in one day. They also told him to ensure that his allies in the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) group and other progressive groups were familiar with this. Due to having this rich information, Datta describes the preparation of Matić's office like being on a flight. They were able to reassure them that "[t]his is just turbulence – don't worry; it will go away." The report was ultimately adopted.

Datta's third strategy, dislocating, refers to preventing anti-gender actors from accessing positions of power. CitizenGO and Ordo Iuris, for example, have consultative status on the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The ADF and the ECLJ have applied for participatory status at the CoE, but were rejected thanks to the awareness-raising efforts of Datta and his organization. The fourth strategy is demonetization. Though there has been limited success in this area, Datta notes that they have at least attempted to expose the sources of funding for anti-gender actors. Based on this information, he hopes, strategies can be developed to halt or disrupt this funding. The fifth and final strategy is defending – specifically, supporting frontline activists who are in the trenches, such as Marta Lempart, and defending human rights themselves. Here, he highlights the issue of abortion, which, in reality, is not recognized as a human right in most European countries. Legally, it remains a crime subject to punishment if certain procedures are not followed. He worked closely with several French members of parliament (MPs) who were striving to make abortion a constitutional right, an effort that came to fruition in March 2024.

What suggestions do the activists have for progressive actors?

Asked to offer possible recommendations to progressive actors who wish to contribute to countering the rise of anti-gender politics, Shameem and Datta take different approaches. Datta steers clear of giving concrete recommendations. Instead, he invites progressive actors and the wider audience to recognize that anti-gender mobilization is closely linked to de-democratization processes currently underway. Once niche topics, gender and sexuality have become central to political discourse, but are unfortunately being instrumentalized to undermine and unravel liberal democracy. Datta notes that, in a different context, the increased visibility of SRHR, women's rights, and the rights of sexual minorities would be good news. Now, however, this increasing visibility means that these rights are no longer incrementally increasing and, in some places, are even being rolled back. On a more positive note, Datta points out that the anti-gender activism and pushback are generating an equal, if not greater, amount of energy on the other side, emphasizing the need to harness this energy to effectively counter these actors and advance progressive goals.

For her part, Shameem provides three sets of concrete recommendations for progressive actors who wish to block the rise of anti-gender actors. First, she advises them to seek new narrative strategies to reach wider audiences. As examples, she mentions two organizations: Catholics for the Right to Decide Mexico (Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir México, CDD) and Bridges. CDD launched *Catolicadas*, a series of cartoons featuring a "sympathetic" Sister Juana. The aim was to use comedy and cultural tropes to challenge Catholic dogma on various issues. The cartoon became very popular as an alternative narrative strategy. Bridges, by contrast, focuses on audience analysis. It categorizes audiences into three groups: the "movable middle," those who are already "galvanized," and the steadfast "antis." Engaging with the "movable middle" is especially important, and Bridges does this through the idea of "hope-based communication." Shameem explains that countering anti-feminists by mentioning and then unpacking their arguments often has the unintended side effect of reinforcing those arguments in the minds of audiences. By contrast, hope-based communication focuses on goals for human thriving and progressive gender norms, and on promoting these messages through strategic communication.

Shameem's second recommendation pertains to changing the way in which feminist organizations are funded. She points out that research by the Global Philanthropy Project, the EPF, and the Open Society Foundations has uncovered that anti-gender actors receive significantly more funding than the feminist ecosystem, and that their funding is also continuing to grow. Moreover, anti-feminist actors enjoy more long-term and flexible funding, which is crucial for developing a robust political apparatus,

as opposed to launching more atomized, project-based, and short-term initiatives. By contrast, despite efforts to make funding more flexible and long term, most funding for feminist and progressive civil society remains project based. In the past year, Shameem notes, there has even been a reduction in funding for feminist and progressive initiatives in many areas. This is a cause for concern, and highlights the importance of changing the structure of feminist funding as a key recommendation for countering anti-gender actors.

Finally, Shameem emphasizes the need to build a stronger connective infrastructure among progressive and feminist organizations and activists. She posits that it is paramount to continue to build power and coordinate to be able to respond to anti-gender mobilization on a large scale. More can be done in particular on collecting information about anti-gender actors' campaigns and their operations at the regional and global levels compared to the national level, and on quickly sharing that information via pre-existing relationships to enable allies to anticipate and mobilize in advance.

Conclusion

The rise of anti-gender activists has greatly impacted how supporters of gender and sexual equality operate. Where environments such as the UN and the EP were once reliable venues for the advancement of human rights, Shameem and Datta both report an influx of new faces who, in recent decades, have turned to the international arena in the hopes of stemming the liberal-progressive tide. It is not only the actors themselves that are new; organizations such as the ADF, C-Fam, and Ordo Iuris have also introduced a new repertoire of strategies centered around contesting the artificial notion of "gender ideology."

Progressive actors have been forced to contend with the arrival of this transnational anti-gender movement. At first, in keeping with the adage "Know thy enemy," they tried to make sense of the changing political landscape. This Conversations piece has touched on some of the important contributions that Shameem and Datta have made in this respect. They, together with their colleagues, have mapped who the main anti-gender activists are; exposed their connections and funding sources; and unpacked the narratives and strategies used to mobilize against gender equality and LGBTI+ rights. This research continues to inform our understanding of the transnational mobilization against "gender ideology." Indeed, in their publications on anti-gender politics, academics and journalists alike regularly draw on reports from the AWID and the EPF.

Crucially, however, Shameem and Datta remind us that investigating anti-gender activism is insufficient. Progressive voices must also formulate a response that prevents the removal of existing rights and lays the foundation

for new rights gains. In other words, the anti-gender actors' counter-mobilization must also be countered. Indeed, discovery is but the first of five strategies that Datta recommends in the fight against the anti-gender movement; progressive actors should also aim to disarm, dislocate, and demonetize their adversaries, while always defending human rights and their advocates. Shameem similarly emphasizes how her work is simultaneously reactive *and* proactive.

Other feminist activists have also begun to fight back against anti-gender mobilization. Take, for example, the manual *Let's Shut Down Antifeminism! The Verbal Self-Defence Guide for Feminists* by Irene Zeilinger (2017), which was published in English by Women Against Violence in Europe (WAVE). The Berlin-based Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy (CFFP) recently launched the study *Power over Rights: Understanding and Countering the Anti-Gender Campaigns* (CFFP 2022). Its authors recount different examples of how activists have succeeded in furthering women's and LGBTI+ rights, and formulate recommendations on how best to counter anti-gender campaigns. At the UN, the Equal Rights Coalition was established in 2016 by member states who are eager to cooperate with civil society to defend LGBTI+ rights. This led, for instance, to the briefing note *Research on and Responses to Contemporary Anti-Gender Movements* (Equal Rights Coalition 2022). These examples confirm Shameem and Datta's insight that activists have learned to adapt; while they initially sought to make sense of the anti-gender movement, they now collaborate to develop strategies to counter this composite adversary.

We believe that scholars should follow suit. Currently, the academic literature betrays a preoccupation with describing and explaining transnational anti-gender politics. This work is of great value; indeed, NGOs often draw on it in their communications (see for example Reid 2018). However, if it is born out of a keen sense that women's and LGBTI+ rights are under threat, it would only make sense for researchers to shift their gaze to the progressive counter-offensive. It is crucial, for example, to learn when, how, and why resistance efforts succeed. Such a shift toward studying and amplifying activist responses can equip us with the tools necessary to dismantle the anti-gender movement's agenda. This would enrich the existing body of knowledge while also providing tangible support to the activists on the frontlines who are directly challenging anti-gender politics.

Notes

1. Following Karen Alter and Michael Zürn (2020), we understand backlash as a type of politics characterized by (1) a retrograde objective of returning to a prior social condition, (2) extraordinary goals and tactics that challenge dominant scripts, and (3) a threshold condition of entering mainstream public discourse. The concept of backlash has attracted criticism on empirical and

theoretical grounds. David Paternotte (2020), for example, warns that the language of backlash gives the false impression that anti-gender actors are merely reactionary, and not productive, actors. We believe, however, that Alter and Zürn's definition is compatible with an agentic approach to anti-gender politics. More importantly, we retain the language of backlash because it is a term that practitioners, including Shameem and Datta, themselves use.

2. For an exception, see Laura Murray's conversation with scholar-activist Sonia Corrêa (Murray 2022).
3. Black Pete is a traditional companion of Sinterklaas or St Nicholas, the Dutch equivalent to Santa Claus. The character was commonly depicted as a racist caricature, including through the use of blackface. After years of widespread criticism, mainstream celebrations began using non-traditional *roetveegpieten* (whose faces are smudged with soot) and various colours of face paint as alternatives to Black Pete.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Huizhi Bao for her assistance in transcribing the interviews.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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