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Special Section introduction: threats and opportunities: the contestation of gender and sexuality in international organizations

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Introduction

The spirits of the Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam) were high during the 69th session of the United Nations (UN) Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) between March 10 and 21, 2025. The right-wing advocacy group gleefully remarked that this intergovernmental body, “one of the UN’s largest annual feminist gathering [sic], has seen a dramatic mood shift, largely because of the change in US leadership” (Oas 2025). Feminist scholars have long noted the CSW’s seminal role in furthering the rights of women across the globe (Englehart and Miller 2020; Galey 1979; Laville 2008). This role can no longer be taken for granted. As C-Fam’s Director of Research observed with relish, “in the past, feminists largely ignored the conservative presence at CSW, but no longer” (Oas 2025). Indeed, feminist activists expressed their dismay over the changing climate at the CSW by organizing myriad events on “backlash,” “setbacks,” “rollback,” and “pushbacks” (Oas 2025). These side events took place alongside a panel titled “The Gender Ideology Assault on Women and the Family” that was co-sponsored by the United States (US) Mission to the United Nations, C-Fam, and the Heritage Foundation.

Developments at the CSW are not unique. Women’s and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex (LGBTI+) rights activists are witnessing how a wide range of international organizations (IOs) are transforming from reliable allies into veritable battlegrounds. The recent re-election of President Donald Trump in the US has, as C-Fam’s statement suggests, provided a fresh impetus to this process. Yet, the Trump administration’s efforts to undermine gender and sexual equality at the international level in many respects

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continue those of Trump's first term or even of previous Republican presidencies, albeit in a more intensified form. To be sure, the dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has dealt progressive activists a new blow. The same goes for the decision to pull the US out of the LGBTI Core Groups at the Organization of American States and the UN. Other developments – such as the withdrawal from the UN Human Rights Council and the World Health Organization (WHO), the reinstatement of the Mexico City Policy or “global gag rule,” and the renewed membership of the Geneva Consensus Declaration on Promoting Women's Health and Strengthening the Family – have echoed previous initiatives.

Moreover, Trump is swimming with the anti-gender current. In his first speech at the UN General Assembly, Argentinean President Javier Milei denounced the UN as “a multi-tentacled leviathan” besotted with “the woke agenda's collectivism and moral posturing” (Buenos Aires Herald 2024). Milei, like Trump, has terminated his country's membership of the WHO and the LGBTI Core Groups. At the G20, Argentina rejected a statement on female empowerment that even Saudi Arabia was willing to sign (Gillespie, Tobias, and Iglesias 2024). Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has accused the European Union (EU) of conducting an “LGBTQ offensive against family-friendly nations” (Orbán 2023). Orbán has not only restricted sexual diversity domestically, most infamously by adopting anti-propaganda legislation and banning Pride events, but has also been at the forefront of resisting “gender ideology” at the international level (Mos and Macedo Piovezan 2024). These leaders are but a few examples of politicians who have abandoned their countries' erstwhile support for gender equality and LGBTI+ rights in favor of a global anti-gender alliance with authoritarian regimes.

In this Special Section, we think through the implications that these changing dynamics around gender and sexuality have for both the *theorization* and the *practice* of advocacy within IOs. Our main contention is that these organizations serve as both threats and opportunities for morally conservative or “pro-family” activists, but that the unraveling of the liberal international order is tipping the balance ever more toward the latter (Bettiza and Lewis 2020). Extant scholarship, we believe, has not sufficiently recognized how the opportunity structure at IOs is being actively refashioned to the advantage of moral conservatives.

Anti-gender activists initially saw IOs as hotbeds of radicalism (see for example Kuby 2015; O'Leary 1997). Some even embraced a “conservative nationalism” that favored abandoning IOs altogether (Dueck 2019). Others viewed themselves as fighting a rearguard action; even if the deck was stacked against them, they believed that multilateral institutions were too important to ignore. As spokespersons of Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) International remarked in their manual *The Global Human*

Rights Landscape, “as utterly frustrating as the situation may have become, the only way change will occur is by engagement and participation, not apathy and neglect” (Coleman, Koren, and Miranda-Flefil 2014, i; see also Gennarini 2021).

Most early studies reflected the defensive nature of anti-gender activism. They commented on the formation of “unholy” alliances or “Baptist–Burqa” networks, which crossed cultural and religious divides that had once seemed unbridgeable, and which desperately sought to stem the liberal tide within organizations such as the UN and the EU (Bob 2012; Buss and Herman 2003; Butler 2006; Chappell 2006; Mos 2018). Scholars have subsequently highlighted the reactive character of conservative mobilization through the use of concepts such as “backlash” and “counter-movements” (Corredor 2019; Cupać and Ebetürk 2020, 2021; Goetz 2019; Graff and Korolczuk 2024; Schopmans and Cupać 2021). This literature has usefully analyzed how IOs have become important sites of contestation around international norms of gender and sexuality.

Yet, the dominant portrayal remains one in which moral conservatives are shielding themselves from the corrosive influence of IOs. This, we believe, captures only part of the story. Anti-gender actors are no longer content, if they even ever were, to play defense. As Rebecca Sanders and Laura Dudley Jenkins (2022, 402) have powerfully argued, “patriarchal populists” are on the offensive; they have “increasingly coordinated attacks on international women’s rights [and LGBTI+ rights] at the United Nations and other international fora.” Today’s moral conservatives increasingly operate from a position of strength rather than weakness. The burgeoning literature on the anti-gender movement has documented the many places across the world where traditionalist politicians and their civil society allies have gained (in) power (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). This scholarship has also captured how a *transnational* anti-gender network has gone from strength to strength (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024; Caiani and Tranfić 2024; Lavizzari and Siročić 2023; McEwen and Towns 2025; Velasco 2023; Velasco and Swindle 2024). Through our focus on IOs, we aim to complement this literature. We flesh out the ways in which anti-gender actors are successfully carving out opportunities for activism within the multilateral system.

Analytical framework: IOs as sites of threat and opportunity for anti-gender mobilization

In this Special Section, we suggest that anti-gender actors hold a dual understanding of IOs, viewing them as both *threats* and *opportunities*. This distinction is both historical and conceptual. Historically, while anti-gender actors initially framed IOs primarily as threats, they have increasingly come to

recognize them as opportunities for advancing their “pro-life” and “pro-family” agenda. Conceptually, the distinction between threats and opportunities builds on the differentiation between closed and open opportunity structures in social movement studies (Meyer and Minkoff 2004).

IOs as threats

The normative foundations of the liberal international order include gender equality and women’s rights. IOs have embraced these norms, thanks in no small part to decades of feminist advocacy. At the UN, feminist non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and supportive states have advanced gender equality through milestones such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the UN Women’s Conferences, and the UN Security Council’s landmark Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (Goetz 2019; Pietilä 2007). Similar accomplishments are visible at the regional level (see van der Vleuten, van Eerdewijk, and Roggeband 2014). Within the Organization of American States, for example, feminist activists and their allies within the Inter-American Commission of Women spearheaded the first ever international treaty on violence against women. Transnational advocacy has likewise influenced the EU’s promotion of gender mainstreaming and LGBTI+ rights.

As a result of these advances, anti-gender actors have long viewed IOs as threats to their “pro-life” and “pro-family” values. Some have therefore resisted transnational engagement. Seeing organizations such as the UN as embodying the “Antichrist” (Buss and Herman 2003, 19–32), they have focused their efforts on the domestic level instead. Other actors have mobilized transnationally to block liberal policy developments that threaten to undermine a binary worldview that rests on the complementarity of the sexes. The Holy See, for example, sought to replace references to “gender” with “sex” at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (Haslegrave and Havard 1995, 465). Such mobilization has often reflected a defensive or obstructive posture. Existing scholarship has analyzed such reactionary activism through the prism of backlash advocacy (Cupać and Ebetürk 2020, 2021), counter-movements (Corredor 2019), and norm spoiling (Sanders 2018; Sanders and Jenkins 2022). This Special Section builds on these works by further probing how moral conservatives perceive IOs as inimical to their values.

In “God’s Lawyers? The Christian Right at the European Court of Human Rights,” Martijn Mos explores how the Christian Right has reacted to the progressive jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). His article shows how one organization, the European Centre for Law and Justice, sought to ward off the ECtHR’s threat to its values by launching a campaign to delegitimize this authoritative body of the Council of Europe.

In a separate contribution, entitled “Opportunity Beckons: The Anti-Gender Movement at the European Parliament,” Mos and Lucrecia Rubio Grundell argue that the European Parliament (EP) has a long-established reputation for promoting women’s and LGBTI+ rights. This limits the anti-gender movement’s capacity to shape EU policy. The EP’s track record, so the authors reason, would seem to make the EU’s legislative arena an inhospitable venue for anti-gender activism.

The article “Anti-Gender Backlash as Anti-Western Politics: Examining the UN’s ‘Being LGBT in Asia’ Project in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand” by George Baylon Radics is one of the first studies of anti-gender activism in Southeast Asia. He shows how “Being LGBT in Asia,” a project administered by the UN Development Programme alongside USAID, has provoked a backlash rooted in anti-Western and anti-colonial narratives. Conservative actors in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand have reinforced nationalist and moral resistance to global equality norms by framing the project as a foreign imposition.

Lastly, in a Conversations piece entitled “A Practitioner’s Perspective on Resisting Anti-Gender Politics in International Organizations: An Interview with Naureen Shameem and Neil Datta,” we, the co-editors of the Special Section, talk to two practitioners who come across anti-gender mobilization within IOs on an everyday basis. Naureen Shameem led the Observatory on the Universality of Rights at the Association for Women’s Rights in Development. Neil Datta is the Executive Director of the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF). In addition to identifying the key anti-gender actors and their patterns of activism and strategies, Shameem and Datta describe anti-gender activism within IOs as a form of reactive politicization. Shameem highlights how feminist advances at the UN alarmed anti-feminist actors, prompting the Vatican to ally with states from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and other conservative blocs, forming what is now known as an “unholy alliance.” Similarly, Datta observes how institutions such as the Council of Europe and the EU were seen as unwelcome to a moral conservative agenda. In response, as epitomized by the launch of the Agenda Europe coalition in 2013, anti-gender actors began contesting the actions and overall legitimacy of these IOs.

When taken together, the contributions to the Special Section thus show how anti-gender actors view the embrace of women’s and LGBTI+ rights by a wide range of IOs as threatening.

IOs as opportunities

Importantly, however, anti-gender actors also increasingly see IOs as opportunities. They not only mobilize defensively, to stave off threats, but actively seek to create conservative policy and promote traditionalist norms around

gender and sexuality. Reactionary actors, in other words, have become proactive players at the international level. Anti-gender actors have learned to engage strategically with global institutions, appropriating – through a process of “competitive mimicry” (Cupać and Ebetürk 2021, 2022) – the language of human rights and organizational resources for coalition building. We should therefore recognize the *productive* dimension of anti-gender mobilization.

This insight builds on the concept of political opportunity structures, which was originally developed in social movement studies to capture the formal and informal features of political systems that shape the possibilities for collective action (see for example Kitschelt 1986; McAdam 1996; Meyer and Minkoff 2004). These include the openness of institutional arenas, the availability of allies within these arenas, and the degree of access to and responsiveness of decision-making structures. IOs, as international governance spaces, offer a distinctive set of such opportunities, from formal consultative mechanisms to discursive venues for legitimacy building and norm contestation (Tallberg et al. 2013).

Scholars have long studied feminist activism within IOs through this lens, highlighting how feminist NGOs have accessed these spaces to shape global norms, mobilize coalitions, and gain recognition (Joachim 2007; Joachim and Locher 2009; Zippel 2004). Our contribution is to analyze anti-gender mobilizations through this same lens. We show how anti-gender actors, too, engage IOs from within, leveraging access, coalition building, and institutional legitimacy to contest and reshape global norms. This shift in focus allows us to better understand how the very tools and spaces once used to advance gender equality are now being strategically repurposed to undermine it.

In this Special Section, Rebecca Sanders and Laura Dudley Jenkins apply this perspective to the UN. Their article “From Norm Breaking to Norm Making: Anti-Feminist Reactionary Norm Building in International Politics” shows how a broad coalition of actors, including conservative civil society groups and populist governments, are no longer content to oppose gender equality and sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) rights. This coalition increasingly seizes the UN as an opportunity for replacing existing frameworks with “pro-family” alternatives and for institutionalizing an anti-feminist agenda. Sanders and Jenkins conceptualize this proactive development as “reactionary international norm building.”

Similarly, in his article, Mos shows that conservative organizations are not merely seeking to delegitimize the ECtHR; the Christian Right is also using the ECtHR’s resources – including the provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights, especially concerning religious freedom, and the doctrine of the “margin of appreciation” – to steer jurisprudence in a conservative direction.

This dynamic is also evident in Mos and Rubio Grundell's article, where they suggest that the EP is gradually transforming from a progressive threat to an opportunity for conservative advocacy. While the anti-gender movement's potential for policy influence is still limited, the authors observe that this movement is taking advantage of two other opportunities that the EP provides: organizational legitimation and the mobilization of allies.

Finally, in the Conversations piece, the two practitioners, Naureen Shameem and Neil Datta, both argue that IOs are no longer only venues at which to contest progressive norms; instead, they now provide platforms for building coalitions, shaping discourse, and advancing an anti-gender agenda. Shameem discusses how activists, despite also wielding anti-globalist rhetoric, use the UN to reframe human rights norms around life and the family. Datta similarly observes how these actors have adapted their strategies to influence regional IOs. He emphasizes the secularization of religious arguments as well as the weaponization of religious freedom.

Taken together, these contributions show that conservative engagement with IOs is not merely reactionary; anti-gender actors also see these institutions as an opportunity to further their agenda.

A new research agenda

While this Special Section establishes the evolving role of IOs as both threats and opportunity structures for anti-gender actors, its scope remains necessarily limited. With only a few contributions, we can fully capture neither the complexity, variation, and dynamics of this dual positioning, nor the growing resources that these actors invest in leveraging IOs as opportunity structures across different regions, institutions, and institutional arenas. We therefore call for a broader research agenda on anti-gender actors' engagement with IOs. Much of the existing scholarship has portrayed IOs as liberal strongholds and anti-gender mobilization as oppositional or external. Future research must examine how these actors are not merely resisting, but actively reshaping the internal workings of IOs – securing consultative status, participating in debates, influencing policy language, and cultivating alliances with sympathetic state and non-state actors. Studies in this vein should, in particular, seek to uncover when and why anti-gender actors opt for norm *production* through IOs rather than for norm *contestation*. One potential explanation concerns institutional vulnerabilities. Funding dependencies, bureaucratic fragmentation, and consensus-based decision-making rules may all be exploited for anti-gender aims.

Future research should also examine the tensions and paradoxes in how anti-gender groups frame their engagement with IOs. How do these actors reconcile deep skepticism or spiritual condemnation of globalism with

active participation in its institutions? Why do they appropriate feminist and LGBTI+ tactics while seeking to undo feminist and LGBTI+ gains? How may their use of human rights language reconfigure the very normative grammar of IOs? Studying these contradictions should illuminate how IOs are being transformed in the process of anti-gender mobilization. Moreover, we hope that this research agenda will offer valuable insights into how feminist and LGBTI+ activists, along with their allies within states and IOs, may respond effectively. We invite scholars to take up this agenda with empirical depth, interdisciplinary approaches, and theoretical creativity, as the stakes for global gender justice – as well as for the integrity of IOs – could not be higher.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Jelena Cupać is a Research Fellow at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Germany. Her work has focused on anti-feminist backlash at the United Nations (UN) within the broader context of anti-liberal politics, democratic backsliding in the Balkans, and, more recently, the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) regulation on democratization, including its intersection with anti-feminist backlash. Her research has been published in *International Affairs*, the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *Democratization*, and *Ethics & International Affairs*, among others.

Martijn Mos is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at Leiden University, the Netherlands. His research centers on the contestation of international norms related to gender and sexuality within international organizations, the member states of the European Union, and transnational civil society. His work has been published in outlets such as the *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *Politics and Governance*, *Mobilisation: An International Quarterly*, *Problems of Post-Communism*, the *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, *East European Politics*, and *New Perspectives*. He has also widely contributed to edited volumes.

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