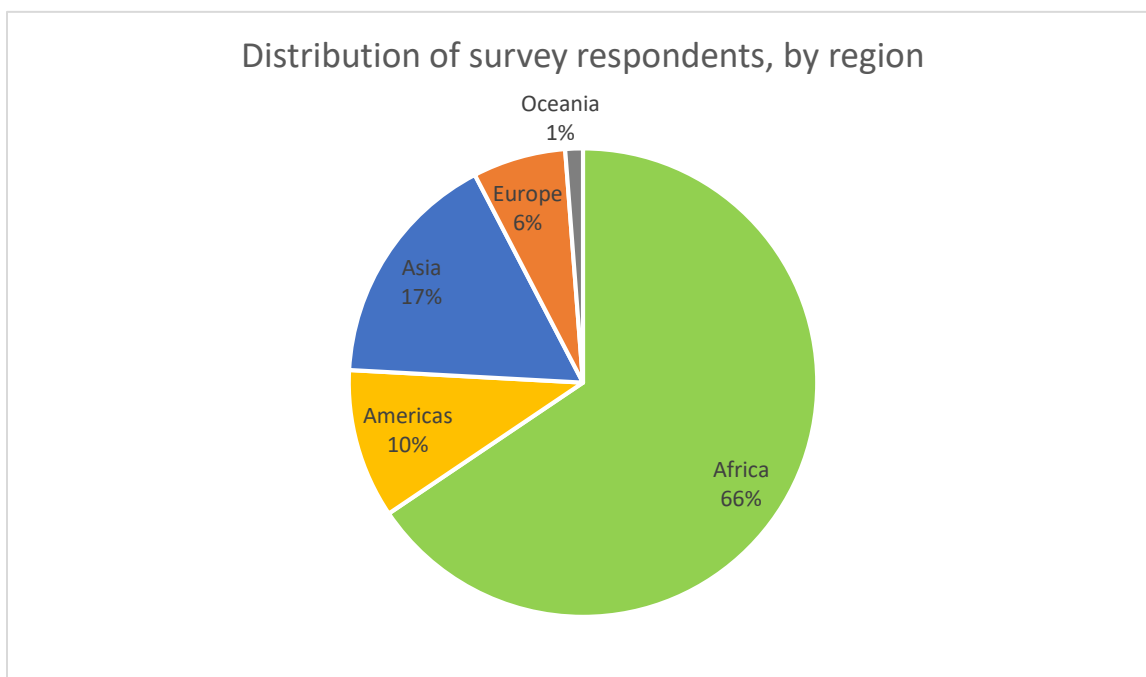


Anti-rights groups survey: key themes

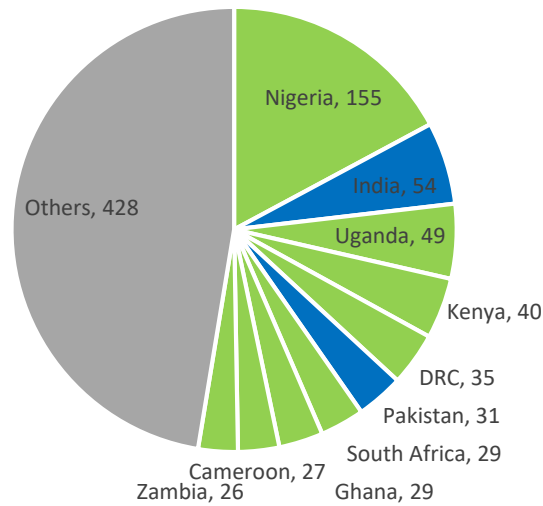
Sample description

CIVICUS members took part in a survey, held in September 2019, about their experiences of facing anti-rights groups. The survey was one of the means by which CIVICUS members contributed to CIVICUS's 2019 report on anti-rights groups and civil society, along with a series of interviews and in-country consultations.

The survey received 903 responses from 115 countries. Overall, 66 per cent of the responses (592) came from 40 countries in Africa, with Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), in that order, accounting for nearly half of the continent's sample. Second came Asia with 17 per cent of responses (149), collected in 23 different countries. Approximately two thirds of the responses from Asia came from India, Pakistan and Nepal, in that order. Ten per cent of respondents (93) were based in the Americas, with 21 countries from this region represented, led by the USA, Mexico, Argentina and Colombia, which jointly accounted for more than half of the responses from the Americas. Europe contributed six per cent of the responses (58), spread fairly evenly among 26 different countries, with the highest number of responses coming from the UK, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands. Just over one per cent of the responses (11) came from six different countries in Oceania: Fiji, Australia, New Zealand, the Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu.

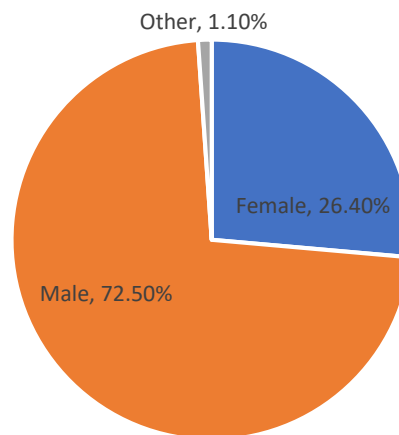


Top 10 countries, by number of respondents



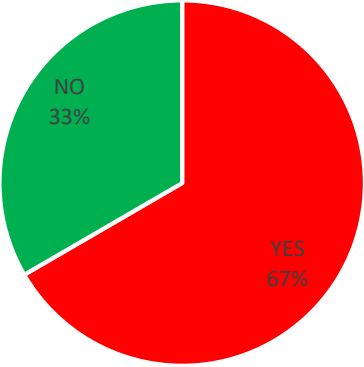
The sample was not gender-balanced, as 72.5 per cent of respondents self-identified as male. A small percentage of respondents, barely over 1 per cent, identified as neither female nor male. The survey was made available in three different languages – English, French and Spanish. Most responses (83 per cent) were collected through the English questionnaire, followed by the French (12 per cent) and the Spanish (five per cent) editions. While respondents to the Spanish language survey (all but one of whom were from Latin America) were 57.8 per cent female, respondents to the French language survey (103 out of 110 of whom were based in Africa) were 89 per cent male. The English language questionnaire, which had a wider geographic spread but had a strong majority of respondents from Asia and Africa, had 72 per cent male respondents.

Distribution of survey respondents, by gender

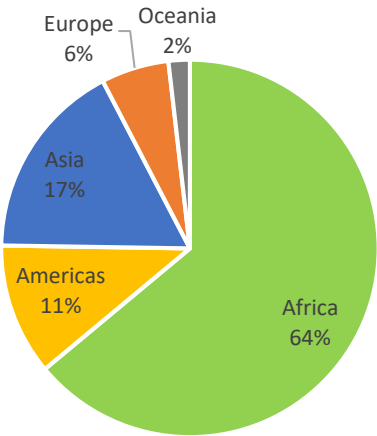


Two-thirds of respondents said they had encountered anti-rights groups and therefore went on to complete the rest of survey. By region, the proportion of respondents who had encountered anti-rights groups varied from 60 per cent of those in Europe to 91 per cent of those in Oceania (although here the number of respondents was very small). Those who had encountered anti-rights groups in the course of their work or activism accounted for 65 per cent of African respondents, 69 per cent of Asian respondents and 73 per cent of those in the Americas.

Q: Have you encountered anti-rights groups in the context of your work or activism?



Respondents who have encountered anti-rights groups, by region



Survey analysis

The survey was sent to all CIVICUS members, about 12 per cent of whom chose to provide responses. The sample cannot therefore necessarily be considered as representative of wider civil society opinion. All the substantive questions in the survey were open-ended and sought to collect qualitative data, with the aim of detecting interesting case studies, singling out specific situations to watch for, understanding tactics and strategies and developing insights into successful civil society responses. The survey's ultimate goal was to collect a wide variety of civil society voices to feed into CIVICUS's analysis on the topic and inform CIVICUS's overall report on civil society and anti-rights groups.

1. Characterisation of anti-rights groups

Analysis of the open-ended responses to the questions regarding the types of anti-groups encountered and the ways they operate reveals not only the existence of a variety of situations, but also a wide variation in the understanding of what constitutes an anti-rights group.

Most interviewees highlight the connections between the anti-rights groups they identify and the structures of government, as illustrated by these responses from Kenya, Nigeria and Cameroon:¹

[Anti-rights groups] are generally government-sponsored groups with diverse interests attached to their manifest, mainly using social media channels and blogs to level attacks [...] against individuals or staff working in rights-oriented groups. They are sponsored by politicians who fear that such groups compete for political space. It's all about succession politics. – Charles Mwangi, Six Knm self-help group, Kenya.

Anti-rights groups are usually sponsored by elements in government [...]. On several occasions, there have been counter-protests against the BringBackOurGirls movement. – Olutoke Dotun, Amplify Initiative for the Advancement of Community Development, Nigeria.

Anti-rights groups in Cameroon are either groups that have close links to government officials or individuals who simply form such groups to discredit the important work being done by civil society. They either present themselves as journalism associations or concerned individuals claiming to be working against civil society organisations that work for foreign interests. Their first complain about us is usually that we work for foreign governments and lobbyists. – Colbert Gwain, A Common Future, Cameroon.

Numerous respondents, notably from countries that have authoritarian governments, are experiencing violent conflict, or have highly restricted space for civil society (civic space), identify anti-rights groups with the state, its leaders and its security agencies because they view these as the main violators of civic space freedoms and the human rights that civil society promotes; they generally see anti-rights groups as attacking rights broadly rather than targeting certain categories of people. A great proportion of African respondents adopt this perspective, followed by numerous Asian ones.

The following testimonies from the DRC are typical in this regard:

Here in the DRC anti-rights groups are most often certain authorities and some members of the armed groups, the militias. Their tactics are to ignore human rights pretending not to know them, to intimidate all those who promote, protect and defend these rights. The latter live under threat, others have been forced to flee, go into exile to preserve their lives, and others have been killed.

¹ All quotations cited in this report are edited (and oftentimes translated) extracts of survey responses. In all cases, the views are the respondents' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of their organisations.

They remove traces of massive human rights violations including by murdering witnesses. – Arnold Djuma, Coalition des Volontaires pour la Paix et le Développement (CVPD), DRC.

In our country, and especially in our region, it is primarily politicians who are part of anti-rights groups. Like any politician in power, they enjoy certain privileges and can harm people who disapprove of their way of managing their power. [...] The second group is the warlords [...]. Their message is one of intimidation and keeping the population in a lethargy, and in the case of warlords it is also a message of hate. – Male respondent from the DRC.²

Other groups cited by respondents as being ‘anti-rights’ are violent gangs in urban peripheries, terrorist organisations, separatist militias, government party supporters, land grabbers and corporations in the extractive sectors. Also cited are “groups that vindicate the dictatorship” in Argentina, “groups that defend armed conflict” and reject the peace process in Colombia, “alt-right white supremacy groups” and “anti-immigration groups in local areas denying basic rights to immigrants” in the USA, with similar concerns in Australia and the UK, and “GONGOs [government-organised non-governmental organisations] at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.”

It is worth noting that even in countries, mostly in the global north, where the state is not generally perceived as an anti-rights actor, there is growing concern about anti-rights political parties that are penetrating the political system and coordinating anti-rights policies in various areas, as expressed by respondents from the Netherlands and Canada:

Anti-rights political parties in parliament: anti-development cooperation, anti-migration, anti-pro climate policies. – Anne-Marie Heemskerk, Partos, The Netherlands.

The People's Party of Canada [is an anti-rights group]. Mostly in discussion with our stakeholders about different aspects of political advocacy, they've pushed forward an anti-progress rhetoric with regards to social inclusion and environmental conservation. – Brett McMillan, Alberta Council for Global Cooperation, Canada.

A respondent from Venezuela, however, points out that anti-rights groups might not necessarily be organised groups, but rather can be informal actors or “opinion trends”:

They are not really organised groups, but opinion trends, some of which are driven by influencers and which seek to introduce restrictions on issues related to the right to safe abortion, gender identity issues and economic, social, cultural and environmental rights, particularly those related to economic freedoms and property rights. – Lorena Liendo Rey, Red por los Derechos Humanos de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes, Venezuela.

Among those who identify anti-rights groups as targeting a specific population and seeking to limit their enjoyment of rights, the majority identify anti-rights groups that focus on sexual and reproductive rights, with two major targets of choice: women and LGBTQI people.³

² Respondents who indicated they would prefer to remain anonymous are identified only by gender and country in this report.

³ Various formulations of this abbreviation were used by survey respondents. For this text, they have been standardised in the abbreviation LGBTQI, which may not necessarily have been the form used by the respondent.

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS UNDER ATTACK

Among the groups we have faced are community members who believe that women should not be given leadership opportunities and female genital mutilation should be compulsory for girls.” – Albashir Mohamed Nur, Eastern Africa Youth Coordination Centroid, Kenya.

“[Anti-rights groups are] groups of people, community leaders and opinion leaders who oppose the comprehensive sexuality education of young people as a sexual and reproductive health right. They produce programmes and information sessions [on this subject] on various radio and television channels and ground their argument on morality, spiritual values and ‘morals’ to further depress young people and turn them hypocritical and unaware of STDs, HIV and unwanted pregnancies.” – Male respondent from the DRC.

“The anti-rights groups I have personally encountered are non-formalised and non-organised groups. [...] One of their main issues is women’s and girls’ rights. They believe that women and girls are given too much priority in the international media [and civil society]. [...] Their firm affirmation that the gender disparity gap has already been closed so there is no need for any further affirmative action for women and girls has been a great down force to the work of civil society. These groups are mostly groups of young and old men, active on social media attacking any activity that promotes women’s and girls’ rights.” – Female respondent from Ghana.

“[Anti-rights groups] are using violence and stopping women from attending women enlightenment programmes. They also fight our girl child education programmes.” – H E Mazi Jideofor Umeh, Ugonma Foundation, Nigeria.

“I have encountered anti-LGBTQI rights groups. A section of pastors calling themselves Kenya Evangelicals and sponsored by politicians have been leading the campaign against gay people. Their tactic is to normalise discrimination by opposing any attempt to decriminalise LGBTQI laws. They hire the best lawyers to counter our efforts to get our rights to love, they lead mass demonstrations against LGBTQI people. They target anyone who raises their voice on LGBTQI rights. They influence political appointments to the powerful Kenya film classification board, which polices any attempt by music artist or film artist to advocate for LGBTQI rights through arts and entertainment. They ban any video with a gay or a lesbian or a trans person. This group wants to make LGBTQI people look like they are enemies of the state.” – Kirimi Mwendia Evans, Victory Pride Center, Kenya.

In these cases, although anti-rights groups are usually identified as being distinct from the state, they are seen as being backed by powerful institutional actors, including state and faith institutions and leaders. In some cases, respondents also identify specific state agencies as anti-rights actors because they embody the ideas promoted by anti-rights groups and translate them into public policy, as seen in the following extract:

The Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs [is an anti-rights actor because] they target sexual and gender minorities and sex workers. They use religiously-instigated discrimination [and employ] overt and covert heteropatriarchal messages to explain what values are deemed African and, in the process, single out sexual and gender minorities and sex workers. In some instances, they use the Christian declaration in our constitution to incite hatred [...]. The same messages are used to stifle fundamental freedoms of speech and expression, so the victims can’t engage in counter-dialogues and debates to defend their views. – Reuben Silungwe, Zambia Sex Workers Alliance.

ANTI-LGBTQI GROUPS IN BOTSWANA

We have been doing strategic litigation on criminalisation of same-sex-sexual conduct and have faced opposition and resistance from Evangelical church leaders. First, they attempted to [file an Amicus Curiae Brief] to oppose LEGABIBO's registration case. After we won at the High Court, they made public pronouncements to push for an appeal. The government appealed. We won the appeal, then they went further to lobby for the registrar of societies to disobey the court order. In our recent win on the decriminalisation case, the evangelical church wrote a statement that they will do whatever possible to ensure the government appeals. They have support and representation within parliament and at the Attorney General level. They use their contacts to push their agenda inside. They use government resources. Their message is that homosexuality is evil and against the fabric of our society. It has also become evident that there is a lot of representation of these views within government structures, traditional structures and families. The religious analysis of what is wrong and what is right has replaced the cultural analysis of tolerance, acceptance and coexistence. Traditional leaders are religious and use the religious analysis to condemn homosexuality. Because of this, [families] reject their queer children or take them to church for cleansing. In some instances, they stage events where lesbian women are prayed for in public, [so that they are] born again and stop being lesbians. [...] [Pastors] depict being gay as being possessed by a demon and evil spirits and these can be cast away – the idea of 'praying the gay away'. Individual religious leaders who support our cause and our work are rejected by the church, and young queer pastors risk not being ordained if they become open about their sexuality.

Anna Mmolai-Chalmers, LEGABIBO-The Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals of Botswana.

When describing anti-rights groups, respondents emphasise their use of hate discourse and the instrumentalisation and politicisation of tradition, religion – including hardline, highly conservative and evangelical readings of Christianity and Islam – nationalist sentiments and racist beliefs. They also point out that it is common for anti-rights groups to portray civil society as driven by 'foreign' interests.

THE INSTRUMENTALISATION OF TRADITION, RELIGION, NATION AND RACE

"Anti-rights [groups] always prioritise their beliefs over rights." – Danessa Luna, Asociación de Mujeres GENERANDO, Guatemala.

"Based on a misinterpretation of religious text, faith-based organisations oppose the full enjoyment of personal freedoms and rights." - Abiodun Rufus-Unegbu, Leadership Initiative for Youth Empowerment, Nigeria.

"[These groups are] mostly religious groups that feel the bible is the only code to be followed. They say things like having sex with another man is sin and should be punished by death, and abortion is murder and whoever does it will not go to heaven." – Charles Emma Ofwono, Development Connection, Uganda.

"The anti-rights group I have encountered uses traditional, cultural and religious norms as the basis for campaigning against LGBTQI rights in Ghana. They normally target religious and traditional leaders who they say should protect us against any aberration of social norms." – Male respondent from Ghana.

"Several forms of anti-human rights groups have emerged in Jordan, the first being some religious groups that oppose the realisation of civil rights that contravene Islamic law. There are many business groups that oppose the realisation of economic and social human rights, as well as some associations and journalists associated with political power opposing human rights in general. These groups often use

traditional media and social media to attack human rights defenders by tarnishing their image and portraying them as third-party agents.” – Ahmad Awad, Phenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies, Jordan.

“[These are] religious fundamentalist groups that in the context of the abortion debate maintain the position that ‘both lives need to be protected’, as they say, while establishing alliances with right-wing sectors that are in favour of the almost total commodification of life.” – Claudio Boda, Unión de Usuarios y Consumidores, Argentina.

“[Anti-rights groups are] usually religion-based groups, posing as civil society, arguing to end rights for sex workers, LGBTQI people, drug users and others, usually on the basis of ‘family values’.” – Female respondent from South Africa.

“Anti-rights groups are mostly faith-based organisations advocating for the ‘traditional family setting’ and ‘abstinence-only’ education. Their leader has a radio station that is used to transmit their message and teachings. In addition, they have held protests outside of LGBTQI-related events with messages calling for our repentance, to turn to Jesus [or be condemned].” – Kevin Mendez, Belize Youth Empowerment for Change.

“Religious extremists threaten people by propagating propaganda that they are enemies of Islam and are morally corrupting our children.” – Female respondent from Pakistan.

“[These are] groups that call themselves ‘pro-life’, whose sole objective is to reduce progress in sexual and reproductive rights and impose a logic of domination over women’s bodies, against the full exercise of their right to choose.” – Male respondent from Bolivia.

“[They are] mainly evangelical or neo-Pentecostal religious groups along with some Catholic sectors, mostly linked to right-wing political forces that focus their discourse on ‘gender ideology’ and intend to repeal hard-won rights (for example, legal abortion and the law that guarantees the rights of trans people)” – Analía Bettoni, Instituto de Comunicación y Desarrollo, Uruguay.

“Anti-rights groups are mostly supported by evangelical churches; at this time they are allied to the government and have several ministers in the executive, such as education. They oppose the ‘gender ideology’, democratic parity and the Global Compact on Migration, they call for the expulsion of the UN [United Nations] and to end relations with the EU [European Union]. They request the closure of several CSOs [civil society organisations] and have introduced a project to regulate them.” – Female respondent from Paraguay.

“Anti-rights groups use ‘moral’ but fundamentally violent narratives.” – Female respondent from Mexico.

“In my context these groups are against women’s and LGBTQI rights. Targets are those speaking and standing for their rights. Key messages go from ‘you want to destroy our traditional Armenian families’ and ‘you will destroy the Armenian pure genes’, up to ‘do not marry other nationalities’. They speak against civil society as a sector getting its funds from foreign donors, thus supporting foreigners to interfere in the development of the country.” – Female respondent from Armenia.

“[Anti-rights groups] are traditionalists, they claim to represent the true values of being Swazi [...]. Their tactics are based on politicising culture and traditional beliefs. They control the local level through traditional leaders. These leaders are in the communities where we work and are gatekeeping for them. They view human rights as foreign, unSwazi concepts.” – Male respondent from Eswatini/Swaziland.

“I work for the promotion and protection of children’s rights and in Senegal, there is a rise of anti-rights groups composed mostly of religious persons who are forming lobbies to counter work promoting respect for the rights of children and other vulnerable groups. Their main tactic is denigrating civil society actors

by accusing us of being anti-Islamists or working on behalf of lobbyists who promote values that are contrary to religion." – Female respondent from Senegal.

"I work with underprivileged girls in informal settlements assisting them to advocate for their access to sexual and reproductive health. [...] An anti-rights group has conducted a smear campaign terming our activities as 'Western' and against our culture and religion." – Male respondent from Kenya.

"They hide behind several public and private structures, members of government, politicians and even fake CSOs. Their main argument for weakening CSOs and fundamental rights [...] is that CSOs are paid from abroad; this happens quite naturally when there is a crisis or any trouble. As soon as you defend rights, there are always people, organised or not, who attack you and accuse you of being an agent of this or that country or group." – Male respondent from Mauritania.

Several respondents state that anti-rights groups are often not upfront about their aims and instead masquerade as supporting benign causes, as in the following examples from Bolivia and India:

Their messages are full of 'positive' expressions that hide their true intentions. – Male respondent from Bolivia.

[There are] groups that pretend to work on women's empowerment, even on 'family rights', but are in fact against women claiming their own bodies [...]. They are mostly religious but some claim more secular roots. [...] These groups are present at all levels, often pitting one rights-oriented group against another. [...] In our work as grant-makers, we see them using professional grant writers, often using rights-friendly language to hide the work they would do with the resources. – Female respondent from India.

In various contexts, groups seeking to undermine women's rights and uphold what they see as women's natural role in society, which is inevitably a subordinate status, do not focus exclusively on sexual and reproductive rights, but also on social, economic and environmental rights:

We work on women's control over land and access to water bodies. Anti-rights groups create obstacles to the implementation of these rights. They do not allow women to attend our courtyard sessions. They give partial information to local elected bodies and other agencies. However, they [do not do it in plain view]; they back-bite. – Female respondent from Bangladesh.

Anti-rights groups in the Palestinian Territory are: 1. Tribal men who still believe that the primary role in the life of the community is for males and they are better able to make decisions in all societal issues. [...] 2. Religiously fanatic groups that believe that men are the supreme authority and that the role of women is mainly confined within their family and in social work such as education and health only. 3. Employers who violate the right of working women to access economic and social justice and practise verbal and physical violence and sexual harassment against working women. 4. [Employers who] refuse to recognise the rights of the child based on the International Convention on the Rights of the Child and violate all their rights and exploit them economically. – Jamil Derbashi, Palestinian Center for Communication and Development Strategies.

Targeted groups are not always minority populations; they may be the majority, as is the case of women or black South Africans. A female respondent from South Africa identifies "groups who are organised and active publicly and on social media who oppose black economic empowerment, equal opportunities and are in favour of apartheid legislation."

The essence is that when particular groups are attacked, they are excluded groups who already have the least access to rights. Other excluded groups that are identified as being targeted by anti-rights actors are people with albinism in Malawi, minority faith groups in Togo, disadvantaged youth in Tunisia, Indigenous peoples in Argentina and migrants and refugees in South Africa.

In our work that seeks to protect migrants' and refugees' rights in South Africa, we have encountered various groups that feel we shouldn't be doing our work because they feel refugees and foreign nationals should not have rights. – Male respondent from South Africa.

[Anti-rights groups] mainly target immigrant communities and are spearheaded as part of political campaigning – most recently, two far-right parties managed to gather signatures to run for parliament. One of them got four MPs elected while the most extreme one didn't succeed. – Male respondent from Denmark.

Anti-rights groups operate in host countries in representation of the authorities of the country of origin. They create fear and division in the diaspora community, aggressively disrupting gatherings where the way the regime back home operates is questioned and defaming those advocating for human rights. [...] Our organisation tries to promote dialogue, trust and reconciliation [...] while questioning the fact that the members of these groups [...] enjoy the benefits of fairly democratic governments while joining the very regime they escaped to keep others from leaving the country. – Female respondent working with refugees in the UK.

Another respondent in the UK mentions their “ongoing issues with Eritrean government supporters”, including a lot of online abuse and misinformation of Eritreans in the diaspora, who therefore become nervous about with engaging with the civil society that advocates for their rights (Helen Kidan, Eritrean Movement for Democracy and Human Rights, UK).

Survey respondents describe anti-rights groups as the mirror image of rights-oriented civil society, rejecting civil society's core values but embracing their successful tactics, and reacting against past gains that have resulted from successful civil society efforts:

The anti-rights groups we have encountered are civil society actors who do not share the same primary values of human rights and their promotion. They seek to divide and criminalise other individuals because of their sexual orientations or different political choices. Their main tactic is to push individuals to hate. – Male respondent from Cameroon.

Church groups campaigning against LGBTQI persons have adopted the playbook of civil society, holding symposia and other such large-scale mobilisation / discussion / planning events, messaging in hateful, fear-mongering and extremist ways, things such as 'gays are taking over and there will be nothing left', and engaging policy-makers. They have created a narrative that there are copious amounts of money flowing from 'the West' to 'promote gayism' in the country, and that activists are only doing this work because they are being paid to do so. They have also asked for a parliamentary investigation into civil society funding for what they term 'immoral work'. They have reversed gains made in winning hearts and minds and toxified the environment for LGBTQI public engagements. – Female respondent from Kenya.

Respondents also identify a set of tactics commonly used by anti-rights groups. They state, for example, that they infiltrate civil society spaces and are not always easy to spot:

Many do not identify them as anti-rights groups or individuals. The latter are perhaps scarier because they get into spaces [...] and speak their anti-rights messaging. – Female respondent from South Africa.

They join the advocacy meetings and sit in as 'ordinary' participants, and then heckle and disrupt presentations and the dissemination of messages [that] are against their ideology and make noise to make the advocacy meetings uncontrollable. They sing slogans to disrupt the meetings. – Male respondent from Zimbabwe.

They seek to create fear:

Anti-abortion campaigners are organised to counter any event and initiative to create awareness around abortion rights and the stigma that surrounds it. [They operate by] creating fear in victims of abortion stigma. – Gayflor Z. Worzi, Center for Inclusion and Empowerment, Liberia.

Groups that target [...] women's rights activists and transgender rights activists [...] not only threaten individuals but also threaten their family members, including children. Anybody active in promoting human rights, religious minority rights and sexual minorities' rights often [...] receives messages meant to silence them, including letters sent at home, threatening calls and even physical abuses. – Female respondent from Pakistan.

They spread disinformation and prejudice:

We have groups, such as Movimento Brasil Livre, that support the extreme right and act in the deep web for spreading 'fake news'. They use misleading data to undermine the efforts of well-reputed and trustful organisations when they disclose data that indicates the danger to minorities and other groups in danger. Church leaders also have been responsible for disseminating hate against activists that struggle for the equal gender agenda. – Female respondent from Brazil.

[Anti-rights groups seek] to criminalise homosexuality and sexual identities, undermine gender equality and women's rights, stigmatise sex workers' groups, and prevent equal human rights for vulnerable LGBTQI groups. [...] messages are: homosexuality can be 'cured', it is a psychological disorder; women are responsible for the sexual violence against them because of the ways they dress and behave; sex workers are sick people who have no rights. – Juan Silverio Ramírez Urbina, Colectivo Seres, Mexico.

The anti-rights movements I have encountered use the following tactics: spreading rumours and 'fake news' to tarnish our image; using people within our movements to create chaos and divide; directly threatening individual members of our organisation and physically attacking them; and spreading the message that we are Western puppets and enemies of the country. – Male youth activist from Burundi.

2. The impact of anti-rights groups on civil society work

Among the various negative impacts repeatedly mentioned by survey respondents are increased risk, fear, silence or the impossibility of raising sensitive issues, legitimacy challenges, regressive policy changes, the reversal of past gains and the introduction of further restrictions on activists and CSOs, particularly when the activities of rights-based civil society are reported to security agencies and supervisory bodies.

Anti-rights perspectives are influencing policy, slowing down progress and reducing effective access to rights – and as a result, anti-rights groups are becoming emboldened:

[Their action is] slowing down the approval of policies and laws providing a legal framework to the exercise of rights on issues considered to be 'controversial' (abortion, sexual orientation, etc.). – Lorena Liendo Rey, Red por los Derechos Humanos de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes, Venezuela.

Unfortunately, they are influencing the agenda, both at the level of political parties and the government. They are present in the legislative body, on both the government and the opposition sides, and the former has two thirds of [the seats]. Although Bolivia claims to be a secular country, [...] a law on religious freedoms was [recently] passed, and on its basis [anti-rights groups] are developing actions that they would not have dared do in the past. – Jimena Freitas, Fundación Construir, Bolivia.

Generally speaking, they challenge the rights of children and vulnerable groups by exerting strong pressure on the state authorities, which constrains the achievement of the aims we have set ourselves. For example, this leads to the delay in adopting certain laws or implementing certain decisions taken by the head of state following civil society advocacy. It also has the effect of narrowing the space for civil society and weakening the social movement. – Female respondent from Senegal.

Similarly, action by “groups against girls’ right to education” has effectively “reduced the enrolment of girls in schools,” according by Abdi Noor Aden of Wamo Relief, Somalia. Anti-rights action has also “closed rights-based reproductive health services and changed public discourse on rights issues,” according to a female respondent from the Netherlands.

ANTI-RIGHTS IMPACTS ON LGBTQI PEOPLE

“The statements issued by the Church have fuelled negative energy and attitudes and put LGBTQI persons at risk of being rejected by their families and homes. Where we sometimes feel we have managed to shift attitudes, people are being guilt-tripped with religious verses to reject the organisation. Religious standpoints also infringe on the rights of LGBTQI persons to access services. For example, when LGBTQI [people] go to health facilities and openly identify as such, service providers preach the Bible, pushing away service-seekers. The religious standpoint has also prevented the adoption of inclusive policies [guaranteeing] access to non-discriminatory services. Other CSOs are often reluctant to support our work because they fear rejection by the government and or because they feel uncomfortable to be seen as supporting our work.” – Anna Mmolai-Chalmers, LEGABIBO, Botswana.

“Among their numerous impacts we can mention the following: 1 – We, human rights defenders working for LGBTQI rights, are liable to prosecution on the basis of Article 347-1 of the Cameroonian Code of Criminal Procedures, which condemns homosexuality. So we usually live in psychosis. Hence the limitation of our ability to serve our peers to promote sustainable development. 2 – Stigma and discrimination based on sexual orientation severely limit LGBTQI access to HIV prevention and care services and other STIs, leading to an increase in the HIV prevalence rate in this marginalised community, making it a pocket of infection. 3 – Violence and rights violations against LGBTQI people create trauma, identity crises, family and sociocultural fractures. 4 – LGBTQI rights violations deprive them of access to several essential services for development, including school, work and legal services.” – Young male LGBTQI activist from Cameroon.

“They have made it difficult to register an LGBTQI organisation in Kenya; in fact, it was only last year that Kenya National Gay Commission was registered, after years of legal battles. They have influenced the current criminalisation of LGBTQI love. They have managed to win court cases that maintain the current status quo. They have opposed any attempt to discuss anything about gay rights on national stations; they say the media is recruiting their children. LGBTQI members cannot vie for any seat in our country; due to the fact that we are gay, we cannot even be nominated by a major political party, leave alone being on

the ballot, meaning we are left out of decision-making in our country.” – Kirimi Mwendia Evans, Victory Pride Center, Kenya.

Anti-rights actors are changing the conversation:

[They have changed] my work specifically: it's shifted the tone of conversation I'll have in some spaces. Where typically I'd be engaging with folks focused on balancing environmental concerns with oil and gas production (I'm from Alberta), I've begun having more conversations about ableism and xenophobia. For civil society more generally, there is a sense that civil society actors need to do more work in justifying their efforts. – Brett McMillan, Alberta Council for Global Cooperation, Canada.

They are diverting CSOs from their missions:

Far-right movements distort facts through overstating challenges. As a result, a great part of Danish civil society usually involved in more global development challenges has had to deal with [domestic] outbursts of discrimination and racism. – Male respondent from Denmark.

And they are making civil society waste valuable time:

These groups have managed to penetrate into politics, they have several representatives in Congress and as a result have triggered processes to repeal laws, such as the abortion and trans rights laws. Although they have not directly impacted the work of the rest of civil society, their strategy forces civil society to permanently respond by providing more information and working to influence public opinion on issues that were already settled. – Analía Bettoni, ICD, Uruguay.

They are sowing confusion, attacking the reputation of rights-oriented CSOs and calling their legitimacy into question:

They make it difficult for us to promote the rights of the minority and socially excluded. People find it difficult to differentiate between our organisations and theirs. So the impact of our work is weakened. – Tizgower Msiska, Revolution Human Aid and Transparency Initiative, Malawi.

These groups are dangerous for the work of civil society because their accusations are serious and, in uninformed communities, these accusations are believed, especially when they are made to indicate that CSOs are anti-patriotic or anti-national. – Male respondent from Mauritania.

[Stigmatisation campaigns have] created a lot of negative images in public. Many bureaucrats and the general public become suspicious about CSOs' events and workshops. Public scrutiny has increased. [In response] we are being more transparent [and] informing people clearly about what we are working on. Still, it is very difficult to tackle the negative image. – Male respondent from Nepal.

Anti-rights groups are putting human rights defenders at risk:

[Anti-rights groups] have made our work unsafe and have made it challenging for us to reach and mobilise the population we represent (LGBTQI youth). They fuel the discrimination faced by the LGBTQI community, which in turn has a big impact on the mental and physical health of LGBTQI persons and on their socioeconomic status. – Kevin Mendez, Belize Youth Empowerment for Change.

In some cases, they succeed in making human rights activists desist their activities:

[Anti-migrants' rights groups] try by all means to silence us and intimidate us using social media or direct messages. [...] As a result, some of our human rights educators have abandoned the work because they fear for their lives. – Male respondent from South Africa.

CSOs that have no wider networking with government line departments have quit their human rights work because of their and their families' safety. But we as a grassroots organisation engage in alliances and networks so in case of threats we raise our concern [collectively] with authorities. – Female respondent from Pakistan.

“Anti-rights groups negatively impact on the work we are doing. Many of our activists live in fear and are not free to perform their activities the way they should do [...]; we are struggling to mobilise people in our rallies as they fear to be considered as supporters of so called ‘Western puppets and enemies of the country’; most organisations have difficulties to obtain authorisations to organise workshops, conferences and other public events; some of them are obliged to suspend their activities for fear of persecution; leaders often have to flee the country, live hidden; members of organisations are jailed, fined and persecuted.” – Male youth activist from Burundi.

3. Civil society responses to anti-rights groups: What we have learned in the process

Many survey respondents are actively trying to fight back against anti-rights groups and through the survey shared details of their response strategies and their suggestions for response tactics. The following are the key types of tactics suggested.

- Tactics are context-dependent

What works or does not work, or what is acceptable or not due to safety grounds, varies according to context. For instance, some respondents prioritise street protest and mobilisation as a key tactic, while others see this as ineffective and even counterproductive, particularly in countries where protests are frequently and severely repressed or go unheard.

Another example is the use of social media, where there are contrasting views of its usefulness and safety. Numerous respondents state that progressive civil society lacks access to traditional media, while government-sponsored or lavishly funded anti-rights actors have plenty of access, and therefore identify social media as an alternative, cost-effective means to produce, exchange and disseminate information. In other cases, respondents explicitly state that in their context mainstream media have not sided with anti-rights groups, and do not find social media attractive for reasons such as a dynamics that fuel hate speech and extremism. In some contexts where physical civic space is highly restricted, social media platforms are acknowledged as offering safer alternatives to make oneself heard. But in other cases characterised by similarly restricted civic space, respondents highlight the dangers that social media present to users, and recommend a variety of measures to navigate social media anonymously in order to diminish risk.

While many survey respondents propose variations of online campaigning as one of their preferred tactics, others question its effectiveness, and in some cases even consider the use of social media to be counterproductive due to its intrinsic polarising effects:

I don't think conversations around addressing non-conventional issues with [conservative religious] groups on social media are very effective – emotions get stirred up and people take things too personally. – Female respondent from Fiji.

Similarly, while many respondents see value in lobbying policy-makers, others note that trying to work in institutional arenas when anti-rights groups are in power or the system is broken can be fruitless:

In our case, actions [involving the justice system] have been organised but they don't often work efficiently because most anti-rights groups are often linked to the government and directly supported by it. Advocacy attempts before lawmakers and other authorities to raise the awareness of authorities on human rights abuses and the need to repeal some laws that are discriminatory against some vulnerable groups (mainly women and LGBTQI persons) have also mostly failed. In fact, most lawmakers are members of the ruling party. They have the obligation to strictly follow the instructions and policies of their party. Otherwise, they can easily lose their seats in parliament. This issue is mainly due to the electoral system in Burundi: MPs are elected on a blocked list system. They are chosen directly by the party which has the right to replace them in case of 'indiscipline'. This situation limits their ability to take initiatives and to voice against what the party wants. – Male youth activist from Burundi.

- Don't shy away from unorthodox approaches

"I have learnt to use sports and entertainment as my major tools of advocacy. This gives our members a confidence in the field that is replicated in real life. For example, if an LGBTQI person is good at football and he is out there, the community may change their attitudes towards LGBTQI people. Look for example at the admiration that Africa has for Caster Semenya of South Africa. Sports can be an ice-breaker." – Kiri Mwenda Evans, Victory Pride Center, Kenya.

"Music [can be used] to pass the message to the people." – Male respondent from Uganda.

Whatever is unorthodox is context-dependent; a new tactic in one context may be something that is being used intensively in other contexts. What respondents typically point out is that it is worth trying to shift tactics when the usual approaches do not seem to be working, as in the following example:

People [in India] are tired of protesting on the streets, [...] so we gave them a new avenue to protest, to contribute to crowdfunding campaigns for social justice, for political interventions, for fighting a legal battle. [...] [We did] this for the last two years and we have raised more than US\$40 million for over 160 different campaigns. It's a campaign crowdfunding socio-political intervention model which uses digital first through crowdfunding, uses data to talk to people in different cities, builds capacity and then does on-the-ground mobilisation with committed people. This gives people different avenues to participate and register their discontent. The whole method of the same 300 activists [and CSOs] writing open letters, signing something and holding conferences and talking among themselves is the most unsuccessful, and yet continued practice. When [something] isn't working, we need to think of creative, newer ways. – Anand Mangnale, Our Democracy, India.

- Embrace non-violence and prioritise safety

“Being violent will not work as this makes [...] civil society to lose credibility, especially in the eye of the public.” – Male respondent from Nigeria.

“It’s important not to fight people that come up to you willing to fight, and give them a reason to believe that fighting is not an option. One tactic we have observed which has mostly backfired is using very aggressive means to communicate your points. Aggressive reactions beget aggressive responses and thus using a soft but firm approach (‘carrot and stick’) has proven much better.” – Female respondent from Ghana.

“We always use non-violent tactics to respond to the anti-rights groups. Peaceful demonstrations, marches, sit-ins and social media. Banners, posters, communications, WhatsApp audio messages, dissemination of images and data. Activists should mostly prioritise their safety and always avoid unnecessary risks. An efficient use of social media can be a useful tool to keep advocating and promoting rights, and at the same time denouncing persecution. We also prioritise communications with a wider audience aiming at community education and awareness-raising.” – Male youth activist from Burundi.

- Work in coalitions

“Working individually may give us exposure as an individual but the long-term impacts are hazardous, so it is better to come together as a coalition of rights groups and work together.” – Female respondent from Cameroon.

“In coalitions you combine expertise, experience and resources. For instance, coalitions are built with human rights lawyers, doctors for human rights and counselling units.” – Male respondent from Zimbabwe.

“[We work] in alliances and building coalitions not only with women’s groups or organisations, but also with youth, salaried female workers and LGBTQI organisations.” – Jimena Freitas, Fundación Construir, Bolivia.

“There is power in numbers when tackling controversial issues that concern the violation of women’s and girls’ rights. Using social media as a loner, even through interviews on print and audio platforms, proved to be not effective and left a lot of civil society leaders at risk. When women and girls experienced all sorts of abuse in our country, we collectively did press conferences and submitted petitions as a collective in a bid to speak with one voice as well as ensure security of each other. Press statements were done collectively as well through the women’s coalition.” – Female respondent from Zimbabwe.

- Choose your battleground

“The one [institution] that was still standing tall till the last six months was the judiciary. We did a lot of judicial intervention, supported by on ground movements, mass mobilisation and crowdfunding. The anti-Rohingya campaign was a very prominent example which I was able to tackle personally. When the government was gearing up to deport the refugees, and civil society was stuck with the same 50 people protesting with banners, doing change.org campaigns, I went and spoke to a Supreme Court lawyer and asked him to file a petition against their deportation, based on the ‘right to life’ principle in the Indian Constitution, which applies even to non-citizens. Then I convinced two refugees to be a party to the case, (which took 10 days of efforts), and now, two years down the line, these refugees are still in India.” – Anand Mangnale, Our Democracy, India.

- Engage your opponent and try to understand their point of view

“In dealing with anti-rights campaigners, you will have to consider their point of view on the issue, which can be based on political, religious, or cultural reasons. The process of engagement will have to be civil and respect their views.” – Gayflor Z. Worzi, Center for Inclusion and Empowerment, Liberia.

“[We must] not distance ourselves from people who may seem to be anti-rights. [...] It is better to engage people, do continued and ongoing interventions to try to shift their position, showing them the evidence and facts. ‘Naming and shaming’ does not push the human rights movement as a whole forward. These groups have always existed and although they are more obvious now, they always will. In my opinion, ignoring them will just further radicalise them through alienation.” – Female respondent from South Africa.

“One important factor is to acknowledge the point of view of people you work against. Once you do, it is helpful to know how to use their own point of view against them gradually until they appreciate how fruitless their approach is.” – Female respondent from Ghana.

“[Mobilising] against anti-rights groups only increases the numbers of people [mobilising] for anti-rights groups. We would recommend tactics that try to build bridges and reduce polarisation. Assigning blame towards each other only increases polarisation. We are currently organising talk clubs where people who would support anti-rights groups are expected to attend to hear both sides.” – Kai Klandorf, Network of Estonian Non-profit Organizations.

“We employ non-confrontational methods such as creating awareness not directly on accepting LGBTQI people but rather on accepting every human being as they are and encouraging understanding between one another. [...] What matters the most is understanding our audience and the root cause of their rejection.” – Josaia Tokoni, Fiji Council of Social Services.

“Because [conservative religious people] are ardent in their beliefs and motives, we take a more passive approach and don’t take them on strongly. Dialogue is important for us, and we aim to believe that there is hope in changing perceptions.” – Female respondent from Fiji.

In connection to this, a respondent from the UK pointed to the importance of “engaging in extensive communications work to reach the ‘anxious middle’, winning [over] people who are ‘not sure’ of where they stand [regarding immigration], and not describing anybody outside of the progressive bubble of the convinced as racist.” – Avila Kilmurray, The Social Change Initiative, UK.

However, a counterpoint is made by a few respondents, such as the following two from the USA and Pakistan:

Personally, I have found that arguments never work at changing minds. Maybe very well-designed handouts might have helped... – Male respondent from the USA.

Argumentation on human or women rights with state agencies is a very bad logic at this point. [...] Our argumentative tactics, strategies and action failed in continuing our work. [...]. Argumentation became counterproductive. – Male respondent from Pakistan.

- Frame an issue so as to find common ground (e.g. focus on problems that different groups are interested in solving)

“[We] engaged with church and government representatives in meetings to show that it is important to reach out to key population groups because they exist and would be ideal to solving some HIV-related challenges.” – Jordan Kaisi, Treatment Advocacy and Literacy Campaign, Zambia.

“We have been a part of consultations with [anti-rights actors] to understand their stance and find a way where we can meet on common ground. At the same time, we provide briefs to educate them about the work that we do and why we do it.” – Kevin Mendez, Belize Youth Empowerment for Change.

“We understand that land and water are sensitive economic and political issues, so when we speak to local public officials, local elected bodies and political actors we avoid the use of sensitive words or expressions like ‘public land acquisition’, ‘land grabbing’, ‘forced land ownership transfer’, ‘land displacement’, ‘corruption with land administration.’ In these instances, we publicly refer to our project as a project on simple issues like nutrition and mothers’ health. In this way, we also protect the safety of our volunteers and the women we work with.” – Female respondent from Bangladesh.

- Counter disinformation and prejudice with accurate information

“Much still needs to be done to erase the false rumours and replace them with solid knowledge. There’s for instance the Maputo Protocol, that [the DRC] has ratified and gives women the right to choose according to the spirit of medical ethics, in the context of pregnancy caused by rape or incest. Anti-rights groups rely on biblical verses and tell made-up stories to impose a yoke on women and destroy the awareness that empowers women to make decisions over their own bodies.” – Male respondent from the DRC.

“[We must react to accusations] by explaining and showing that CSOs generally have limited means, while if they were foreign agents they would be rich, which is not the case. [We need] to make our work and activities public (including funds and their sources). What does not work is to keep quiet and believe that people know the truth and no explanations are necessary.” – Male respondent from Mauritania.

“The use of data is key in our work and has enabled us to get into social bubbles and change public opinion. It also supports the work of mainstream media and the judiciary in an attempt to keep the current policies that are minority-oriented.” – Female respondent from Brazil.

“We have learned to make evidence-based reporting to distant press organs meanwhile hiding our identities to assure untraceability. We have also used diplomatic channels and the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council in Geneva.” – Male respondent from Cameroon.

“During discussion about the ratification of the Istanbul Convention by Armenia, anti-rights groups claimed that a sentence in the Convention contradicted our perception of family and ethical traditional norms. We asked them, ‘Did you read the Convention?’. This kind of worked, as many people started reading the document before speaking as ‘experts’.” – Female respondent in Armenia.

“Explain the facts, always provide verifiable data. And refer to an experience [people] can relate to, such as the fall of the market price of rice due to badly planned policies.” – Male respondent from the Philippines.

“We cannot say anything to [religious extremists]. We only politely educate people to think critically and question what these people say to them. [...] It’s the only thing we can do.” – Female respondent from Pakistan.

- Use faith-based discourse for good

“Partnering with global and regional religious bodies and ensuring that local religious leaders are affiliated to those [to] empower religious leaders with positive messages. Targeting families and parents and empowering them on how to ensure that they protect themselves against persecution and blame for their children being gay. Building LGBTQI support groups where they learn the tricks of using the Bible to defend their communities and verses that talk about love. Queer religious leaders are great messengers of love and tolerance within communities. We have mobilised religious leaders with positive voices to speak messages of love and support. Our recent decriminalisation case is a good example of how the country can be inclusive, respect human rights but remain committed to religious practices. We used the judgement to douse negativity from the church.” – Anna Mmolai-Chalmers, LEGABIBO, Botswana.

“We have engaged [these religious leaders] to understand their perceptions and what win/win situation we can work out. [...] We worked with them to develop a pastoral letter which conforms to their kind of language, picks ideas and verses from scriptures and also covers our advocacy agenda, especially when it comes to access to services and vital information on sexuality education and HIV testing services.” – Charles Emma Ofwono, Development Connection, Uganda.

- Start from the ground up

“High-level advocacy has failed because the leaders up there never interact with the communities, so most of the times a policy will be developed and passed [down] but very few people will abide to it because their local level leaders haven't yet bought into the idea. I think we need to engage the leaders starting from grassroots and climb up with demands for [sexual and reproductive rights] services and information.” – Charles Emma Ofwono, Development Connection, Uganda.

- Engage targeted groups at the grassroots level (but ensure their confidentiality and safety)

“We recommend direct engagements with victims of human rights abuses, before solutions could be sorted out on their behalf.” – Henry Udemeh, Grassroot Development Support and Rural Enlightenment Initiative, Nigeria.

“Information is the main and most important tool. When [women] don't know they have rights that have to be respected, they cannot do anything about it. [But] trying to impose never works. All the work that we do comes as a response to a need that women identify. If they don't feel there is a need, they will never embrace the solution and it will never be effective.” – Female respondent from Tanzania.

“Our more successful tactic has been spreading the voice and organising at the grassroots level: active participation in social movements. At the Bloque de Trabajadores Migrantes, we have conducted a series of workshops in cooperatives and facilities with migrant workers. [...] We discussed and analysed the legislation, and we went over press coverage of cases and situations of discrimination against migrant workers. A similar tactic was developed with people of African descent. [...] In this regard, I am actively working as an academic, producing collaborative research and documents that may feed into policymaking. [...] Lastly, an initiative to teach Spanish to informal Senegalese street vendors was conducted with extraordinary participation. While the core content of this initiative was indirectly related to discrimination, the tool of language showed to be crucial to empower this group.” – Nicolás Fernández Bravo, Universidad de Buenos Aires/GEALA, Argentina.

- Learn from your mistakes and change course

“At the beginning we wanted to use the customary leaders directly as agents of change, which did not work. It was over time that we understood that they were not transmitting the real message in our absence. This is why we organised public abandonment ceremonies of these harmful social practices.” – Zongo Wendwaoga Yves, Association d'Appui et d'Eveil Pugsada, Burkina Faso.

- Stay alert – human rights are fragile acquisitions and reversals are always possible

“We need to do better at solidifying gains and progress made, and not presume that a shift in social attitudes remains without us aggressively holding the position. Reversals are just as easy.” – Female respondent from Kenya.

Anti-rights groups in Mexico

In Mexico, the National Front for the Family and the Don't Mess With My Kids movement have quite some influence. They focus on the promotion of the traditional family, with the aim of curbing the rights of the LGBTQI community and of women. They seek to maintain what they view as 'natural,' to curb sex education in schools and maintain legislation consistent with their conservative thinking. To promote their ideas, they have organised marches, workshops and campaigns in social and traditional media. They have had an impact, since they have halted reforms to decriminalise abortion and to legalise equal marriage in several Mexican states, in addition to consolidating the ban on adoption for homosexual couples. They base their ideas on what they call 'gender ideology'; they argue that there is an attempt to impose a new world order to control people and 'homosexualise' the country and to benefit companies and organisations linked to abortion and human rights education.

Civil society organisations have developed educational campaigns that do not promote hatred against other ideologies, but explain on the basis of specialised statistics the importance of the exercise of sexual and reproductive rights. Our organisation, Otro Tiempo México, has established networks that include diverse organisations, with various objectives but a single overarching purpose: the respect, promotion and defence of human rights. This has allowed for the formulation of arguments and the creation of a new language that takes up the language of other groups, including on the importance of the family, but does so by stating the importance of family diversity and family support for LGBTQI people, that is, of working with the family group from a plural perspective, demystifying prejudices and misconceptions about gender and opening up spaces where all voices are heard, based on a culture for peace approach.

Gabriela Mendoza Santiago, Otro Tiempo México, test survey.

Anti-rights groups in Tanzania

I am not sure if it is to be considered an anti-rights group, but the Government of Tanzania has spoken against women's rights and access to education (banning pregnant young women from schools) and reproductive and sexual health (speaking against family planning). There is also existing gender-based violence in the community where we base our work, and while trying to address these issues with different actors in the community, the public statements done by the government give more grounds to perpetrators and anti-feminist rights arguments.

In response, we are organising a workshop to mobilise various actors in the community in order to create a common vision and definition of women's rights and define what activities and roles we can all play to support this definition. We will then accompany all actors in their commitments in order to create changes at the community level and fight against gender-based violence in a holistic and inclusive approach.

Albane Gaudissart, TATU Project, Tanzania, test survey.

Anti-rights groups at the regional level: Latin America

As a regional organisation, we have seen increasing action by anti-rights groups in most of the countries we work in, with the situation arising in Brazil after the Bolsonaro election being particularly serious. In terms of the regional scenario, at the assemblies and summits of the Organization of American States we have seen very coordinated action by groups that have been increasingly learning strategies traditionally used by human rights movements to spread their messages, but have used them to advance their causes and restrict the rights of others. The main obstacles have been faced by LGBTQI groups and people, especially transgender ones, and sexual and reproductive rights groups. Some of these actors, especially those with religious backgrounds, have made very positive [assessments](#) of their participation in regional forums.

In response, we have worked to foster alliances and render visible the existence of religious actors that are more progressive and can challenge the language of more traditional and conservative groups. In terms of fostering alliances, I have seen two different approaches: one used by feminist groups that declare themselves at war with anti-rights groups, and [...] single out all the anti-rights organisations and actors [and refuse to engage with them]; and the one that consists in trying to have a conversation with these actors. This is what we do: we work to create a scenario for dialogue and identify actors with whom dialogue is possible. I recommend this alternative. Speak with those who are different and render visible the invisible actors who can offer a counter-narrative. The experience of the [Religions, Beliefs and Spiritualities Coalition](#) in dialogue with civil society is a good practice in this regard.

Gina Romero, Latin American and Caribbean Network for Democracy (REDLAD), test survey.