

# MISSION CREEP: EXPANDING ATTACKS ON GENDER THREATEN THE UNITED NATIONS

## Executive Summary Forthcoming Ipas Report

At the 2019 session of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) all 126 United Nations (UN) Member States—except Russia—[agreed](#) to address the significant global problem of women and girls' [disproportionate](#) food insecurity. By 2023, eight other countries had joined Russia in holding the world's [2.4 billion](#) food insecure people hostage to a worldview that does not consider the needs and priorities of this demographic. Over a four-year period, a near consensus project quickly turned into an intractable quagmire when Russia and its ideological allies, including the Holy See and Indonesia, created [havoc](#) in the drafting process of a set of guidelines that were meant to address gender inequality in the context of food insecurity. They removed or diluted language addressing gendered barriers to food security and acknowledging [women's gender diversity](#). The guidelines were [delayed](#) by a year and the final product was significantly weakened and did not meaningfully attend to the needs of food insecure women and girls.

The CFS is not the only multilateral space where new battles over gender are playing out. Indeed, the CFS experience forecasted a shift in strategy for States who oppose gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and the universality of human rights. [Previously](#), anti-gender States and their civil society [allies focused their efforts](#) on UN spaces dedicated to advancing gender, women's rights, and reproductive health. They have been particularly active at gender-focused UN annual conferences like the [Commission on Population and Development](#) and the [Commission on the Status of Women](#). There, anti-gender campaigning against abortion, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), and other critical human rights topics is a [predictable](#) obstacle for women's and LGBTIQ rights advocates and State delegations seeking to make progress on these issues.

As the anti-gender movement has become [more influential at the UN](#) in the last decade, they are opening new fronts and moving into spaces dedicated to issues other than gender. Without abandoning their usual haunts, anti-gender States are advancing in UN spaces where their issues are an unexpected feature of debate. They are blocking progress on issues like hunger, infectious disease, and crimes against humanity, and more prosaic areas like UN operations and administration. In these spaces, anti-gender States attempt to water down language on gender and insert provisions exempting them from accountability based on national sovereignty or cultural context. The result of this campaigning is often an outcome document with lower human rights standards, which harms historically marginalized people whose rights and personal wellbeing stand to benefit from the norms and protections set in the halls of the UN.

To better understand this trend, Ipas mapped 13 cases of anti-gender campaigning in unexpected UN spaces from 2019 to 2023. These included the CFS, a treaty on crimes against humanity, World Health Organization (WHO) strategies, UN agencies' programs and budgets, and more. UN spaces are increasingly addressing cross-cutting recognition of gender inequality in human rights and international development to promote equity. As a result, some of the gender language appearing in the cases studied is new in those contexts. Many of these cases were identified by civil society advocates in interviews conducted by Ipas in the fall of 2023. Advocate testimony was corroborated by primary evidence from official UN documents, proceeding records, country statements, document drafts, and media articles.

Together these cases demonstrate not only an escalated effort to advance anti-gender goals in unexpected UN spaces, but an increasingly coordinated and systematic one which enhanced their ability to wrangle cooperation on joint anti-gender negotiation positions. In the five years studied beginning with the CFS case, the number of obstructions in one year rose from one to nine, while the number of States involved jumped from six to 90.

Anti-gender actors [acknowledge](#) their increasing [dedication](#) to monitoring the entire UN system and our case studies show that language related to gender and minority rights is targeted and opposed systematically. This is occurring even in [technical reports](#), [UN agency budgets](#), and other administrative documents, including seemingly minor ones like [agencies' internal staffing guidelines](#). Now, [any mention of gender](#) is vulnerable to attack, which has direct implications for rights holders and the UN's responses to issues like hunger, development, and conflict; these issues are the latest casualties of the anti-gender movement.

The degree to which certain States have attacked language that was previously agreed by consensus—sometimes even in previous iterations of the same texts—suggests that their dedication to systematically opposing gender wherever it appears is relatively new. As this trend increases, it should be of concern not just to those who seek to advance gender equality, it should worry anyone invested in the UN as a place for productive international cooperation on global issues.

Weakening outcome documents also impacts UN institutions and their programmatic implementation, which is part of a broader, deliberate anti-gender effort to undermine multilateralism and the international human rights system. This includes defunding, discrediting, and weakening the consensus from which multilateral institutions derive their authority. Our investigation illustrates one recent effort to claw back human rights and 'restore' a patriarchal world order anti-gender groups perceive has been lost.

These efforts must be countered by an intersectional human rights response that is cross-cutting, bold, and prepared to defend the universality of human rights. This movement should embed respect for the human rights of all in the mandate and agenda-setting documents of UN bodies, while formalizing meaningful [civil society participation](#) in all policy processes that lack them. Only through creative cooperation can the erosion of universal human rights be prevented.

## The Cases

Anti-gender campaigning in unexpected spaces between 2019 and 2023 were primarily led by the Holy See and Russia and some Member States from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and African Group.

Date	Case	Details and Tactics
Oct–Dec 2020	<b>1. The <a href="#">CFS Voluntary Guidelines</a></b>	Cameroon, China, Egypt, the Holy See, Indonesia, Malaysia, Russia, and Sudan <a href="#">campaigned to remove</a> language on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) and language addressing gendered barriers to food security.
Jan 2019–Apr 2023	<b>2. Crimes against humanity treaty</b>	A group of mostly African and Eastern European States, including Egypt, Senegal, and Poland, sought to re-insert an <a href="#">outdated</a> binary gender definition in the draft articles, <a href="#">arguing</a> that there was no other agreed definition of gender and that drafters had <a href="#">gone beyond their mandate</a> and competence.
Feb–Jun 2021	<b>3. <a href="#">Global AIDS Strategy</a></b>	Russia and Iran <a href="#">disassociated</a> from the parts of the strategy that included SOGI, saying they did not use <a href="#">agreed language</a> and <a href="#">conflicted</a> with their national legislations and contexts.
Apr–Jun 2021	<b>4. Political declaration on HIV/AIDS set <a href="#">new targets</a> for ending AIDS</b>	A diverse group of twenty States including Bangladesh, Guatemala, and Russia <a href="#">fought to remove</a> rights- and evidence-based language on ending AIDS, including CSE. Russia <a href="#">called the declaration to a vote</a> for the <a href="#">first time</a> in UN history. <i>(NB: not an unexpected case; mentioned by advocates for the tactics).</i>
Jun–Oct 2021	<b>5. World Intellectual Property Organization’s <a href="#">Independent Advisory Oversight Committee Report</a></b>	Though consensus on this report <a href="#">was not required</a> , States <a href="#">tried to remove SOGI language</a> . Other states found the anti-gender States’ attempts to negotiate the content of an independent report <a href="#">concerning</a> .
Nov 2021–May 2023	<b>6. <a href="#">Right to development treaty</a></b>	Early in negotiations, Egypt, Iran, Nigeria, and Russia <a href="#">asserted</a> that “gender equality” was not agreed language, so it <a href="#">became</a> “equality between men and women” in subsequent drafts.
Jan–May 2022	<b>7. WHO’s global health sector strategies <a href="#">guide efforts on HIV and more</a></b>	The draft was opened for negotiations due to <a href="#">opposition</a> to gender language. Despite months of debate, anti-gender States <a href="#">refused</a> to accept the draft and the strategies were put to an unprecedented vote. Rather than adopting the strategies, States <a href="#">took ‘note’</a> of them and agreed to implement only as was congruent with their national contexts.
Jan–May 2023	<b>8. WHO’s global strategy focused on <a href="#">infection prevention</a></b>	Non-experts were <a href="#">allowed</a> to negotiate this technical document. States called CSE and SOGI <a href="#">not agreed upon</a> and sought exceptions based on <a href="#">cultural context</a> , resulting in the removal of SOGI language.
Jan–May 2023	<b>9. WHO’s <a href="#">program and budget</a></b>	Language referencing SOGI was absent from the <a href="#">second</a> draft of the budget after Russia <a href="#">complained</a> about its inclusion in the <a href="#">first</a> . The dispute was resolved behind closed doors, per an advocate.
Jan–Jun 2023	<b>10. International Labor Organization’s <a href="#">program and budget</a></b>	Led by Cameroon, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, 88 States <a href="#">attacked</a> SOGI language so fervently that the debate <a href="#">threatened</a> to deprive the organization of all funding. While the proposal was <a href="#">adopted</a> it was weakened by a note recognizing States’ disagreement.
Mar–Jun 2023	<b>11. World Intellectual Property Organization’s <a href="#">program of work and budget</a></b>	<a href="#">Contentious negotiations</a> saw “gender equality” being replaced with “balance between men and women.”
Jul 2023	<b>12. 53<sup>rd</sup> Human Rights Council resolution <a href="#">strengthening Colombia’s peace process</a></b>	Pakistan (on behalf of the OIC) presented an <a href="#">amendment</a> to remove SOGI on a Colombia-specific resolution—against Colombia’s will.
Aug–Sep 2023	<b>13. UN Refugee Agency’s <a href="#">program budget</a></b>	Likely due to chilling effect of anti-gender attacks, the agency did not include references to SOGI in its program budget or a related paper, even though they had been included in the previous year’s versions of <a href="#">both documents</a> .

## Key Recommendations

From these 13 cases, we highlight four key trends of anti-gender Member States making gains in these unexpected spaces—and suggest strategies to counter them:

### 1. Mainstream gender training for diplomats and officials.

*Anti-gender States are [more easily](#) winning concessions in these unexpected spaces because delegates are more likely to deprioritize gender in favor of other issues or inadvertently agree to weak language. The relative absence of feminist civil society in unexpected spaces means fewer experienced advocates who can provide support.*

- Governments, the UN, and its agencies should [mainstream training](#) on gender for diplomats and officials working across all issue areas.
- This should include education on gender, SRHR, and SOGI and raise awareness of how anti-gender actors exploit the UN's procedural weaknesses to win concessions.
- Training should help delegates and officials remain vigilant about attempts to negotiate documents through political processes like independent advisory reports and technical documents.

### 2. Improve intersectional collaboration and communication among feminist civil society.

*Anti-gender opposition is more common in unexpected spaces, aided by allied civil society organizations (CSOs).*

- Feminist CSOs can counter this by improving [collaboration and information-sharing](#), including with CSOs from other social justice and human rights movements already engaged in these unexpected spaces.
- Feminist civil society should partner with CSOs from other movements to create an [alert system](#) to share information on anti-gender activity across the UN system, and collaborate on strategic responses.
- The system should include better mapping and reporting, joint strategy sessions, and other opportunities for strategic coordination among advocates.

### 3. Encourage advocates and delegations to boldly and consistently counter anti-gender statements.

*Anti-gender Member States are coordinating their positions in groups, lending them political weight.*

- Advocates and delegations should craft and share value and rights-based talking points for consistent use.
- They should encourage Member States that are part of political groups like the OIC to disassociate from anti-gender group statements.
- Advocates should encourage group members that have indicated disagreement with group position to become champions of gender among their fellow group members.
- They should provide them with adaptable resources to counter anti-gender narratives so they can encourage other group members to disassociate too.

### 4. Prepare mitigation strategies for upcoming negotiations.

*Because feminist advocates and allied delegations have not historically encountered anti-gender opposition in these unexpected UN spaces, they have not been prepared to counter it.*

- Civil society, delegations, and UN officials should plan mitigation strategies for the upcoming negotiations:
  - April 2024: UN General Assembly's [Sixth Committee's meeting](#) on the crimes against humanity treaty;
  - May to June 2024: 77<sup>th</sup> session of the [World Health Assembly](#), including the [draft pandemic accord](#);
  - June 2024: The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [program and budget renewal](#);
  - September 2024: [Summit of the Future](#);
  - 2024: Ongoing negotiations over the draft [right to development treaty](#); and the [Extrajudicial, Summary, or Arbitrary Executions Resolution](#) renewal;
  - 2025: [Elections Resolution](#) renewal; and,
  - 2026: [High-level meeting on HIV/AIDS](#)