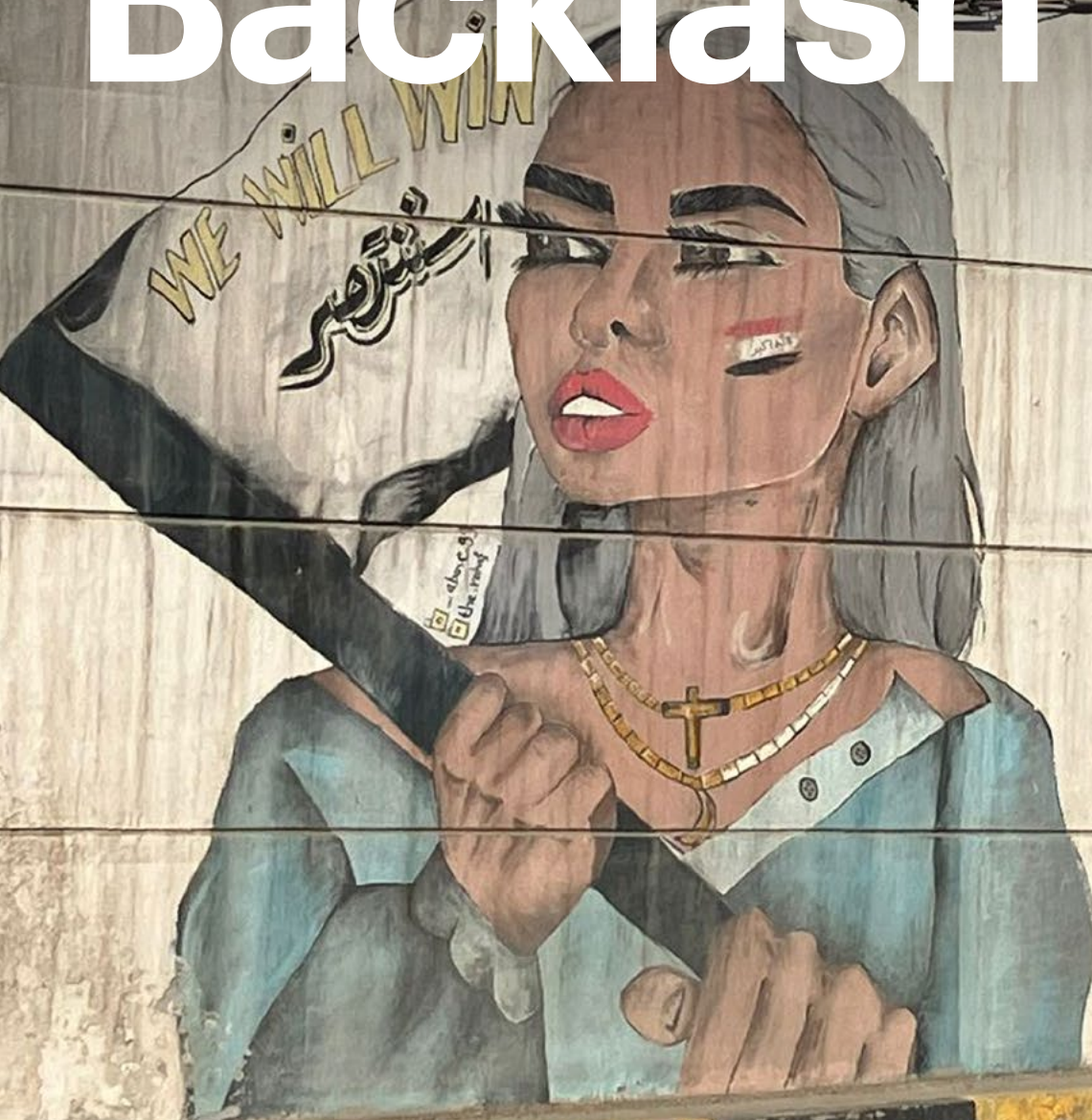# Countering Anti-Gender Backlash

Learning Brief: Strengthening Civil Courage in times of Anti-Gender Backlash

About the SCC programme

Strengthening Civil Courage (SCC) is a 5-year programme (2021-25) aiming for more equal power relations and inclusive peace and justice, particularly more equal gender roles and relationships and transformation of harmful gender norms.

The programme is implemented by ABAAD, Amnesty, Defend Defenders and PAX across 14 countries in Africa and the Middle East.

Within SCC programme countries enormous gender gaps persist. Women and youth are hardly represented in places of power, and violent conflict often reinforces and is shaped by gender inequitable norms between men, women, and other groups, as well as worsens already widespread sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). At the same time, there is a positive correlation between gender equality, people-centered security and conflict transformation. We see (young) women at the forefront of human rights and peace movements. We know from well-established research and our practice, that women's participation and influence in informal and formal peace processes increase chances of longer-lasting success. Ultimately, gender equality is an important indicator for stability and sustainable peace of an area and gender a causal factor in conflict dynamics.

Applying gender-sensitive and gender-transformative approaches across all SCC programming has proven essential to build peace and realize human rights.

This Learning Brief shares learning from our SCC partners in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria on countering anti-gender backlash, as part of an ongoing effort to document gender within peacebuilding and human rights work. Due to security concerns names of partners cannot be made public, showing the severity of gender-specific pressure on civic space.

1. While focusing this brief on the Middle East region, the SCC Alliance recognizes the worldwide impact of anti-gender backlash, including in Europe and North America.

About anti-gender **backlash**

Worldwide we witness a surge in systematic anti-gender backlash, at times orchestrated and often backed by state authorities. This backlash manifests through various channels, from governmental policies to community and online shaming tactics, targeting activists and organisations advocating for gender equality, leading to grave risks and consequences.

In recent years, this anti-gender backlash has taken on a more coordinated, long-term and targeted form, supported by governmental policies aimed at erasing the gains made towards gender equality and enforcing conservative norms. Religious actors and community leaders often amplify these sentiments, portraying gender equality as a foreign imposition and a threat to national and religious values rather than fundamental human rights. Additionally, political parties instrumentalize gender dynamics to delegitimize opponents and consolidate power, further entrenching regressive attitudes within society.

The impact of anti-gender backlash extends beyond legislative measures, affecting societal structures and undermining the work of women's rights activists, women-led CSOs and gender-specialized departments within governments. This all the while 99% of all ODA funding does not reach women's rights and feminist organisations, with only 0,4% (not even 1%) of ODA going to women's rights.[2]

Considering the serious nature of these challenges, there is a growing recognition of the need to confront and counter anti-gender backlash. The recent intensification of anti-gender movements underscores the urgency of developing comprehensive strategies to mitigate its impact and uphold the rights and dignity of all individuals, regardless of gender identity.

In this learning brief, we delve into the complexities of anti-gender backlash, drawing upon insights from interviews with SCC colleagues and partners in conflict-affected regions. The PAX Gender Unit developed this learning brief by conducting interviews with over 20 CSO staff and activists from Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria, who are partners within the Strengthening Civil Courage Programme. The interviews were semi-structured and part of qualitative research. By analyzing the underlying factors, impacts, and responses to anti-gender backlash, we aim to contribute to challenging regressive narratives and advance gender equality agendas as a crucial part of peacebuilding.

2. AWID (2021): Where is the money for feminist organizing?

Drivers of anti-gender backlash

The drivers of anti-gender backlash are multifaceted and deeply intertwined with regional dynamics, political influences, and societal factors. The following key drivers were identified.

1. Regional dynamics: Structural socio-economic and political inequality, causing conservatism, is partly due to the embedded neo-colonial (capitalist) structures sustained by western governments. Further, the deep-seated influence of Iran in the wider Middle East region has intensified anti-gender backlash, connected to the repressive response to the feminist non-violent protest movement within Iran. Particularly in Iraq, influence is exerted through connected militias, religious leaders and politicians. Iranian-backed militias exert significant influence in regime-controlled areas, contributing to the spread of anti-gender sentiments. In conflict-affected Northwest Syria, anti-gender resistance stems from Islamist militias and is supported by external actors such as Turkey.

> In Iraq, governmental directives have banned the word 'gender' and compelled Women's Empowerment Departments to seize activities, reflecting a broader trend of institutionalized resistance to gender equality initiatives. International and national CSOs have been pressured to stop working on gender equality. Furthermore, the proposed criminalization of LGBTQI+ individuals, for instance, has garnered international attention and sparked renewed efforts to counter regressive policies.

2. Political motivations: Anti-gender campaigning is a political tool for repressive authorities to foster mistrust between public and civil society. The timing of anti-gender campaigns often coincides with significant political events, such as provincial and national elections. For instance, Conservative Islamist groups, funded and controlled by armed militias supported by Iran, mobilize support in Iraqi communities by promoting anti-gender rhetoric and publishing CSO resourcing.

In Lebanon, a leading CSO directly experienced the current backlash against gender equality whereby transphobic religious and political leaders and communities are wrongfully linking the term "gender" to promoting a "transgender agenda". Lebanese society remains largely unfriendly and hostile towards the LGBTQI community, and women's organizations are now viewed by conservative groups as having hidden agendas. One interviewee noted that this anti-gender backlash, "set back the fight for women's rights by years."

> The Iraqi 2023-24 anti-gender campaign started on 27 July 2023 during the Day of Ashura, the anniversary of Hussain's killing. During this large and famous religious event, millions of Shiaa people came together in Iraq. Shiaa religious leaders spoke at length about the harm of gender concepts and called on their followers to spread anti-gender campaigns as a religious responsibility.

3. Religious leaders' influence: Religious leaders play a crucial role in shaping anti-gender backlash developments, for example in Syria. Statements targeting CSOs and their activities contribute to a spike in resistance against gender equality initiatives, highlighting the need for dialogue and understanding to counter misconceptions. Prevalent anti-Western sentiment among some religious leaders contributes to their opposition against gender equality initiatives. Engaging with religious leaders is essential to

understanding their motivations and addressing misconceptions about the work of civil society organizations.

4. Wider societal roots: Anti-gender backlash is deeply rooted in societal norms and traditions, compounded by political positioning and religious values. It reflects broader societal attitudes towards gender roles and equality, which are often exploited for political or religious gain or to maintain traditional power structures. In conflict-affected areas anti-gender backlash intersects with broader socio-political dynamics, exacerbating vulnerabilities among women and girls. Militarized environments and increasing power inequalities, lead to increased control of and restrictions on women's rights and freedoms.

> Gender equality activists and CSOs face immense challenges, with young women activists encountering additional barriers to their participation in political action. In Lebanon, for example, activists often resort to deception to engage in advocacy efforts, navigating familial and societal pressures that seek to restrict their involvement.

5. Conflict dynamics, including return of soldiers and militia members to their home was mentioned by some interviewees as a driving factor for increased anti-gender community support. As men return from conflict zones, they may seek to reclaim their traditional positions of authority within their families and communities. However, due to the prolonged absence of male figures during conflict, women have often assumed leadership roles and responsibilities within their households.

This shift in gender dynamics, where women have taken on more prominent roles in family decision-making and economic provision, can create tensions and increase support to anti-gender pushback from returning fighters who seek to reassert their authority. Renegotiating power dynamics requires a deep understanding of interlinkages between household and societal dynamics within communities.

6. Diminishing civic space, discrediting CSO programmes that are pursuing gender equality: State authorities exert greater control over civic space by portraying CSO activities in support of gender equality as foreign interventions threatening to destroy local and traditional values and customs.

The portrayal of gender equality initiatives as foreign interventions has been utilized by anti-gender backlash proponents to mobilize support and justify their opposition. By framing gender equality as a Western agenda, reflecting neo-colonial power structures, they seek to delegitimize and discredit efforts to promote women's rights and challenge patriarchal structures and reinforce the notion that gender equality is incompatible with traditional values. In Iraq, the nationwide anti-gender campaign specifically stated 'gender' going against national values

Overcoming this perception requires nuanced approaches that root efforts in societal history and current activism, respecting cultural diversity while advocating for universal human rights principles. Efforts to promote gender equality must be contextualized within local history, cultures, activism and traditions, emphasizing the shared values of dignity, equality, and respect for all individuals. By addressing misconceptions and fostering dialogue, it is possible to counter the narrative that portrays gender equality as a threat to traditional norms and culture.

Effective civil society strategies

In response to the anti-gender backlash, activists and organizations have demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resilience, employing a range of strategies to navigate the challenging socio-political landscape and continue their advocacy for gender equality. Drawing upon insights from the interviews conducted with various stakeholders, the following key reflections and tactics have emerged:

1. Adaptation of language and approaches: Activists have proactively and tactically adjusted their language and approaches to mitigate risks and garner community support, while remaining true to their overarching goals. Recognizing the negative connotations associated with the term "gender" in certain contexts, and the governmental bans put in place against certain terms as is the case in Iraq, Iraqi, Lebanese and Syrian CSOs have shifted their focus towards terms more receptive to the community such as "women's participation", "social roles" and "our roles in community" to effectively counter anti-gender backlash.

2. Diplomatic engagement and advocacy: Diplomatic channels can have negative or positive influence and as such, have been very carefully engaged with to highlight the repercussions of anti-gender backlash, advocate for upholding human rights standards and influence diplomatic action. When diplomatic missions have carefully fostered trust with CSOs and activist groups, they have proven useful by creating closed-door sessions in secure locations to build trust and facilitate needed strategizing between human rights and women activists. Subsequently, activist insights provided valuable insights to exert diplomatic pressure.

However, activists and organisations also emphasized that diplomatic engagement can at times cause more harm than good. For instance, as an example:

> "Diplomatic support would at the moment do more harm than good. Embassies were directly discredited in social media due to the way that they promote Pride month and gender equality. Much more cultural and contextual awareness is needed by international diplomatic actors in their online and public presence to back women's rights advocates and peace activists".
> – Iraqi women's rights activist

3. Community-centered programming: Activists have prioritized community engagement and rootedness in their programming efforts, recognizing the importance of building trust and deepening their understanding of community dynamics. By incorporating community perceptions and practices into their initiatives, organizations have fostered acceptance and facilitated open discussions on gender equality issues. For instance, a CSO in Syria conducted community based research on how the organizations can adapt their work on gender equality to ensure it more accepted at the community level. In Lebanon, positive parenting is seen as a strategic entry point as raising healthy children is a priority for many women and men. Through these sessions, open communication, non-violence, and men's involvement in caregiving are the main messages.

4. Strategic engagement with religious and political leaders: Despite the often negative religious discourse towards gender inequality, activists have pursued strategic engagements with moderate religious leaders to garner support for women's rights and political participation. By framing gender equality within religious frameworks and emphasizing shared values, organizations have managed to bridge divides and

build alliances within their communities. In Lebanon, anti-gender backlash is seen as inherent within prevalent systems of oppression, and a built-in self-protective mechanism of groups to remain in power. Though complex, working with religious leaders has been a way to work within established and influential institutions to promote equality.

The "We Believe" campaign ran from 2012 to 2018 featuring four prominent Lebanese religious leaders through a public service announcement video, billboards across Beirut, and a broad social media campaign, emphasizing that all women are entitled to a life free from violence, a principle agreed upon by all involved religions.

During 2020-21 a grassroots campaign engaged local religious leaders in the fight against violence against women. *"Nothing justifies violence against women, not even stress and anger."* A committee of allied religious leaders was created.

A non-confrontational approach with religious leaders and the community was taken in Lebanon, facilitated the acceptance gender equality work within the community. For example, dialogues centered on a human rights perspective making campaigns difficult for religious leaders to challenge. More specifically, they highlighted how human rights emphasizes the inherent dignity and worth of every person, aligning with many religious teachings creating common ground. Using this language made it difficult for religious leaders to oppose the campaign without undermining shared moral principles. Additionally, by reaching out to high-level religious leaders, the campaign prevented backlash that would stem from communities, as these high-level religious leaders had a large influence on religious interpretation in Lebanese society.

In Lebanon, having the support of male religious leaders based in the community to promote key messages has proven more impactful than the assistance of male CSO staff. It was noted that even non-religious men, living in conservative societal environments, were more receptive to messages from religious leaders.

Feminist groups raised concerns that engaging religious leaders might reinforce their patriarchal authority, given their significant control over women's autonomy and family affairs under Lebanon's personal status laws.

They feared that this collaboration could negatively impact efforts against child marriage, and reinforcing patriarchal structures. By actively involving feminist groups in dialogue platforms with religious leaders, common interests were addressed and concepts related to gender equality and violence clarified.

"Direct engagement with religious leaders is crucial to support women's participation during elections and subsequently for women to hold political office. Religious leaders are open to discussing women's participation in elections, as our organization links this to women's rights. It's essential to clearly delink women's political participation from LGBTQI+ advocacy." - Iraqi CSO staffer

5. Developing good communication with political leaders and local and national authorities
Highly dependent on authority dynamics, some CSOs have invested in their interactions with specific authority representatives. For example, in Lebanon good relationships with the Ministries of Social Affairs, Justice and Social Development were helpful, as there was a trusted and coordinated way in which Ministries provided some protection and back-up.

6. Engaging men: Most interviewed CSOs and activists detailed the importance of developing ways to engage moderate men in their communities and particularly male community leaders. For example, to stop the practice of early/forced marriage in Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon, a CSO strategically involved specific men who experienced the negative consequences of early/forces marriage and were willing to publicly speak up about this.

7. Creative communication strategies: Activists have embraced creative communication strategies to circumvent censorship and promote dialogue on gender equality. Utilizing visual materials and survivor-centered approaches, organizations have effectively conveyed the impact of gender-based violence and challenged harmful societal norms in digitally secure and non-threatening ways, without linking activist or organization names to the communication channels or materials.

8. Coalition building and solidarity: In the face of heightened risks and threats, activists have recognized the importance of building solidarity networks and strengthening connections with like-minded organizations. This strengthening of collaboration and

information sharing moves at the speed of trust and requires a sensitive approach. By pooling resources and sharing intelligence, organizations have effectively enhanced their collective resilience and ability to respond to anti-gender backlash.

An important challenge when anti-gender backlash surges, is the diminishing trust between activists and CSO members, which makes coordination efforts more difficult.

9. Bottom-up mobilization: In conflict-affected societies with national level authority led anti-gender backlash like Iraq, activists have emphasized the importance of bottom-up mobilization strategies to engage communities. By empowering local leaders and fostering grassroots movements, organizations have laid the groundwork for countering the backlash through sustained advocacy and social transformation.
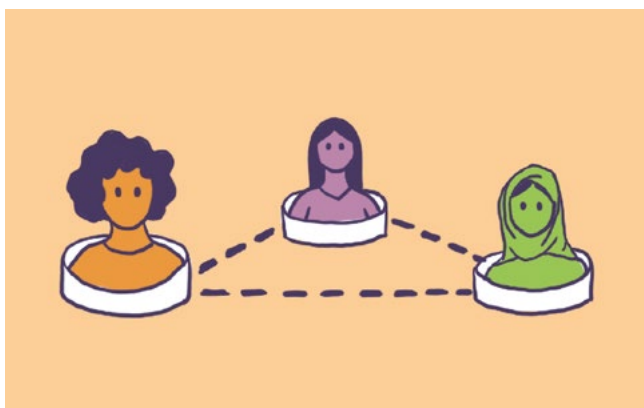
10. Strategic withdrawal and adaptation: In response to escalating risks, organizations have strategically adjusted their public presence and programming tactics. From postponing activities to reframing organizational identities, activists have prioritized their safety while maintaining their commitment to gender equality goals. All the while activists and CSOs also indicated the need for holistic and contextually relevant security trainings with attention to gender-sensitive digital and physical security and mental health support.

In conclusion, activists and organizations confronting anti-gender backlash have demonstrated remarkable resilience and ingenuity in navigating threatening and complex socio-political environments. Through strategic adaptation, community engagement, and creative advocacy efforts, they continue to advance the cause of gender equality despite formidable challenges and threats. They require tailored and conflict-sensitive capacity strengthening, funding and diplomatic support.

Useful resources for activists

In countering anti-gender backlash, activists and organizations have tapped into diverse resources and strategies to strengthen their advocacy efforts and navigate the challenging socio-political landscape. Drawing upon insights from the interviews conducted with various stakeholders, several key resources and tactics have emerged:

1. Regional and international networks: Organizations have leveraged regional sources and networks on basis of trust building, to access valuable information, support, and solidarity. These networks facilitate knowledge sharing, collaboration, and mutual support among activists working to counter anti-gender backlash across different contexts.

2. Social media tactics and storytelling: Recognizing the power of social media as a tool for advocacy and awareness-raising, organizations have focused on developing stronger social media tactics, at times through social media channels and platforms which are not identifiably linked to their organization or particular activists. By utilizing storytelling and highlighting the impact of their work on communities in a recognizable and engaging way, activists aim to foster greater understanding and empathy, effectively countering negative narratives perpetuated by anti-gender forces.

3. State accountability through UPR & CEDAW mechanisms: International human rights mechanisms such as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), provide valuable avenues for holding governments accountable for their obligations to uphold gender equality. Activists have utilized these mechanisms by drafting shadow reports, at times anonymous, to advocate for policy reforms and internationally raise awareness about the impacts and drivers of anti-gender backlash.

The need for anonymity of CSOs showcases the rising repression of civic space. For example Iraqi CSOs, due to fear and control imposed by Iraqi authorities on civil society (as a direct consequence of the anti-gender backlash), submitted UPR reports through international organisations.
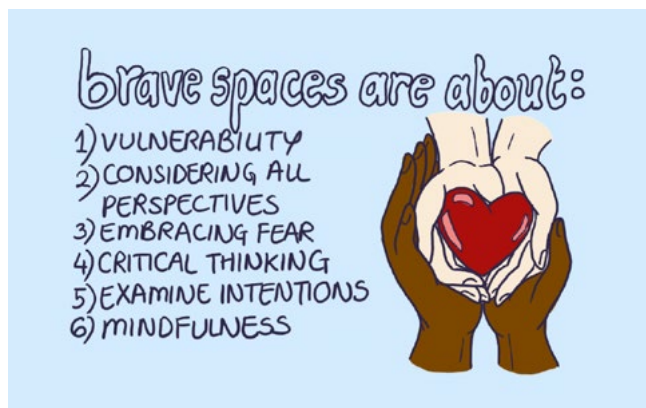
4. Safe diplomatic spaces: Diplomatic engagement has the potential to support civil society actors and foster stakeholder trust. The creation of safe diplomatic spaces within countries, possibly outside of Embassies to protect activists allows for open dialogue, knowledge exchange, and collaboration between diplomatic missions, civil society organizations, and international actors, contributing to more effective advocacy efforts against anti-gender backlash.

5. Feminist flexible funding: Flexible funding mechanisms, particularly those provided by feminist donors, have proven essential in supporting organizations' efforts to counter anti-gender backlash. This funding is severely lacking. By offering responsive and adaptable funding, these mechanisms enable organizations to address emerging challenges, implement innovative strategies, and maintain their autonomy and effectiveness in advocating for gender equality.

6. Community-based resources and tools:
Organizations have turned to community-based resources and tools, such as those provided by Musawah, (https://www.musawah.org/) to develop culturally sensitive and contextually relevant materials for their advocacy work. These resources facilitate grassroots engagement, empower communities, and promote dialogue on gender equality issues, contributing to more impactful advocacy efforts on the ground.

7. Collaboration and solidarity: Activists have emphasized the importance of collaboration and solidarity within and across borders. Articles on feminist websites and platforms, as well as connections with activists from other conflict-affected regions such as Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and Syria, have provided valuable support, inspiration, and strategic insights for countering anti-gender backlash.

brave spaces are about:
1) VULNERABILITY
2) CONSIDERING ALL PERSPECTIVES
3) EMBRACING FEAR
4) CRITICAL THINKING
5) EXAMINE INTENTIONS
6) MINDFULNESS

8. Security training: Recognizing the risks faced by activists, organizations have prioritized security training, both digital and physical, to ensure the safety and well-being of their members. By equipping activists with the knowledge and skills to mitigate harm and adapt their tactics, security training enables them to continue their advocacy and community work effectively, both online and in public spaces. however many organizations many identified the need for donors and international NGOs and organisations to support holistic and gender-sensitive security training.

In conclusion, a combination of regional networks, international mechanisms, flexible funding, community-based resources, and collaboration efforts has equipped activists and organizations with the tools and strategies needed to effectively counter anti-gender backlash and advance the cause of gender equality in conflict-affected regions. By leveraging these resources and tactics, they continue to push back against regressive narratives and advocate for a more inclusive and equitable society for all.

Civil society learning and collaboration

In response to inquiries about their learning needs, interviewees highlighted several key areas for development and collaboration in countering anti-gender backlash and advancing gender equality agendas. Here are the key insights and suggestions provided:

1. Linking contextual information to human rights instruments: Interviewees expressed a need to better understand how human rights instruments, such as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), can be effectively utilized to address anti-gender backlash. By linking contextual information to these processes, activists can strengthen their advocacy efforts and hold governments accountable for upholding gender equality standards.

2. Trusted shared learning sessions and structural exchanges: Interviewees emphasized the importance of closed, contextually relevant shared learning sessions. These sessions provide value, especially when addressing regional dynamics such as Iranian-backed anti-gender campaigns. Bringing together specific partners in a trusted space allows for the exchange of insights, strategies, and best practices in countering anti-gender backlash. Additionally, there is a need for more structural exchanges to share expertise and lessons learned with colleagues in other contexts, such as Lebanon and Syria. Ongoing collaboration and support networks play a crucial role in navigating anti-gender backlash and sustaining advocacy efforts.

3. Building connections and collaborations: Activists expressed a keen interest in building connections and collaborations with feminist groups and activists from other contexts, including Afghanistan, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq. These exchanges provide opportunities for mutual learning, solidarity, and collective advocacy efforts, particularly in advocating for flexible feminist funding and impactful international political responses.

4. Adapting activist tactics: the importance of adapting activist tactics in response to evolving challenges and threats. They expressed a desire to explore innovative approaches to advocacy and prevention of harm while remaining resilient and steadfast in their commitment to advancing gender equality agendas.

5. Learning from Experience: There is a desire to hear more from organizations who have experienced direct threats. By sharing experiences and insights, activists can better understand effective strategies for countering backlash and mitigating harm.

In conclusion, interviewees highlighted the importance of ongoing learning, collaboration, and adaptation in effectively countering anti-gender backlash and advancing gender equality agendas. By leveraging human rights instruments, fostering collaboration with diverse stakeholders, and sharing experiences and expertise, activists can strengthen their advocacy efforts and create positive change in their communities and beyond.

Recommendations

Based on the insights gathered the following recommendations are proposed by interviewees for countering the severe threats posed by anti-gender backlash and to effectively continue promoting gender equality:

1. **Building alliances:** Regional and diaspora feminist groups, along with feminist funders, can serve as valuable allies in combating anti-gender backlash. Strengthening connections with these groups can amplify efforts and provide additional support for promoting gender equality agendas.

2. **Global perspectives:** Recognizing that anti-gender backlash is not confined to the Global South, efforts should be made to understand and address the wider global anti-rights movement. Drawing lessons from experiences in other regions, such as Hungary, can inform strategies for effectively countering conservative opposition and promoting human and religious rights.

3. **Research and cultural sensitivity:** Prior to initiating any project or intervention, conducting thorough research is essential to understand cultural and religious sensitivities. By centralizing values and messages that resonate with local communities, CSOs can better navigate obstacles and promote gender equality in culturally sensitive ways.

4. **Learning from experiences:** Organizations and activists should actively seek insights from those who have faced direct threats. By sharing experiences, they can develop effective strategies to counter backlash and minimize harm.

    By implementing these recommendations, INGOs, CSOs and women rights activists can work collaboratively to mitigate the impacts of anti-gender backlash and advance towards a more inclusive and equitable society.

5. **Counter Gendered Disinformation:** Develop and strengthen national, EU and UN strategies and legislation to counter gendered disinformation, including technological tools like deep fakes. Establish national support systems for victims of disinformation and cyber harm, involving feminist civil society, relevant private sector actors, technical experts, and academia.

Specific donor recommendations:

6. **Enhance Funding Practices:**
    - **Implement and strengthen feminist funding practices by prioritizing funding for those most affected by gendered oppression and organizations addressing discrimination intersectionally, including both women's rights.**
    - **Ensure funding accessibility for activists and movements, particularly for grassroots organizations.**
    - **Provide long-term, core, and easily administrable funding for activities aimed at driving social, political, legal, and cultural changes, such as campaigns and advocacy efforts.**
    - **Support cross-issue work and cross-regional movement building, as well as activities enabling feminist work like digital security and psychological support.**

7. **Establish Dedicated Funds:**
    - **Create a separate fund managed by women's funds and gender-lens investors to support feminist and women-led organizations, offering flexible funding approaches.**

8. **Facilitate Consultation and Advocacy:**
    - **Offer formal and informal consultation and advocacy spaces for feminist civil society in governmental and multilateral settings,**

- **Center do-no-harm principles to ensure activists' safety both online and offline.**

9. **Support Human Rights Defenders:**
- **Assist women rights defenders facing criminalization and judicial processes.**
- **Facilitate visa processes for activists fleeing persecution, providing humanitarian visas without hindrances.**

By implementing these measures, we can bolster feminist civil society, protect activists, and advance gender equality and human rights on national and international levels.

Colophon

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