

RIGHTS at RISK

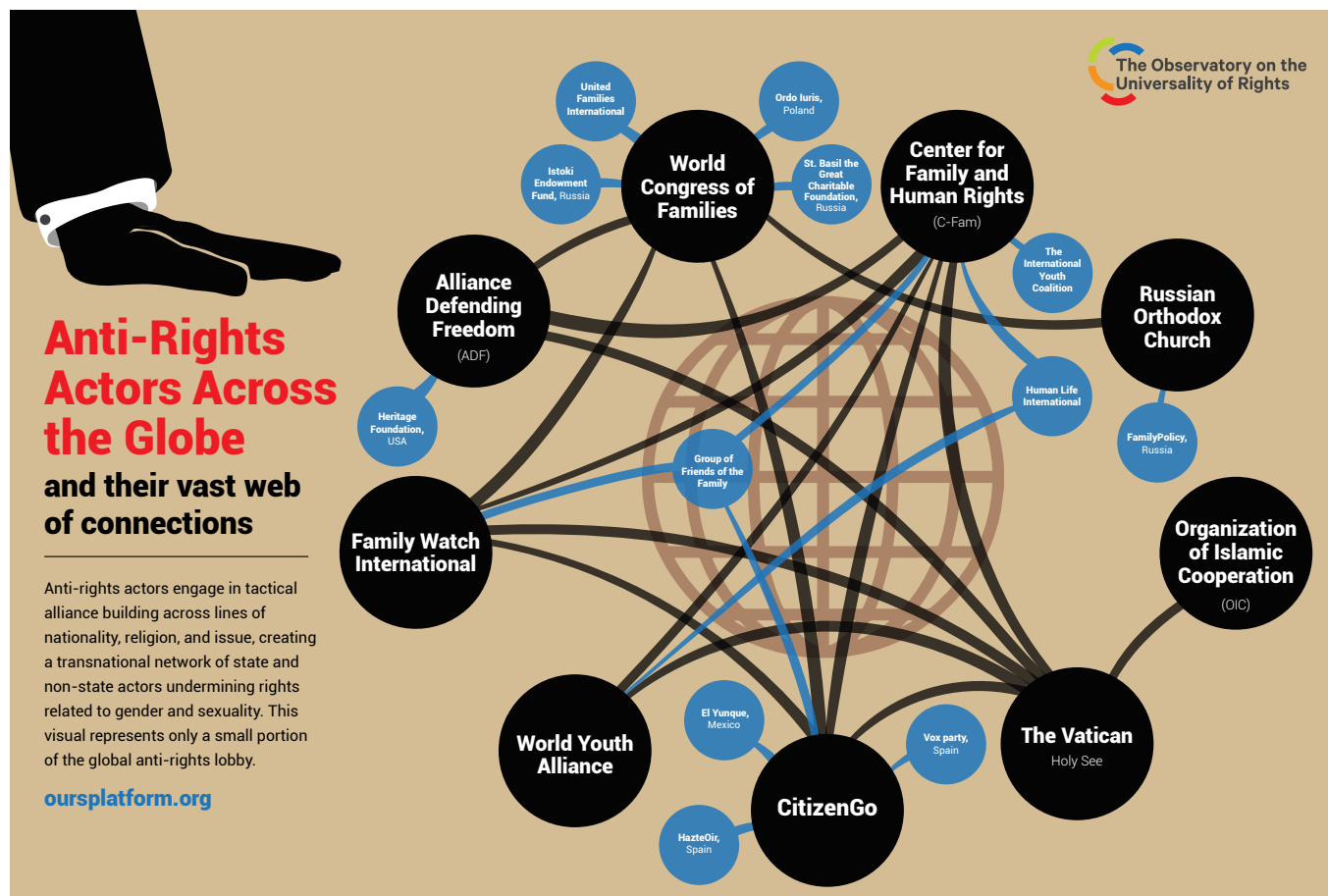
A PRIMER

Anti-rights actors have infiltrated the UN – Here’s how to spot key groups and debunk their narratives

It is an unmistakable and deeply alarming trend. Anti-rights actors are now operating with **increased frequency, coordination, resources, and impact** in human rights systems – putting our rights at risk. They are **chipping away at the very concept of human rights and gender justice**, and the structures, institutions, and protections that uphold them, with disastrous consequences.

Who are anti-rights actors?

“Anti-rights” describes a range of state and non-state actors who are working to undermine the universality of rights, the cornerstone principle that every person is equally entitled to human rights, with no exceptions. Anti-rights actors include individuals and institutions affiliated with **religious fundamentalisms, nationalisms or ultra-nationalisms, white supremacy, ultra-conservatism** and other oppressive ideologies and movements.



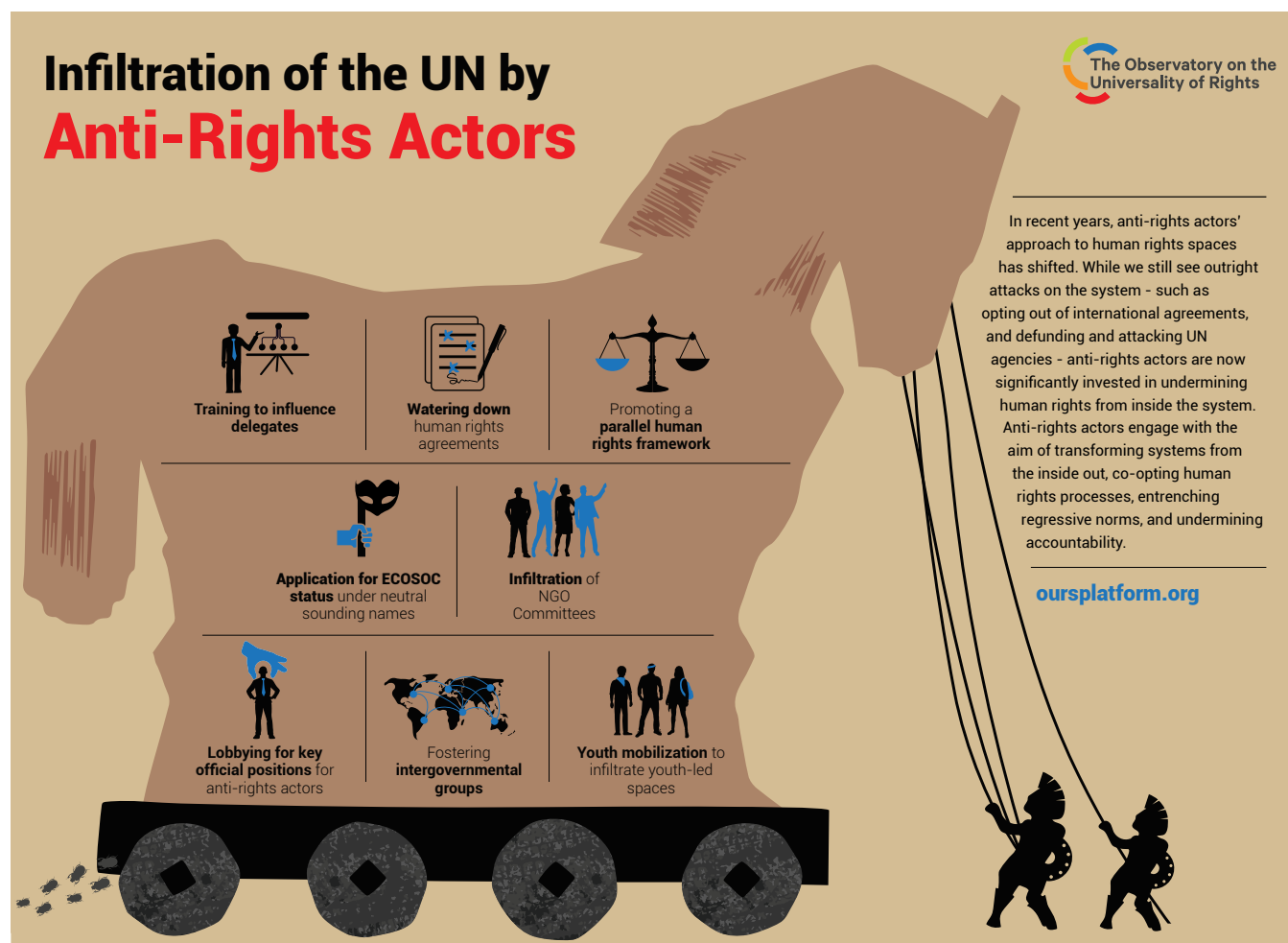
Anti-rights actors use human rights language to mask discriminatory ideologies. They are increasingly engaging in tactical alliance-building across different sectors, regions, issues, and faiths. As a result, **the very basis on which we can claim rights is being eroded**, while a parallel framework that codifies discrimination and inequality is being built.

Key non-state anti-rights actors who are active in international spaces include:

- **World Congress of Families** – A global convenor which aims to sustain a worldwide network of anti-rights “pro-family” organizations, scholars, state officials, and conservative religious actors who influence international policy spaces, including the UN.
- **Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam)** – A US-based Catholic organization which focuses on lobbying at the UN, particularly the Commission of the Status of Women (CSW), to “defend life and family.” The group sends weekly newsletters that “expose” and delegitimize UN agencies. C-Fam has also held trainings for conservative activists at the CSW.
- **Family Watch International (FWI)** – A US-based Mormon-led organization highly active in international spaces. FWI focuses on international lobbying for “the family” and against LGBTQI and comprehensive sexuality education policies. The group also trains civil society and state delegates while disseminating documents like ‘The Resource Guide to UN Consensus Language on Family Issues.’
- **World Youth Alliance** – Trains youth members in diplomacy, international relations, and message development while focusing its international advocacy on “the family” and against sexual and reproductive rights. It hosts internships and a regular Emerging Leaders Conference.¹ In 2015, the Alliance launched the ‘Human Dignity Curriculum’ developed as a conservative alternative to comprehensive sexuality education.²
- **CitizenGo** – An organization registered in Spain and working internationally to “defend and promote life, family and liberty.”³ Its main activities include petitions and campaigns, many of which use spectacle and shock tactics. CitizenGo has been linked to the Spanish far-right party Vox,⁴ while its affiliate HazteOir has ties to the ultra-right Mexican Catholic group El Yunque.⁵ A petition by the group was investigated as the source of the harassment of a CSW facilitator in 2019.⁶
- **Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF)** – A legal advocacy and training group founded in the United States and active globally. ADF misuses concepts such as religious liberty, the right to life, and freedom of speech to justify discrimination. Since 2008, ADF has spent at least \$21.3 million across five continents⁷ supporting campaigns and legal initiatives against the rights of women and LGBTQI people.

What are their strategies?

Outright attacks on the system - such as opting out of international agreements, and defunding and delegitimizing UN agencies - remain key tactics employed by anti-rights actors. However, anti-rights actors are increasingly using a Trojan horse strategy to **transform global and regional systems from the inside out**.



Where does their money come from?

Anti-rights actors are extensively networked within international human rights systems, and with ultra-conservative actors at the national level. They are able to sustain their work through **large budgets backed by powerful financial interests, often from obscure sources**. Key sources of anti-rights funding include: ultra-conservative grant-makers and private donors, businesses and corporations, religious institutions, public and state financing, and inter-organizational funding.

Anti-rights arguments (and how to debunk them)

Anti-rights actors are moving away from using explicitly regressive language. Instead they are **co-opting human rights language and social justice issues** to gain legitimacy in human rights systems.

“Gender ideology”

The “gender ideology” narrative casts advocates of gender and social justice as a nefarious agenda threatening the “natural order” of society. **It claims that oppressive gender roles are “common sense”**, strategically painting all other ideas, cultural norms, and forms of social life as a dangerous conspirative “ideology.” This narrative originated from the Vatican and has become **a flexible concept that can suit different contexts**. It has been invoked against comprehensive sexuality education⁸ and used to justify laws and policies discriminating against LGBTQI people.⁹ It is also used by some women’s rights groups to promote an agenda of women’s “sex-based rights” and oppose the rights of trans people. “Gender ideology” narratives rely on **provoking uncertainty and fear**, and are often combined with misinformation and sensationalism.

Debunking the discourse

- It is important to understand that **anti-rights actors themselves invented the concept** of “gender ideology” in order to oppose it.
- Rights related to gender and sexuality are **not a threat to society; they are a threat to the patriarchal order**, and the violence and discrimination inherent in it. While anti-rights groups claim to speak on behalf of society, they actually harm society by advancing discriminatory agendas.
- The concept of gender – as articulated by feminist, trans, and queer scholars and movements – threatens anti-rights actors not because it constitutes an ideology, but because it **challenges their power**.

Ideological colonization and cultural imperialism

Anti-rights narratives on ideological colonization and cultural imperialism assert that rights related to gender and sexuality are being imposed on certain countries, particularly those that were previously colonized. **Universal rights are labeled as “Western”, “secular”, or “foreign”** and anti-rights actors can then present themselves as defending non-Western countries from “ideological colonization” by foreign actors.

Debunking the discourse

- Cultural imperialism is a real issue and global power imbalances do play out in the dynamics of feminist and LGBTQI movements. However, **this anti-rights discourse operates in bad faith, as it is a tool to perpetuate inequality** and discrimination against women and LGBTQI people in post-colonial countries.
- **Diverse gender identities, relations, and sexual orientations have existed everywhere throughout history, and still do today.** When anti-rights actors present patriarchy and homophobia as “authentic” to a culture, they erase this reality.
- These narratives rely on a static, one-dimensional idea of “culture.” In reality, **culture is fluid, multiple, and constantly evolving.**
- In many cases, the discriminatory laws that anti-rights actors are defending in post-colonial countries were installed by colonial rulers and served **the colonial erasure of indigenous cultures.**

Conscientious objection

Anti-rights actors, such as Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), argue that there exists a human right for healthcare professionals to conscientiously object to participation in abortion and forms of contraception due to their beliefs. By referencing the “right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion” under the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,¹⁰ **the “conscientious objection” discourse is framed as a matter of individual conscience.** However, anti-rights actors are applying it to an ever-widening circle of healthcare providers from nurses and midwives, to doctors and surgeons – and even to institutions.¹¹ **This narrative aims to make abortion access impossible in practice,** even where it is legal, and where direct opposition to abortion access is less likely to succeed. Currently, more than 70 jurisdictions around the world have provisions that allow healthcare providers to refuse reproductive services like abortion.¹²

Debunking the discourse

- There exists no right to conscientious objection for health professionals in international human rights law. In fact, **binding human rights law only recognizes a right to conscientious objection for individuals who object to performing military service.** The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion has clearly held that the right to conscience cannot be invoked by healthcare providers and personnel to refuse to perform abortions or to make referrals for the service.¹³
- While individuals may act according to their own moral beliefs, **they do not have the right to prevent the fulfilment of others’ right to health,** including the provision of healthcare services.
- Human rights treaty monitoring bodies have called out States’ **insufficient regulation of the use of “conscientious objection”** and have directed them to guarantee patients’ access to services.¹⁴

“Prenatal genocide”

Anti-rights actors such as CitizenGo have launched anti-abortion campaigns declaring that “abortion is the prime cause of femicide in the world,”¹⁵ while the Vatican has talked of a “prenatal genocide” of children with disabilities.¹⁶ In North America especially, anti-abortion campaigns have instrumentalized racial justice, with slogans like “Black preborn lives matter.” **The “prenatal genocide” narrative co-opts progressive themes of women’s rights, disability rights, and racial justice in service of an anti-abortion agenda.** The discourse seeks to present communities who experience deep discrimination in society as threatened by the so-called “abortion industry.”

Debunking the discourse

- Discourses on “prenatal genocide” use social justice language to cloak their real objective: **restricting or eliminating access to abortion**, with the gravest harm falling on communities that depend on public health services.
- These discourses reference critical concerns about ableism, medical racism, and patriarchy. But rather than seeking to address the structural causes of these issues, or to improve the material conditions of these groups, **anti-rights actors seek only to limit everyone’s access to reproductive health and rights.**
- These groups only claim a concern for the lives of Black and disabled people, and the lives of women, before birth – **their interest disappears once these people are actually born.** In fact, anti-rights groups are often tied to patriarchal, white supremacist, and ableist nationalist ideologies.
- A **comprehensive framework of reproductive justice** affirms the right to bodily autonomy and encompasses gender, racial, and disability justice, instead of pitting them against each other.

“Protection of the Family”

Discourse on “protection of the family” and other family-centred anti-rights narratives function as a useful umbrella to house multiple discriminatory positions. **The aim is to construct a new category of rights where the institution of the family itself is a rights holder**, rather than the individuals that make up families. It can be a useful narrative for discriminatory agendas because it sounds innocuous and **few want to be seen to oppose “family.”** A number of resolutions have been passed on the “protection of the family” at the Human Rights Council since 2014, and using family-centred narratives has been a key anti-rights tactic in many national contexts.

Debunking the discourse

- Human rights exist to protect individuals, not institutions. Shifting them away from the individual and towards the institution of the family means **reducing accountability for the violations that happen within families.**

- The narrative also pushes a **singular, hierarchical, heterosexual, and patriarchal concept of the family** that does not reflect the diversity of families around the world. It discriminates against families that don't fit within these rigid definitions.
- Ultimately “protection of the family” works to **restrict rights both *within* and *to* family life**.

“Parental Rights” and Protection of Children

Just as anti-rights actors aim to construct a new category for the “protection of the family,” they are also attempting to **construct a new category of “parental rights.”** This discourse skews and misinterprets the idea of the protection and rights of children in order to assert the rights of parents to **control their children and limit or disregard children’s rights and autonomy**. It often comes with scare-mongering narratives like that of “gender ideology”, as well as **opposition to Comprehensive Sexuality Education and the promotion of religious homeschooling** and its deregulation.

Debunking the discourse

- The notion of “parental rights” has **no support in existing human rights standards**.
- This discourse attempts to **misuse the rights protections children have**, as articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to actually limit their rights.
- For children to be protected from harm, **their human rights and autonomy must be respected**. An emphasis on parental control and authority in disregard of children’s autonomy actually takes away the safeguards that protect children.

Subverting Universality

In international policy spaces, anti-rights actors are increasingly manipulating references to universal or fundamental human rights to reverse the meaning of the universality of rights. Rather than using the term “universal” to describe the full set of indivisible and interrelated human rights, ultra-conservative actors instead use it to **delineate a subset of human rights as “truly fundamental.”** In this narrative, other rights (often those related to gender and sexuality) are described as “new rights”, and optional or subject to state discretion.¹⁷ This discourse is especially dangerous not only because it can sound legitimate, but because their category of what is “truly universal” is constantly shifting.

Debunking the discourse

- A key principle of human rights is that, as well as being universal and inalienable, they are indivisible, interdependent, and interrelated. This means **no one set of rights can be discarded or ranked as less important than another**. Fulfilment of one right often depends, wholly or in part, upon the fulfilment of others.



This brief is based on N. Shameem, *Rights at Risk: Observatory on the Universality of Rights Trends Report 2017*, AWID, 2017, and N. Shameem et al., *Rights at Risk – Time for Action: Observatory on the Universality of Rights Trends Report 2021*, AWID, 2021.

Endnotes

- 1 For more information, see <https://www.wya.net/programs/elc/>.
- 2 An information handbook on the curriculum is available at <https://www.wya.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/HDCBook.pdf>
- 3 CitizenGo, *What is CitizenGO?* <https://www.citizenngo.org/en/about-us>
- 4 An investigation by openDemocracy reported that a senior Vox official compared CitizenGo to a “Super PAC” for the party. During the same investigation, CitizenGo reportedly told openDemocracy that it was working to drive voters towards far-right parties like Vox ahead of the European Parliament elections and Spain’s national elections in 2019. See: Adam Ramsay and Claire Provost, Revealed: the Trump-linked ‘Super PAC’ working behind the scenes to drive Europe’s voters to the far right, openDemocracy, 25 April 2019. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/revealed-the-trump-linked-super-pac-working-behind-the-scenes-to-drive-europes-voters-to-the-far-right>
- 5 See: Irene Ortiz, *Building the City of God: Mexico’s Ultra-Right Yunque*, NACLA, March 2008. <https://nacla.org/article/building-city-god-mexico%27s-ultra-right-yunque>
- 6 Sonah Lee, *The Case of Harassing a UN Diplomat Via 1,000s of Text Messages*, Pass Blue: Independent Coverage of the UN, 14 May 2019. <https://www.passblue.com/2019/05/14/the-case-of-harassing-a-un-diplomat-via-1000s-of-text-messages/>
- 7 As taken from ADF’s publicly-available US financial records from the years 2008-2018, compiled by openDemocracy 50.50 and reported on at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/trump-us-christian-spending-global-revealed/>
- 8 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/how-paraguay-became-a-lab-for-anti-rights-ideas/>
- 9 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/14/poland-reject-new-curbs-abortion-sex-ed>
- 10 OHCHR, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, Article 18(1). <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- 11 See for example: Verónica Undurruga and Michelle Sadler, *The misrepresentation of conscientious objection as a new strategy of resistance to abortion decriminalisation*, Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters, 2017; 27(2). Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/26410397.2019.1610280>.
- 12 Refer to WHO’s Global Abortion Policies database, see: <http://www.conscientious-objection.info/current-policies-and-laws/>
- 13 UN Human Rights Council (HRC), *Report on freedom of religion or belief and gender equality*, 27 February 2020, A/HRC/43/48. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/Pages/ReportGenderEquality.aspx.203>
- 14 See *General Comment 22 from the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, available at: <https://www.escr-net.org/resources/general-comment-no-22-2016-right-sexual-and-reproductive-health>
- 15 BBC News, *Italy anti-abortion posters spark outcry in Rome*, 15 May 2018. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44122556>
- 16 https://c-fam.org/friday_fax/un-panel-condemns-prenatal-genocide-of-children-with-down-syndrome/
- 17 See, for example the Geneva Statement: <http://adfinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/IMHR-Poster-Geneva-Statement.pdf>