

# Data and evidence on global rollback of women and girls' rights since 2016

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## Questions

*What is the data and evidence on whether there has been a roll back of women's and girls' rights globally since 2016? How has the response to Covid-19 exacerbated rollback?*

- *Consider changes in legislation, policy and space for civic engagement*
- *Include a summary of trends seen in composite indices of gender equality*

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## 1. Summary

In 2019, an evidence review commissioned by the gender equality team at the UK Department for International Development (DFID),<sup>1</sup> looking at global rollback on women's rights, identified a range of evidence to show that these rights, along with progress towards global gender goals, are being increasingly challenged on multiple fronts (Jobes et al., 2019, p. 1). The purpose of this further review is to consider additional data and evidence on this topic that has since been published. It sits alongside an accompanying review looking at rollback on gender equality and women's rights in international fora since 2016 (Birchall, 2020).

Since the publication of Jobes et al.'s review, the evidence base has been added to by a proliferation of studies in several areas. Firstly, 2020 marked the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action at the fourth World Conference on Women, prompting largescale reviews of progress and challenges. Secondly, as debates around "gender ideology" have intensified, and populist and conservative forces have increased their hold in several countries, further evidence has emerged on the threats to gender equality that these forces pose. Thirdly, as the Covid-19 pandemic threw every region and country into crisis, a body of research on the pandemic's disproportionate impact on women and girls' rights developed.

Reviews of the Beijing Platform for Action demonstrate that many of the victories achieved around women and girls' rights during the past 25 years have, since 2016, been stalling or even being reversed (UN Women, 2020a, WGDAWG, 2020). Globally, progress towards Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality and empowering women and girls is limited, and there has been a lack of investment in the commitments made in the 2015 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN Women et al., 2020). Fiscal austerity measures have had harsh impacts for women and the health, education and social protection policies that have underpinned progress on gender equality since Beijing (Goetz, 2020; UN Women, 2020a).

A number of indices provide data on women and girls' rights and progress toward gender equality across regions and countries. Latest data from the Global Gender Gap Index, Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI), Women, Business and the Law Index, and the Gender Inequality Index demonstrate mixed results, indicating that progress has slowed in some areas, and that significant gender inequalities and gaps remain. The latest Gender Gap Index report estimates that at the current rate of change, it will take 54 years to close the gender gap in Western Europe, 59 years in Latin America and the Caribbean, 71 years in South Asia, 95 years in Sub-Saharan Africa, 107 years in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 140 years in the Middle East and North Africa, 152 years in North America, and 163 years in East Asia and the Pacific (WEF, 2020, p. 6).

Since 2016, a range of evidence has emerged to demonstrate a rise in exclusionary politics, characterised by misogyny and xenophobia, and the resulting erosion of women's rights in the name of a "return to traditional values" (UN Women, 2020a). Many studies map out links between a rise in populism, debates around "gender ideology", and protests against marriage equality, reproductive justice, gender mainstreaming and quotas, sex education and LGBTQ

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<sup>1</sup> Now the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)

rights (Dona, 2020; McEwen, 2020; O’Sullivan and Krulisova, 2020; Paternotte and Kuhar 2018; WGDAGW, 2020).

Since March 2020, a significant amount of data and evidence has been published demonstrating the distinct and disproportionate impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on women and girls. The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing gender and other intersecting inequalities in a host of ways, from violence against women and girls to unpaid care work (Women’s Link Worldwide et al., 2020; Efang and Woodroffe 2020). Evidence suggests that the Covid-19 pandemic has begun to reverse many of the gains made in recent decades around women’s economic empowerment, access to justice, and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) (Enguita-Fernandez et al., 2020; Park and Inocenio, 2020). Furthermore, there is evidence highlighting the ways that some countries that had already begun to roll back the rights of women and girls have used the Covid-19 pandemic to undermine rights further, as well as the rights of those in LGBTQ communities (UN WGDAGW, 2020).

The evidence included in this report is not exhaustive; it represents what was found in the time allocated. It includes both peer reviewed and grey literature. Given the enormity of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on the rights of women and girls across the globe, the evidence included in the section of the report focusing on Covid-19 is a selection only, with new data being published on a frequent basis.

## **2. Global trends in policy and legislation on women and girls’ rights**

In 2019, an evidence review commissioned by the gender equality team at DFID, looking at global rollback on women’s rights, found that these rights, along with the hard-won gains made over recent decades since the historic Beijing Platform for Action, are being increasingly challenged on multiple fronts (Jobes et al., 2019, p. 1). The review presented evidence on rollback in a number of areas:

### **Legislation**

While globally there had been considerable improvement made in terms of legislation on women’s rights during 2017-19, some states had seen a rollback or blocking of legislation protecting women from discrimination or violence. This includes 2017 legislation in Russia that decriminalises a first offence of violence committed against family members including children and spouses, and Child Marriage Restraint Bill in Bangladesh which introduces exemptions to the minimum age of marriage in ‘special cases’ or in the ‘best interests’ of the child (Jobes et al., 2019, p. 1).

### **Policy**

The review highlighted increasing challenges to the international global consensus on women’s rights, with the rise of organised, conservative resistance and attempts to undermine international human rights agreements (Jobes et al., 2019, p. 1). Examples included: opposition to comprehensive sexuality education as a component of sexual rights; conservative action within the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW); and push back at the UN General Assembly on a proposed resolution on human rights defenders (Jobes et al., 2019, p. 2).

### **Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)**

The review noted that funding for SRHR is increasingly under threat, including from the US reinstatement and expansion of the Mexico City Policy, also known as the Global Gag Rule, which blocks US global health assistance to all foreign non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that use their own funding to provide abortion services, counselling or referrals, or advocate to decriminalise or expand these services (Jobes et al., 2019, p. 2). It also highlighted cases of states rolling back women's sexual and reproductive rights, with examples of Poland and Italy (Jobes et al., 2019, p. 2).

### **Economic participation and workers' rights**

In this area, the review highlighted falls in women's labour force participation over the last 30 years and recent roll back of women's workplace rights in some countries (Jobes et al., 2019, p. 2).

### **Education**

The review noted that while there has been substantial global progress in girls' school enrolment, there is some evidence that gender inequalities in education are starting to widen again in some regions (Jobes et al., 2019, p. 2-3).

### **Political participation and challenges to civic space**

Past successes around women and girls' rights, gender equality and inclusion may be provoking backlash and rollback, and women's rights have been used as a scapegoat during challenging economic circumstances (Jobes et al., 2019, p. 2-3). 50 countries worldwide have implemented anti-NGO laws, and in many countries women's rights advocates and activists are working in a context of closing civic space (Jobes et al., 2019, p. 3). The review found a range of evidence demonstrating the ways that women's choices, bodies and freedoms were being used in battles for key social, economic and political resources. At the same time, however, there is evidence of increased and more effective mobilising, organising and activism with coalition-building across boundaries and creating common cause across social justice issues (Jobes et al., 2019, p. 3).

### **Safety and security**

The review found that in countries where there has been a backlash against women's rights, there is evidence that women leaders and activists are at increased risk of violence and abuse. Examples include the assassinations of prominent Afro-Brazilian human rights defender Marielle Franco in Brazil and prominent lawyer and women's human rights defender Salwa Bugaighis in Libya, as well as routine harassment against women candidates in the US mid-term elections (Jobes et al., 2019, p. 4). The use of new forms of online violence and harassment is increasing, and is often intersectional, with women who speak out facing online abuse that is misogynistic, homophobic and racist (Jobes et al., 2019, p. 4).

Since the publication of Jobes et al.'s review, the evidence base has been further enhanced. 2020 marked the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Beijing Declaration on Women's Rights, prompting largescale reviews of progress and challenges. UN Women's review argues that many of the victories achieved during the 25 years since the landmark Beijing conference are now being stalled or reversed (UN Women, 2020a, p. 2). Women and girls' rights, particularly in the area of sexuality and reproduction, gender-sensitive education and gender-based violence (GBV), are now increasingly at risk (UN WGDWAG, 2020, p. 1). Human rights defenders working on

women's sexual and reproductive rights and LGBTQ rights continue to be at heightened risk of violence and murder (UN WGDAG, 2020, p. 10).

Globally, progress towards Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality and empowering women and girls is limited (UN Women, 2020a). A lack of investment in the commitments made in the 2015 Agenda for Sustainable Development means that girls are already lagging behind in terms of achieving equal participation in society as adults (UNICEF, UN Women and Plan, 2020, p. 8). Analysis of European Union (EU) countries' progress towards achieving SDG 5 found that while there has been progress towards EU targets on leadership positions for women in national parliaments and in senior management, there has been movement away from EU targets on education, employment gaps, including gaps caused by caring responsibilities (Eurostat, 2020, p. 106). In the US, analysis of multiple indicators for gender inequality has highlighted a slowing, and in some cases, stalling of progress in recent years (England, et al., 2018).

Fiscal austerity measures have had harsh impacts for women and the health, education and social protection policies that have underpinned progress on gender equality since Beijing (UN Women, 2020a, p. 2). Goetz (2020) argues that austerity measures have led to the erosion of public social protection schemes, bringing a "partial re-privatisation of women in their mothering roles" (Goetz, 2020, p. 2). A study looking at the impact of austerity policies in Brazil and Mexico found that such policies were limiting the effect of interventions to address female poverty and to promote gender equality more widely (Martinez et al., 2020, p. 385).

### 3. Gender equality indices

A number of useful indices provide data on women and girls' rights and progress toward gender equality across regions and countries. The section below contains an overview of the Global Gender Gap Index, the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI), the Women, Business and the Law Index, and the Gender Inequality Index. In the time available for this report it was not possible to look in detail at the data in order to make comparisons between indices, countries, regions or over time if this was not available in reports and online summaries.

#### Global Gender Gap Index

The Global Gender Gap index synthesises data across four dimensions: economic participation, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. It includes data for 153 countries.

The 2020 Global Gender Gap report, which provides commentary on data from the Global Gender Gap index, notes that the overall global gender gap has reduced by 0.6% since 2018. The area with the most progress is political empowerment, although it is important to note that this remains the area with the largest gender gap (WEF, 2020, p. 21). Meanwhile, economic participation and opportunity has seen a regression of 0.35% during the same period (WEF, 2020, p. 15-16). Women's progress in the labour market is stalling and financial disparities between women and men are widening, with only 55% of adult women active in the labour market on average, compared to 78% of men (WEF, 2020, p. 5). The regions with the most overall improvement between 2018 and 2020 are Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, both of which have reduced their gender gap score by 1.4% (WEF, 2020, p. 20). However, progress

overall remains slow and uneven across countries and regions. The report estimates that at the current rate of progress, the gender gap will take 54 years to close in Western Europe, 59 years in Latin America and the Caribbean, 71 years in South Asia, 95 years in Sub-Saharan Africa, 107 years in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 140 years in the Middle East and North Africa, 152 years in North America, and 163 years in East Asia and the Pacific (WEF, 2020, p. 6).

Table 1: Global Gender Gap Index. Regional performance 2020.

See: WEF (2020), Global Gender Gap Report 2020, 'Figure 8: Regional performance 2020, by subindex'.

## Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)

SIGI measures discrimination against women in social institutions. It looks at four dimensions: the family; physical integrity; access to productive and financial resources; and civil liberties. It includes data for 180 countries, 120 of which have full data coverage.

The latest SIGI report was in 2019. It notes that between 2014 and 2019, there was been an increase in new legislation to enhance gender equality, including 15 countries enacting legislation to criminalise domestic violence, eight countries introducing legal measures to promote gender-balanced representation in elected public offices, and 15 countries eliminating legal exceptions allowing child marriage (OECD, 2019). However, the report argues that progress is too slow due to legal loopholes and inadequacies, weak implementation, and discriminatory customary laws and social norms. It estimates that at the current rate of progress it will take at least two centuries to meet SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower women and girls (OECD, 2019).

Table 2: Social Institutions and Gender Index. Global performance 2019

Scores based on: 0-20%=very low level of discrimination; 20-30%=low level of discrimination; 30-40%=medium level of discrimination; 40-50%=high level of discrimination; and over 50%=very high level of discrimination

	2019
<b>Overall</b>	29%
<b>Discrimination in the family</b>	44%
<b>Restricted physical integrity</b>	22%
<b>Restricted access to productive and financial resources</b>	27%
<b>Restricted civil liberties</b>	29%

At the time of writing it was not possible to compare 2019 scores with those from the last SIGI report (2014) due to differences in the data included in each report. It was also not possible to disaggregate 2019 scores by region using the publicly available online version of the SIGI report.

Source: OECD, 2019 (online)

## Women, Business and the Law

Women, Business and the Law 2020 is the sixth in a series of studies from the World Bank that analyses laws and regulations affecting women's economic opportunity in 190 economies. Eight indicators are used: mobility, workplace, pay, marriage, parenthood, entrepreneurship and pensions (World Bank, 2020, i).

Economies are scored between 0 and 100, with 100 being the highest possible score. The 2020 report states that the average global score in 2019 was 75.2, up from 73.9 in 2017 (World Bank, 2020, p. 6). While all regions improved their scores on average, it was the lowest-scoring regions that made the most progress toward gender equality over the last two years (see Table 3). The 2020 report notes that between 2017 and 2019, 40 economies enacted 62 reforms enhancing gender equality (World Bank, 2020, p. 1). However, some indicators in particular are still scoring low, with the average score for parenthood being 53.9. This means that half of the economies included in the index do not have good practices in this area (World Bank, 2020, p. 8).

Table 3: Women, Business and the Law index. 2017 and 2019 scores by region

Scores based on a scale of 0-100, with 100 being the highest possible score

	2017	2019
<b>High income: OECD</b>	94.0	94.6
<b>Europe and Central Asia</b>	83.8	84.2
<b>Latin America and Caribbean</b>	78.7	79.2
<b>East Asia and Pacific</b>	70.8	71.3
<b>Sub-Saharan Africa</b>	68.5	69.9
<b>South Asia</b>	59.1	62.3
<b>Middle East and North Africa</b>	44.9	49.6

Source: World Bank, 2020, p. 6. This work is available under the [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 IGO license](#) (CC BY 3.0 IGO).

## Gender Inequality Index (GII)

GII measures gender inequalities in the areas of reproductive health (measured by maternal mortality and adolescent birth rate), empowerment (measured by share of seats in parliament and secondary education), and economic status (measured by labour market participation). Countries are scored between 0 and 1, with 0 being full gender equality. The index covers 162 countries (UNDP, 2019).

Analysis of GII data is included in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s Human Development Reports. The 2019 report notes that while data for the past two decades show great improvement in education enrolment and reducing the maternal mortality ratio, gains in other dimensions of women's empowerment have not been as strong, and in recent years, progress has been slowing (UNDP, 2019, p. 149). The report tracks mean GII scores between 2005 and 2018. It shows scores steadily improving between 1995 and 2010, with a more gradual improvement between 2010 and 2013. Between 2013 and 2018, however, scores have levelled out (UNDP, 2019, p. 150).

Table 4: Gender Inequality Index: Regional scores 2019

Scores based on a range of 0-1, with 0 being full gender equality

	Overall score
Arab states	0.531
East Asia and the pacific	0.310
Europe and Central Asia	0.276
Latin America and the Caribbean	0.383
South Asia	0.510
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.573

At the time of writing, it was not possible to compare 2019 regional GII scores with those for 2016, due to differences in data included in the 2016 and 2019 Human Development Reports.

Source: UNDP, 2019, p. 149

## 4. Backlash and “anti-gender” movements

As Jobes et al.'s review discusses, recent years have seen increasing challenges to the international global consensus on women's rights, with the rise of organised, conservative resistance (Jobes et al., 2019, p. 1).<sup>2</sup> In response to this rollback and resistance, the last three years have seen a proliferation of literature considering and charting the rise of “anti-gender” movements around the world.

### “Gender ideology” and “anti-genderism”

Since 2016, a range of evidence has emerged to show how opposition to gender equality, and feminist and sexual politics, is growing, characterised by growing polarisation in politics and increased politicisation of gender and sexuality (Verloo and Paternotte, 2018). The UN Working

<sup>2</sup> More on rollback on gender equality and women and girls' rights in international fora such as the United Nations can be found in another K4D report (Birchall, 2020).



Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls has noted the increasing misuse of the concept of gender, with gender positioned as an “imposing ideology” (UN WGDAWG, 2020, p. 1). In some contexts, such as in Poland, the term “LGBT ideology” is also being used (Korolkzuk, 2020, p. 166). McEwen’s study of the ideological backdrop to the “anti-gender” movement describes how those in the anti-gender movement see the issues of gender and “gender ideology” as being at the heart of various global economic, social, and population crises, and see the restoration of the “natural family”, the gender binary and gendered hierarchies as the solution to these crises (McEwen, 2020, p. 14).

UN Women’s review of the Beijing Platform for Action notes a rise in exclusionary politics, characterised by misogyny and xenophobia, and the resulting erosion of women’s rights in the name of a “return to traditional values” (UN Women, 2020a, p. 2). Similarly, UN Women’s most recent Progress of the World’s Women report, which focuses on the family, documents a recent resurgence of patriarchal sentiments, mobilised by forces with immense political power. While efforts to roll back the achievements of many decades of work for gender equality are cloaked in the rhetoric of “family values”, in reality those using this rhetoric have introduced policies that erode the conditions needed for families and their members to thrive (UN Women, 2019, p. 14).

McEwen argues that the discourse of “family” is built upon gendered power relations and its use excludes other forms of kinship (McEwen, 2017, pp. 738-739). It is used to make moralistic arguments that shame marginalised groups (UN Women, 2019, p. 28). Sexuality education and education to raise awareness of gender inequalities have been increasingly attacked and criticised (UN WGDAWG, 2020, p. 9). Efforts to undermine education of this type include closing gender studies programmes, reducing funds for gender studies, and introducing or proposing laws prohibiting education on sexuality and/or gender (UN WGDAWG, 2020, p. 9).

Some analyses use the term “anti-genderism” to describe this move away from gender equality and individual rights towards the prioritisation of the rights of families as a unit. Within this discourse, different right wing forces come together in alliances that position gender equality within broader critiques of liberal value systems (Korolkzuk and Graff, 2018, pp. 797-798). Other literature discusses “anti-feminism”; a narrative and movement involving global and local resistance to women’s rights in general and feminism in particular, which is easily attached to the strategies of populist parties as well as nationalist or racist movements (Rothermel, 2020, pp. 1369-1834).

Many studies map out links between a rise in populism, debates around “gender ideology”, and protests against marriage equality, reproductive justice, gender mainstreaming and quotas, sex education and LGBTQ rights (Dona, 2020; McEwen, 2020; O’Sullivan and Krulisova, 2020; Paternotte and Kuhar 2018; WGDAWG, 2020). Commentators have noted that attacks on women’s fundamental human rights have come from both ‘above’ and ‘below’ - i.e. from heads of state to grassroots movements, as global and local dynamics intersect (Rothermel, 2020, p. 1367). Sen (2019) points out that while conservative forces and religious fundamentalists are often at odds with each other on a number of subjects, when it comes to opposition to gender equality and women’s human rights, their views converge (Sen, 2019, p. 30). Conservative North American NGOs have formed alliances with NGOs in Islamic, Catholic and post-Soviet countries (Roggeband, 2019, p. 9). New forms of opposition and transnational alliances, such as, for example, the World Congress of Families, are giving shape to the anti-gender movement (McEwen, 2020, p. 14). Research has shown how such alliances have grown in recent decades;

one study documents the rise of the ultra-conservative Tradition, Family and Property network, which originated in Brazil but is now active across Europe, and is thought to be a key influence in recent events such as the ban on abortion in Poland, halting a civil union law in Estonia and blocking support for the She Decides movement in Croatia (Datta, 2020, pp. 3).

Goetz's recent analysis of the politics of preserving gender inequality charts a trend from 2016, when many feminists, particularly in the global north, thought "they could be on the verge of a new gender-equal world order," to 2019, where there is a "post-liberal misogynist backlash in many contexts, part of the social change agenda of right wing, often xenophobic populist governments or of significant populist or racist opposition parties" (Goetz, 2020, p. 3). This is despite gains being made in some regions and states, such as, for example, the 2018 decriminalisation of abortion in the Republic of Ireland and the strength of women's activism condemning VAWG in Latin America (Goetz, 2020, p. 3).

### **"Anti-genderism" across countries and regions**

One study by Kovats (2018) discusses the different triggering factors for the surge in right wing and populist parties, as well as religiously affiliated movements, who are advancing this opposition to gender equality. In Slovenia, the trigger was debate around same sex marriage, in Croatia it was new reproductive technologies, in Austria and Germany it was gender mainstreaming policies, and in Hungary it was the launch of gender studies at a university (Kovats, 2018, p. 2).

Another study looking at the institutional environment for gender equality in the Czech Republic describes an increasingly hostile and challenging context for the committed feminist bureaucrats attempting to implement the women, peace and security agenda (O'Sullivan and Krulisova, 2020, p. 527). It describes an anti-gender movement that frames "gender ideology" as a successor to communism and/or an import from the west (O'Sullivan and Krulisova, 2020, p. 532).

McEwen's (2020) study of the anti-gender movement includes four case studies of such movements in Brazil, Hungary, Poland and South Africa. The case studies demonstrate how both women's rights and LGBTQ rights are entwined within anti-gender debates and actions. In Poland, where ministers have publicly opposed the Istanbul Convention<sup>3</sup> and there has been targeted opposition to abortion, divorce, sexuality education, reproductive technologies and LGBTQ rights, gender equality movements and activism have been positioned as "a direct attack on the family and children" (McEwen, 2020, pp. 28-29). In Hungary, the government removed gender studies from accredited Masters programmes in the country in 2018, on the grounds that it was not acceptable to talk about socially constructed genders rather than biological sexes. Women's and LGBTQ rights gains have been blamed for a declining population rate and positioned as a blockage to a strong society and economy (McEwen, 2020, pp. 31-33). In Brazil, gains made in LGBTQ rights over the past decade, including same sex marriage in 2013 and legal transgender name and gender changes, have been accompanied by a move towards more conservative politics and pressure from the growing religious right to ban mention of gender or sexual orientation in classrooms (McEwen, 2020, pp. 34-39). In South Africa, anti-gender

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<sup>3</sup> The 2011 Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence

campaigning has been gaining momentum, drawing on support from US-based pro-family movements to call for an end to sex education in schools, again blaming women's and LGBTQ rights for declining fertility rates (McEwen, 2020, pp. 40-43).

Another study looking at 'democratic backsliding' and backlash against women's rights maps trends of backsliding during recent decades across Europe and the Americas, starting around the times of the 2007-8 global financial crisis. Looking specifically at Croatia, Hungary, Poland and Romania, this study discusses how women's rights are particularly vulnerable in fragile and nascent democracies where such rights have been more recently established, and where space for civil society actors to defend women's rights them is limited and shrinking (Roggeband and Krizsan, 2019, p. 4).

Several recent studies have looked at rollback of the rights of women and girls, as well as other marginalised groups, in Brazil, focusing on the advancement of religious conservatism in government that has negatively impacted on reproductive and sexual health and rights in particular (Zanatta et al 2016, Snyder and Wolff 2019, Perry 2019).

## **The rise of men's and father's rights groups**

Jobes et al.'s review discusses demands from women world leaders for a concerted effort to tackle the rollback of women's rights orchestrated by the "macho-type strongmen" leading countries such as Brazil, the Philippines, Italy and parts of Eastern Europe (Jobes et al., 2019, p. 3). Some research on anti-gender or anti-feminist movements has highlighted the struggles around masculinity embedded within these movements, demonstrating the links between backlash on women and girls' rights and unwillingness to question or concede male privilege. International Men's Day, which began 15 years ago with the aim of raising awareness of men and boys' health, has been increasingly embraced since 2016 by men's rights advocates in up to 50 countries worldwide, sparking debate about patriarchy, male privilege and gains in women and girls' rights (Barker, 2016).

One study of anti-feminist websites in the US, Russia and India found that collective identities were being built online from shared perceptions that efforts to empower women, whether seen as emanating from imported western discourses or from neo-liberal globalisation, were made at the expense of men (Rothermel, 2020, p. 1383). In some countries, such as Poland, fathers' rights groups have joined with anti-gender activists in a bid to restore traditional fatherhood and hegemonic masculinity (Korolkzuk and Graff, 2018, p. 803). Halperin-Gaddari and Freeman's (2016) study of global backlash on gender equality notes the role of family law. They discuss how, faced with advances in this area intended to promote gender equality such as equal marital property division and mandatory child support, men's and fathers' rights groups have reacted to losses of patriarchal power by agitating "for parental 'sharing' that scrambles children's lives, reduces child support awards, and exposes mothers to violence" (Halperin-Kaddari and Freeman, 2016, p. 167). The vocal nature of these groups means that they are frequently listened to in legislative committees and family courts (Halperin-Kaddari and Freeman, pp. 167-168).

A body of international evidence is emerging to show how, as women's rights groups' successes in raising awareness of domestic abuse and the rights of survivors and their children have grown, there has been a backlash from men's rights and fathers' rights groups. Such groups seek to undermine understandings of the gendered nature of interpersonal violence (Goetz and Gore-

Weeks, 2018). A growing number of studies demonstrate how in the family courts in many countries, the result of this backlash is that the rights of perpetrators of abuse are often prioritised over those of their victims and children. Women's access to justice is undermined, and perpetrators are allowed to use child contact proceedings as a strategy of post-separation abuse (Barnett, 2020; Birchall and Choudhry 2018; Meier, 2020).

## Resistance to backlash

As Jobes et al. pointed out in their 2019 review, there is evidence of increased and more effective mobilising for the rights of women and girls. The review highlights two examples: the #MeToo and Time's Up movements putting sexual harassment and abuse on the international agenda at a scale and pace not seen before, and mass mobilisation in Brazil to prevent a rollback of women's rights (Jobes, Fraser and Vlahakis, 2019, p. 3). Snyder and Wolff (2019), in their study of misogyny and crisis in Brazil, point out increasing political conservatism and its threats to the rights of women and girls has created an opportunity for the coming together of different women's movements, including Afro-Brazilian women, indigenous women and student groups (Snyder and Wolff, 2019, p. 87).

This increased mobilisation and alliance-building has continued during 2020. For example, while the government in Poland introduced an anti-abortion bill during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic when opportunities to oppose it would be difficult, it still attracted huge nationwide protests from women's rights and pro-choice advocates, leading to a delay in implementation of the bill (Walker, 2020).

However, some studies note the effectiveness of the tactics used by those opposed to gender equality and women's rights to undermine women's rights advocates and activists, by dismantling institutional and implementation arrangements and gender equality machineries, side-lining women's rights organisations in regional and international fora and blocking or withdrawing funding (Roggeband, 2019; Roggeband and Krizsan, 2020). These studies highlight the gendered nature of efforts to close civic space, with women's rights activists targeted because of the focus of their work, and through gendered mechanisms to repress organisations promoting rights, such as GBV, harassment and intimidation (Roggeband, 2019, p. 14-15).

Finally, some studies have highlighted more "unlikely alliances", in debates around gender and rights. In the UK, the women's movement itself became embroiled in debates around sex and gender in 2019 and 2020, as the government's proposals to reform the Gender Recognition Act in England and Wales sparked divided opinions and increasingly difficult and toxic debates (Hines, 2020, pp. 25-26). In this context, shared and similar opinions between some feminist groups and Christian conservatives have been observed (Provost and Archer, 2018, online).

## 5. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on women and girls' rights

Since March 2020, a significant amount of data and evidence has been published demonstrating the distinct and disproportionate impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on women and girls. The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing gender and other intersecting inequalities in a host of ways, from violence against women and girls (VAWG) to unpaid care work (Women's Link International et al., 2020; Efang and Woodroffe, 2020). Evidence suggests that – as was

observed with the Zika virus, where the gender dimensions of the public health response were not considered in advance – the Covid-19 pandemic has begun to reverse many of the gains made in recent decades around women’s economic empowerment, access to justice, and SRHR (Enguita-Fernandez et al., 2020; Park and Inocenio, 2020).

A strong body of evidence has emerged documenting the impact of the pandemic on domestic abuse and femicide rates, and on the rights of domestic abuse survivors (UN Women, 2020b) There is also evidence to demonstrate the specific impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on adolescent girls, including heightened gender-based restrictions on behaviour and increased time spent caring for children or elderly people (Oakley et al., 2020).

In addition, there is evidence highlighting the ways that some countries that had already begun to roll back the rights of women and girls have used the Covid-19 pandemic to undermine rights further, as well as the rights of those in LGBTQ communities (UN WGDWAG, 2020). In Brazil, for example, two public health officials who produced a guidance note advising improved access to sexual and reproductive health services for women and girls during the pandemic were immediately dismissed from their positions (Human Rights Watch, 2020a, online). In Hungary, a law was passed in May 2020 to make it impossible for trans or intersex people to legally change their gender (Human Rights Watch, 2020b, online). In the US, the Trump administration asked Planned Parenthood affiliates to return funds received via Coronavirus relief packages, while Christian advocacy groups are not required to pay such funds back (Gruskin, 2020, online).

As Efange and Woodroffe (2020) point out, the Covid-19 pandemic has showcased the crucial work that women’s rights organisations do in their communities. Examples include work to help survivors of domestic abuse escape to refuges during the lockdown, efforts to provide food and basic needs to households that have lost their income, and providing SRH services in place of clinics that have closed (Efange and Woodroffe, 2020, p. 6).

The following sections synthesise evidence on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in four areas: SRHR, economic empowerment, violence against women and girls (VAWG), and education.

## **Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)**

In April 2020, UNFPA estimated that 47 million women in 114 low- and middle-income countries would be unable to use modern contraceptives if Covid-19 related disruption continued for another six months (UNFPA, 2020, p. 1). SRH services have been severely stretched in many countries during the pandemic, with women unable to access services classified as ‘non-essential’ (Efange and Woodroffe, 2020, p. 6). In some developing countries, where funding has been diverted away from such services and towards the response to Covid-19, this has exacerbated the challenges of the Global Gag rule (Efange and Woodroffe, 2020, p. 6).

One paper on the impact of Covid-19 on SRHR globally notes that reproductive and maternal services have been affected in a number of ways. First, women’s initial access to services may be delayed due to isolation and infection control procedures. Second, acute and emergency maternal services and the life-saving treatment they provide may be limited due to staff shortages and lack of infrastructure. Third, routine antenatal and reproductive services may be restricted due to cancellation of routine services and limited capacity for infection control measures (Hussein, 2020, p. 1). Another study of the experiences of new mothers in the UK

during the pandemic found that isolation and lack of face to face support is impacting on new mothers' mental health and post-natal health care (Vazquez-Vazquez et al, 2021, p. 1).

Some states have attempted to restrict or block access to abortions during the Covid-19 pandemic (UN WGDWAG, 2020). Poland, for example, introduced an anti-abortion bill during the pandemic when those in opposition would find it much more difficult to protest (Caruana-Finkel, 2020, p. 1). In Malta, where abortion laws are amongst the strictest worldwide and women resort to secretly travelling abroad, the government's ban on inbound travel during the pandemic led to more women contacting abortion support groups and ordering abortion pills online, some from unverified providers (Caruana-Finkel, 2020, p. 2). Health experts have warned of the increased risks of unsafe abortion, complicated births and unwanted pregnancies (Cousins, 2020, p. 301).

## **Economic empowerment**

The economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been acutely felt by vulnerable and marginalised people across countries and regions. As women make up a disproportionate number of those working in insecure, lower paid, part time and informal employment, with little or no social protection or income security, they are particularly vulnerable to the unemployment, poverty and recession that the pandemic has brought (Durrant and Coke-Hamilton, 2020; Park and Inocenio, 2020; UN Women, 2020b, p. 5). In addition, social distancing measures have particularly impacted upon sectors with a high proportion of female workers (Alon et al., 2020).

A review exploring the impact of Covid-19 on women and girls in Sub-Saharan Africa based on emerging evidence and lessons from past health crises found strong evidence to suggest that women and girls will experience higher poverty rates, loss of income and reduced financial empowerment, increased household work and greater food insecurity (Rafaeli and Hutchinson, 2020, p. 2).

Evidence shows that it has been largely women filling the gaps around childcare, schooling, domestic work and caring for the elderly and sick during the pandemic (Efange and Woodroffe, 2020, p. 10). There are a range of studies demonstrating the disproportionate impact of the closure of schools and childcare facilities on mothers when compared to fathers (Alon et al., 2020; Czymara et al., 2020). A survey of 19,950 mothers and pregnant women in the UK found that 46% of women who had been made redundant during the pandemic said that a lack of childcare provision played a role in their redundancy. 72% of women said they were working fewer hours because of childcare problems, and 65% of women who had been furloughed said that a lack of childcare was the reason (Pregnant then Screwed, 2020). One study of the impact of Covid-19 on mothers' and fathers' working hours in the US found that during the first peak of the virus, mothers with children under the age of 13 reduced their working hours four to five times more than fathers, leading to a 20-50% growth in the working hours gender gap (Collins et al., 2020, pp. 1-3). These findings were echoed in studies on gender inequality and the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany (Czymara et al., 2020) and in the US, Germany and Singapore (Reichelt et al., 2020).

Emerging evidence suggests that the pandemic is changing livelihoods and work for women in ways that will have an impact long after the pandemic is over. One study of female garment workers in Ethiopia found that after the outbreak of Covid-19, women were migrating away from urban areas and significantly changing employment as a result of high food insecurity (Meyer et al., 2021, p. 1-2). Another study looking at women's unpaid care during the pandemic argues that

the increasing and negative care burden placed onto women and girls as a result of Covid-19 and shutdown measures will continue for years without proactive intervention measures (Power, 2020, p. 67).

## **Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)**

UN Women has termed VAWG during the Covid-19 public health crisis as a “shadow pandemic” (UN Women, 2020b, p. 2) and UNDP estimated that the pandemic was likely to cause a one-third reduction in progress towards ending GBV by 2030 (UNDP, 2020, p. 1).

Evidence demonstrates the intensification of VAWG, and particularly domestic violence, across regions and countries, as lockdowns and other restrictions have left domestic abuse survivors isolated and trapped inside their homes with perpetrators (UN Women, 2020b; Women’s Aid, 2020). There have been increases in calls to domestic violence helplines in France, Argentina, Cyprus, Singapore, Canada, Spain, Germany, Australia, the UK and the US (UN Women, 2020b, p. 2). In Peru, calls to the Linea 100 domestic violence helpline rose by 48% between April and July 2020 (Aguero, 2020, p. 1), and in India, reporting of domestic violence increased across states and districts (Das et al., 2020, p. 1-2). In England, research by the national domestic abuse charity Women’s Aid found that: experiences of domestic abuse got worse for survivors during the pandemic; access to escape and support networks was restricted, and availability of refuge spaces decreased (Women’s Aid, 2020, p. 7). Online violence and harassment also increased for women during periods of lockdown (UN Women, 2020b, p. 3).

The most vulnerable women and girls, such as those with disabilities, older women and those who are refugees or internally displaced, who before the pandemic were at greater risk of violence and abuse and were already experiencing severe barriers in accessing services around VAWG and SRH, are now increasingly without any form of support at all (Banik et al., 2020, p. 1580; Efange and Woodroffe, 2020, p. 11; ISCG, 2020, p. 24).

In April 2020, UNDP estimated that due to pandemic-related disruptions in female genital mutilation (FGM) prevention programmes, two million FGM cases could occur over the next decade that would otherwise have been averted, and that disruptions to programmes, combined with the economic impact of the pandemic, would lead to 13 million child marriages between 2020 and 2030 that would not otherwise have taken place (UNDP, 2020, p. 2). Women and girls’ rights advocates echo this prediction, as families lose household income and access to schooling. While data on this is not yet available, experiences from the Ebola crisis and other emergencies supports this prediction (Girls Not Brides, 2020, p. 1). Programmes to end harmful practices and abuse rely on community engagement and education activities that have not been able to take place during the pandemic, and gender transformative initiatives that were beginning to have an impact have been halted (ISCG, 2020, p. 24).

## **Education**

A review exploring the impact of Covid-19 on women and girls in Sub-Saharan Africa, based on emerging evidence and lessons from past health crises, noted a likely surge in school dropout rates and child labour of adolescent girls due to the pandemic (Rafaeli and Hutchinson, 2020, p. 2). Other studies have highlighted the role that school closures during the pandemic may play in an expected increase in child marriages (Jones et al, 2020, p. 2). One study on the gendered

impact of Covid-19 on refugees in Bangladesh found that 90% of women in the Rohingya community said that children were no longer going to school (ISCG, 2020, p. 17).

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