

Anti-Rights: The New Censorship Weapon of the Left

By Rebecca Oas, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the label "anti-rights" has been used by UN officials, progressive countries, and organizations to denigrate individuals and organizations who defend traditional social values, including the protection of life in the womb and the family. This *Definitions* examines how the term emerged, how progressive governments and their surrogates use it, and how it fits into a larger campaign to label social conservatives as a danger to a progressive concept of human rights and to silence them. As this report will explain, the "anti-rights" label is not merely an exercise in political name-calling but rather part of a larger strategy to delegitimize social conservative voices in multilateral spaces and to redefine civil society to exclude such conservative organizations. This plan becomes particularly dangerous when its tactics are adopted by those with the power to act as gatekeepers.

The "Anti-Rights" Accusation

The label "anti-rights" has been used indiscriminately by diplomats from progressive countries and UN officials in recent years to describe opponents of progressive social policies like abortion, comprehensive sexuality education, homosexual marriage, and transgender policies. The label has proliferated, especially across the UN's bureaucratic and human rights entities.

In March of 2022, in his opening remarks at the annual Commission on the Status of Women, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said, "We are seeing a pushback on women's rights; we must push back on the pushback."¹ It was widely understood at the time, and every time he has used this terminology since then, that he was referring to the pro-life and pro-family positions of traditional countries. Later that year, a joint statement by several UN entities declared that "there has been a rise in anti-rights movements, including anti-feminist groups, resulting in shrinking space for civil society, a backlash against women's rights organizations, and a rise in attacks against women human rights defenders and activists."²

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The anti-rights accusation is not just a label. It is a weapon to censor and exclude groups labeled as anti-rights. The point is to eventually impose restrictions on the ability of individuals and groups labeled as anti-rights to participate in UN civil society space and to target them for censorship through artificial intelligence on social media. This intent can be seen clearly from the way progressives use the term.

The anti-rights label is closely associated with "hate speech" and "disinformation." For example, in his 2020 annual report, the Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association referred to "a context marked by the rise of anti-rights movements, the spread of their disinformation and the use of hate speech tactics."³ Similarly, progressives use the label "civil society spaces" where they block "anti-rights" groups from participating. In 2023, a group of UN human rights experts called for "the creation of a safe and supportive environment for feminist movements and civil society to combat the backlash against women's human rights and to resist all anti-rights trends and movements."⁴

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The intent of censorship and exclusion becomes apparent in the speeches of the highest UN officials. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, has drawn associations between "anti-rights movements" and "disinformation and manipulation."⁵ And he has made the link between the label "anti-rights" and pro-life and pro-family views explicit. On International Women's Day 2023, Türk's office called for a "feminist revolution" in digital spaces: "The pushback against the rights of women and girls is particularly around sexual and reproductive health and rights where anti-rights groups are using online petitions and campaigns opposing access to sexual and reproductive health services."⁶

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Most recently, the Biden administration has adopted the "anti-rights" moniker within the U.S. Department of State, where U.S. diplomats have called for anti-rights language to be included in UN resolutions.⁷ The 2023 Equity Action Plan of the Biden administration instructs the State Department to work through the United Nations and other governments to find ways to censor anti-rights groups through artificial intelligence and other information technologies by creating "rights-affirming" governance of technologies.⁸ It also calls on the State Department to investigate anti-rights groups and their sources of funding—with the implication that sanctions may be applied.

Even now, the U.S. State Department advertises grants for counteracting "anti-rights actors who employ an exclusionary framing of 'traditional values,' or 'anti-gender ideology' as both in opposition to and superseding universal human rights."⁹ The text of the funding notice refers to "attacks" by "anti-rights" groups. Still, its contents make clear that opposition to gender ideology, opposition to special rights categories on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, and support for legislation limiting propaganda on these subjects, including to children, would be included under the umbrella of "attacks."

Anti-Rights Defined

The "anti-rights" label, as well as references to a "pushback" or "backlash," have been taken up by progressive governments and feminist organizations in recent years to generate fear and anxiety about their inability to make gains for abortion and gender ideology internationally, particularly in the multilateral context. Some groups promote a narrative of hard-won gains at risk of being lost. The pro-abortion feminist group Women Deliver accuses conservative organizations of working to "deny and roll back hard-won gains relating to [sexual and reproductive health and rights], including access to safe abortion and comprehensive sexuality education (CSE)."¹⁰

Several reports have been published in recent years attempting to map, characterize, and explain the "anti-rights" movement. All of them make clear that the "rights" they seek to defend are specific to the topics of gender, sexuality, and reproduction and contested subjects that have never achieved international consensus as human rights. Some of these analyses, including those by the organizations AWID and Civicus, which receive funding from the European Union and the Open Society, specifically name C-Fam, the publisher of *Definitions*, as an anti-rights organization, alongside the Heritage Foundation, Alliance Defending Freedom, and other mainstream pro-life

and pro-family organizations, many of which are accredited to participate as members of civil society at the UN.^{11 12}

Among the anti-rights reports that stand out is one produced by UNRISD, a UN research institute on social development.¹³ The report identifies C-Fam, the Vatican/Holy See, Family Watch International, International Organization of the Family (IOF), World Congress of Families (WCF), Family Policy Institute, and the UN Family Rights Caucus as anti-rights and "anti-gender," and *calls for further investigations into pro-life and pro-family groups* (italics added).

The "anti-rights" label is not limited or even primarily used to designate fringe groups

As these examples make abundantly clear, the "anti-rights" label is not limited or even primarily used to designate fringe groups. It includes, above all, mainstream groups that support the traditional family and oppose abortion as a human rights and gender ideology—propositions that have never been approved by consensus at the UN and remain controversial within countries in all regions of the world.

Defining conservative groups out of "civil society"

The way that progressive actors use the label anti-rights to exclude pro-life and pro-family groups is perhaps the most insidious aspect of the campaign. The idea is to create a civil society space that is "rights-affirming" and free of "anti-rights" groups. And this second stage of the campaign against "anti-rights" groups is already operational.

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UN Women pledged to work to counter "anti-rights" groups in a recent paper published on the website of the UN agency.¹⁴ Lopa Banerjee, the director of the Civil Society Division of UN Women, used the term in her contribution to the 2020 handbook for NGO-CSW, a civil society platform associated with the Commission on the Status of Women.¹⁵ This collusion between UN Women and NGO-CSW against those deemed as anti-rights is especially troubling because the NGO-CSW platform has blocked the participation of pro-life and pro-family organizations since at least 2019, preventing them from hosting events on the margins of the Commission on the Status of Women.¹⁶ Similarly, some groups have openly called for the expulsion of "anti-rights" groups from the United Nations in the context of NGO-CSW meetings with UN diplomats and UN Women officials.¹⁷

In the UN system, civil society groups can be accredited through the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Committee of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which provides access

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to UN buildings and offers opportunities to take part in certain processes, including by making statements and hosting events. Numerous conservative pro-life and pro-family groups have such accreditation, including C-Fam.

However, some NGOs have taken it upon themselves to more tightly define the "civil society" category to exclude those who do not share their progressive values and priorities. In 2019, Civicus, a group that receives funding from the European Union, published "Against the Wave: Civil Society Responses to Anti-Rights Groups," in which they define an "anti-rights group" as one that works to restrict a particular right or set of rights. Civicus specifically singles out pro-life and pro-family groups and refers to them as "[h]ard-right, ultra-nationalist, neo-fascist, neo-Nazi, white supremacist and Islamophobic groups."¹⁸

Civicus was founded in 1993 and is an international nonprofit headquartered in Johannesburg, South Africa, with members worldwide. Its report on "anti-rights" groups has a photo of a pro-abortion demonstration in Argentina on its cover. While the conservative groups they criticize "operate in civil society space," Civicus does not consider them to be legitimate civil society actors. Instead, Civicus defines civil society as "non-state groups that stand for universal human rights and progressive values."

Along with defining opponents out of civil society without evidence, Civicus accuses "anti-rights" groups of not following civil society's unwritten rules: "They do not share our civil ways of working. They try to shut down or hijack debate. They are generally not open to persuasion or interested in genuine dialogue. They engage in violence directly or enable it by promoting hatred and division."¹⁹ Similarly, "anti-rights groups" are said to violate another key attribute of civil society: they "see rights as a zero-sum game: they want to advance the rights of their supporters or constituencies by taking rights away from other groups. They want to challenge the universality of human rights."²⁰

Oddly, "anti-rights" groups are accused of behaving exactly like UN NGOs are supposed to act, working in groups and lobbying and acting exactly like feminist groups behave. A report from the think tank ODI in 2024 charges pro-life groups with "Multiple, well-funded, interconnected and professional strategies... employed at national and transnational levels, including lobbying, activist training and mobilization, strategic litigation, and public awareness campaigns." The ODI paper cites scholars who "warn that the UN's progressive bias is no longer a given,

rather, that a 'fundamentally different social order' is on the cards that favours (sic) 'pro-family' values over women's rights."²¹

The anti-democratic "champions" of democracy

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The Women Deliver conference of 2023 provided an illustrative example of how gatekeeping, rather than open dialogue, is the mode by which today's feminist movement seeks to operate. The openly pro-abortion conference was the scene of many complaints against "anti-rights" groups. Among the invited speakers was a lone conservative, then-President of Hungary, Katalin Novák, who gave a short presentation detailing some of her country's efforts to support women and families, including benefits for those with many children and efforts to ensure that women in the workforce received the support they needed. The backlash was intense and immediate. One abortion group complained the conference had been "penetrated by people who have espoused anti-rights opinions."²²

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Their essential complaint is that progressive organizations are experiencing decades of stalemate on controversial social issues in UN negotiations, even charging the UN with backsliding and regression. This stalemate for abortion groups happened largely because of the now 30-year presence of pro-life groups working on these negotiations at the UN. These ongoing defeats have led progressive groups to growing skepticism about truly democratic and open multilateral processes. They have reacted by supplanting such official UN conferences with their own closed events, complete with rigorous gatekeeping. Abortion groups, like Women Deliver, have given up on attempting to have their agenda adopted by consensus at the United Nations. They have chosen to bypass normal international governmental processes in favor of conferences and mechanisms that they control exclusively. They then try to have their conference conclusions adopted bureaucratically. Abortion groups have been very successful in coopting the World Health Organization to promote radical abortion views in this way.

In July of 2023, shortly before the feminist Women Deliver Conference convened that year in Kigali, Rwanda, ODI recorded a podcast to discuss "the growing anti-rights agenda relating to women and sexual minorities." Podcast host Sara Pantuliano looked back to the conferences in Cairo and Beijing. "The terms

of the debate internationally around gender justice have shifted so far, including because of the ultraconservative forces that we will discuss today that I really feel that such moments wouldn't really be possible nowadays."

Maliha Khan, the president of Women Deliver, said, "I don't think any of these moments could happen now because there is such an anti-rights movement that wouldn't allow a Beijing or ICPD to happen." Khan proposed that, instead, "the non-multilateral spaces like Women Deliver can help to fill in some of those aspirational and inspirational gaps."²³

The left largely failed at Cairo and Beijing, so they shifted tactics.

If the Cairo and Beijing conferences were impossible today, it would not be because they excluded disfavored heads of state or their representatives, much less duly accredited civil society organizations who advocated for conservative positions. Rather, the results of those conferences, for better and for worse, were influenced by the relatively democratic aspects of their work. The left largely failed at Cairo and Beijing, so they shifted tactics. However, critical to their project is the idea that open debate between progressive and conservative sides must be avoided, and the conservative voices must be discredited and, where possible, excluded outright.

The threat posed by would-be-gatekeepers

Pro-life and pro-family organizations working at multilateral institutions have little to fear from insults and smears from pro-abortion organizations calling them "anti-rights" or being accused of "hate." However, it is concerning to see the UN Secretary-General himself use the pejorative phrases of the sexual left against conservative NGOs. Under the leadership of Secretary-General Guterres, the UN Secretariat published a system-wide report by independent reviewers assessing the "UN system's capacity to deliver on gender equality." Issued last year, the report concluded,

"Civil society interviewees [...] raised concerns about the System's CSO engagement channels being used by anti-rights actors, who advance agendas that appear to promote rights, but in practice go against core human rights instruments and violate the System's commitment to leave no one behind."²⁴

The implication, once again, is that "anti-rights" actors must be excluded or expelled from UN civil society space. Indeed, the report of the Secretary-General cites Civicus and AWID as its

sources, both organizations that are funded by the European Union, which have identified pro-life groups as "anti-rights" actors.

A UN gender equality strategy released at the end of 2023 titled "Clara Plan" frames itself as a response to a "backlash against women's and girls' rights and the very concept of gender and gender equality."²⁵ The plan calls for support and protection of "women's human rights defenders" "in accordance with international norms and standards:"

"We are witnessing "anti-gender ideology" campaigns aimed at dismantling gains on gender equality and the rights of women, linked to violent misogyny and a broader anti- rights agenda, as part of broader efforts to undermine democratic governance."²⁶

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Not only do the gatekeepers want to keep so-called anti-rights actors out of the UN space, but they also want to dictate how gender and human rights are addressed by everyone within the UN system. Elsewhere in the "Clara Plan," there are multiple references to "sexual and reproductive health and rights" (SRHR), including this mandate that it be included in all UN reports and briefings:

"[Secretary-General], [Deputy Secretary-General] and all entity heads consistently insist that women's and girls' rights, gender equality and SRHR are addressed in all SG reports and briefing. [...] Reports that do not address the state of gender equality and UN system measures to shift power and uphold a strong policy stance will be returned for improvement."²⁷

Should this plan be adopted, it clearly shows that the UN bureaucracy is choosing sides in a highly contested debate and willingly embracing the "anti-rights" rhetoric that will be used to shut down debate and exclude critical voices.

This push for controlling UN spaces has the full backing of the U.S. government under the Biden administration. The U.S. State Department 2023 Equity Action Plan mentioned above requires the State Department to actively promote ways to exclude anti-rights actors from civil society spaces internationally. It proposes as one of its metrics the "number of joint bilateral and multilateral efforts to combat discriminatory national legislation and/or address the role of technology in global anti-rights movements." It also mandates the State Department to track down and monitor anti-rights groups with a metric of "enhanced

tracking of data on, and mapping of, transnational financial and advocacy activities of anti-rights groups and movements to better inform targeted interventions and engagement."²⁸

Like other State Department documents that have recently adopted "anti-rights" language, there is nothing in this plan that specifies which groups it is referring to, nor any particular activities or tactics that would warrant the label of "anti-rights," such as might be used when designating a terrorist group. Instead, the only unifying feature of such groups is opposition to gender ideology, a framing of women's rights based on the right of a woman to access abortion, and opposition to ideologically extreme sex education for children.

Conclusion

Where the "anti-rights" label becomes truly dangerous is when the leaders of multilateral organizations, as well as national governments, adopt the activist language of progressive groups and use it to marginalize fellow civil society groups with whom they disagree. At the UN, we are seeing a troubling move away from negotiated outcomes and toward more agency-managed summits and forums. The more UN processes exclude the voices of both countries and civil society groups that do not agree with the most progressive interpretation of human rights standards, the more the concept of human rights will lose credibility, and the UN will risk becoming an echo chamber to house the "debates" of those already in firm agreement about everything. Meanwhile, organizations that espouse conservative values and operate within UN and other civil society spaces according to their rules are at risk of being silenced or excluded—not on the basis of threatening behavior or dangerous tactics, but purely on the basis of their viewpoints, which are shared by many of the delegates representing their countries' governments in the same multilateral institutions.

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Endnotes

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Oas is Associate Director of Research at C-Fam. She earned her doctorate in genetics and molecular biology from Emory University.

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805 3rd Avenue, Suite 1440
New York, New York 10022

info@c-fam.org
www.c-fam.org

