



PERSONAL TO POWERFUL

Holding the line for gender justice in the face of growing anti-rights movements.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Abstract

Thirty years on from the commitments enshrined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) this briefing reveals a picture of broken promises and unfulfilled ambition by States. This failure is not just due to a lack of political will, but also an economic system that is unequal by design. A range of right-wing, religious, and conservative actors around the world are capitalising on persistent crises, to reorient state power towards a reassertion of racist and sexist profit-driven systems that favours the wealthy, privileges men, and harms and disadvantages women and LGBTQIA+ people in the name of ‘traditional’ family values. This diminishes governments’ capacity to protect, respect, promote, and fulfil bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health, rights and justice. As world leaders prepare to review their commitments to the BPfA, the consolidation and mainstreaming of these anti-rights movements risk eroding the hard-won gains of feminist, LGBTQIA+ activists and movements, ultimately breaking the social contract between the state and people.

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This paper was written by Lata Narayanaswamy and Amina Hersi.

Commissioning Manager: Amina Hersi

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List of Acronyms

ACLJ - American Centre for Law and Justice

AI – Artificial Intelligence

BPfA – Beijing Platform for Action

CEDAW – Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

COVID - Coronavirus Disease

CSE – Comprehensive Sexuality Education

DEI – Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

EU – European Union

FGM – Female Genital Mutilation

GBV – Gender Based Violence

GCD – Geneva Consensus Declaration

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

GGR – Global Gag Rule

HIV - Human Immunodeficiency Virus

ICPD – International Conference on Population and Development

IDP – Internally Displaced Persons

ILO - International Labour Organization

INGO – International Non-Governmental Organization

IOF - International Organization for the Family

IPV – Intimate-Partner Violence

IWH – Institute for Women’s Health

LAC – Latin America and the Caribbean

LDCs – Least Developed Countries

LGBT - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender

LGBTQIA+ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual

MMR – Maternal Mortality Ratio

MSI Reproductive Choices – Marie Stopes International Reproductive Choices

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

ODA – Official Development Assistance

RGA – Rapid Gender Analysis

RN - National Rally

SAAF - Safe Abortion Action Fund

SDG – Sustainable Development Goals

SOGIESC - Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Expression, and Sex Characteristics

SRH – Sexual and Reproductive Health

SRHR – Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

SRHRJ – Sexual and Reproductive Health, Rights, and Justice

UK – United Kingdom

UN – United Nations

UNFPA – United Nations Population Fund

UNWRA– United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

VAW – Violence Against Women

WASH – Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene

WHO – World Health Organization

WROs – Women’s Rights Organizations

Executive Summary

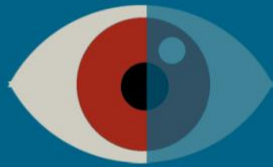
Representing the cumulative efforts of feminist movements and women's rights coalitions globally, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA), recognised that 'women's rights are human rights' and called for financial resources to strengthen the capacity of national, subregional, regional and international institutions to achieve gender equality.¹ All countries acknowledged the need for 'urgent action in the spirit of determination, hope, cooperation and solidarity' that must include 'the right of all women to control all aspects of their health, in particular their own fertility'.²

However, thirty years on from the commitments enshrined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) this briefing reveals a picture of broken promises and unfulfilled ambition by states. This failure is not just due to a lack of political will, but also an economic system that is unequal by design.³ A range of state and religious actors in the Global North are capitalising on the collapsing social contract to reorient state power towards a reassertion of the racist and sexist profit-driven system that favours the wealthy, privileges men, and harms and disadvantages women and LGBTQIA+ people in the name of 'traditional' family values.⁴ The promotion of heteronormative⁵ family systems, frequently done under the guise of protecting 'women',⁶ simply risks entrenching patriarchal gender roles, exacerbating the already unequal gendered distribution of care work disproportionately undertaken by women that remains unpaid, underpaid, and undervalued.⁷

As world leaders prepare to review their commitments to the BPfA, they must reject the mainstreaming of anti-rights movements and their co-optation of human rights language as this risks eroding the hard-won gains of feminist, LGBTQIA+ activists and movements, ultimately breaking the social contract between the state and people.

51% OF COUNTRIES

WITH SLASHED SOCIAL PROTECTION BUDGETS
OFFER LITTLE TO NO SUPPORT FOR MOTHERS
WITH NEWBORNS.



If we are to achieve a more gender just and equal world, we must acknowledge and work to overcome the shortcomings of the system that produces these inequalities. Aid spending is in decline⁸ and economic inequality is widening dramatically with billionaire wealth rising three times faster in 2024 than 2023; this is part of a wider systemic extraction of 'wealth from the Global South to the super-rich one percent in the Global North'.⁹ These trends are resulting in rapidly rising debts¹⁰ for which the near-universal response is further economic austerity measures,¹¹ with dire consequences for SRHRJ and bodily autonomy. More than half of countries (51%) that have either cut their social protection budget or have very little social protection budget (below 15% of total government expenditure), have little or no social assistance to mothers with newborns.¹² Diminishing aid and growing inequality are also undermining our collective capacity to hold states to account for upholding SRHRJ and bodily autonomy amidst vast increases in the resources available to anti-rights actors. According to Global Philanthropy Project, just three anti-LGBTI organizations received more funding in 2021-2022 than all 8,000+ LGBTI globally in the same time period.¹³

Actions that governments have and continue to take in areas including maternal mortality, gender-based violence, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), abortion and contraception information and care, or LGBTQIA+ rights demonstrate that acting in favour of SRHRJ and bodily autonomy is possible.¹⁴ Gains are not, however, happening fast enough. We still live in a world where one in three women (1.3 billion) lives in countries that do not prohibit the dismissal of pregnant women workers.¹⁵ Care work is distributed unevenly amongst women in ways

that reflect prevailing race and class inequalities. The gendered labour of wealthier women is frequently displaced on to poorer, racialized women in a range of contexts, with these forms of unpaid work representing a massive wealth transfer from the poorest to the richest.¹⁶



However, this is no time to despair. Instead, we can take inspiration from the collective action that brought feminists together in Beijing. States must pave the way for a new social contract that centres accountability to women, trans, and non-binary people – one that uphold everyone’s fundamental rights to make decisions about their own bodies, centres care and the redistribution of resources and power through transformative gender just policies. Only then is the realisation of SRHRJ, bodily autonomy and gender justice possible.

This briefing recommends that states should:

Uphold and promote bodily autonomy and SRHRJ as fundamental human rights.

Women, girls, and people of diverse SOGIESC must have full autonomy over their lives and bodies for improved health and education outcomes, as well as their freedom to participate in all aspects of economic life. States must ensure, all people, including in emergency settings, have universal access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health

services, including safe abortion and post abortion care. States must also repeal laws that criminalizes or discriminate consensual sex between adults, challenge discriminatory and harmful social and gender norms, and uphold universal human rights that promote and protect people of diverse SOGIESC.

Strengthen the feminist social contract and end austerity

Austerity is a political choice that is neither necessary nor inevitable. States must reject and end austerity as it weakens economic, political and social settlements by dismantling the social contract on which we depend. This can only be achieved by taxing the rich, cancelling unsustainable debt of low and middle-income countries to free up financial resources, and invest in social protection and universal public services, alongside other gender transformative policies.¹⁷

Recognise care as a right and as a public good

The global economy has long relied on the undervalued and unpaid labour of women, particularly those from the Global South, reinforcing racialized and gendered inequalities. States must recognize care as a public good, a human right, and a cornerstone of SRHRJ. This is only possible if states shift to a caring economy that ensures dignified work for all, and an increased investment in universal and gender transformative public infrastructure and services, social protection and publicly funded healthcare systems for all.

Strengthen and resource feminist and queer organisations and movements

Feminist and queer organisations and movements have demonstrated time and again that they are best placed to challenge states that break the social contract by not respecting, protecting, and promoting bodily autonomy and SRHRJ. Funding, including through official development assistance (ODA) should be prioritised to ensure that feminist and queer organisations and movements can continue to hold governments accountable. States must promote the equal and meaningful participation and leadership of women, trans and non-binary people in decision making spaces and protect and expand public and civic space for all, including ensuring individuals and groups dedicated to the

protection and promotion of SRHRJ can carry out their work in an enabling environment.

Now is the time to unite in solidarity with feminist and queer movements holding the line and resisting anti-rights actions that seek to limit SRHRJ, bodily autonomy and gender justice.

Notes

¹ UN Women. (1995). *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Beijing+5 Political Declaration and Outcome*. Accessed 25 February 2025. https://unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/PFA_E_Final_WEB.pdf

² Ibid.

³ D. Perrons. (2017). 'Gender and Inequality: Austerity and Alternatives'. *Intereconomics* 52, 28–33. Accessed 25 February 2025. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10272-017-0639-x>

⁴ H. McEwen and L. Narayanaswamy. (2023). *The International Anti-Gender Movement Understanding the Rise of Anti-Gender Discourses in the Context of Development, Human Rights and Social Protection*. Geneva: UNRISD. Accessed 25 February 2025. <https://cdn.unrisd.org/assets/library/papers/pdf-files/2023/wp-2023-4-anti-gender-movement.pdf>

⁵ heteronormative' simply refers to cultural and social practices that support the notion that heterosexuality is the only legitimate sexual orientation. These terms refer to the positioning of heterosexuality as the only way of being 'normal' and as a source of social reward. H. Wishart. (2023). *Inclusive Language Guide*. Oxford: Oxfam GB for Oxfam International. Accessed 25 February 2025. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/inclusive-language-guide-621487/>

⁶ E. Miolene (30 January 2025). *Scoop: US government issues guidelines on 'defending women'*. *Devex News*. Accessed 25 February 2025. <https://www.devex.com/news/scoop-us-government-issues-guidelines-on-defending-women-109227>; As Holzberg notes: 'What makes the misogyny of this ideology so insidious is that it works through the discourse of saving rather than attacking women. The problem is not that women are inherently devious but that they have been confused and misled by feminists—away from their destiny as good wives and mothers and into non-reproductive lifestyles or even worse queer and trans communities that threaten the haven of the heteronormative family. This saviourism is confined to white women who are framed as in need of defence from the corrupting forces that dare to critique the naturalised sex/gender system of heteronormative whiteness.' In B. Holzberg. (2024) 'The Great Replacement Ideology as Anti-Gender Politics: Affect, White Terror, and Reproductive Racism in Germany and Beyond'. in A. Holvikivi, B. Holzberg and T. Ojeda (eds). *Transnational Anti-Gender Politics Feminist Solidarity in Times of Global Attacks*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 183-202. In reality these approaches do the opposite, please see ILGA World. (23January 2025).

⁷ A. Taneja, A. Kamande, C. Guharay Gomez, D. Abed, M. Lawson and N. Mukhia. (2025). *Takers Not Makers: The unjust poverty and unearned wealth of colonialism*. Oxford: Oxfam International. Accessed 25 February 2025. <https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2025-01/English%20-%20Davos%20Full%20Report%202025.pdf>

⁸ M. Sheldrick. (25 February 2025). *Foreign Aid Is Shrinking—What Happens Next?* *Forbes*. Accessed 26 February 2025. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/globalcitizen/2025/02/25/foreign-aid-is-shrinking-what-happens-next/>

⁹ A. Taneja, A. Kamande, C. Guharay Gomez, D. Abed, M. Lawson and N. Mukhia. (2025). *Takers Not Makers: The unjust poverty and unearned wealth of colonialism*. Oxford: Oxfam International. Accessed 25 February 2025. <https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2025-01/English%20-%20Davos%20Full%20Report%202025.pdf>

¹⁰ D. Abed and F. Kelleher. (2022). *The Assault of Austerity: How prevailing economic policy choices are a form of gender-based violence*. Oxford: Oxfam International. Accessed 25 February 2025. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/assault-of-austerity-prevailing-economic-choices-are-gender-based-violence-221122-en.pdf>

- ¹¹ I. Ortiz and M. Cummins. (2022). *End Austerity: A Global Report on Budget Cuts and Harmful Social Reforms in 2022-25*. Accessed 25 February 2025. https://assets.nationbuilder.com/eurodad/pages/3039/attachments/original/1664184662/Austerity_Ortiz_Cummins_FINAL_26-09.pdf
- ¹² See *Personal to Powerful: Methodology Note*, Stat number 2
- ¹³ Global Philanthropy Project. (2024). *2021-2022 Global Resources Report: Government & Philanthropic Support for LGBTI Communities*. Accessed 25 February 2025. <https://globalresourcesreport.org/>
- ¹⁴ UNFPA (2024). *Target 5.6: Legal Commitments for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights for All*. Accessed 25 February 2025. https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/SDG%205.6.2%20data%20report_15.pdf
- ¹⁵ See *Personal to Powerful: Methodology Note*, Stat number 1.
- ¹⁶ A. Taneja, A. Kamande, C. Guharay Gomez, D. Abed, M. Lawson and N. Mukhia. (2025). *Takers Not Makers: The unjust poverty and unearned wealth of colonialism*. Oxford: Oxfam International. Accessed 25 February 2025. <https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2025-01/English%20-%20Davos%20Full%20Report%202025.pdf>
- ¹⁷ J. Ghosh. (2024). 'Financing social protection requires changing the global financial architecture'. *Global Social Policy*. Accessed 25 February 2025. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/14680181241290164>

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