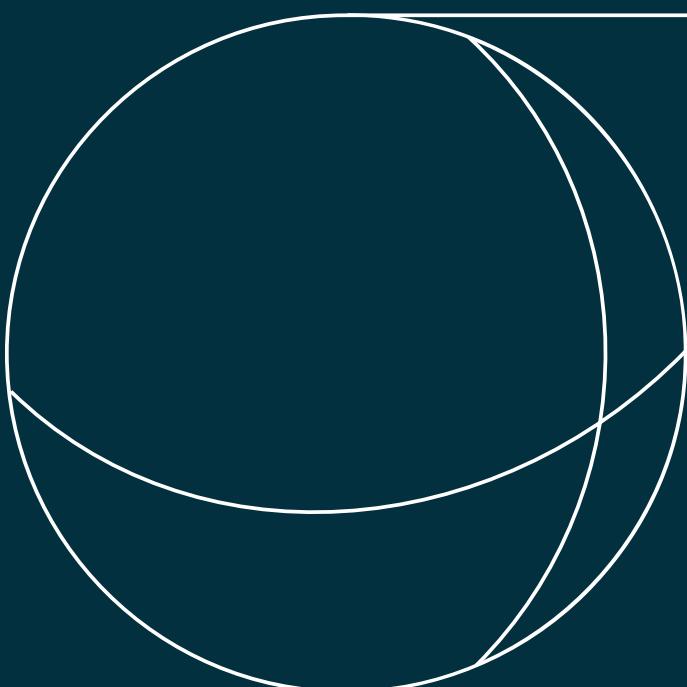


research report

The Global Governance of Sex and Gender: Women's and LGBTQI+ Rights Amid Regress, Reform, and Resilience

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December 2025



Abstract

The global governance of women's and LGBTQI+ rights is characterised by persistent institutional weakness and intensifying political contestation. Decades of norm development, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and United Nations human rights mechanisms, have advanced principles of equality and non-discrimination. Yet compliance gaps, financial constraints, and weak enforcement continue to hinder their effectiveness. At the same time, coalitions of conservative states and civil society actors opposing the expansion of women's and girls' rights and of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) related rights have employed discursive and procedural strategies to limit further institutionalisation of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and SOGI protections. This analysis demonstrates that reform trajectories remain constrained by enduring divergences among state coalitions, chronic funding shortages within the UN system, and shrinking civic space — factors that collectively undermine the democracy, effectiveness, and robustness of global human rights governance.

Citation Recommendation

Choi, Ha Eun and Andrea Liese. 2025. "The Global Governance of Sex and Gender: Women's and LGBTQI+ Rights Amid Regress, Reform and Resilience." *ENSURED Research Report*, no. 19 (December): 1-40. <https://www.ensuredeurope.eu>.

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Introduction

The global governance of women's rights and of sexual and gender-minority¹ rights is undergoing a period of heightened contestation. This follows decades of standard-setting and institution-building around women's rights, including the nearly universally ratified 1979 landmark treaty Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and thematically related United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) mechanisms, which were adopted by consensus. In 2016, a non-unanimous HRC decision tasked the UN with expanding its mandate to protect sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) rights. While normative advancements have enshrined principles of equality and non-discrimination into the global governance architecture, efforts to translate these principles into effective protection through institutional reform have encountered renewed challenges rooted in cultural relativism and, at times, intense political and ideological opposition. These tensions are most visible when it comes to body politics — that is, the governance of gender identity, sexual orientation, and reproductive rights.

Contestation directly affects the overall stability and legitimacy of the human rights framework.

This report examines the tension between the recognised need to strengthen — or at least protect — global governance mechanisms related to the rights of women and girls by improving state commitment and rule implementation under UN coordination on the one hand, and countering the rise of coalitions opposing the expansion of SHRH- and SOGI-related rights on the other. These actors, including many different states as well as non-state actors, question several human rights developments within the HRC and the treaty bodies (TBs) by invoking particularist and relativist arguments centred on traditional values and the protection of the family — claims that have in some contexts been advanced “to the detriment of the human rights of women and girls, migrants and LGBTI persons” (Bourke-Martignon 2016, 2). Divisions on women's and LGBTQI+ rights cut across regional groupings, political orientations, and regime types, with many autocratic governments opposing any further expansion of SOGI protections (Pauselli and Urzúa 2024). Such contestation directly affects not only the potential for institutional reform but also the overall stability and legitimacy of the human rights framework, including the HRC's capacity to mediate disputes.

Based on the ENSURED conceptual framework laid out in Choi et al. (2024), this report asks: (1) How do the positions of major international actors and patterns of contestation shape institutional reform in the global governance of women's and LGBTQI+ rights? (2) How do these dynamics affect the democracy, effectiveness, and robustness of this governance? And then, based on this analysis, (3) what are the likely trajectories for future governance in this domain?

1 This term includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) individuals.
NB: The SOGI mandate does not cover intersex issues, but is limited to sexual orientation and gender identity.

Our findings indicate that institutional reform efforts are profoundly constrained by enduring divergences in state and non-state positions on the governance of sex and gender. These divergent positions hinder efforts to improve effectiveness and democracy, and more importantly, reveal underlying vulnerabilities in the robustness of the human rights system.

Institutional Challenges and Reform Debates

The reform debates within global gender governance reflect three interrelated challenges that map onto the ENSURED framework of effectiveness, robustness, and democracy (Choi et al. 2024). Each speaks to a different dimension of how the UN human rights system performs and endures in the face of contestation. The first challenge concerns the effective institutional functioning of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), TBs, and the UN HRC's Special Procedures (UNSPs). Chronic financial and procedural constraints restrict the ambition and responsiveness of policy outputs — limiting outcomes and impact, and reducing their overall effectiveness — and destabilise the human rights system. The second challenge, norm contestation, concerns the regime's robustness, particularly its rule stability. Disputes over the meaning and scope of gender-related norms, such as sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and SOGI protections, test the universality and legitimacy of recent norm developments. The third challenge, shrinking civic space, concerns the democratic dimension of global governance. Growing restrictions on civil society engagement and uneven de facto access to UN forums reduce the system's inclusiveness and render it less representative.

Effective Institutional Functioning

The gap between commitment and compliance has traditionally been high when states lack the “will and the way” (Anaya-Muñoz and Murdie 2022) — that is, the willingness and the capability to comply with international human rights law. The OHCHR and the relevant TBs lack the institutional capacity to compel compliance in such cases. First, the OHCHR and TBs, such as the CEDAW Committee, have neither coercive enforcement powers nor material incentives at their disposal. Instead, they rely on non-coercive instruments of compliance management, including constructive dialogue and non-binding recommendations from monitoring bodies whose authority rests on expertise and moral persuasion. In a similar vein, the effectiveness of UNSP mandates relies heavily on state cooperation. The UNSPs depend on sufficient political will to provide access for country visits, to respond to letters inquiring about alleged violations, and to implement recommendations.

Second, the monitoring mechanisms themselves face persistent capacity constraints. The TB system, including the CEDAW Committee, struggles with significant backlogs in reviewing state reports and individual communications submitted under Optional Protocols, which undermines both timely output and accountability (UNGA 2024b; ISHR 2024; Interview 7). Reform debates centre on adjustments to monitoring processes and procedures. For instance, following extensive intergovernmental negotiations and technical input from the OHCHR and TB experts, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) adopted reforms to introduce aligned reporting

cycles for the TBs, standardise working methods, enhance the follow-up to concluding observations and views, and encourage measures to facilitate the implementation of TB recommendations at the national level (UNGA 2014).

Even these agreed procedural adjustments have not resolved a more fundamental structural constraint: the shortage of adequate and predictable funding. Chronic under-resourcing remains a central weakness of the UN human rights system. Bodies central to women's and LGBTQI+ rights, such as OHCHR and UN Women (the UN entity for gender equality and women's empowerment), are no exception. The UN's continuing liquidity crisis has led to layoffs of UN staff supporting UNSPs and broader disruptions to human rights operations, cancellation of the annual meeting of the UNSP, as well as the cancellation of one country visit for each mandate by the UNSP — an instrument widely regarded as their most effective tool (Interviews 2, 3, and 5). It has also led to a reduction in the number of CEDAW members attending UN meetings in person (Interviews 2 and 10). In addition, given the mismatch between the TBs meeting time as allocated by the UNGA, on the one hand, and the resources as approved by the UNGA, on the other, CEDAW (like all TBs) has had to reduce its meeting time (UNGA 2024a) — overall raising doubts about the TBs capacity to provide timely and effective remedies (Interview 7).

Chronic under-resourcing also reflects the broader political economy of UN budgeting. Only about 40 percent of the OHCHR's financial needs are covered by the regular budget, which leaves the Office dependent on voluntary and earmarked contributions. This reliance constrains predictability and institutional autonomy. Donor preferences for earmarking, often used as a means of leverage, limit the flexibility of fund allocation and can raise concerns about impartiality (Interviews 7 and 10). Structural reform has therefore remained difficult. Despite steady growth in treaty ratifications and individual communications, the resource formula has not kept pace with institutional demand (Abashidze and Koneva 2019, 366). The UNGA's 2017 decision to approve only five of 11 requested temporary posts for treaty-body support illustrates this funding gap. While extrabudgetary contributions enable the OHCHR to continue operations during shortfalls, the resulting financial fragility has become systemic.

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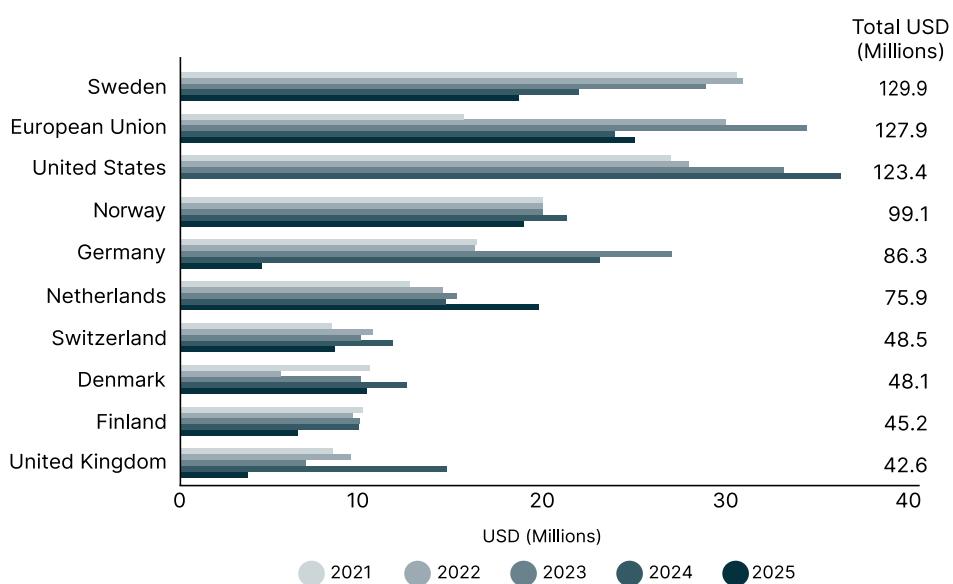
These structural constraints are mirrored in the composition and volatility of OHCHR funding. In 2024, the UN regular budget allocated only around 5 percent to the Office, forcing it to continue to rely on voluntary contributions to sustain its core functions (OHCHR 2025a). Over the last decade, approximately 60 percent of funding for the UN human rights system has come from voluntary contributions, with the remaining 40 percent from the UN regular budget. The latter percentage has increased somewhat in recent years, primarily due to earmarked resources allocated for treaty-body strengthening and for new mandates, including commissions of inquiry established by the HRC. Despite these recent increases, OHCHR has not received its full approved allocation, obtaining only 73 percent in 2025 (as of July 2025) compared with 87 percent in 2024, although some

of this shortfall may reflect delayed payments by member states (UNGA 2025: 16).² This liquidity shortfall has further limited sessions, preparatory work, and backlog reduction.

Figure 1 shows that OHCHR voluntary funding has remained highly concentrated among a small group of Western donors — most prominently the United States (US), Sweden, and the European Union (EU) — leaving the Office vulnerable to shifts in a few donors' political priorities and budgets. Figure 2 shows that, while contributions were relatively stable between 2008 and the mid-2010s, they rose steeply from 2017, peaking in 2021–2023 amid global crises before dropping sharply in 2024–2025. A key factor in this downturn was the abrupt withdrawal of US voluntary contributions during the second Trump administration, meaning that the top donor in 2024 (and for many years prior) provided no funding at all in 2025.

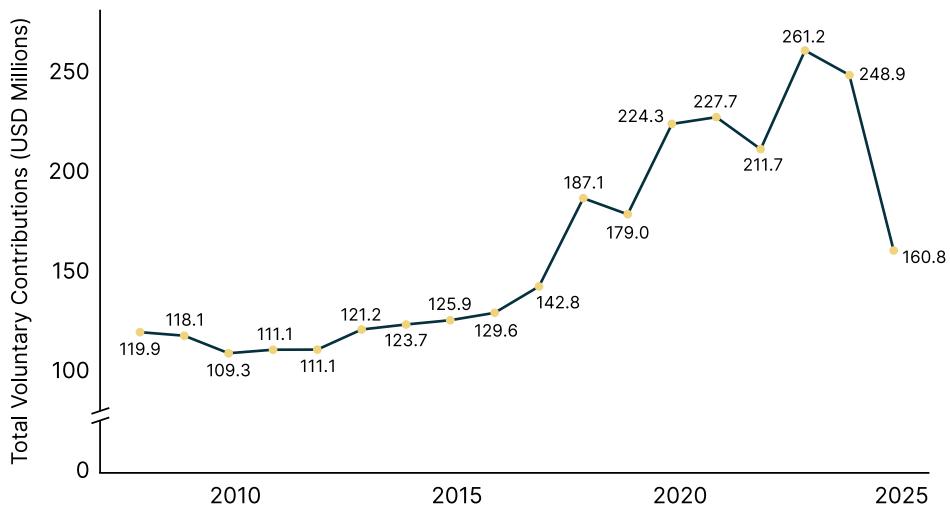
Dependence on voluntary contributions creates several problems that impact institutional stability and governance autonomy. First, funding levels are too low to ensure the effective fulfilment of (all) mandates. Second, a high degree of earmarking by donors restricts the allocation of funds to those needs which the HRC or the TB prioritise; this not only reduces institutional flexibility, but also increases transaction costs. Earmarking can also result in the *de facto* bilateralisation of funding, where donor preferences disproportionately shape agendas and more inclusive — that is, more democratic — modes of decision-making are obstructed. Third, beyond earmarking, voluntary contributions can serve as a tool to exert political pressure. States may withhold or withdraw funding in response to institutional decisions they oppose, using financial leverage to influence behaviour or express disapproval.

Figure 1: OHCHR Voluntary Contributions, Top 10 Donors 2021–2025 (as of 31 August 2025)



2 Last-minute payments are of hardly any use, as money unspent at year's end must be paid back to the donor.

Figure 2: OHCHR Voluntary Contributions, Total Contributions 2008–2025 (as of 31 August 2025)



Source: Authors' illustration based on data from UN OHCHR (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/about-us/funding-and-budget/our-donors>, accessed September 22, 2025). NB: data for 2025 reflects the total as of August 2025.

Norm Contestation

It is important to note that the ineffective functioning and financial fragility described above may themselves be “symptoms” of deeper, ongoing contestation around the norms underpinning global gender governance (Interview 3). Transnational coalitions opposing the expansion of gender- and SOGI-related rights — often comprising conservative religious organisations, nationalist political actors, and allied civil society organisations (CSOs) — seek to limit the scope and application of these norms within multilateral institutions. They question the legitimacy of gender-related rights by framing gender as a culturally biased or externally imposed concept, and by invoking traditional values to justify alternative interpretations and priorities (Kollman and Waites 2009; Cupać and Ebetürk 2020; Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024). This opposition has become more pronounced with the current wave of autocratization and right-wing populism. Patriarchy and authoritarianism are seen as mutually reinforcing (Brechenmacher 2024): autocrats and right-wing populist leaders view women’s and SOGI rights as a danger to their leadership, use traditional (meaning: unequal) gender relations to legitimise their rule, and/or leverage stereotypes about sexual minorities to discredit their opponents (Chenoweth and Marks 2022; Pauselli and Urzúa 2024).

One frequent strategy is the reinterpretation of legal obligations to restrict their scope — a practice which is sometimes termed “norm spoiling” (Sanders 2018). For example, some states have sought to reinterpret reproductive rights provisions under CEDAW by excluding women’s autonomous decision-making from state obligations, thereby narrowing both the substantive reach of the norm and the Committee’s authority (Roggeband 2023).

Efforts to institutionalise SOGI rights at the UN have been particularly contentious. The 2016 establishment of the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on SOGI (IESOGL) was a major institutional development (HRW 2016) that was only possible under the HRC's simple-majority voting rule. From its inception, the mandate encountered procedural and political challenges, as opposing

Supportive states and advocacy networks direct their efforts towards preserving existing mandates rather than expanding them.

states sought to delay or modify its implementation by means of funding objections and amendment proposals (Voss 2018). Notably, autocracies have consistently opposed resolutions advancing SOGI rights, with over 80 percent voting against such measures (Pauselli and Urzúa 2024).

To this day, ongoing and forceful contestation of SOGI rights, of SRHR, and of efforts to combat violence against women (VAW) constrains further progress. In response, supportive states and advocacy networks

direct their efforts towards preserving existing mandates rather than expanding them (Interview 2). Esther Barbé and Diego Badell (2023) demonstrate that this reactive strategy relies on entrenching previously established norms, utilising procedural expertise, and deploying institutional memory to maintain a foothold amid sustained opposition. For instance, in the current debates over the meaning of "gender," the EU, UN expert bodies, and other states promoting gender equality, SRHR, and the elimination of VAW emphasise references to the Beijing Declaration, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Action Plan, or UN Declaration on Elimination of Violence against Women to preserve and recall prior achievements and compromises (personal observation during HRC session; Interviews 2 and 10).

Governments with restrictive approaches to gender equality have amplified resistance by promoting domestically resonant narratives of cultural sovereignty and traditional gender or religious norms in international forums. They present these narratives as defences of national identity, the family, and moral order, thereby justifying their resistance to certain international human rights standards. The "traditional values" framework advanced by autocratic states contrasts with a liberal understanding of human rights as individual entitlements to be guaranteed by the state.

Shrinking Civic Space

Human rights compliance also rests on information provided by CSOs and other human rights defenders ("naming") as well as on the social — and occasionally material — pressure they can mobilise ("shaming"). A (new) wave of repression and unequal access to UN human rights bodies has reduced the effectiveness of civil society naming and shaming efforts (see King and Pousadela 2025 for a broader discussion related to the HRC).

First, at the national level, the curtailment of civic space, particularly in autocratic and autocratising regimes, poses a serious threat to CSOs' capacity to engage in global governance processes. Autocracies systematically weaken such CSOs because they perceive them as a dual threat: first as a challenge to autocratic legitimacy, and second as

a potential nucleus for broader anti-regime coalitions to promote SOGI rights (Pauselli and Urzúa 2024). Women's rights groups and LGBTQI+ advocates are subject to disproportionate restrictions, especially when they challenge dominant political or religious ideologies. When it comes to rights-based organisations, more than 130 states — among them Egypt, Hungary, Russia, and Türkiye — have used some form of legal or extra-legal mechanism to limit their access to funding, expand registration requirements, control their operations, and thereby weaken their work and public visibility (Chaudhry 2022; Chaudhry and Heiss 2022). These domestic constraints directly affect transnational engagement, as CSOs under surveillance or legal threat are less able to contribute to reporting processes, attend UN sessions, or pursue strategic litigation internationally. In recent years, shrinking civic space has impaired the work of women's rights organisations across Europe, with 75 percent of women human rights activists having faced harassment or threats — a 15 percent increase since 2021 (Council of Europe 2025).

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Second, at the international level, de facto CSO access remains structurally unequal. Although platforms such as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and TB reporting processes are formally open to CSO input, participation remains skewed in favour of well-resourced NGOs, often based in the Global North (Gereke and Brühl 2019). For many organisations in the Global South, especially those working on politically sensitive issues such as SOGI or SRHR, participation is constrained by limited resources, high logistical barriers (such as travel costs and visa restrictions), and a lack of institutional support (Interview 1). These challenges are further compounded by the increasing securitisation of UN spaces and by limited UN Economic and Social Council accreditation for grassroots actors. In recent years, the deepening financial crisis has exacerbated these inequalities. Several TBs have been forced to cancel sessions, postpone state-party reviews, and curtail opportunities for civil society and rights holders to engage, particularly via virtual or hybrid modalities (OMCT 2025).

In addition, actors critical of SOGI and SRHR have increasingly occupied civil society spaces at the UN. Conservative organisations, often well-funded and formally registered, have stepped up their engagement in the forums traditionally used by liberal rights advocates (Sanders 2018). At the 68th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in March 2024, for instance, groups opposed to SRHR and SOGI rights — most of them invited by conservative governments — disrupted side events by seeking to derail discussions on abortion access and LGBTQI+ rights (CIVICUS 2024). Supported by actors such as Family Watch International and C-Fam, an alternative summit (the “Conference on the State of Women and Family”) advanced a counter-narrative emphasising traditional values and national sovereignty (Fillion 2024). This contested civil-society dynamic not only complicates agreement by consensus but also challenges assumptions about the inherently progressive role of NGO participation (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024).

Key International Actors and Their Positions on Reform

This section maps the positions of key international actors across the three dimensions identified in the previous section: institutional reform, normative contestation, and the regulation of civic space within global governance of women's and LGBTQI+ rights. Our analysis focuses on major actors with divergent positions on the reform agenda and draws on official national statements, UN documents, first-hand observations from two field visits to the UN in Geneva, and expert interviews.

The United States

US engagement with the international human rights system has been ambivalent for several decades, fluctuating across administrations. Republican-led governments have generally avoided treaty commitments. The country's selective multilateralism, combined with unpaid financial contributions, has contributed to its isolation in the UN Commission on Human Rights, where it often failed to secure support for its resolutions — a situation that has continued in the HRC.

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To signal its dissatisfaction with institutional or normative developments and to press for reform within the UN human rights system, the US has often relied on financial conditionality and treaty withdrawal. Under the George W. Bush administration, the US initially supported Kofi Annan's reform proposal but

ultimately declined to join the newly established HRC in 2006, contending that the election of undemocratic states with detrimental human rights records undermined the Council's credibility. The Obama administration reversed course and joined the new Council. The Trump administration again withdrew in 2018, emphasising sovereignty and alleged anti-Israel bias, while the Biden administration returned in 2021, reaffirming US commitments to multilateralism (White House 2024). During Biden's presidency, the US supported technical aspects of TB reforms — such as harmonised reporting cycles and funding restoration — yet refrained from endorsing deeper structural reforms. The US withdrew again in 2025 under the second Trump administration.

In terms of norms, the US has defended existing standards on gender equality and SOGI rights, particularly under Democratic administrations. At multilateral forums, US diplomats have resisted efforts to roll back these rights and have aligned with states that support gender equality and SOGI rights and the protection of agreed language on SRHR. During these periods, UNSP mandates were able to meet with US ambassadors and discuss measures against discrimination (Interview 2). The first Trump administration took a markedly different approach, leading the Geneva Consensus Declaration in 2020, which rejected interpretations of

rights that include abortion and promoted the family as the fundamental unit of society — a policy line that continues under the second Trump administration (US Department of State 2024). The declaration has since served as a rallying point for anti-SRHR coalitions.

Civic space has largely mirrored these fluctuations in US normative leadership. While the Biden administration restored funding channels and advocated for human rights defenders — including LGBTQI+ and feminist groups, for instance, through initiatives such as the Global Equality Fund (a US Department of State public–private partnership) — broader geopolitical and domestic constraints limited the transformative impact of these efforts. By contrast, the Trump administration supported conservative NGOs and deprioritised mainstream CSOs, which contributed to the reduction of civic space, particularly in the Global South (Gutheil 2025). The expansion of the Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance policy further constrained civil-society speech.

The European Union

The EU — in terms of both its institutions and its member states — is a consistent supporter of multilateralism and human rights, providing political, material, and ideational support. It supports institutional reforms in Geneva, upholds women's and LGBTQI+ rights in multilateral forums amid contestation, and works to protect civic space within and beyond its constituency.

The EU has continuously funded the OHCHR and has typically been the second-largest donor when it comes to voluntary funding, becoming the largest sponsor after the US withdrew in 2025 (OHCHR 2025b). However, due to long-term budget commitments and planning cycles, it cannot compensate for US cuts (Interview 9; UN Press Release 2025a). When it comes to institutional reforms, the EU supported TB harmonisation, predictable review cycles, and broader participation mechanisms.

Within the HRC, it is important to note that, as an institution, the EU holds observer status and uses its “right to speak” to participate in negotiations and support resolutions. However, voting rights are restricted to EU member states elected to the Council on behalf of three (of five) UN regional groups. To facilitate coordination and guide EU member states' positions, the Council's Working Party on Human Rights (COHOM) identifies EU strategic priorities and coordinates member state positions. The High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy is supported by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the “EU focal point” in Geneva, and is mandated to ensure consistency in the EU's external action. Established in 2012, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights has further enhanced the visibility of the EU's human rights policy. Together these positions, frameworks, and mechanisms enable the EU to support normative progress in global human rights governance despite internal divisions among member states.

The EU to support normative progress in global human rights governance despite internal divisions among member states.

At the UN, the EU has supported the development of standards and instruments to protect women's rights and to combat violence against women. This engagement is in line with EU Treaty provisions,³ the EU's commitment to the European Convention on Human Rights,⁴ and, since 2023, to the Istanbul Convention (IC)⁵ along with its Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy and the subsequent Action Plans (2015–2019 and 2020–2024, which was extended to 2027).⁶ The EU also co-sponsored — and most EU member states with seats on the HRC voted for — the 2016, 2019, 2021, and 2025 SOGI resolutions.

Despite the EU's *acquis*, LGBTQI+ rights have become increasingly contested and serve as markers of ideological division across party lines and member states. The European Parliament, the first to explicitly mention sexual orientation in the context of European foreign policy (Malmedie 2023, 154), has lately become a site of gender- and sexuality-based activism, including portrayals of gender equality "as a dangerous and elitist 'gender ideology' which challenges traditional family values based on heteronormative relations and education" (Kantola and Lombardo 2021, 566). Nevertheless, EU institutions have maintained a strong position on non-discrimination and provided direction for the EU delegation in Geneva. In its 2025 priorities for the UN human rights system, the EU reaffirms its emphasis on individual liberties, with explicit support for gender equality and non-discrimination, including SOGI (European Council 2025). At the UN, the EU delegation seeks to mainstream gender equality in the HRC's

country and thematic resolutions and, as stated, "vigorously promote[s] action to achieve gender equality and ensure the full recognition, and equal and full enjoyment of all human rights by all women and girls and their empowerment" (European Union 2024).

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Beyond financial, institutional, and political support, the EU contributes to the resilience of civic space by fostering what Phillip M. Ayoub (2013) terms "cooperative transnationalism." Vertically, EU institutions provide funding to CSOs (e.g., to ILGA-Europe). Horizontally, its free movement principle enables activists in EU countries where civic spaces are shrinking (such as Poland) to build alliances across borders, access resources, and find safe social environments in more open EU states. Within the HRC, the EU supports the UNSP mandates on the situation of human rights defenders (HRDs) and on the right to freedom of opinion and expression, thereby reinforcing mandates that protect civic space.

3 For example, the 1999 Treaty of Amsterdam includes human rights and sexual orientation.

4 It should be noted that the European Court of Human Rights has also expanded the rights of sexual minorities through its dynamic interpretation of the Council of Europe (CoE) Convention (Helfer and Ryan 2021).

5 The CoE Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.

6 Further important milestones in external policy include the "Toolkit to Promote and Protect the Enjoyment of All Human Rights by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) People" (known as the LGBT Toolkit), which was adopted by COHOM in 2010.

China

China's reform positions are most pronounced in relation to civic space. It has consistently emphasised state authority as the primary channel of participation. In TB reform debates, China rejected the use of NGO information without state consent during the 2012 strengthening process and has repeatedly introduced amendments in the HRC and UNGA to reduce protections against reprisals and demand instead that CSOs "respect territorial integrity" (see Piccone 2018; ISHR 2022).

As regards norms, China formally aligns with international standards but combines this with selective engagement. Domestically, the State Council's Outline of Women's Development in China (2021–2030) sets targets for employment, political participation, maternal health, and legal protections, linking national objectives to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. By contrast, protections related to sexual orientation and gender identity remain absent.

At the multilateral level, China has sponsored resolutions on "The Contribution of Development to the Enjoyment of All Human Rights" (2019, 2021, 2025), which advance the view that economic and social development provide the foundation for the enjoyment of all human rights. Official interventions reflect this orientation. In 2021, China urged the UN to integrate women's poverty eradication into international development cooperation and identified new challenges, such as the gender digital divide.

While this approach signals increased commitment and engagement, it also demonstrates selectivity. On one hand, China affirms its commitment to CEDAW and the SDGs, situating domestic planning within these frameworks. On the other, its engagement remains filtered through a sovereignty-centred, development-first lens, echoing the view that there is "no universally applicable model" of human rights implementation (SCIO 2019). The emphasis on second- and third-generation rights contrasts with the civil and political rights prioritised by Western states, reflecting both normative preferences and the intensifying rivalry between the US and China over the future of global human rights governance (Mierzejewski and Matera 2025).

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The Russian Federation

Russia has generally aligned its positions with China's in promoting sovereignty-centred reforms within the UN human rights system (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2023; President of Russia 2025). At the institutional level, Russia has sought to limit reforms that would expand or consolidate the authority of human rights bodies. In 2021, for example, it tabled nine amendments to the HRC resolution on reprisals. More broadly, Russia has consistently resisted initiatives to strengthen UNSP mandates, citing principles of sovereignty and non-interference. It has been particularly active in contesting rights related to SRHR, gender-based violence, and SOGI. In the Security Council, Russia spearheaded efforts to remove reproductive health language from Resolution 2467

(2019) on sexual violence in conflict. At both the HRC and the General Assembly, Russia has opposed the IESOGLI mandate, arguing that it lacks a basis in international law, and has mobilised procedural challenges questioning its legitimacy. In 2022, the Duma extended the scope of Russia's "gay propaganda" law — which prohibits the public portrayal of "non-traditional sexual relations" — from minors to all age groups. This restriction of individual freedoms aligns with broader authoritarian governance patterns, while state-sponsored homophobia has also served specific foreign policy objectives.

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the African Group

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has similarly resisted institutional mandates that, in its view, promote interpretations of human rights which it does not endorse. OIC member states have consistently questioned expansions in the universality of human rights norms related to gender equality, SRHR, and SOGI. This position is reflected in their broad reservations to CEDAW, particularly concerning marriage, family relations, and equality — several states explicitly subordinate the Convention to Sharia law. In multilateral negotiations, OIC governments have also pushed to replace the term "gender" with "women and girls," citing religious considerations. They remain firmly opposed to the recognition of SRHR as a distinct category of rights — arguing that these issues fall within the realm of "the rights to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health" — and to the institutionalisation of a mandate on SOGI (Interview 4).

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The UN Group of African States holds a less uniform position on SOGI rights. In the HRC, South Africa is the only African state that has never voted against the mandate (it abstained in 2018 and voted in favour in 2021). In contrast, all other African states in the HRC have consistently abstained or voted against the mandate, mirroring the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) position that sexual orientation is not a recognised right under the African Charter and citing its contradiction with "African values" (ISHR 2023).

OHCHR and Experts (CEDAW Committee and UNSPs)

UN expert bodies and mechanisms, such as the CEDAW Committee and the UNSPs, provide the normative infrastructure of the UN human rights system. By articulating authoritative interpretations of international obligations, advocating for the further development of human rights law, and offering platforms for civil society engagement, they function as epistemic and procedural anchors in an otherwise state-dominated and highly politicised arena. Through its awareness-raising materials and campaigns, the OHCHR informs governments and other stakeholders

about the work of the TBs and the UNSPs, relevant obligations, and recent developments. Experts also played a pivotal role in shaping the 2014 UNGA resolution (A/RES/68/268) on TB strengthening, which introduced harmonised reporting cycles, standardised procedures, and improved follow-up to recommendations.

On normative contestation, the OHCHR and expert mechanisms have advanced interpretations of women's and gender-related rights that states variously praise as progressive or criticise as expansionist. For instance, the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls (WGDAWG)'s predecessor clarified its position on the termination of pregnancy, stressing women's and girls' autonomy over reproductive decisions as central to equality and privacy (United Nations 2017). CEDAW General Recommendation (GR) No. 28 clarified that the Convention prohibits both sex-based and gender-based discrimination, extending its applicability beyond restrictive interpretations (CEDAW/C/GC/28), and most human rights mechanisms have since adopted more expansive, gender-based understandings (Langrand 2025).

UNSPs continue to serve as crucial agenda-setters. By working at times on politically sensitive or complex issues, UNSPs advance difficult conversations, particularly through their human rights-focused contributions, reminding States and societies of the human rights obligations of States and the consequences of policies (Interview 5). The two UNSP mandates on women and girls also adopt an intersectional approach and address violations against the most vulnerable, including LGBTQ girls, thus building bridges to the SOGI mandate (Interview 2). Despite cross-mandate collaboration, in recent years, internal tensions within the UNSPs have become visible over policies on gender self-identification. The current Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls (SRVAWG) maintains that violence against women and girls is rooted in the material reality of their biological sex, which often intersects with other aspects to augment vulnerability. The Rapporteur further emphasises that "recognition that women are female does not reduce women to biological determinism," and that acknowledging the centrality of sex does not negate "gender" or "gender-based violence," since the concept of gender builds on sex and does not erase it (UNHRC 2025; see Alsalem 2025). At the same time, a majority of UNSP mandate holders underscore the centrality of gender for the promotion and protection of women's rights, maintaining that it "provides the broader and more salient analytical lens, encompassing the socially constructed identities, roles and expectations" (UN Press Release 2025b).

UNSPs continue to serve as
crucial agenda-setters.

CSOs

Civil society has historically played a central role in advocating for the expansion and strengthening of human rights promotion and protection. The global campaign against discrimination based on sexual orientation started in 1984, when more than 1,000 LGBT people marched at UN headquarters in New York, and CSOs have supported it ever since. ILGA World, a global federation of more than 2,000 member organisations from

170 countries, has actively supported the renewal of the SOGI mandate. Yet the polarisation among member states is mirrored in a more recent divide within civil society itself. Points of contention often concern issues that challenge traditional values and customs and/or relate to the empowerment versus exploitation of marginalised and vulnerable groups, such as transgender persons or sex workers and prostituted persons.⁷

Women's and LGBTQI+ CSOs are divided over priorities as well as the content and the degree of state regulation on issues such as surrogacy, prostitution, intersex medical interventions, and most prominently gender self-identification and gender self-declaration (Interviews 1 and 6). These divisions are also reflected in how CSOs and CSO coalitions interpret and respond to recent expert positions. On one side, a group of CSOs that views gender as a socially constructed, non-binary, and inclusive category argues, for example, that the SRVAWG's framing of violence as sex-based "[undermines] decades of coherent UN agency, Treaty Body, and Special Procedures' analysis of gender" (Women Deliver n.d.). On the other side, a group of CSOs, including feminist organisations, express concern that reducing the emphasis on women and girls may dilute the recognition of harms based on biological sex and weaken the legal protections for women and girls originally envisaged under CEDAW and at the core of the SRVAWG mandate (e.g., ENoMW et al. 2025; Interview 6).⁸ These divisions also extend to the question of whether the current SRVAWG is undermining international standards when focusing on "sex-based violence" against women and girls (see the allegations and accusations by Women Deliver n.d. and AWID 2023), while others argue that she "is doing exactly what is within her mandate" (see the defense and praise by Sex Matters 2023 and ENoMW et al. 2025)⁹.

Table 1: Actor Mapping on Core Challenges (Potential Reform Areas)

Continued on the next page.

| Positions on Core Challenges | |
|------------------------------|---|
| United States | |
| Institutional Reforms | Uses exit (threats) and funding conditionality to enforce change; backs technical TB reform but opposes strengthening enforcement; alternates engagement and withdrawal at the HRC. |
| Normative Contested | Democrats defend SRHR/SOGI and protect agreed language; Republicans advance "traditional family" framings; overall consolidates baselines more than it expands new rights. |
| Shrinking Civic Space | Backs HRDs yet applies aid conditionalities that constrain CSOs; tilts towards conservative NGOs under Republican administrations. |

⁷ To reflect these divergent positions within UN human rights mechanisms, we refer to both "sex workers" and "prostituted persons" in this report.

⁸ This position was endorsed by more than 800 organisations and individuals (AWID 2023).

⁹ This letter was supported by nearly 800 organisations and 2,600 individuals across 60 states (Sex Matters 2023).

Continued from the previous page.

European Union

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Institutional Reforms | Supports TBs and procedural improvements. |
| Normative Contestations | Supports women's and LGBTQI+ rights and strengthening of these rights, yet significantly contests developmentalist human rights. |
| Shrinking Civic Space | Supports strong formal protections in external action; offers uneven protections within the EU. |

China

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Institutional Reforms | Opposes reforms that strengthen independent monitoring; prefers state-consent procedures and earmarked development funding. |
| Normative Contestations | Supports development-first readings; opposes expansion of civil-political and SOGI obligations and universalist interpretations. |
| Shrinking Civic Space | Opposes expansion of NGO access and public use of NGO inputs without state consent; opposes stronger reprisal protections; seeks sovereignty conditions on participation. |

Russian Federation

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Institutional Reforms | Opposes reforms that expand or renew UNSPs and investigate mandates; uses procedure to curb oversight powers. |
| Normative Contestations | Opposes expansion of SRHR and SOGI norms and reproductive health language; contests the legal basis of the IESOGL. |
| Shrinking Civic Space | Opposes stronger protections for HRDs and wider roles for NGOs. |

Organisation of Islamic Cooperation member states

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Institutional Reforms | Prefer state-consent formulations in CSW/HRC negotiations. |
| Normative Contestations | Oppose expansion of SRHR, CSE, and SOGI language; substitute "women and girls" for "gender"; rely on broad CEDAW reservations and Sharia primacy. |
| Shrinking Civic Space | Oppose broader civil society influence; often support China/Russia-led hostile resolutions. |

African Group

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Institutional Reforms | Curtailed ACHPR autonomy via AU Decision 1015; rejected observer status in 2022, citing "African values." |
| Normative Contestations | Holds heterogeneous views on SOGI. |

Continued from the previous page.

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Shrinking Civic Space | Narrowed NGO observer status at ACHPR; noted procedural deviations in 2022 decisions. |
|------------------------------|---|

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and Expert Bodies

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Institutional Reforms | Strongly support institutional reform for effective functioning (e.g., TB strengthening). |
| Normative Contestations | (OHCHR) produces guidance and awareness materials that synthesise SRHR and LGBTI+ obligations to promote and uphold these rights; (CEDAW) GR No. 28 clarifies the Convention's prohibition of both sex- and gender-based discrimination, extending its applicability beyond restrictive readings; (UNSPs) overall advocate agreed language, and often further norm strengthening. However, current interpretations regarding biological sex-based versus gender-based frameworks diverge across mandate holders. |
| Shrinking Civic Space | Provide platforms for CSO engagement; provide support through various mechanisms, policies, and activities. |

Liberal Rights-based CSOs

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Institutional Reforms | Advocate increased/flexible funding and effective implementation/monitoring; support TB strengthening. |
| Normative Contestations | Defend/advance gender equality, SRHR, and bodily autonomy; counter anti-gender narratives. |
| Shrinking Civic Space | Demand meaningful/safe/funded CSO participation; defend civic space. |

Conservative CSOs

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Institutional Reforms | Critique UN body mandates/funding transparency; advocate reforms prioritising sovereignty. |
| Normative Contestations | Block SRHR/SOGI language; promote "natural family"/"pro-life" norms; engage in norm spoiling; co-opt rights language. |
| Shrinking Civic Space | Actively participate to oppose progressive norms, form alliances, and challenge progressive CSOs. |

Development of Key Challenges and Reform Efforts

Recent years have seen significant developments in global governance mechanisms aimed at protecting the rights of women and LGBTQI+ persons. These developments have involved strengthening norms and institutions on the one hand, and intense contestation over their scope and legitimacy on the other. Key milestones, such as the creation of new human rights mandates, landmark declarations and resolutions, and reforms of treaty monitoring systems, have further institutionalised the protection of women and LGBTQI+ persons within global governance frameworks. Simultaneously, opposing blocs of states have resisted these trends via alternative normative initiatives and, in some cases, financial and political withdrawal. This section examines the major milestones in both the normative and the institutional domains of global governance relating to women's and LGBTQI+ rights (as summarised in Table 2). The normative dimension focuses on the development of women's rights and SOGI norms, including the establishment and renewal of UNSP mandates. The institutional dimension (highlighted in yellow in Table 2) identifies the main reform processes within the UN human rights system.

These milestones rarely resulted from consensus, and the chronological overview in Table 2 inevitably simplifies the underlying political contestation, conflicting interests, and divergent state coalitions that shaped their adoption. From the outset, even widely ratified instruments have faced resistance. CEDAW, in force since 1981, includes reservations even on its core provisions, which limit their applicability in national courts (Kuhlmann 2023; Kreutzer and Mitchell 2024). Several states, including Saudi Arabia and other OIC members, subordinated these provisions to Sharia law. At the same time, the US, Iran, Sudan, Somalia, Tonga, Palau, and the Holy See never ratified the treaty — a fact which reflects enduring domestic opposition.

From the outset, even widely ratified instruments have faced resistance.

Early efforts to institutionalise SOGI rights were met with strong resistance. Brazil's 2003 Draft Resolution on Human Rights and Sexual Orientation, the first UN-level attempt to address discrimination based on sexual orientation, was blocked by a coordinated campaign led by Pakistan, on behalf of the OIC. Mexico and Costa Rica withdrew their support under pressure from religious actors, illustrating a procedural obstruction strategy that persisted in later debates. Contestation over SOGI rights intensified in 2008 with the UNGA Declaration on SOGI, which was supported by 66 states and countered by 57, led by Syria and the OIC. This "duelling declarations" episode underscored the deep normative divide that continues to shape the debate. Between 2009 and 2012, Russia introduced a series of "Traditional Values" resolutions that reframed human rights around family, community, and religion. Although presented as neutral, these resolutions provided a diplomatic framework for contesting gender- and sexuality-related rights and gained broad cross-regional support. Subsequent SOGI-specific initiatives faced persistent procedural challenges. South Africa's

2011 HRC resolution (17/19) passed with 23 votes in favour and 19 against, following walkouts and opposition. The creation of the IESOGL in 2016 (HRC 32/2) triggered further debate across the HRC, the UNGA, and the Fifth Committee, including attempts to withhold funding. Although the mandate survived, each renewal (in 2019, 2022, and 2025) required a recorded vote, in contrast to mandates that face a lower level of contestation, such as WGDWG, which have generally been renewed by consensus, in line with common practice for most thematic UNSPs.

Contestation around family and gender concepts has also intensified. Russia's "Protection of the Family" resolutions (2014 and 2015) excluded recognition of diverse family structures and blocked inclusive amendments with procedural motions. By 2023, the states that supported inclusive language accepted adoption by consensus in order to avoid renewed confrontation. Comparable divisions characterised the CSW. The 2016 CSW60 Agreed Conclusions were adopted by consensus only after extensive negotiation. The final text retained diluted references to SRHR but omitted any mention of SOGI or comprehensive sexuality education (CSE).

At CSW57 in 2013, an OIC and African Group walkout over "sexual rights" illustrated the limits of negotiated agreement.

Institutional reform efforts were equally contested. The 2009–2014 TB Strengthening Process, led by High Commissioner Navi Pillay, sought to address backlogs and inefficiencies but met resistance from a cross-regional group led by Russia. Critics argued that TBs exceeded their mandates and encroached on state sovereignty. The resulting 2014 General Assembly resolution (A/RES/68/268) introduced procedural adjustments without additional resources — what scholars describe as "fine-tuning [...] without structural change" (Abashidze and Koneva 2019, 359). Still, it helped to increase the effectiveness of TBs and provided grounds for the TB Chair's conclusions and their implementation in the TB strengthening process. As a result of these efforts, state reporting compliance has improved. The percentage of states with overdue state reports fell from 86 percent in 2013 to 73 percent in 2023, while in the same period the reporting backlog — the number of reports awaiting TB review — decreased by 15.4 percent (A/79/336). Later initiatives, including the 2020–2022 Co-facilitation Process, proposed harmonisation and digitalisation. A digital platform has been launched to submit complaints, including those to the TBs, but further improvements stalled again amid political reluctance and funding constraints.

Taken together, these developments reveal a recurring pattern: normative and institutional advances have generally resulted from extended contestation and remain susceptible to reversal. Global governance on women's and LGBTQI+ rights is more institutionalised than it was two decades ago, but it is still characterised by fragility, polarisation, and dependence on the political and financial commitment of a limited group of states.

Table 2: Major Milestones in Women's and LGBTQI+ Rights and the UN Human Rights System*The cells highlighted in yellow indicate the institutional dimension, identifying the main reform processes within the UN human rights system.**Continued on the next page.*

| Year | Milestones of Rights and the UN Human Rights System (marked in yellow) |
|------|---|
| 1981 | CEDAW entered into force |
| 1992 | CEDAW GR 19: First recognition of gender-based violence as a form of discrimination under international law |
| 1993 | Vienna Declaration , leading to creation of OHCHR |
| | DEVAW: UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women |
| 1994 | SRVAWG (Res. 1994/45, adopted by consensus) established Belém do Pará Convention: First binding regional treaty in the Americas defining violence against women as a human rights violation |
| 1995 | Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action |
| 1999 | CEDAW Optional Protocol adopted, establishing formal complaint and inquiry mechanisms |
| 2000 | Sexual orientation (SO) added to UNGA Resolution for the first time |
| 2002 | Council of Europe (CoE) Rec(2002)5: First international instrument proposing a comprehensive strategy against gender-based violence |
| 2003 | UN Draft Resolution (E/CN.4/2003/L.92): First UN imitative explicitly addressing SO-based human rights violations |
| 2004 | Maputo Protocol: First binding regional treaty in Africa comprehensively protecting women's and girls' rights |
| 2005 | CHR Joint Statement: First mention of SO |
| 2006 | HRC established, replacing CHR |
| | CoE campaign (2006–2008): Significantly raised awareness on violence against women First HRC Joint Statement on SOGI-based human rights violations |
| | Yogyakarta Principles (YP) adopted, providing the first (expert-devised) authoritative reference on SOGI rights |
| 2008 | OAS Resolution 2435: First regional recognition of SOGI-based human rights violations in the Americas First UNGA Joint Statement on SOGI-based human rights violations |
| 2009 | Treaty Body Strengthening Process (2009–2014) , leading to UNGA Resolution 68/268 (2014) |
| 2010 | WGDWG (Res. 15/23, adopted by consensus) established Council of Europe Rec(2010)5: First regional standard adopted by a governmental body on combating SOGI-based discrimination |
| 2011 | Istanbul Convention (IC) adopted (entered into force in 2014) HRC Resolution 17/19: First HRC resolution on SOGI-based discrimination, leading to creation of IESOGI UN Secretary-General Ban's public support for SOGI rights: First top-level UN endorsement, rejecting cultural or religious arguments used to justify discrimination |
| 2012 | Gender Identity (GI) added to UNGA Resolution for the first time |

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| | |
|------|---|
| 2014 | CoE Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) Unit established EU Parliament Resolution (2013/2183[INI]): First comprehensive call for coordinated EU-wide approach to SOGI rights protection, leading to development of EU LGBTIQ Equality Strategy |
| 2016 | IESOGLI (Res. 32/2, 23Y-18N-6A) established; subsequent renewals by vote |
| 2017 | HRC Resolution 35/18: First explicit reference to rights to bodily autonomy (related to SRHR) YP+10: Addition of 10 new principles on gender expression and sex characteristics |
| 2019 | HRC Resolution 40/5: First HRC resolution on intersex issues |
| 2020 | EU LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020–2025 (renewed for 2026–2030): First comprehensive EU framework integrating LGBTIQ rights across all policies, funding, and legislation |
| 2024 | UN Secretariat LGBTQI+ Strategy: First UN-wide protection strategy, institutionalising SOGIESC inclusion as part of the UN's mandate |

Unexploited Potential for Reform

Meaningful Enforcement and Strengthened TB Authority

A recurring problem in the international human rights system is the absence of enforcement mechanisms for both the HRC and the TBs, namely powers that would complement their largely deliberative and reputational functions. Although the desirability of stronger enforcement has been widely acknowledged since the 1980s, successive reform initiatives have stalled over sovereignty concerns. Many states remain reluctant to endorse mechanisms that could entail binding compliance or material sanctions. Consequently, proposals to establish enforcement or sanctioning powers—whether for the TBs, the UPR, or the UNSPs—have not gained sufficient support. Some have suggested strengthening TB authority by creating a single, consolidated oversight body (Arbour 2006; Alston 1997; see also Salama 2020; O’Flaherty 2024), but this idea has also failed to attract political support (Interviews 7 and 10). Ultimately, meaningful institutional reform depends on member states’ willingness to advance it (Interview 7).

Many states remain reluctant to endorse mechanisms that could entail binding compliance or material sanctions.

Given current resource constraints, the scope for strengthening TB authority is limited. However, follow-up mechanisms remain a primary area for improvement (Interview 10). Possible measures include engaging UN country teams more systematically in follow-up beyond report inputs; supporting governments in establishing permanent domestic mechanisms via capacity-building programmes; and enhancing coordination with National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) to sustain follow-up to TB recommendations, including those made in inquiry reports (Interview 10). Regional engagement through informal missions (such as technical cooperation visits) could further sensitise governments to human rights obligations and increase the visibility and accessibility of TB activities, although financial constraints continue to limit the feasibility of such initiatives (Interview 10).

Innovation and Procedural Reform

Severe resource limitations continue to constrain the effectiveness of the UN human rights system. Within these constraints, incremental procedural and technical adjustments appear to be the most feasible path to reform. UN officials note that the system remains overly paper-based and administratively burdensome, highlighting the need for digital transformation. Potential measures include expanding digital reporting and petition systems, introducing automated translation, and integrating existing UN data platforms to reduce costs and delays (Interview 7). The digitalisation of follow-up processes could further improve efficiency and extend the reach of TBs (Interview 10).

Simplifying working methods and enhancing coordination across TBs are a means to improve effectiveness under financial pressure. Streamlined procedures and shorter, more accessible recommendations may facilitate implementation (Interview 10). Establishing a predictable review calendar could strengthen coherence and reduce duplication across committees (Interview 7). Finally, delegating regional reviews or joint activities to smaller groups of members may offer a cost-effective means of bringing the system closer to rights holders (Interviews 7 and 10).

Supporting Normative Frameworks Through Reaffirmation

The further codification of women's rights and the codification of SOGI rights would close a legal protection gap. This remains unlikely for SOGI and SRHR in the near future, as persistent contestation makes consensus improbable. Even less disputed women's rights, such as the right to protection from violence against women and girls (soft law at the global level), continue to face international and domestic opposition. Although the idea that normative progress is currently feasible is generally met with some scepticism (Interviews 2, 3, and 4), efforts to reinforce existing commitments to gender equality and non-discrimination are ongoing. One example is the biennial UNGA resolution on the intensification of efforts to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, adopted since 2014, which reaffirms prior commitments and requests regular reports from the SRVAWG and the UN Secretary-General. An Optional Protocol to CEDAW on violence against women and girls has been proposed by former and current SRVAWGs, promoted by a core group of states (Antigua and Barbuda, Costa Rica, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Sierra Leone), and supported by CSOs, notably under the Everywoman Treaty umbrella organisation (Manjoo and Beninger 2024). This protocol would close the legal protection gap with respect to violence against women at the global level — which, despite soft-law

progress, results in states viewing this as an optional commitment (Manjoo and Beninger 2024). At the same time, other states in the Global South contend that reform discussions should better reflect their circumstances, as the standards set are sometimes "too high," which makes meaningful progress difficult (Interview 4).

States in the Global South contend that reform discussions should better reflect their circumstances.

In the current climate — in which UNSP mandate holders or TB experts are subject to harsh comments or even intimidated, and in which their authority and their mandates are called into question by claims that they have exceeded either or both — normative as well as political support from member states is essential, at meetings in Geneva and also in New York (Interview 2).

Preserving Civic Space for Participation

Multiple stakeholders are actively engaged in TB reporting processes and UNSP work (including country visits, communications on alleged violations, inputs to thematic reports, and participation in Interactive Dialogues). The UN Geneva environment serves as a forum for many CSOs, where information is shared and resources are pooled among local actors, transnational networks, and human rights experts in the TBs and UNSPs, creating space for “experimentalist” governance (de Búrca 2017). To further strengthen civic space, states could align more closely with the UN’s 2020 guidance on the protection and promotion of civic space, improve the implementation of existing policies on free and equal access to information (including in local languages and via secure digital platforms), and support initiatives that promote inclusive participation in UN partnerships. Political and financial support for diverse CSOs, especially those facing resource constraints or security risks, remains essential. Furthermore, there is additional scope to support and expand existing OHCHR and UN initiatives designed to strengthen civil society participation and protect against reprisals (see, e.g., United Nations 2020; King and Pousadela 2025, 20).

The Role of the EU and Its Member States

The EU has been a consistent supporter of gender equality and a reliable ally in advancing institutional reform of the global human rights regime. The European Commission often highlights that EU support for women's rights and multilateralism is an obligation grounded in Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union and identifies gender equality as either a "foundational norm" or a "founding principle." While this narrative arguably overstates the EU's early commitment to gender equality (Macrae 2010, 158), it provides a normative foundation for the EU's Action Plans on Human Rights and Democracy (most recently Action Plan 2020–2027); its Thematic Guidelines, including the 2013 EU guidelines to promote and protect the enjoyment of all human rights by LGBTI persons; subsequent equality strategies, such as the Commission's first LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020–2025 and the LGBTIQ+ equality strategy 2026–2030; and the EU Guidelines on violence against women and girls and combatting all forms of discrimination against them. With its human rights guidelines adopted at the ministerial level, the EU seeks to send

"a strong political signal" concerning the priorities of its institutions and its members.

Finding allies with whom to
strengthen women's and SOGI
rights has become
increasingly difficult.

To promote institutional robustness, the EU combines human rights dialogues, public statements, UN interventions, and quiet diplomacy. Regular human rights dialogues are an important means by which the EU Council promotes diversity and inclusion with non-EU partner countries. Dialogues are held with 40 individual countries and with the African Union, usually at a higher level and with line ministries, but the EU delegation also interacts with CSOs and human rights defenders in these partner countries. These dialogues may centre on cooperation at the UN or on the implementation of specific human rights, with women's rights among the priorities. Yet finding allies with whom to strengthen women's and SOGI rights has become increasingly difficult. Due to internal divisions and a perceived decline in its normative power, in addition to its limited engagement with the Global South's human rights priorities, the EU's capacity to influence global governance on sex and gender appears constrained (see also Bouris, Fisher-Onar, and Huber 2025).

The EU's influence in Geneva is not only limited by its right to speak, but also by the fact that some HRC members may perceive the EU as selective in its human rights priorities and positions. Indeed, the EU and/or its member states do not support and sometimes even oppose certain HRC human rights agendas. This holds true particularly for agendas that are less aligned with political liberalism. EU member states regularly oppose UNSP mandates sponsored by Cuba and other members of the Non-Alignment Movement, for instance, the mandates on the right to development, the human rights effects of foreign debt, and the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order. To counter contestations of SOGI and women's rights norms and strengthen institutional robustness in a highly

politicised forum such as the HRC, the EU employs several strategies. It mobilises cross-regional alliances to show that these rights are not a product of Western ideology, but are shared by African and Latin American countries, for instance. As an example, in human rights dialogues, the EU refers to regional agreements and interpretations by regional courts, such as the 2003 Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Human Rights of Women (the Maputo Protocol). It also frames these rights as universal and grounds them in universal principles of non-discrimination. To do so, it uses agreed language as a tool to hold the line — to counter pushback and prevent norm regress (Interview 9). Still, the EU has room to demonstrate its commitment to women's and SOGI rights more visibly beyond the UN's human rights hub in Geneva, to defend UNSP mandates and achievements, and to further human rights advocacy in deliberations in New York as well (Interview 2).

A more recent obstacle to consistent EU foreign policy stems from the rise of right-wing movements — not only at the global level, but also within the EU. Such movements often invoke neo-traditional “family values,” demonise transgender and sexual minorities, and oppose or roll back reproductive rights and policies on gender identification. Certain EU member states, notably those representing the Group of Eastern Europe in the HRC (such as Hungary and Poland) and candidate countries, have expressed dissent. This internal fragmentation challenges the coherence of EU foreign policy, which requires unanimity on the EU Council. Rising gender stereotypes and “the backlash against women's rights in the legislation of the State party and in political and public life” (CEDAW 2023, 3), raised as a concern in CEDAW's concluding observations on Hungary's ninth state report, threaten to weaken the EU's credibility as a normative actor. Türkiye's withdrawal from the IC in 2021 and the Latvian Parliament's vote to exit the IC in October 2025 indicate that EU efforts to promote certain values are facing severe limitations and need to be strengthened.

The EU plays an important role in
defending civic space and
supporting the work of CSOs.

Finally, the EU plays an important role in defending civic space and supporting the work of CSOs, which are disproportionately affected by the current backlash. EEAS provides support to CSOs, “including human rights defenders, women's organisations, LGBTIQ+ communities, indigenous peoples, youth movements, people with disabilities, racial, ethnic and religious minorities and socio-economically disadvantaged groups” (EEAS 2023).

Conclusion: Four Future Trajectories

In this report, we have analysed the global governance of women's and LGBTQI+ rights through the lens of the ENSURED framework, focusing on three challenges: preserving (1) the capacity of human rights institutions to deliver policy outputs, monitor outcomes, and facilitate impacts (effectiveness); (2) the robustness of core gender-related norms in the midst of contestation; and (3) the democratic quality of participation at a time when civic space is shrinking. Based on this analysis, we have identified several possible trajectories for the governance of sex and gender globally, which are not mutually exclusive.

The first and most likely trajectory is the continuation — and potential deepening — of normative polarisation and institutional weakening (Interviews 3 and 4), which would further undermine the robustness and rule stability of global sex and gender governance. In this scenario, opposing blocs remain entrenched, preventing further institutionalisation of SOGI rights and leading to a narrowing of commitments to women's rights, with few efforts to pursue more ambitious reforms in order to address persistent discrimination. One coalition may focus on safeguarding existing mandates on discrimination and violence against women and girls, as well as SOGI rights, rather than pursuing new initiatives or expanding or legally strengthening institutional mandates. Another may channel its efforts into launching new initiatives — for instance, on discrimination against women in sports — potentially straining already limited resources and political attention.

The first and most likely trajectory
is the continuation — and potential
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This stalemate at the global level is already accelerating a second trajectory: regionalisation. As global consensus remains elusive, progress is increasingly pursued via regional mechanisms. Examples include the IC, the EU's internal and external commitments, and developments in the Inter-American system. While these mechanisms may advance protection, they also contribute to uneven standards and regional disparities, shifting participation and accountability away from more inclusive, multilateral forums. This, in turn, affects the democratic quality of state participation in global governance.

A third (more pessimistic) trajectory concerns potential norm decline or institutional decay. Previously entrenched norms may lose influence when contestation, financial pressures, and political withdrawal erode institutional capacity. This scenario becomes more likely if the coalition of states and CSOs supporting gender and SOGI norms weakens or loses influence, or if key donors reduce funding. In such circumstances, core bodies and mechanisms such as the TBs and/or the UNSPs could experience a decline in legitimacy and effectiveness. Although this outcome remains unlikely, it highlights the vulnerability of a system that relies on voluntary funding and is susceptible to political capture.

Finally, a fourth (more positive) trajectory is institutional resilience. To prevent institutional decay, the coalition supporting the current multilateral frameworks on women's and LGBTQI+ rights needs to uphold or even strengthen its investments and provide sufficient material and political support. This may fill the void left by the US withdrawal and defend the OHCHR, the TBs, and the UNSPs against the various forms of contestation described in this report (Krieger and Liese 2023; Heinkelmann-Wild forthcoming).

Taken together, these potential trajectories suggest that the global governance of women's and LGBTQI+ rights is unlikely to collapse but will remain extremely fragile. Its future will likely be shaped less by expansive norm-building than by defensive strategies, regional variation, and the sustained investment of political and financial resources required to preserve its effectiveness, robustness, and democracy.

List of Interviews

This list includes only the interview month and anonymised identifiers. Names, places, and other details have been omitted to avoid identifiability. The interviews were conducted either online or in person, typically lasted around 60 minutes. They were carried out either by one of the researchers or by both. The interview material was analysed alongside our own observations and relevant secondary sources. As with any qualitative study, our analysis reflects a synthesis of multiple inputs. Where the text does not explicitly reference an interviewee, the discussion presents the authors' analytical assessment, informed by — but not attributable to — individual participants.

In accordance with the University of Potsdam Ethics Committee's requirements, all interviewees provided consent to be interviewed. In addition, we invited all interview participants to review and confirm the passages in which they were directly referenced. Three interviewees requested revisions. Of these, two raised minor factual corrections concerning the scope of their work or their titles, which were implemented in full. One interviewee expressed concern that certain views were not represented as intended and that some points raised during the interview were not reflected in the report. In response, we revised the relevant passages attributed to the interviewee. However, several suggestions to amend passages in which the interviewee was not directly cited could not be incorporated, as these parts of the analysis draw on a broader body of evidence and are not based on the account of a single interviewee.

| Number | Date | Interviewee |
|--------|--------------|--|
| 1 | January 2025 | NGO representative |
| 2 | June 2025 | UNSP expert |
| 3 | July 2025 | UNSP expert |
| 4 | July 2025 | National diplomat |
| 5 | July 2025 | UNSP expert |
| 6 | August 2025 | NGO representative |
| 7 | October 2025 | UN official (views offered in personal capacity) |
| 8 | October 2025 | EU representative |
| 9 | October 2025 | EU representative |
| 10 | October 2025 | UN official (views offered in personal capacity) |

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Funded by
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The ENSURED project is funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under the Call HORIZON-CL2-2022-DEMOCRACY-01 – Grant agreement n° 101092077. Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency (granting authority). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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