



Navigating the politics of backlash to sexual and reproductive health and rights

Policy lessons from Kenya, Sierra Leone and The Gambia

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Key messages

Sexual and reproductive rights are increasingly weaponised as part of a wider anti-gender backlash. This risks reversing decades of progress on women's and LGBTQ+ rights, and increases political sensitivities for governments wishing to advance progressive reform.

Local rights-based civil society organisations are key to achieving progressive policy reform. International funders must provide long-term investment to build and maintain civil society infrastructure, allowing them to lead and foster domestic support.

Democratic institutions and independent judicial or parliamentary processes are essential for upholding rights related to sexual and reproductive health. The global human rights frameworks which underpin these are increasingly under attack, and must be defended and strengthened at the multilateral level.

Political opportunism, more than ideology, often shapes politicians' stances on sexual and reproductive rights. Progressive actors should consider when in the election cycle to introduce policy initiatives.

For sexual and reproductive rights to be sustained, policy reform must be underpinned by gender norm change throughout society, which requires time and long-term investment.



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Introduction

We are witnessing a peak in the global backlash against gender equality (The White House, 2025a; UNFPA, 2025). This backlash is fuelled by actors, working inside and outside of government, who are funding initiatives to roll back gender equality policies and programmes around the world in defence of traditional patriarchal values (Flood et al., 2018; Corredor, 2019; Shameem, 2021).

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are a common target for these actors, including in western contexts (Datta, 2021) and across the African continent and beyond (Okech, 2023; Judge, 2024; Otieno and Makabira, 2024). These global trends considerably increase the political risks for national governments that wish to advance progressive policy initiatives on SRHR, and women's rights more broadly, given how deeply contested they are.

The slashing of international development funding in general, and particularly for SRHR, is deepening the vulnerability of communities in need (NL Times, 2025; The White House, 2025b; UNFPA, 2025). The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the UN agency responsible for reproductive and sexual health, has lost \$377 million worth of funding from the United States (US) alone (UN News, 2025). This shrinking pool of funds places further strain on development agencies and other donors who remain committed to supporting SRHR and gender equality, forcing them to consider how to enhance their support to partner governments and civil society organisations (CSOs).

ODI Global conducted a political economy analysis of three policy initiatives with significant consequences for gender equality and reproductive rights across the African continent – LGBTQ+ rights in Kenya; abortion rights in Sierra Leone; and female genital mutilation (FGM) in The Gambia – to understand how the politics of backlash is playing out across domestic debates on SRHR in different contexts.

After providing some key context (Section 2), this policy brief draws together the main lessons from the three studies (Section 3) and recommendations for progressive actors on SRHR – bilateral and multilateral donors, international civil society and philanthropy – seeking to protect and enhance SRHR (Section 4).

Context

This section briefly outlines the three cases, highlighting the salient political economy considerations.

LGBTQ+ rights and the Family Protection Bill in Kenya

In April 2023, Kenya was embroiled in a surge of political and public debate about LGBTQ+ rights that resulted in a draft member's bill to increase already harsh punishments for same-sex sexual acts, impose new restrictions on teaching sexuality education and limit freedom of expression. The Family Protection Bill mirrored Uganda's 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act, suggesting a deliberate alignment with regional narratives of 'defending African values'. These narratives have been supported by substantial foreign involvement, directly influencing politicians such as Peter Kaluma, the bill's sponsor and a figurehead for anti-homosexuality legislation in Kenya.

The bill was ultimately blocked by civil society resistance and quiet opposition from political insiders, drawing on the rights-based Constitution, and it was never formally tabled in Parliament. But it appears to be resurrected in 2025, reflecting the global rise of anti-LGBTQ+ policy.

Abortion rights and the Safe Motherhood Bill in Sierra Leone

In 2024, Sierra Leone's Government, led by President Julius Maada Bio, revived a stalled attempt to legalise pregnancy termination through the Safe Motherhood and Reproductive Health Bill (in short, 'the Safe Motherhood Bill'). It formed part of a broader initiative to promote safe motherhood, spearheaded by the Ministry of Health. In recognition of the wider social sensitivity around the issue and potential political risks associated with advancing abortion rights, the process of building public and stakeholder support for the initiative continues.

The Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone, along with Pentecostal churches, are opposed to the initiative, leading to a compromise in the new draft bill that would limit access to safe abortion services to an extent that is deemed unacceptable to domestic feminist and SRHR advocacy groups. Debates and discussion are ongoing, but despite the president's clear track record of policy-making for gender equality, he has not yet succeeded in advancing this initiative into law (Kelly, 2025).

Women's rights and repealing the FGM ban in The Gambia

The Gambia has one of the highest rates of FGM in the world (DHS, 2020). Although the practice was criminalised through legal reform in 2015, nearly a decade passed without enforcement. The first convictions under the law in 2023 sparked a nationwide backlash – linked to the protection of religion, tradition and culture (Jadama, 2023). This set off a chain of events that brought the country to the brink of repealing its FGM ban, which would have made The Gambia the first country ever to do so.

A proposed bill to overturn the ban passed its first reading, and was then referred to parliamentary committee for a three-month consultation process (Ahmed and Ford, 2024). After intense community mobilisation and advocacy by local human rights organisations and CSOs, Parliament ultimately rejected the bill at the second reading on the grounds that it violated key human rights protections – thereby maintaining the ban on FGM (Christensen, 2024). The rejection of the bill was a critical win for women's and girls' rights. However, after the bill's defeat, a case was filed before the Supreme Court to decriminalise FGM, claiming that the ban violates constitutional rights to cultural and religious freedoms (Alkamba Times, 2024). The case is set to be heard later in 2025.

Lessons

This section summarises the key findings and related lessons from the three country studies, identifying the main influences, barriers and opportunities for navigating the politics of backlash.

Rights-based civil society is essential to advance SRHR

Where political support for SRHR is contentious and social norms are relatively less progressive, local CSOs have stepped in as strong advocates for SRHR and watchdogs for restrictive initiatives.

Locally grounded feminist CSOs know which approaches are likely to work to protect SRHR – in The Gambia, they protected the FGM ban through community activism and sensitisation, media advocacy and meetings with key political stakeholders, while in Kenya, strategic litigation has been successful in advancing LGBTQ+ rights.

An open and vibrant civic space is important for ensuring that threats to women's and girls' rights, as well as to democracy, are contained.

Protecting rights relies on robust democratic institutions and processes

An independent judiciary, respect for the rule of law and democratic due process are critical for upholding human rights obligations. All three cases show the importance of a rights-based legal system, which can counteract conservative politics and norms on SRHR.

Kenya's Constitution played a central role in how the courts navigated LGBTQ+ rights cases, ruling in a strategic litigation case that LGBTQ+ organisations have the right to register as non-governmental organisations due to the constitutional protection of freedom of association, even though same-sex sexual acts remain illegal.

In The Gambia, the reignition of the FGM debate led to a thorough review by parliamentary committee. Respect for the committee's recommendations was central in stopping the bill from passing.

It is vital that these independent processes – whether by committee or courts – remain rooted in human rights frameworks and free from political interference.

International human rights instruments remain important

Although human rights are contested in all three case studies, achieving progress on SRHR often relies on national, regional and international human rights instruments. Local CSOs and activists use these frameworks to hold their governments accountable to their human rights obligations (Mafotsing, 2024).

The Gambia's parliamentary committee framed its recommendation to maintain the FGM ban in terms of the country's adherence to national, regional and international frameworks, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Maputo Protocol – the latter a key instrument for guaranteeing African women's rights. The Safe Motherhood Bill in Sierra Leone is also situated within international human rights obligations to protect maternal and child health, and forms part of a package of wider reforms that create a robust legal framework for gender equality.

In countries where it is dangerous to speak up in favour of certain rights, like LGBTQ+ rights in Kenya, the international system and foreign actors can push governments to respect rights in ways that citizens cannot. Strengthening the human rights system at the multilateral level – notably through the UN – and increasing buy-in from Member States is an important instrument to safeguard SRHR at the national level.

Timing of policy reform matters

The electoral cycle can have a strong influence on whether a reform has traction. Politicians, especially heads of government, are often unwilling to push a highly contentious policy before an election. Civil society may also strategically decide not to turn an SRHR concern into a salient electoral issue – particularly if there is a fear of a sustained pushback on these rights.

The Sierra Leone Safe Motherhood Bill was tabled towards the start of President Bio's second term and coincided with a series of progressive reforms on gender equality. Their timing suggests a strategic effort to push through progressive legislation in the wake of a large mandate and high legitimacy, making reform less politically contentious.

In Kenya, Peter Kaluma has positioned anti-homosexuality legislation as a central pillar of his political agenda, using its discussion to demonstrate political success and bolster his re-election prospects. Meanwhile, Kenyan civil society is cautious about creating public opposition to such legislation, concerned that renewed debate on LGBTQ+ rights ahead of President William Ruto's 2027 re-election bid could prompt a populist regressive stance from the president.

Progressive actors are often viewed with suspicion

Progressive actors on SRHR, both local and foreign, are often viewed with deep suspicion by local people, seen as part of a colonial, western agenda seeking to eradicate other countries' culture and tradition. This pervasive narrative pits 'African' values against 'western' ones. As a result, upholding traditional and religious values is intricately connected with anti-colonial sentiment, which is stoked by transnational anti-rights movements (McEwen and Narayanaswamy, 2023).

SRHR have become increasingly weaponised in this regard, portrayed as a symbol of western colonialism. Actors in all three countries showed suspicion of foreign actors advocating for these rights – fearing interference in matters of national sovereignty. Actors with a restrictive approach to SRHR are often portrayed as the defenders of cultural and religious values in the face of the perceived threat to these rights and freedoms.

This is despite the clear neocolonial and missionary overtones of many international actors that hold restrictive views on SRHR. In Kenya, for example, the US Christian organisation Family Watch International has directly supported politicians and influenced the anti-homosexuality bill. This highlights the contradiction in how progressive and restrictive actors are viewed, and the legitimacy afforded to them.

To counteract the narrative of colonial imposition, building domestic support for reform is central to its success. For example, President Bio's assembling of domestic support for abortion legalisation in Sierra Leone is proving relatively successful as he is not perceived to be pushing a western agenda. Local leadership on SRHR initiatives is more vital than ever as oppositional stakeholders in Sierra Leone, The Gambia and Kenya are effectively tapping into anti-colonial and anti-western sentiments among the public to undermine hard-won rights, including on SRHR.

Conservative religious influence is a significant barrier

Conservative religious values consistently underpin opposition to SRHR, framing these rights as existential threats to people's religious identity, tradition and culture. Faith-based CSOs have opposed legalising abortion in Sierra Leone, while in The Gambia, religious leader Imam Fatty has exerted strong influence on the public and political discourse on FGM through his campaign to uphold it as a religious and traditional cultural practice.

Faith leaders and their religious voting blocs are powerful political constituencies, influencing policy directly and indirectly through politicians courting voter support by alignment with specific religious values. The strong religious influence means more is at stake for policy-makers who stand up for SRHR. They fear the loss of votes and other political sanctions associated with being cast as 'anti-religion'.

Political opportunism often shapes policy more than ideology

In all three countries, SRHR policies have been used to gain political capital, domestic and international influence, and ultimately to cement a legacy.

In Sierra Leone, President Bio has shaped his profile by promoting several progressive policy reforms, including on gender equality, women's empowerment, child marriage and now safe motherhood. He is viewed as a committed ally to women and girls domestically, regionally and internationally.

Peter Kaluma's effort to pass an anti-homosexuality bill in Kenya and National Assembly member Almameh Gibba's attempt to overturn the FGM ban in The Gambia, both capitalised on a controversial public debate for private political gain. Their initiatives served both parliamentarians well, bringing them into political prominence and garnering media attention.

Thus, political actors may potentially be motivated by political capital and personal gain more than by ideological commitment, including when it comes to SRHR policy reform initiatives.

Building domestic support for reform is critical

When a progressive SRHR policy initiative challenges prevalent social norms, it is unlikely to have much support or impact unless prevailing social attitudes and behaviour also change (Harper et al., 2020).

In The Gambia, the 2015 ban on FGM did not reduce its prevalence due to little change in the practice's cultural significance. Recent debates on whether to overturn the FGM ban show that cultural norms attached to cutting are still deeply entrenched. Sierra Leone President Bio's efforts to decriminalise abortion included eight years of quiet consultations with citizens and investment in a nationwide sensitisation campaign to raise awareness and build public support for a practice that is already widespread, although it remains stigmatised. He has gained government buy-in by framing the initiative around health, not gender, and by including several ministries to create broader support.

In contrast, Kenya's anti-homosexuality bill is well aligned with anti-LGBTQ+ social norms in the country, giving it a strong chance of implementation. The case studies show that public buy-in and attitudes towards SRHR are central in achieving successful reform.

All three case studies have shown indications that younger people hold relatively more progressive views on the SRHR issues at hand, suggesting that shifts in support have a generational timeframe. In Sierra Leone, a generation of youth advocates now hold influential positions in government and are driving progressive reform.

Recommendations for effective engagement

This section outlines the recommendations developed from the country studies for supportive international actors to engage successfully to protect and enhance SRHR.

Support civil society

- **Support local actors to lead the SRHR agenda**

When international actors support front-line stakeholders to uphold SRHR, it enhances their leadership on key issues without reinforcing perceptions that local stakeholders are following a western agenda. Behind-the-scenes conversations between donors, embassies, international non-governmental organisations, local civil society and local policy-makers are often a more successful strategy for international actors than public pressure or sanctions.

- **Take the lead from civil society on when or how to speak up**

CSOs need support, but the politicised debate on SRHR can create backlash. Local CSOs are best placed to advise on the most appropriate support from international progressive actors – listen and learn from them.

- **Invest in local organisations for the long term**

The ongoing funding, policy and legal challenges to SRHR show how easily progress can be reversed. International actors must maintain and enhance their funding to rights-based organisations.

Strengthen national and international institutions

- **Support national legal capacity and the rule of law, with a political understanding**

SRHR policy relies on a robust national legal system that supports human rights and has public trust. Donors can support this by providing training, knowledge exchange and resources to the judiciary, taking into account power dynamics and motivations within the various branches of government. A strengthened rights-based rule of law increases domestic legitimacy for progressive SRHR policies.

- **Support human rights at the multilateral level**

Be aware of the erosion of rights and rights-based language in multilateral spaces such as the UN Human Rights Council, and work with like-minded allies to hold firm against these attacks on human rights. The international human rights framework supports national civil society's efforts to protect and advance SRHR.

Leverage political astuteness

- **Use political economy analysis to inform activities**

Understand the broader context and motivations to find opportune moments to advocate for and support successful reform. For example, it might be better to initiate reform after an election rather than immediately before. Understand the extent to which influential progressive and regressive actors are motivated by ideology or political gain, and what they have to win or lose by taking certain positions on SRHR.

- **Appeal to reputation and legacy**

Progressive actors on SRHR can leverage politicians' sense of legacy and domestic or regional influence to generate buy-in for progressive policy reform.

- **Be mindful of political constraints due to religious influence**

The deep religiosity in many contexts makes it difficult for policy-makers to publicly advocate for SRHR, as they risk being accused of undermining religious and cultural values. Being cognisant of these constraints can help shape how to best respond.

Develop locally responsive narratives

- **Call out double standards on foreign interference**

Robustly challenge the narrative that progressive actors represent a colonial, western imposition while regressive actors protect sovereignty and African values. This can be done through elevating and foregrounding domestically owned efforts to claim SRHR, and exposing the neocolonial dynamics underpinning the agendas of regressive actors and their funding streams.

- **Reframe narratives that posit SRHR and religion as oppositional forces**

Strategic engagement with moderate and progressive religious voices – domestically, regionally and even globally – can be effective to create buy-in for SRHR. Successful strategies include humanising the impacts of SRHR policy and centring the voices of survivors or affected populations to shift the focus of the debate.

- **Build legitimacy for SRHR in society through norm change**

Support key ministries and CSOs in their sensitisation campaigns and norm change initiatives, showing an alternative future for people where culture and tradition are preserved and respected – but not at the expense of women's and girls' rights. Building wide stakeholder support for reform across government and civil society is key – for example, through inter-ministerial initiatives, awareness-raising initiatives like the Gambian FGM parliamentary committee's visit to Cairo, and direct consultations with civil society and local people, to better respond to their concerns and develop locally appealing framings. Norm change takes time, so this requires a committed long-term investment.

- **Seek opportunities to engage with youth**

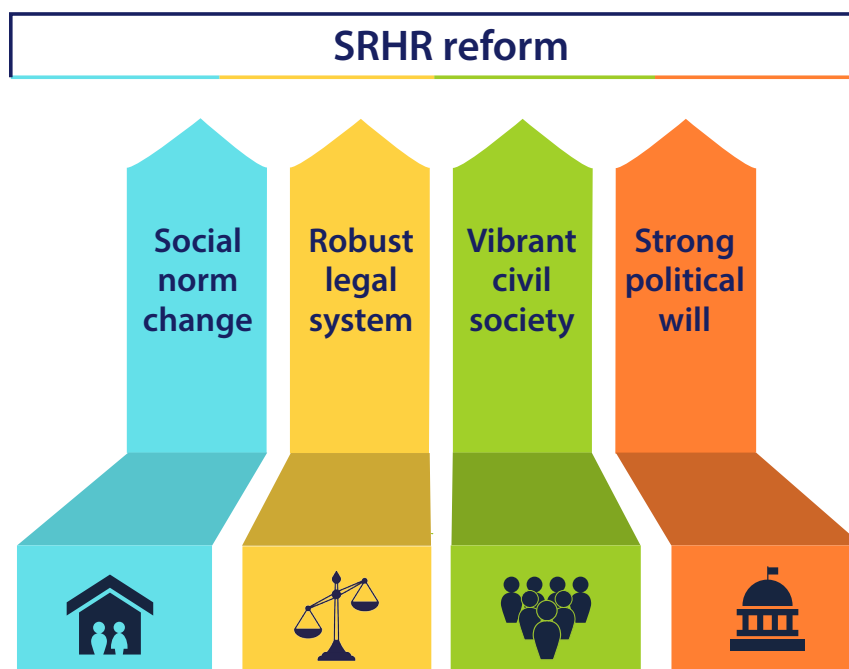
If younger generations are relatively more supportive of SRHR, progressive actors can work specifically with youth organisations and consider opportunities to support their political action and participation.

Conclusion

Progress on women's and LGBTQ+ rights is deteriorating globally, fuelled by a coordinated and well-resourced backlash against gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, diversity and feminism (Khan et al., 2023). Women and marginalised groups are raising the alarm in their respective countries about the hostile political environment for progressive reform, or even for holding the line on hard-won sexual and reproductive rights. In The Gambia, Sierra Leone and Kenya, SRHR have increasingly been weaponised in a wider debate that sets African values against western values, and religious tradition and social norms against international human rights – making progressive policy reform increasingly contested.

The three case studies demonstrate that effective SRHR reform often requires the confluence of several factors: political will, social norm change, a robust legal system and a vibrant civil society. A political economy approach can help identify where these factors align and offer strategic opportunities for actors seeking progressive reform on SRHR.

Figure 1 Foundational factors to support successful SRHR policy reform



Recent assaults on SRHR can be seen as a resurgence of patriarchal social norms, which risk unravelling the normative frameworks that have helped protect and strengthen human rights since the 1990s. But progressive actors are fighting back, providing an alternative vision and building strategic coalitions to advance these goals. This brief has demonstrated the importance of developing a politically informed approach: illuminating strategic opportunities and political openings to protect, and ultimately enhance, sexual and reproductive health and rights for all.

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