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Briefing Paper

Where next for feminist foreign policy on regional multilateralism and human rights?

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ALiGN Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms

Key messages

Regional organisations and their human rights mechanisms are important tools in response to the global polycrisis. As the liberal order faces increasing challenges, and geo-political centres of power shift, regional human rights mechanisms are essential for safeguarding gender equality, social inclusion, and sustainable peace and security.

Many regional mechanisms have been leading the expansion of human rights standards, and face targeted attacks by anti-gender and anti-democratic actors. Countries with feminist foreign policies and those committed to gender equality have a unique responsibility and opportunity to defend, strengthen and improve regional human rights mechanisms.

Governments should support human rights mechanisms financially, diplomatically and politically. They should adopt approaches that complement efforts at the global level, and which recognise the diversity of regional systems and unequal power relations among countries.

A key strategy ought to meaningfully support feminist civil society, human rights defenders, knowledge exchanges and cross-regional convenings, strengthening independent national human rights institutions and monitoring bodies that ensure compliance and implementation of human rights norms.

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About this publication

This briefing paper is part of ODI Global's series *Where next for feminist foreign policy?* Drawing on a closed-door roundtable at the V Ministerial Conference on Feminist Foreign Policy in Madrid, Spain in June 2026, plus interviews with practitioners and experts, it offers recommendations for governments committed to feminist foreign policy and gender equality to strengthen regional multilateralism and human rights.

The briefing paper highlights the rise of anti-gender and anti-democratic actors who undermine gender equality standards and international human rights systems. It calls on governments to use their political, diplomatic and financial resources to boost legitimacy, capacity and compliance within regional systems.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

AfCHPR	African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AU	African Union
CJEU	Court of Justice of the European Union
COE	Council of Europe
CSO	civil society organisation
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
ECLAC	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
FFP	feminist foreign policy
IACtHR	Inter-American Court of Human Rights
KII	key informant interview
LAS	League of Arab States
LGBTQI+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NHRI	national human rights institution
OAS	Organization of American States
SRHR	sexual and reproductive health and rights
UN	United Nations
US	United States

1 Introduction

The global multilateral human rights system is under strain. Anti-gender and anti-democratic actors are weakening the international liberal order and, with it, the hard-won rights and protections of all people (Goetz, 2020; Barbé and Oyarzún, 2026). While some governments are withdrawing from key human rights bodies (The White House, 2026), others are defunding them and weakening them from within (Cupać and Ebetürk, 2021; Janoff, 2022).

Various governments and civil society organisations (CSOs) are using technical, procedural and political strategies to contest gender rights and norms. They reframe, twist and hollow out concepts[1] (Lewin, 2021; Holmes, 2024; Cornwall, 2026). Even the idea of human rights itself is being challenged by those advocating for 'natural rights' – where rights are considered immutable and fixed, and therefore not expandable with societal advancements or political changes as human rights are (Cormier Smith and Stern, 2025).

The United Nations (UN) and its human rights mechanisms draw much attention in the current polycrisis of the liberal world order (see Box 1). However, regional human rights systems are equally crucial in upholding and advancing gender equality and human rights. Indeed, African, American and European human rights mechanisms have impacted the development of international human rights law (Brown and Oder, 2016; Okafor and Dzah, 2021; Fuentes, 2023). Rather than being passive adopters of global norms, these regional entities have led and influenced universal standards (van der Vleuten et al., 2021).

Box 1 Key terms and concepts

Feminist foreign policy+ (FFP+): FFP+ frequently refers to an official group of Member States at the UN in New York. This group includes diverse countries like France and the United Kingdom (UK), and also controversial ones such as Israel, Rwanda and Morocco. But in this briefing paper, FFP+ denotes countries that have formally adopted feminist foreign or development policies or have indicated commitment to gender equality and inspiration by feminist principles.

1 An example of reframing human rights is the creation of new rights that are not recognised in the global multilateral system, or shifting the rights from individuals, such as women and girls, to the family as a unit (Kane et al., 2023).

Box 1 Key terms and concepts (continued)

Gender-restrictive and anti-gender actors: States and civil society actors who pursue efforts to limit the expansion of gender equality. While some actors oppose gender as a concept and its well-established use in the international human rights frameworks, others seek to limit some aspects. Using the term 'gender restrictive' alongside 'anti-gender' opens up the possibility of collaboration with certain states on some gender equality issues (Khan and Michalko, 2026a). 'Gender-expansive' positions, on the other hand, seek to advance and strengthen gender equality provisions within human rights norms.

Human rights systems and mechanisms: Systems encompass norms, treaties, laws and organisations. Human rights mechanisms are specific procedures or bodies that form part of human rights systems. Regional human rights systems are tied to organisations such as the African Union (AU), the Council of Europe (COE) and the Organization of American States (OAS).

Liberal world order: 'Norms, rules, and institutions related to political liberalism (human rights, the rule of law, and liberal democracy), economic (neo)liberalism, and liberal internationalism manifested in multilateral cooperation' (Jezierska, 2026: 6).

Multiplex world order: 'A world without a single or a handful of dominant powers, which is culturally and politically diverse but economically and functionally interdependent, where the makers and breakers of peace and well-being are not just great powers or states, but also non-state actors (corporations, social movements, and extremist groups, etc.) interacting at global, regional, and local levels' (Acharya et al., 2026: 8–9). 'Multiplex order' differs from 'multipolar order' where numerous powers dominate and may have their spheres of influence.

Unsurprisingly, regional human rights systems are being targeted by gender-restrictive and anti-gender actors. This can be seen in attempts to weaken the AU's Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa ('the Maputo Protocol', see Box 2), and in resistance to the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence ('the Istanbul Convention'). The Inter-American system is no exception – being well known for its decades-long track record of expanding gender equality and the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) people – it is facing well-resourced and coordinated efforts to halt progress on the gender equality agenda (Kane et al., 2023; Bianculli, 2026; Urzúa, 2026).

Box 2 The Maputo Protocol: a feminist tool and target of anti-gender mobilisations

The Maputo Protocol (2005) is widely praised for advancing gender equality in Africa, including with regards to cultural and traditional practices (Mahmoudi and Rudman, 2023). While some critique its queer-blindness, others recognise its untapped potential for protecting the rights of sexual minorities (Kihali, 2025; Simiyu, 2025).

The Protocol is weakened by reservations linked to traditional values and by non-ratifications (International Commission of Jurists, 2026). The African Charter on Family, Sovereignty and Values directly challenges the Maputo Protocol and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (Adogla-Bessa, 2026). This Charter amplifies to the regional level national anti-gender mobilisations seen in countries including Ghana, Uganda and Kenya, which seek to criminalise and violate the rights of LGBTQI+ people and prevent advancements in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) or comprehensive sexuality education. The Charter was pushed at the Accra Family Values Conference in June 2026, which gathered representatives from some 20 African countries as potential signatories. Rooted in anti-colonial rhetoric and discourses of African traditional values and family, proponents of the Conference and the Charter actively undermine regional human rights mechanisms (ISLA, 2026).

Some feminists are concerned too about weakening of the Maputo Protocol by the Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls adopted in 2025 (Roundtable; key informant interviews (KIIs) 01, 03). Under the #PauseforPurpose campaign, activists are calling for ratification of the Convention to be paused and for the text to be revisited. They believe the Convention 'weakens the existing state obligations' in the Maputo Protocol, lacks legal accountability and normative entitlements, and faces implementation challenges (#PauseforPurpose, n.d.). Despite raising new issues such as cyberviolence, femicide and stronger workplace harassment provisions, some consider the Convention to be a possible step backwards (Equality Now, 2026; Nnoko, 2026). Others see the potential of the Convention as a decolonial intervention and praise its recognition of intersectionality, culture and participatory governance (Tchoukou, 2026).

Countries with feminist foreign policies (FFPs) and those committed to gender equality have a unique responsibility and opportunity to defend, strengthen and improve regional human rights mechanisms alongside their efforts to hold the line globally. Feminist theorising of FFP argues for states to commit to gender equality, multilateralism and human rights – and many governmental FFP documents do already include these commitments (Thompson et al., 2023; Whipkey et al., 2025; Cohn and Duncanson, 2026; Ignacio et al., 2026). State signatories of the final declaration of the 2026 V Ministerial Conference on FFP in Spain, for example, called for 'unwavering commitment to a multilateral order based on international and humanitarian law, human rights

and a strengthened multilateral system' (Government of Spain, 2026). This affirmation builds on declarations made in Mexico City (Government of Mexico, 2024) and Paris (Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2025), where countries pledged their commitment to international human rights instruments and multilateralism.

FFP+ countries can – and many do – engage globally and regionally to push for the highest standards within the organisations of which they are members. They can also respond to opportunities to advance human rights and gender equality where they emerge. But regional human rights systems differ considerably in their structures, procedures and normative standards, especially on gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights, meaning FFP+ governments need to use tailored approaches for each.

Approaches to regional multilateralism should also be shaped by the relationship between FFP+ countries and regional institutions, because this effects their power and legitimacy to implement recommendations. For instance, where FFP+ governments represent a majority or substantial proportion of an organisation's membership, more ambitious actions may be possible. Similarly, FFP+ states should consider their colonial histories, as these have shaped many regional organisations (Acharya et al., 2026; Reiss, 2026) and are being used within anti-gender and anti-democratic rhetoric (Khan and Carson, 2026). In this sense, advising or pressuring formerly colonised nations on regional human rights mechanisms may be ethically dubious and also counterproductive for the goals of FFP+ governments in the Global North.

This briefing paper provides FFP+ governments with recommendations for how to meet their commitments to advance human rights and gender equality, in line with feminist principles and objectives such as meaningful engagement and leadership of feminist civil society. Section 2 describes the current context of multilateralism in a polycrisis. The briefing paper then focuses on three interconnected and mutually reinforcing elements of regional multilateralism – legitimacy (Section 3), capacity (Section 4) and compliance (Section 5) – that, if strengthened, can improve gender equality and human rights outcomes and safeguard the international rights-based system.

Research methodology

The briefing paper draws on: 1) a non-exhaustive literature review; 2) a closed-door roundtable with 10 participants (including civil society representatives, diplomats, academics and practitioners – anonymised for confidentiality) convened at the 2026 V Ministerial Conference on FFP in Madrid; and 3) nine key informant interviews (KIIs).

Academic and grey literature were used to identify key themes in regional multilateralism, FFP and gender equality. These themes – legitimacy, capacity and compliance – were then used to analyse qualitative data from the KIIs and roundtable to draw out specific policy recommendations. The roundtable notes and interview transcripts were analysed inductively and, due to the small sample, represent indicative observations and suggestions.

The briefing paper focuses on five regional organisations (see Table 1), but other regional institutions (e.g., the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the East African Community (EAC) and the European Union (EU)) are used as additional examples.

Table 1 Selected regional organisations and their human rights mechanisms

Region	Key human rights institutions	Key instruments	Strengths	Weaknesses
African Union (AU)	African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (AfCHPR) African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child Pan-African Parliament	African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights ('Banjul Charter') Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa ('Maputo Protocol')	Institutions carry high levels of authority and esteem	Capacity challenges (budget and staff) Little chance of reaching the AfCHPR
Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)	ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) ASEAN Committee on Women Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children	ASEAN Human Rights Declaration Declaration of the Advancement of Women in the ASEAN Region Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and Children in ASEAN	Strong civil society pressure to strengthen the human rights dimension	Cautious approach to national sovereignty Lack of legally binding instruments and enforcement mechanisms
Council of Europe (COE)	Committee of Ministers Parliamentary Assembly European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) Commissioner for Human Rights Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO)	European Convention on Human Rights Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women and Domestic Violence	High compliance with decisions made by the ECHR	Challenges to authority (Russia, populist movements)

Region	Key human rights institutions	Key instruments	Strengths	Weaknesses
League of Arab States (LAS)	Arab Permanent Committee on Human Rights or the Committee of the Arab Charter on Human Rights Permanent Arab Commission of Human Rights Secretariat of the League of Arab States Arab Women's Organisation	Arab Charter on Human Rights Declaration on Violence against Women and Girls	Legitimacy of the institutions among Member States	Limited engagement with civil society Weak enforcement mechanisms
Organization of American States (OAS)	Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) Inter-American Commission of Women Follow-up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention (MESECVI)	American Convention on Human Rights Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women ('Convention of Belém do Pará')	Gender-expansive jurisprudence of the IACtHR	Difficulty translating the instruments into reality on the ground

Source: Authors based on literature review and KIIs

2 Human rights, multilateralism and the global polycrisis

> 'Don't fall into the provocative narrative that multilateralism is failing or irreversibly in crisis.' (Roundtable participant, Madrid, Spain, June 2026)

The global polycrisis comprises intertwined and mutually reinforcing social, political, economic and ecological crises. These include the climate and planetary emergency, widening socioeconomic inequalities, democratic decline and rising nationalism (Khosla et al., 2024; Hassim and Korteweg, 2025; Cohn and Duncanson, 2026). Attempts to weaken human rights at the UN and beyond is therefore a fundamental component of the polycrisis (Ishmael et al., 2026).

The UN has been, according to some, in perpetual cycles of crisis (Romaniuk et al., 2024). However, the current shift towards a multipolar or multiplex world makes it more difficult for the UN to function. Some critics of the UN suggest it unfairly stabilises power in the hands of veto-holding states. While the shift to a more multipolar world redistributes power from the centre to the margins, it also makes global decision-making harder (Ruggie, 1992).

The UN was established under a largely different geopolitical reality than today. Currently there are multiple rather than single sites of collaboration, and the world has become more regionalised and fragmented (Acharya et al., 2026; Ishmael et al., 2026; Paganini, 2026). Regions have gained importance in this shifting geopolitical context (Rüland and Carrapatoso, 2022), although the UN has always recognised the role of regional organisations in upholding its mission (Reiss, 2026). This is underscored in the Vienna Declaration:

> 'Regional arrangements play a fundamental role in promoting and protecting human rights. They should reinforce universal human rights standards, as contained in international human rights instruments, and their protection.' (UN, 1993: para 37)

The UN is facing ever-expanding needs and demands stemming from its ambitious global mandate, on the one hand, and funding shortages and inability to deliver, on the other. This leaves its human rights mechanisms lacking strong enforcement abilities (Cattafi and Peña Llanes, 2026; UN, 2026). The ongoing reform – UN80 – is both an opportunity to address the UN's weaknesses and a moment of vulnerability. Some states seek to undermine the UN's mandate, while many feminists have raised alarm around key elements of UN80 pertaining to bodies mandated to advance gender equality, namely UN Women and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) (Feminist Cross-Coalition UN-80 Working Group, 2026).

The recent UN Commission on the Status of Women demonstrates the challenges of achieving consensus on the gender equality and human rights agenda at the global level. In March 2026, the United States pushed the body to a vote due to the inclusion of the word 'gender' in the outcome document. It was the only country voting against the document, despite the tradition of making agreements by consensus. The incident was skilfully navigated by experienced diplomats, including the chair from Costa Rica (Barbé and Oyarzún, 2026; Barišić, 2026). Similarly, the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Conference was a stark reminder of the inability of the global community to have held another world conference in the meantime (Oladipo, 2025).

Successes in global bodies are still possible, however. This was proven at the 62nd session of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) in 2026, when reproductive violence was included in the resolution on women's and girls' rights in humanitarian situations (IPPF, 2026), and in the standalone reference to SRHR in the 2025 HRC resolution on violence against women and girls (Khan and Michalko, 2026a). As such, some academics caution that crises of multilateralism and the UN are often less grave than many suggest (Weiss and Annan, 2018; Fontaine-Skronski et al., 2023; Guilbaud et al., 2023).

Furthermore, as Murphy (2024) warns, labelling the current moment a 'polycrisis' can be paralysing because the crises may then seem too difficult to address. It can also result in technocratic rather than transformative solutions. It is these transformative approaches and 'rethinking of the goals and practice of foreign policy' that are required of FFP+ governments (Cohn and Duncanson, 2026: 22). Sections 3, 4 and 5 propose some solutions for FFP+ governments, ranging in complexity and transformative potential.

3 Strengthen the legitimacy of regional human rights mechanisms

Legitimacy of international organisations – among states, civil society and ordinary people – is key for the promotion and adoption of international instruments and norms. It is especially important for human rights norms where there is little incentive for states to comply with restrictions on their power and sovereignty, other than by considering that such compliance is the 'right thing to do' (Koh, 2005; Franck, 2006).

This section focuses on two forms of legitimacy,[2] based on: 1) shared values and 2) representation and inclusion.

Shared values

Regional organisations can be perceived by Member States as having more legitimacy than global organisations due to their smaller membership, deeper integration and greater consensus around societal values tied to similar sociopolitical characteristics and shared economic and security interests (Renshaw, 2022). For example, the African Charter that is the cornerstone of the African human rights mechanism explicitly draws on the concept of *ubuntu*, a shared cultural foundation connecting individuals with their surrounding societies and worlds (KIIs 01, 03). This foundation is reflected in the development of collective as well as individual rights (KII 01). Regional decision-making on human rights can also be more legitimate according to subsidiarity, meaning decisions should be taken as close as possible to those who they affect (Carozza, 2003).

However, members of regional organisations differ and they do not always share values and histories. Similarly, states' overlapping membership in multiple regional organisations – such as the AU and LAS – can both strengthen and weaken the human rights agenda, because regional human rights mechanisms apply different standards (KII 06).

Institutions like the AU, ASEAN and LAS emerged to preserve the regional autonomy of newly independent states (Acharya, 2011; Murithi, 2017). Therefore, these institutions do not suffer from the critique that postcolonial states did not have a say in their design, as is sometimes said of the UN system (Cattafi and Peña Llanes, 2026). Yet even in these organisations, the legitimacy

2 For more information on other relevant forms of legitimacy see, for example, de Silva and Tepliakova (2024), who identify the role of procedure-based legitimacy behind EU ratification of the Istanbul Convention.

of the gender-expansive agenda is presented by some anti-gender actors as externally imposed and against the culture and traditions of the region, in their misappropriation of a postcolonial critique of the global system (Corrêa et al., 2023; KIIs 03, 07).

Human rights defenders and gender equality advocates are somewhat ambivalent about engagement with cultural values. Although culture is used to attack feminist agendas, feminists appeal to regional instruments based on their cultural relevance, proximity and embeddedness (KII 03). Consequently, activists tend to highlight the complementarity and mutually reinforcing relationship between regional (culturally specific) and global (universal) articulations of rights.

The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) exemplifies a global framework that is successfully leveraged regionally. Most countries have ratified this global commitment and many regional organisations support it too (KII 06; Roundtable). This complementarity was echoed in 2026 by Amina Bouayach, the chairperson of Morocco's National Human Rights Council. At the Accra Family Values Conference, which advances the conservative African Charter on Family, Sovereignty and Values (see also Box 2), Bouayach (2026) said:

> 'The African human rights architecture … was built precisely to translate universal human rights commitments into the specific realities of this continent. These instruments do not stand apart from the international framework. They deepen it. They bring it closer to the ground.'

Representation and inclusion

Fair representation and safe, meaningful engagement with civil society – especially (women) human rights defenders – and the general public also influence the perceived legitimacy of organisations.

While some regional mechanisms allow direct access by citizens (e.g., submitting legal cases after domestic avenues have been exhausted), others are more limited. Visibility enhances legitimacy among the general public as well. In this regard, regional organisations may be advantaged over global organisations. Also important are organisations' performance and ability to deliver (Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2015; Tallberg and Zürn, 2019), which often make CSOs and human rights defenders essential for the effective functioning of human rights mechanisms.

According to interviewees, many bodies within the South-East Asian and American system do not engage meaningfully with civil society (KIIs 02, 06, 07). In Africa, some types of organisations lack access to human rights mechanisms. For example, the Coalition of African Lesbians, Synergía and others were denied access to the African Commission on Human and

Peoples' Rights or had their observer status revoked (Reiss and Tabengwa, 2025; Simiyu, 2025; KIIs 01, 04). Improving the transparency and efficiency of CSO registration is therefore vital for reform of the AU (ISLA et al., 2024).

In the Americas, the OAS has offered CSOs relatively neutral and institutionalised access channels, which have provided a route for organisations to criticise their own governments. But these tools are also used by gender-restrictive actors to attack the OAS and lobby Member States, especially through the General Assembly (Kane et al., 2023; Urzúa, 2026). Some governments are now seeking to limit this access, however, as witnessed at the 2026 OAS General Assembly in Panama City.

CSO engagement is also shaped by domestic conditions and resource constraints. A rise in legislation that stifles the activities of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), for example in Latin America, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and in Southwest Asia and North Africa, makes it difficult for NGOs to keep their registrations or receive funding, especially if they are critical of the government (KIIs 04, 06, 08). And while travelling to attend sessions in Addis Ababa or Cairo to appear in front of the Courts may be less prohibitive than attending global events in New York and Geneva, such travel costs are still a financial barrier for many NGOs (ISLA et al., 2024; KII 04). Similarly, the political and security situation in host countries can deter their participation (KII 05).

Several regional organisations embed forms of parliamentarism, making them more representative and democratic. The European Parliament is a prime example of a body that can be more progressive on gender and sexuality issues than intergovernmental institutions, but there are tensions here too (Ahrens and Meier, 2026). In fact, regional organisations are not free from democratic deficit. For instance, it has been argued that ASEAN's decision-making based on informal consultation limits accountability (Chiou, 2010); and the EU is often criticised for poor transparency because major decisions are taken in closed-door negotiations within the Council of the European Union or in trialogues between major EU institutions (Brandsma, 2019).

Weakening legitimacy

The legitimacy of regional organisations is being undermined as governments withdraw, often due to disagreements. Recent examples include Russia's exit from the COE in 2022 (COE, 2022); Nicaragua's withdrawal from the OAS in 2023 (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2023); and Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger's withdrawal from ECOWAS in 2025 (Ewokor, 2025). Legitimacy is also undermined by governments' critique of the decisions of regional bodies and courts as encroaching on their national sovereignty (Petrov, 2020; Arévalo-Ramírez and Rousset-Siri, 2025). This happened in 2025 when nine governments challenged the jurisprudence of the ECHR on migrant rights (EPSU, 2025).

Recommendations for FFP+ governments

Amplify the importance of regional human rights mechanisms for gender equality and social justice. FFP+ governments can defend human rights mechanisms more vocally and decisively by carrying out the following actions:

- Including regional bodies and instruments in ministerial declarations from FFP conferences and by showcasing the unique importance of regional organisations for gender equality and the human rights of excluded groups.
- Using the UN80 reform to strengthen complementarity between regional and global human rights mechanisms, for example by drawing on the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and its regional transpositions.
- Using regionalism to challenge the narrative of anti-gender actors that the gender equality agenda is a western, colonial imposition.
- Improving the knowledge and awareness of diplomats about the role of regional mechanisms.
- Identifying shared agendas and priorities to increase collaboration between regional organisations and FFP+ groups. This includes enhancing the Women, Peace and Security agenda and tackling technology facilitated gender-based violence, as agreed at the Paris and Madrid FFP Conferences (Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2025; Government of Spain, 2026).
- Using regional and bilateral trade agreements to amplify the human rights agenda. Many regional organisations such as the AU, LAS or ASEAN have economic, development and trade mandates, and the use of gender chapters has already been spearheaded by many FFP+ countries such as Canada or Chile (Michalko et al., 2025). This must be done through mutually accountable partnerships, however, rather than inequitable relationships rooted in the economic strength of countries in the Global North.

Challenge the creation of new mechanisms outside existing systems that can weaken gender equality and human rights protections (Pousadela and King, 2026). Examples include the Global Board of Peace or the African Charter on Family, Sovereignty and Values. FFP+ governments should consider which states are best placed to pursue bilateral conversations on these issues, bearing in mind global power hierarchies and colonial histories that have led to abuse of economic and military power.

Lead by example and comply with regional normative and legal obligations. Incoherence and double standards – for example, regarding human rights and humanitarian law violations in Palestine or the right to development – are common critiques against FFP+ governments that delegitimise human rights mechanisms (Michalko, 2023; Khan and Michalko, 2026b). FFP+ governments should address their own human rights record to strengthen the rights-based international order.

4 Increase the capacity of regional human rights mechanisms

International human rights mechanisms rely on established and emerging regional instruments. This section describes strengths and weaknesses of regional mechanisms, before outlining strategies to expand normative standards through: (1) inter- and intra- regional exchanges and (2) efforts to address resource shortages and insufficiencies.

Normative standards

Some of the strongest human rights mechanisms are attached to the COE, AU (see Box 1) and the OAS. In Latin America, in addition to the American Convention on Human Rights, human and gender equality are strengthened through instruments such as the Convention of Belém do Pará on violence against women, which is the first international legally binding treaty on eliminating violence against women (van der Vleuten et al., 2021; Bianculli, 2026). Also important are trailblazing advisory opinions of the IACtHR, which in 2017 stated that same-sex couples are entitled to marriage rights (advisory opinion OC-24/17) and in 2025 concluded that everyone has the right to care (see Box 3) (IACtHR, 2025).

Box 3 Advisory Opinion 31 on care

IACtHR Advisory Opinion 31 made history as the most authoritative pronunciation of the right to care derived from international human rights law. It was issued in June 2025 in response to Argentina's submission prior to the victory of Javier Milei in 2023. While the Milei Government tried to withdraw the submission, the IACtHR proceeded (KII 04). The process attracted considerable engagement from CSOs and governments, resulting in 129 written submissions and attendance at the hearing by 67 delegations (IACtHR, 2025).

The Opinion builds on long-term regional trends captured in the 2025 Tlatelolco Commitment on 'care society'[i] (ECLAC, 2025). The Opinion states that care is an important component of multiple rights protected by the American Convention on Human Rights and encompasses three dimensions of rights: to care, to be cared for and self-care. It also confirms the discriminatory character of gender-unequal division of care work. Several state obligations follow from the Court's reasoning. For instance, states must ensure minimum social security protection for those providing unpaid care work and guarantee access to care services to those who need them.

Box 3 Advisory Opinion 31 on care (continued)

The decision is important because many Latin American governments are becoming more conservative and are exercising pressure on the OAS system, which may hinder the Court (KIIs 04, 08). One interviewee believed the Advisory Opinion was possible because there is broader consensus over issues like care versus more controversial issues like abortion (KII 08). While domestic recognition of the right to care is still lacking, the IACHtR Opinion is likely to be important in domestic advocacy for litigation across the region (Henríquez Viñas and Ragone, 2025).

Note: i) 'Care society' is a widely accepted English translation from the Spanish original '*sociedad del cuidado*'. Other translations in use are 'caring society' or 'care-centred society'.

Other regional human rights mechanisms are not as robust, but emerging frameworks in ASEAN and the LAS do present opportunities for feminist actors and are slowly progressing human rights commitments (KIIs 02, 05). For example, ASEAN moved from open rebellion against the human rights regime to habitual but superficial support for human rights (Davies, 2021). It is now increasingly using human rights language in documents (Duxbury and Tan, 2019) and has dedicated human rights bodies like the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children. The LAS adopted the 2022 Arab Declaration on Combatting All Forms of Violence Against Women and Girls.

However, greater focus on human rights language may also signal 'gender washing' or contestation over the meaning of emerging international human rights norms. For example, global discussions on the right to care have been exploited by gender-restrictive actors in efforts to entrench patriarchal gender roles in the Arab region (Roundtable). As Abou-Habib (2025: 878) argues, using the example of family and parental rights in Southwest Asia and North Africa, the strategy has been to reframe rights to 'make feminists appear marginal, immoral, and destabilising' and to restrict the rights of women and LGTBQI+ people.

Geopolitical conflicts among members also negatively impact organisations' ability to systemically enhance human rights norms. Wars, such as Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, or conflicts, illegal occupations, genocide and political fragility in Southwest Asia and North Africa weaken or sideline human rights and gender equality mechanisms and they disrupt government engagement (Chaban et al., 2017; Rishmawi, 2023; roundtable discussion; KIIs 04, 05, 06).

Regional exchanges

Cross-regional cooperation is also important for developing human rights standards. Many bi-regional initiatives, such as between the EU and the LAS or AU and OAS, have focused on mutual

learning. They can also address shared challenges, such as those affecting Afro-descendent and indigenous populations. In these circumstances, UN regional bodies often facilitate exchanges regarding the gender equality agenda and serve as a bridge between civil society and other regional bodies, especially political ones (KII 06). However, experts highlight that these initiatives are infrequent (Roundtable).

A prominent example of regional exchange is the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), which runs both the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean and the Gender Equality Observatory, and has accelerated the care agenda in the region too (see Box 3). The European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) (ENNHRI, n.d.) and the Asia-Pacific Forum of NHRIs (APF, n.d.) also support peer exchange and learning in their regions, and they contribute to compliance and implementation of norms and standards (see also Section 5).

Budgets, staffing and appointments

The ability of regional organisations to advance normative standards depends directly on resource quality and quantity. Apart from the special case of the EU, only three regional organisations manage annual budgets of over $100 million: the COE, AU and ASEAN (Mattheis, 2024; COE, 2026) (see Box 4).

Box 4 Resourcing among regional mechanisms vs the UN

Africa:

- The budget of the African Commission, the African Court and the African Children's Committee barely exceeded $20 million in 2022 and employed fewer than 150 staff (ISLA et al., 2024: 37).

Europe:

- The COE employs approximately 1,300 staff and in 2025 the ECHR received over 30,000 job applications.
- It takes, on average, 64 months for non-expedited cases to be processed (Raifeartaigh, 2026) and the ECHR has a backlog of cases with limited resources to process them (KIIs 08, 09).

UN:

- The 2026 UN budget amounts to close to $3.5 billion (Mishra, 2025).
- The UN employs 120,000 staff (UN CEB, 2025).

Feminist practitioners see timelines as a challenge for IACtHR too, with cases taking up to a decade (KIIs 04, 08). Due to long waits and changing dynamics within certain regional bodies (see Section 5), some CSOs are turning to UN mechanisms because they may be quicker and potentially more favourable. One interviewee expressed the same regarding the LAS (KII 06). Other CSOs use UN mechanisms due to lower admissibility criteria (rather than the ECHR, for example) (KII 09). Increased budgetary allocations nationally and regionally could increase the efficiency and impact of these mechanisms.

In addition to staffing numbers, participants underscored the will, expertise and values of staff and appointees as a key to the expansion of human rights apparatus and gender equality across regional organisations. Many highlighted specific judges, members of secretariats and commissioners whose technical knowledge and openness enabled (albeit limited) human rights advancements in their regions (KIIs 02, 03, 04, 05, 08). As such, increased expertise and independence could enhance the legitimacy of various regional organisations such as the AU (ISLA et al., 2024).

However, international organisations are built on masculinist norms, meaning they operate internally according to values and practices that undermine gender-transformative, feminist agendas. For example, masculinist norms around promotions and senior appointments make it difficult even for those committed to gender equality to succeed (Haastrup, 2023). As Cohn and Duncanson (2026) highlight, inclusion in international bodies is no substitute for the transformation of norms.

There are worries too about the future of traditionally gender-expansive bodies, such as IACtHR, as individual appointments change. As more governments adopt national-level anti-gender or gender-restrictive policies, this may lead to changes to their nomination practices and the composition of the Court which shift the direction of its jurisprudence (KIIs 04, 08). Indeed, many gender-restrictive governments are becoming bolder in appointing people to human rights bodies who can protect particular interests from within (KII 09). Combined with their funding powers, these governments can exercise considerable leverage. For example, the current United States (US) Administration continues to use funding as a tool against the OAS, threatening the survival of this regional body (Mora and Fiallo, 2026).

Recommendations for FFP+ governments

Use diplomatic relationships to encourage states' ratification of expansive regional human rights instruments. For example, the Convention of Belém do Pará has been widely ratified in the Americas, except by the US and Cuba (Equality Now, 2025). Similarly, roundtable participants called for the withdrawal of reservations to the Maputo Protocol and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Instruments such as the AU Convention on Violence against Women, whose standards have been questioned, could be progressed in dialogue with feminist civil society and human rights experts.

Convene inter- and intra-regional summits and lead initiatives to enhance regional planning, coordination and learning among governments and CSOs. For example, Mexico has chaired the Women's Regional Conference in Latin America since the 1970s under the coordination of ECLAC (Roundtable). Governments can also use development funds to create networks, as happened with Spanish development support used in the early 2000s to establish the Network of National Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women of the Andean Region (Bianculli, 2026). Such support should extend to South–South or triangular exchanges, as is currently ongoing between the EU and the Latin American region on care (EU-LAC Foundation, n.d.). Learning from the Istanbul Convention, Maputo Protocol and Belém do Pará Convention could be especially valuable as they show different yet complementary approaches towards strengthening the rights-based agenda.

Help create a sociopolitical environment conducive to improvements to human rights mechanisms. FFP+ governments can engage diplomatically and through development cooperation to address geo-political barriers such as violent conflicts, wars and occupation.

Fund regional multilateral bodies. The dependency of some regional organisations such as the OAS and the AU on key donors makes them vulnerable. FFP+ governments, and especially those that are members of regional organisations, can step up their financial commitments to support the efficiency and survival of organisations.

Support organisations financially and diplomatically to enable regional gender equality discussions. These organisations could include, for example, ECLAC, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and UN Women's regional offices. Some bodies leverage convening power to advance normative standards, while others build capacity and co-develop model laws to support the transposition of norms into national contexts. Others build bridges between civil society and regional organisations.

Support the meaningful and equitable representation of experts and practitioners committed to human rights from under-represented groups, including women. This could include coordination among FFP+ groups and like-minded states to ensure women diplomats and CSO representatives are appointed to commissions or monitoring bodies nominated by Member States.

Identify key allies in regional organisations for collaboration. Within every organisation there are individual civil servants, members of secretariats and other representatives who support the gender-expansive agenda. These people can drive change internally, even if incrementally. FFP+ governments can work with civil society and regional experts to identify these individuals who may not be publicly visible (KII 04; Roundtable).

5 Close compliance and implementation gaps

A lack of political will among Member States is a major challenge for human rights mechanisms. This section describes three additional mechanisms to address the implementation gap between human rights obligations and state actions: 1) courts and judicial levers, 2) monitoring and reporting mechanisms, and 3) status competition.

Courts and judicial levers

Many regional organisations have strong enforcement mechanisms to ensure states' compliance with human rights obligations that affect women and LGBTQI+ people, plus other excluded and systemically disadvantaged groups such as ethnic and racialised minorities, people living with disabilities' and migrants. These mechanisms include in particular the courts: the ECHR, the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU), IACtHR and AfCHPR.[3] These Courts issue binding decisions and financial penalties. Sanctions, while beneficial for compliance, are not always sufficient; also important are efforts by civil society and independent domestic courts pushing for compliance with judgements (Simmons, 2009).

Although compliance with ECHR judgements is high, implementation may be significantly delayed when legislative changes are required (Stiansen, 2019). Compliance is lower for the IACtHR and AfCHPR and often requires pressure from civil society (Etuvoata, 2020; Zuloaga, 2020; Chenwi, 2026). Even in the case of ECHR judgements, however, some states remain inactive. For example, several European countries (e.g., Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and San Marino) still do not have legal frameworks for same-sex partnerships (see Box 5).

The AfCHPR has only issued one – albeit a landmark – judgement on women's rights. In the case *Association pour le Progrès et la Défense des Droits des Femmes Maliennes* (APDF) and the Institute for Human Rights and Development in Africa (IHRDA) v Republic of Mali from 2018, the AfCHPR mandated Mali to change its family code to protect girls from child marriage. But the implementation status of this ruling is unclear. Moreover, only 34 of the AU's 55 Member States have ratified the protocol establishing the Court, in stark contrast to the institutional design of the ECHR, where all members must recognise the Court's jurisdiction (KII 09). Also, only seven states allow individuals and NGOs to directly submit complaints to the AfCHPR (Amnesty International, 2026), which limits the avenues through which a case might reach the Court.

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3 ASEAN and the LAS do not have human rights courts. While the Arab Court of Human Rights was proposed in 2014, the relevant statute has not been ratified by enough states to come into force.

Box 5 LGBTQI+ rights protections by European courts

In November 2025, the CJEU ruled that Member States are obliged to transcribe certificates of marriage concluded abroad for same-sex couples residing in their territory, even if their domestic laws do not recognise such marriages. This ruling was made on the basis of freedom of movement within the EU (*Jakub Cupriak-Trojan and Mateusz Trojan v Wojewoda Mazowiecki*, 2025). This adds to the established line of ECHR jurisprudence that states are obliged to provide legal recognition and protection to same-sex couples (*Oliari and Others v Italy*, 2015; *Fedotova and Others v Russia*, 2023; *Przybyszewska and Others v Poland*, 2023; *Formela and Others v Poland*, 2024).

These ECHR and CJEU rulings have been used to push for changes in domestic laws in the region. For example, Italy and Greece opened the possibility for same-sex partnerships in direct response to the ECHR's judgements (Cavaletto, 2017; COE, n.d.). However, several countries still do not have appropriate safeguards in place. In Poland, an already weak draft bill on cohabitation contracts has been recently vetoed by the President, leaving same-sex couples with limited legal recognition (Reuters, 2026). And while the CJEU's decision that obliged Poland to transcribe foreign marriage certificates has been recognised by domestic courts and civil registries (Miller, 2026), the decision is still contested – the Constitutional Court concluded this move was unconstitutional, and the Constitutional Court's decision is considered illegitimate by the Polish Government in the continuing rule-of-law saga (Hallam, 2026).

Jurisprudence on LGBTQI+ rights in Europe shows both the strength of regional human rights mechanisms and obstacles to compliance. Despite the generally high level of implementation of ECHR rulings by Member States (Stiansen, 2019), there are few safeguards against non-compliance. The Committee of Ministers monitors implementation of non-executed judgements such as *Przybyszewska and Others v Poland* (2023), but the EU can assert more pressure through the European Commission and the Court imposing financial penalties. Compliance in Europe with the recent judgement on foreign marriage certificates is yet to be seen.

The AfCHPR has, however, untapped potential. Strategic litigation is needed to realise it (Brown and Oder, 2016) – and a key challenge is that more national-level cases are required (KII 01). That said, strategic litigation has been a major strategy of anti-gender actors across Africa and globally (Nyarko and Kanhiya, 2026). Other African regional courts, such as the East African Court of Justice and the ECOWAS Court of Justice, are also becoming important platforms for human rights litigation; however, they are sometimes opposed by Member States (Un Eom and Helfer, 2023).

For its part, the IACtHR has earned a reputation as a champion of gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights jurisprudence (Duhaime and Tapias Torrado, 2025). Following Costa Rica's request, it issued the landmark Advisory Opinion OC-24/17 in 2017 concluding that states are obliged to recognise same-sex marriage. While several Latin American states have introduced marriage equality since then, others like Paraguay and Peru do not recognise same-sex relationships (Antoniazzi and Martínez, 2026). The Court also has (partial) jurisdiction over the Convention of Belém do Pará, which strengthens the framework on violence against women in Latin America and has led to important cases like *Vicky Hernández et al. v Honduras* in 2021, where the Court confirmed the application of the Convention of Belém do Pará to trans women (Lis, 2024). Several OAS members have still not submitted to the general jurisdiction of the IACtHR though, most notably the US and Canada (IACtHR, 2026).

While strategic litigation has been used to limit gender-expansive advancements by actors such as the Alliance for Defending Freedom (ADF International), this has historically not been the case in the Inter-American system. Instead, most anti-gender actors prefer to engage directly with OAS Member States (Urzúa, 2026). The growing power of anti-gender and gender-restrictive actors then creates political pressure that may influence judges. This concern was raised especially regarding the case of *Beatriz v el Salvador* (KIIs 04, 08), where the IACtHR adopted a 'formalistic approach' and focused on the individual. It avoided engaging in broader debates about SRHR and the human rights agenda, and it missed the opportunity to expand its track record on the issue (Ely Yamin and Ochoa, 2025).

According to some research participants, feminist and women's rights organisations are strategic in choosing the courts and bodies they engage with. They consider the appetite of the judges and courts to take on gender equality issues, in order to avoid the possibility of retrogression (KIIs 03, 04, 08). One interviewee also noted that knowledge of regional human rights mechanisms such as the LAS is limited among CSOs in the region, which contributes to their lower engagement despite windows of opportunity (KII 05). Others suggested a key barrier is the approach of regional bodies to CSOs, as discussed in Section 3. Some feminist and women's rights CSOs would therefore benefit from more technical knowledge and skills, as well as the means to flexibly respond to opportunities and adapt their strategies to regional mechanisms.

Monitoring and expert bodies

Several non-judicial bodies protect gender equality and the rights of excluded and marginalised groups. In many regions, for example, independent expert bodies and special rapporteurs have been able to critically challenge states. The Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) is a monitoring body of the Istanbul Convention that demands comprehensive reporting from Member States. Its methods have been praised for ensuring detailed evaluation of state compliance, especially through on-site visits and high involvement of national parliaments and civil society (Buscemi, 2023).

Because avenues to reach the AfCHPR are limited, the African Commission plays a large role in ensuring compliance, including with the Maputo Protocol. Although it does not issue binding decisions, its recommendations carry great authority among African governments (Tieku, 2021). For instance, it mandated Ethiopia to repeal its 'marry your rapist' law and held Egypt accountable for not investigating violence against women. The Maputo Protocol was also effectively enforced several times through high domestic courts (Equality Now, 2021).

The picture is more complicated regarding the protection of LGBTQI+ rights. In 2014, the African Commission adopted a resolution on protection against violence on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity (Reiss, 2026). But while some believe the Commission holds considerable potential to advance the rights of sexual and gender minorities (Simiyu, 2025), others caution against making recourse to the Commission due to its rather conservative stance, especially in the face of its denial of observer status to several LGBTQI+ organisations (Ibrahim, 2015; Viljoen, 2023). The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa is also active on gender equality issues. It does so through reports and indices that measure gender equality in African countries, assistance to states to implement gender equality commitments, and by convening high-level events (UNECA, 2026).

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights acts on behalf of the IACtHR and is also mandated to conduct country visits, publish reports and make recommendations. Historically, this made the Commission an important actor in safeguarding human rights in Latin America, despite budgetary constraints and challenges with domestic implementation of the American Convention on Human Rights (Goldman, 2009). The Commission also has longstanding rapporteurships on the Rights of Women and on the Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Trans, Bisexual, and Intersex Persons (IACHR, 2026).

As the Convention of Belém do Pará suffered from low effectiveness early on, state parties created a follow-up mechanism (MESECVI) in 2004 to ensure systematic and permanent evaluation based on peer exchange and expert review. Implementation of the Convention still faces challenges, however, and rates of violence against women in Latin America such as femicides remain high. Civil society organisations argue for allocation of adequate budgets for the effective implementation of public policies and support for the MESECVI (Equality Now, 2024), and they see the problem of violence against women in Latin America as often a problem with local law enforcement rather than legal frameworks (Wilson Center, 2020).

ASEAN has the Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children and the Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. It does not have a complaints procedure though and has no fact-finding authority. Furthermore, as intergovernmental arrangements, these commissions are largely insulated from civil society and citizens, while the possibility for lateral pressure between governments is underutilised due to a strong culture of non-interference (Ciorciari, 2012). As such, governments and civil society have

lobbied ASEAN to introduce stronger compliance mechanisms into its human rights ecosystem (Wahyuningrum, 2024; Virginski, 2026). Until then, the ASEAN Civil Society Conference asserts some pressure on the organisation, including on women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights.

Finally, the LAS was designed to maintain strong sovereignty and to insulate Member States. Consequently, there are calls for the LAS to introduce compliance initiatives such as the issuance of recommendations on human rights in Member States and to establish a complaint mechanism (Sadri, 2019). Civil society is also advocating for initiatives to address people's perceptions of gender roles in the Arab world (Almutawa and Magliveras, 2021).

Status and prestige

Many regional organisations are well suited to use status and prestige to drive change, due to their legitimacy and ability to distribute economic advantages. They are also good vehicles for social identity and learning among governments, which can encourage compliance with human rights norms (Checkel, 2001).

Regional organisations can have relatively strict membership criteria and therefore act as exclusive clubs. The clearest example of prestige influencing compliance is the EU's enlargement policy, where the incentive of EU membership was an important factor in the ratification of the Istanbul Convention by Ukraine and Moldova.

Regional organisations incentivise peer states too. For instance, although ASEAN's human rights mechanisms have weak powers, they can create change through reputational costs imposed by Member States (Jetschke, 2015). Other examples include the influence of the AU Commission's soft power of recommendations on African governments (Tieku, 2021) and the influence of OAS on its members through a mentality of club multilateralism (Legler, 2014).

Lastly, feminist actors can leverage competition among regions on human rights championship to push for bolder and innovative solutions. For instance, the existence of two care models in Europe and in Latin America could lead to productive competition but also cooperation between regions (Hernandez Pepe and de Silva, 2026). The pressure to catch up with other regional organisations in the Global South, like the AU, pushed ASEAN to develop its own human rights framework (Ciorciari, 2012). As noted by one interviewee, countries like to perform well in global indices and lead in regional comparisons (KII 06).

Recommendations for FFP+ governments

Support efforts to raise awareness and knowledge among CSOs (especially women's rights, feminist and LGBTQI+ organisations) about the importance and opportunities of regional instruments. Feminist CSOs and human rights defenders play a key role in human rights accountability, therefore their increased awareness, monitoring and pressure could enhance state compliance with regional instruments. This should be accompanied by appropriate resourcing.[4]

Champion and enable meaningful and safe participation and inclusion of CSOs in regional multilateralism. At the national level, this could include calling out shrinking civic space and anti-NGO legislation, as well as institutional barriers, such as revoking or obstructing CSO registration and observer status. FFP+ governments can also support the creation or expansion of funding schemes for CSOs, legal practitioners or feminist human rights defenders to engage with regional bodies. These schemes can increase the capacities for strategic litigation, which are essential to expand gender equality and normative standards.

Advocate with partner governments to allocate funding to domestic policies and programmes that increase compliance with regional human rights obligations. This could include increasing the independence and capacity of NHRIs and gender equality institutions. FFP+ governments should also support their own NHRIs' engagements in regional exchanges to contribute to knowledge-sharing and learning on gender equality and human rights.

Exchange knowledge and good practices to strengthen enforcement and compliance mechanisms. Collaboration between partner governments, multilateral institutional secretariats, regional political bodies, and CSO practitioners and experts can mobilise key stakeholders to adopt regionally relevant reforms. It can also boost the position of commissioners, courts and other stakeholders to help close the implementation gap.

Exercise peer pressure towards other governments and utilise regionally specific avenues to increase state compliance. Lack of political will – to implement recommendations issued by human rights commissions or committees, or to abide by legally binding court decisions – hinders human rights mechanisms. FFP+ governments should encourage active and full participation by other states.

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4 See Michalko and Tant (2024), Alliance for Feminist Movements (2026), Veerapen et al. (2026) and Woroniuk (2026) on funding feminist movements, women's rights organisations and the gender equality agenda in general.

6 Conclusion

> 'In a world where conflicts are multiplying, inequalities are deepening, and hate speech is gaining increasing legitimacy, we need more international cooperation, not less; more political dialogue, not less; and more collective solutions, not less.' (Roundtable participant, Madrid, Spain, June 2026)

As the global polycrisis unfolds and power continues to shift towards a multiplex world order, FFP+ governments must pay closer attention to regional systems. Regionalism is growing in importance, and therefore regional human rights mechanisms should be seen as essential tools to complement global efforts to safeguard gender equality, social inclusion, and sustainable peace and security.

Regional systems have varying levels of legitimacy, capacity and compliance mechanisms, however. As such, FFP+ governments must consider which levers and pathways will be most effective in expanding gender equality and human rights. This is especially crucial due to the persistent global power inequalities that shape how many FFP+ governments are perceived and how they relate to Member States of regional organisations. Shared values and closer proximity to the public and civil society give regional organisations an advantage to respond to narratives that portray gender equality and feminist agendas as western or colonial impositions – narratives which currently dominate much of global anti-gender politics.

As anti-gender and gender-restrictive actors grow in power and influence in organisations such as the AU, COE and OAS, strong political and financial investments are needed for feminist civil society, human rights defenders and lawyers, and those committed to human rights to hold the line on gender equality. Ceding space to anti-gender and anti-democratic actors will only amplify the polycrisis of the global order and threaten the rights-based protections of all people in their diversity.

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