

BEYOND BACKLASH:

Advancing Movements to End Violence Against Women

INSIGHTS FROM GRANTEE PARTNERS
OF THE UN TRUST FUND TO END
VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN





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About the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women

The United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund) is the only global grant-making mechanism dedicated to eradicating all forms of violence against women and girls. Managed by UN Women on behalf of the United Nations system and since its establishment in 1996 by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 50/166, the UN Trust Fund has awarded \$241,767,742 in grants to 706 initiatives across 140 countries and territories. Data collected annually by the UN Trust Fund testify to the profound impact of the work of the civil society organizations behind those initiatives.



Section 1 Introduction

In every corner of the world, organizations working to end violence against women and girls (EVAWG) are facing alarming and increasing backlash that threatens hard won progress for safety and equality. This backlash is not accidental – it is a strategic response to the growing visibility and influence of feminist movements, global campaigns against domestic violence, sexual assault and femicide and perceived threats to power and privilege. 1 in 4 countries say backlash has hampered progress on gender equality in the past 5 years¹.

For activists, organizations and movements working on ending violence against women and girls, backlash is a daily reality shaping how they operate, who they can support, and whether their efforts are sustained, undermined or reversed. Some forms of backlash are immediately recognizable – in many parts of the world where our grantee partners operate, governments have defunded essential services, rolled back legislation or policies that protect survivors, and openly threaten or attack organizations working to eliminate violence against women. Social media has become a battleground, where organizations and women leaders/activists face relentless abuse, threats, and misinformation designed to threaten and discredit them. Other forms are more insidious, embedded in bureaucratic inertia, resource deprivation, or subtle yet systematic exclusion.



As United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres put it: “We must push back against the pushback.” Yet, to do so effectively, we must first understand how this backlash manifests in practice and listen and learn from practitioners, especially those in the frontlines of ending violence against women and girls.

While backlash to gender justice is not new², the current backlash against feminist work is unfolding in a uniquely strategic, highly coordinated and deeply entrenched manner. The current backlash is uniquely coordinated and deeply embedded in political, legal, and digital spheres³, and is embedded in broader anti-democratic⁴ and authoritarian trends, fueled by well-resourced actors who are anti-gender, anti-human rights, anti-women’s rights and are actively working to dismantle feminist gains, shrink civic space,

and restrict rights. These forces do not act in isolation but are leveraging political, legal, and digital tools to weaken protections for women and girls while simultaneously claiming to ‘defend’ them – often by co-opting language around rights and safety to justify restrictive policies.

This brief provides a real-time, practitioner-centered analysis of backlash against initiatives focused on preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in 2024. Drawing on insights from over 100 civil society organizations (CSOs) across more than 50 countries in three languages, all supported by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women, it examines how backlash manifests in efforts to prevent and respond to VAWG. The brief categorizes backlash into three interconnected forms:

- **Systemic Backlash:** the exclusion of VAWG from laws and policies, inadequate budgets allocations, defunding organizations specialized in EVAWG and institutional inertia to implement EVAWG actions.
- **“Deny, Distort and Distract” tactics:** including denial and minimization of VAWG as an issue, overtly advocating against VAWG but covertly attempting to undermine it, and appeasement to limit the impact of VAWG initiatives. These tactics can spread misinformation and pose a serious threat to the lives and work of EVAWG organizations
- **Repression and Violence:** including direct co-optation of the agenda, surveillance, suppressing change initiatives, threats to life and violence, aiming to dismantle feminist organizing altogether.

Beyond identifying these patterns, this brief amplifies the voices of CSOs and women’s rights organizations (WROs) to highlight the real-world impact of backlash on survivors and at-risk women and girls. This dataset captures the experiences of organizations of varying sizes and focuses, including grassroots WROs, LGBTQI+ organizations, disability rights groups, and humanitarian actors.

The findings are clear: backlash is not just a barrier, it is an active force shaping the landscape of EVAWG work. In 2024, nearly 60% of grantee partners self-reported experiencing some form of backlash and backlash to their work, by both state and non-state actors. This data, collected via an annual grantee survey⁵, was triangulated with monitoring report data, mission reports and independent evaluations of the UN Trust Fund which shed light

1 See UN Women (2025): “Women’s Rights in Review 30 Years After Beijing”. New York: UN-Women. See [here](#).

2 See Viswanathan (2021): “Learning from practice: Resistance and backlash to preventing violence against women and girls. Lessons from civil society organizations funded by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women on prevention” See [here](#).

3 See UN Women (2024): “Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls: Technology-facilitated violence against women and girls: Report of the Secretary-General”, New York. See [here](#)

4 See UN Women (2025): “Democratic backsliding and the backlash against women’s rights: Understanding the current challenges for feminist politics” See [here](#). Also see UN Women (forthcoming): “Defending rights in hostile times: understanding backlash to advance gender equality”

5 The UN Trust Fund grantee survey, along with a KPI and partner survey is sent annually to all UN Trust Fund grantees implementing initiatives in the reporting year. In 2024 the annual grantee survey was sent to 103 grantees and 94% responded. The survey included 10 modules on grantees organizational results, temperature check, feedback on the Trust Fund’s wraparound services and further support needed from the UN trust Fund. One of the 10 modules is on backlash

on backlash experienced by an additional 10% of the portfolio. As grantees note, much like VAWG, backlash too is underreported due to fear of retaliation, normalization of backlash, lack of safe reporting channels, limited time and capacity to document and funding concerns, making it safe to assume that over 70% of the UN Trust Fund portfolio has experienced some form of backlash in 2024. This has direct consequences for continued services and support to survivors, obstructs justice, and forces feminist movements to operate in increasingly restrictive environments.



Over 70% of UN Trust Fund grantee partners have experienced one or more forms of backlash against their work.

CSOs and WROs are not passive actors; they are at the forefront of developing contextually appropriate and innovative responses to both the immediate manifestations and structural causes of backlash. This brief documents how they adapt, resist, and remain resilient and continue their work through coalition-building, advocacy, reframing strategies, ensuring the safety and security of activists and women and girls, and simultaneously delivering essential services. However, this critical work remains at high risk of being undermined and reversed in many parts of the world.

This brief also serves as an urgent call to action for donors, policymakers, and the broader international ERAWG community. The strategies outlined here directly complement UN-Women's Evolving Strategy to Push Forward for Rights, Equality and Justice, which aims to accelerate progress in the context of backlash. It amplify the ways communities and actors are working together to realize the principles of non-discrimination and universal equality for all and redressing inequalities through multistakeholder alliances, inclusive open spaces for dialogue, intergenerational and intersectional solidarity across sectors, and documentation, research and analysis to inform action future action. CSOs are already putting these strategies into action – but they cannot do it alone. What is needed now is more than awareness. This moment demands for decisive, coordinated action to strengthen and support feminist movements, sustain ERAWG work, accelerate funding and push forward.

Section 2 Forms of Backlash Against CSOs/WROs working on Ending Violence against Women and Girls

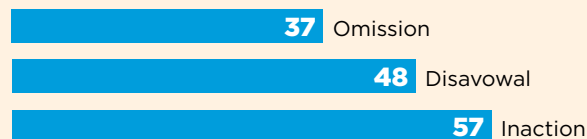
In 2024, CSOs, particularly WROs, navigated increasingly hostile environments where backlash to their work manifests in various ways. This opposition is not limited to a single source but arises from multiple fronts, including state institutions, non-state

actors, international agencies, donors, communities, internal organizational structures. While some forms of backlash are overt and aggressive, others are more insidious, subtly undermining ERAWG efforts over time. This section examines these dynamics through **three key categories: (1) Systemic Backlash, (2) “Deny, Distort and Distract” tactics, and (3) Repression, the details of which form the backbone of this analysis.** These three forms cluster and build on nine distinct forms of backlash identified by grantee partners during the COVID-19 pandemic – across a spectrum that ranges from passive omission to aggressive action⁶. By consolidating these into three overarching categories—systemic backlash, deny, distort and distract tactics, and repression – this brief provides a streamlined framework that captures both the structural and immediate threats faced by CSOs.

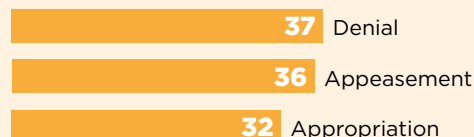
Of the grantees reporting backlash, majority of grantees – 41% – reported experiencing systemic backlash i.e. exclusion of VAWG from laws and policies, inadequate budgets allocations and institutional inaction. Grantee partners also reported in the survey that most of the backlash is imposed by state actors, creating hurdles that obstruct VAWG interventions, with the most common forms of backlash being inaction and avoiding responsibility. Backlash by non-state actors appears lower, but still remains a significant barrier—particularly in the form of denial of VAWG as an issue and insufficient data collection, repression of change initiatives, and violence and harassment against organizations and activists. These findings suggest that backlash is not only institutional but also societal, posing direct risks to organizations, activists, and survivors. In addition to systemic backlash (41%), grantees also reported experiencing ‘denial, distortion and distraction’ (31%) and outright repression and violence (28%).

Instances and Forms of Resistance and Backlash reported by UN Trust Fund grantee partners against VAWG initiatives

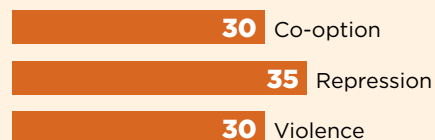
Systemic Backlash



Deny, Distort, Distract



Repression



6 See here UN Trust Fund brief co-produced with grantees on resistance and backlash in 2021: <https://unf.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/12/learning-from-practice-resistance-and-backlash-to-preventing-violence-against-women-and-gi>

Systemic Backlash: A Quiet Disruption

At the core of the backlash spectrum lies a subtle yet pervasive form of backlash to EVAWG work – one that simmers below the surface, remains difficult to detect and is often dismissed as a “contextual challenge”. This type of backlash is often seen as an inherent reality, and may go unreported. It manifests in various ways, including the denial of VAWG as an issue, the exclusion of VAWG from laws and policies, inadequate budgets allocations and institutional inertia to implement EAWG actions. Many organizations report experiencing this systemic neglect or exclusion which impedes their ability to secure funding, shift policy and deliver essential services effectively.

While it is a principle for humanitarian response projects to be apolitical and based on the fact that humanitarians support must be provided regardless on ones political affiliation, we were surprised like other WROs and HROs in the Arab region that donors are requiring grantees to comply with the former’s political positions and affirm their political assumptions. During 2024, donors have conditioned their funding to this compliance, even overpassing the UN resolutions.”

— Grantee Partner from Arab States

In Africa⁷, for instance, grantee partners report that correctional services frequently fail to allocate resources to transport perpetrators of gender-based violence (GBV) to court, resulting in prolonged delays in legal proceedings. Even when CSOs step in to cover transportation costs, cases continue to stagnate, reflecting a deeper institutional reluctance to pursue justice. Similarly, grantee partners from Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) share that local governments systematically exclude gender-sensitive initiatives from their annual operational plans, citing budgetary constraints while simultaneously deprioritizing local laws to combat violence against women. Also in LAC, underfunded national institutions leave survivors without adequate support, reinforcing the perception that addressing VAWG is a low priority. In Europe and Central Asia (ECA), budget cuts have further marginalized VAWG services, reducing access to critical interventions. CSOs in ECA also shared that they face funding inconsistencies where government ministries routinely cut pre-approved budgets by as much as 50%, despite clear funding guidelines stating otherwise. ECA grantee partners report that the government ignored all activities to implement the Istanbul Convention and relevant ministries refused to cooperate on the creation and signing of the entity Protocol for prevention, protection and treatment in cases of sexual violence.

In the past year, our organization has faced significant resistance and backlash, primarily stemming from societal stigma, discriminatory policies, and the anti-rights movement. One notable challenge was the rising anti-rights momentum for repealing the [new anti-VAWG law]. This backlash gained traction after the law passed the Senate’s first and second readings. The movement targeted provisions protecting vulnerable groups, including sex workers, LBT women, and survivors of GBV, framing them as incompatible with cultural and religious values. Additionally, our harm reduction programs faced opposition from local community leaders who viewed our interventions with suspicion, associating them with promoting substance use or sex work rather than addressing public health and safety concerns. This resistance was particularly evident during our peer-driven human rights campaigns and GBV interventions in rural communities.”

— Grantee partner from Africa

According to grantee partners, the lack of specific laws, policies, institutions, monitoring and accountability mechanisms targeting VAWG in the country, also comes as part of a dismissal of VAWG as secondary to other high priority concerns of national interest. In Africa for instance, grantee partners report, “We have raised concerns and key actors have openly told us that they have more important issues to deal with around the economy and security than giving too much attention to “women issues””. Similarly, in Arab States, authorities have deprioritized VAWG in the face of broader political crises and closure of Shari’a courts in certain cities, allowing law enforcement to neglect cases. In Africa, grantee partners report that the prevalence of sexual violence against women increased worryingly in and around IDP sites, but the government took no specific steps to limit this and take care of survivors, months after which fighting has escalated dramatically, leading to fresh waves of deaths, sexual violence and displacement. According to a grantee partner in Asia and the Pacific, their local governments were resistant to integrating gender-sensitive practices or acknowledging systemic gaps in addressing violence against girls.

Several grantee partners reported that the neglect which began during the COVID-19 pandemic has persisted⁸. For instance, in ECA, grantee partners reported that the rapid loss of donors and foundations that began during the pandemic, especially donors that provided core, long-term and flexible funding to organizations providing lifesaving services to Roma women and girls, has continued. This combined with the fact that the relevant gender law has been suspended, until the Constitutional Court deliberates and publishes an official decision on its constitutional nature, any legal acts stemming from or referring to this Law must

7 While our analysis benefited from detailed accounts and extensive documentation provided by grantee partners, data has been aggregated at the regional level and anonymized throughout this analysis to protect the security and safety of contributing organizations. This approach allows us to present comprehensive findings while safeguarding those who shared their experiences.

8 See here impact of COVID-19 pandemic on UN Trust Fund grantees work: <https://untf.unwomen.org/en/learning-hub/knowledge-products/covid-19>

be put at a halt. In practice, this means, that cases of gender-based violence cannot be prosecuted based on this Law; that women's organisations cannot call upon this Law to cooperate with specific national and local government bodies or institutions; nor can the government form a Coordination Body for Gender Equality. For organisations working with minorities in ECA and on issues of early and forced child marriages (EFCM) this means that national coalitions cannot function, and will thus be out of order until further notice, posing a great risk to the work with minorities.

“Deny, Distort and Distract”: The Illusion of Progress

While some forms of backlash against violence against women initiatives operate beneath the surface, others are performative, strategically designed to create the illusion of progress while actively undermining meaningful, substantive change. This form of backlash relies on tokenistic policy gestures and bureaucratic hurdles to stall real advancements. In LAC, for instance according to grantee partners, state actors deflected demands for substantive reform by renaming the Domestic Violence Unit but leaving internal policies untouched. Officers within the unit voiced frustration, noting that despite the name change, systemic barriers to addressing GBV remained firmly in place. A similar dynamic is at play in LAC, where institutions report to work with a gender perspective but fail to implement corresponding policies.

Some governments adopt advocacy tactics to sideline gender-related issues and disregard CSO's counter data on cases of violence. In another country in LAC, the National Electoral Council resisted providing gender-based violence data and refused to publicize key violence prevention protocols. In Africa, another striking example, where grantee partners shared that the government launched shelters “only to leave them underfunded, inadequately staffed, and non-functional”. Meanwhile, femicide rates in the country according to them has continued to rise in 2024, with no meaningful intervention from authorities.

...there is an effort in some states to hide the figures, there are threats so that people do not report cases, the official data serve as a sample nothing more”

— Grantee partner from LAC

CSOs representing marginalized women may encounter substantial backlash from multiple fronts including invisibilization of the types of violence experienced by them. In LAC, grantee partners find it difficult to convince state partners of the rising violence faced by women and girls who are LBT+. In LAC for instance, grantee partners report that local governments have not made visible the violence suffered by women with disabilities. In ECA, organizations working with Roma women and girls, report that against the backdrop of limited funding, those working with minorities are even less likely to receive funding and services and hotlines dedicated to them risk being further invisibilized.

As an LGBT+ organization, the fight becomes 100 times harder”

— Grantee partner from LAC

In LAC, in 2024 according to grantee partners, there was a retreat of the state from actions to disseminate information about women's rights and programmes aimed at preventing and ending VAWG, especially for women and girls with disabilities and LGBTQI+ community. In Africa, grantee partners working with LGBTQI+ community report that the “the project's environment was influenced throughout by hesitations and reticence. This generated slowness, heaviness and hesitation in the implementation of activities, as it is essential to continuously examine and analyze the probable effects and/or impacts and feedback actions in the life of the project and in that of the associations called upon to implement it”.

Organizations working on prevention of violence, especially social norm change work, also face backlash at the community level – often in the form of distraction tactics designed to divert attention from their efforts and hinder progress. Unlike legal restrictions or bureaucratic barriers that explicitly target civil society organizations, distraction tactics operate through a veneer of community backlash, making them harder to challenge. For instance, in Africa, a grantee partner faced several challenges during implementation of their EVAWG initiative when the community began to view their work and their organization as a threat to traditional values and societal structures. In LAC, the Community Development Committees or COCODEs made community organizing quite difficult for grantee partners. “In my community, the COCODE never supported us, during the process of 3 training groups we did not have their support. Organizing with them is difficult; when we called to communicate something, they responded: ‘no, I don't have time, and if you want me to attend to you, come at 8 PM”.

Several CSOs see these as intentional deny, distort and distract tactics that can spread misinformation and pose a serious threat to their lives and work in contexts where such issues are highly sensitive. In Arab States, grantee partners reported that the “accusations against us were that we support homosexuality and call for establishing gender concepts and empowering women, which posed a very great danger to our lives, especially since our organization works in southern and central parts of the country, and these areas are considered tribal areas where old customs and traditions prevail”. In Africa, according to grantee partners, religious and traditional leaders label female parliamentarians and rights campaigners as disbelievers when they advocate for women's human rights in Parliament. A Trust Fund grantee partner published a briefing paper in 2024, which addressed sexual violence in two countries in Africa, and highlighted the role of religious groups in supporting a bill that could worsen the already troubling situation. At the same time, these groups have criticized the bill, accusing it of being ‘un-Islamic’.

Repression and Violence:

At the most extreme end of the spectrum, backlash escalates into outright co-optation, repression and violence. This form of backlash employs repression of change initiatives and civic space, direct threats, criminalization of activists, restrictive laws targeting women's rights organizations, physical and/or digital attacks on those advocating for change. In some contexts, state and non-state actors—including extremist groups – use intimidation, surveillance, imprisonment, or even lethal force to silence voices pushing for ending violence against women and gender justice initiatives.

Implementing an IPV project in Eswatini exposed the project and its staff to state-sponsored security threats. The project was misconstrued as part of an anti-government prodemocracy movement and was seen as targeting cultural practices associated with King Mswati. This led to difficulties convening gatherings and public awareness events, as prodemocracy activists often hijacked them. The project leaders faced threats to their lives, and certain activities like broadcasting on national television, became unsafe. The need for safer venues, like expensive hotels, increased costs and strained the project budget."

— Grantee partner from Africa

One direct form of repression is evident in countries where legal restrictions have been imposed to limit CSO operations. In **Asia and the Pacific** for instance, the enforcement of new registration laws requires organizations to disclose funding sources and locations of operations, placing them under government scrutiny and effectively stifling their work, against the backdrop of the armed conflict escalating across many parts of the country. In **LAC**, legislative advances on supervision of NGOs represents a serious threat to the autonomy of the work of grantee partners. In **ECA**, a grantee partner was abruptly evicted from its office space with only five days' notice. While international advocacy temporarily secured a six-month extension, the uncertainty surrounding future operations places additional strain on their ability to serve survivors effectively. Finally in **Arab states**, one grantee partner reported that their national government has constantly made it difficult for CSOs to renew registrations and has frozen bank accounts of grantee partners making disbursement extremely challenging.

In **Africa**, for instance organizations advocating for reproductive rights and safe abortion access have faced harassment online and threats from anti-women's rights groups. Grantee partners in **ECA** have been subjected to state surveillance, social media smear campaigns, and legal harassment, all designed to discredit their advocacy. In one country in **LAC**, grantee partners have witnessed dismantling of gender-focused ministries, slashed budgets for women's rights programs, and banned gender-sensitive language in state institutions. Grantee partners working on VAWG as a result have faced pushback against inclusive language and against comprehensive sexual education, in the form of persecution of feminists on social networks and in mainstream media, and hate speech against the LGBTQI+ community, migrants and indigenous people.

The society is divided into "they-we" due to high corruption concerns, media control, social media trolling, dissemination of false information and attack on private lives of opposition, citizens, activists, even recently open life threats. Our organization was abused by some part of the national security agency as well as by our partner NGO after the latest elections. Our Facebook profile was constantly reported and closed (something that was also experienced by private profiles of some activists even in 2024), including Instagram. In courts we are faced with open security threats and friendly reminders that we "should not do this against some people" that "we risk a lot" and we are receiving information that they are far more powerful than we think."

— Grantee partner from ECA

Meanwhile, in another country in **LAC**, grantee partners reported how the executive government reinforced anti-gender rhetoric in 2024, leading to the removal of LGBTQI+ health and education materials, and eliminating all references to 'gender ideology' in the curricula of public and private schools. "On the eve of the celebration of International LGBTQI+ Pride Day, the executive announced that the Ministry of Culture would proceed to remove 300 officials from their positions for "promoting agendas that are not compatible with the government's vision." CSOs in **LAC** have also faced criminalization for their pro-abortion activism, with local governments imposing legal barriers to their work. In **Africa**, feminist organizations have reported break-ins, threats, and theft of critical resources, severely disrupting their operations. In **Arab States**, CSOs advocating for women's rights have been targeted by online smear campaigns and threats to life via Facebook and Whatsapp, with their explicit names and addresses mentioned. The government has also imposed administrative barriers, making it increasingly difficult for shelters to operate, including issuing arrest warrants against grantee partners working in shelters. Countries in **Africa** saw armed attacks against CSO staff, highlighting the severe risks faced by those working on gender justice. Additionally, feminist organizations from four countries in **LAC** have reported suffering cyberattacks aimed at shutting down their advocacy platforms.

Impact on Women and Girls

The repercussions of this backlash extend far beyond organizations, directly impacting the lives of women and girls who depend on these services and directly benefit from the work on prevention. The backlash weakens prevention efforts, essential services and legal protections, leaving women and girls, and more particularly marginalized groups, more exposed to violence with fewer protections. Restrictions on prevention work reinforce harmful norms, while legal and financial constraints erode survivor support, making justice and safety increasingly out of reach. In many contexts, policy rollbacks and legislative restrictions further shrink protections, limiting access to rights-based frameworks that safeguard women and girls from violence and discrimination.

Backlash against prevention efforts restricts women and girls' access to vital awareness initiatives, limiting their ability to engage, organize, and challenge harmful norms. In **Arab States** for instance, grantee partners have faced backlash from local communities towards their VAWG awareness raising sessions especially around 16 days of activism, which resulted in women ultimately being prohibited from attending these sessions. Similarly, in **LAC**, the state-imposed “régimen de excepción” (state of exception) restricted the ability to hold meetings with youth and community organizations. This meant that government actions directly impacted the project's ability to bring communities together and engage directly with women and girls in these groups limiting the impact of their prevention efforts.

Backlash against essential services weakens and often strips away support systems for survivors, creating critical gaps in protection, justice, and recovery, making them more vulnerable to violence, exploitation, and systemic abuse. For essential services, in **LAC** for instance, legislative changes risk shrinking the civic space further, reducing the availability of gender-focused programs that previously had community support. This systemic obstruction translates into fewer services, fewer resources, and a growing gap in survivor assistance and advocacy efforts. Similarly, in **ECA**, grantee partners report that budget cuts have further marginalized VAWG services, reducing access to critical interventions for survivors, who face overwhelming obstacles when seeking justice. The absence of a comprehensive GBV law, coupled with societal stigma, discourages many women—particularly those from marginalized groups like women in the sex industry and women living with HIV—from reporting abuse. In **Africa**, justice is further delayed as correctional services fail to transport perpetrators to court, and for one of the grantee partners operating a shelter, no cases were closed or sentenced throughout 2024. In **Arab States**, legal closures between cities have left survivors with no recourse, worsening impunity. The consequences of this backlash are not just institutional—they are deeply personal, denying women and girls the protection and justice they deserve, deepening societal inequalities, and pushing them further into cycles of violence and exclusion.

Section 3 CSO / WRO Responses to Backlash against EVAWG initiatives

Despite the significant challenges posed by backlash, civil society organizations (CSOs) are demonstrating remarkable resilience and adaptability in efforts to sustain their work. Their responses can be mapped to the spectrum of backlash they face—whether addressing subtle systemic backlash, countering distort-and-distract tactics, or responding to overt repression and violence. By leveraging alliances, sustaining advocacy, reinforcing security, ensuring service provision, and adapting operational strategies, CSOs continue to safeguard the rights of women and girls in hostile environments.

Responding to Systemic Backlash

For many CSOs, backlash takes the form of systemic exclusion, bureaucratic neglect, and resource deprivation. To counter these challenges, organizations have relied on coalition-building and maintaining essential services despite institutional failures. In **LAC**, organizations have reinforced ties with international institutions outside of government control, ensuring they can sustain their work despite domestic hostility. Similarly, in another country in **LAC**, women's rights organizations have successfully mobilized against systemic exclusion through alliances with women leaders in positions of power and the development of high-level technical knowledge products. The creation of a coalition of organizations committed to defending democracy and human rights has become a critical mechanism for responding to legal and political maneuvers that threaten gender equality.

This project was both an opportunity and a challenge for us to undertake a national and official initiative for the LGBTQI+ community. It was unprecedented in our context. And we're not giving up hope; we're still cherishing the dream of making it a reality. But we're proceeding cautiously, to make sure it doesn't backfire on us. That could prove counter-productive, and undermine all our efforts in this direction over the last few years”

— Grantee partner from Africa

CSOs also continue to provide services where state institutions fail to act. In **Africa**, sexual assault and referral centers (SARCs) do not have the treatment to support survivors of rape, but grantee partners have continued supporting these despite the lack of government support. In **Asia and the Pacific**, CSOs are finding ways to work within regulatory constraints, obtaining temporary registrations while awaiting formal approval, thereby continuing their work without interruption. These responses highlight the determination of CSOs to persist in the face of institutional indifference and resource constraints.

Countering “Deny, Distort and Distract” Tactics

When state and non-state actors employ tactics that appear supportive while covertly undermining feminist work, CSOs respond by either doubling down on advocacy and public engagement with practice based knowledge and counter data grounded in survivors voices, or are constantly evaluating their positions and framing and reframing their claims and responses vis-à-vis institutions. In **LAC**, despite state-led restrictions on gender discourse, organizations continue to use feminist language and provide GBV services, even as authorities attempt to marginalize them. In **Arab States**, organizations remain steadfast in their advocacy, calling for a permanent ceasefire and emphasizing the protection of women and children in conflict zones, directly challenging efforts to sideline gender issues amid broader humanitarian crises. In **Africa**, where legal protections for women have come under threat, CSOs have launched coordinated campaigns to prevent the repeal of a VAWG Law. By mobilizing media platforms, engaging policymakers, and hosting community dialogues, they have actively pushed back against misleading narratives that seek to weaken legal protections for survivors of VAWG. In **Asia and the Pacific**, CSOs are adopting low-profile implementation approaches, working discreetly with partner organizations to avoid state interference while continuing to provide essential services to women and girls. These strategic advocacy efforts expose contradictions in state rhetoric and sustain pressure for genuine policy change.

We trained grassroots advocates and service providers to counter misinformation, promote inclusivity, and uphold survivors' rights. These strategies helped mitigate backlash, fostered dialogue, and strengthened our commitment to promoting justice and equity”

— Grantee partner from Africa

Resisting Repression and Violence

For CSOs facing the most extreme forms of backlash—including physical threats, government surveillance, and criminalization—responses have focused on security adaptation, continued advocacy, and finding alternative operational methods. In **Arab States**, where state protection is absent, organizations have implemented their own security measures, such as avoiding isolated areas, altering daily routines, installing surveillance cameras, and strengthening digital security. These measures are essential for survival in environments where activists face direct threats. Similarly, in another country in **Arab States**, organizations remain resolute in their advocacy despite state hostility, holding firmly to their principles while resisting efforts to silence them. In **Asia and the Pacific**, organizations navigating restrictive legal environments have adopted discreet operational models, securing alternative registrations and using indirect strategies to continue their work without drawing government retaliation. In addition to security adaptations, CSOs in **LAC** have strengthened digital protections after experiencing cyberattacks aimed at disrupting their work. The ability to counteract these threats while continuing advocacy demonstrates the resilience of feminist organizations operating under repressive conditions. Their responses align with the forms of backlash they face—whether countering systemic neglect through coalition-building and service provision, resisting distort-and-distract tactics through sustained advocacy, reframing strategies, countering misinformation or navigating repression through enhanced security measures. These strategies not only sustain feminist movements but also ensure that women and girls continue to receive essential support, even in the most restrictive environments. Moving forward, reinforcing these adaptive strategies and strengthening global support for CSOs, including long-term, flexible and core funding will be critical to ensuring the longevity of gender justice movements in the face of escalating opposition.

There was no governmental measure to protect us or any international or UN measure to give us a safe space outside Iraq, so we are working to protect ourselves on our own by avoiding being in isolated places and avoiding going out at night, in addition to installing more cameras and changing the route from time to time and enhancing digital security among the organization's cadres”.

— Grantee partner from Arab States

Conclusion The Current Backlash Against EVAWG – What’s Different?

This analysis makes clear the patterns of backlash against efforts to end violence against women and girls – it is deliberate, systematic, and deeply entrenched. Even if backlash is not new, the current moment represents a sharper, more strategic, and politically coordinated escalation of backlash. Compared to previous waves of backlash as documented in the Trust Fund’s 2021 brief, today’s backlash is more legally embedded, technologically sophisticated, and globally connected. Five major shifts distinguish the present backlash from that of the UN Trust Fund’s 2021 analysis:

- 1. Direct targeting of EVAWG services and funding:** Unlike in past years, where backlash often focused on broader gender equality issues, EVAWG services – such as shelters, survivor support, and legal aid – are now explicitly under attack through funding cuts and legal rollbacks.
- 2. A rise in the “Deny, Distort, and Distract” playbook:** There is an acceleration of gaslighting tactics, where state and non-state actors claim to support ending violence while dismantling policies and institutions that address it.
- 3. Regulatory and legal repression as the primary mechanism of backlash:** Rather than banning EVAWG work outright, complex legal and bureaucratic tools are being used to obstruct CSOs and limit their funding, programming, and public engagement.
- 4. Weaponization of technology and digital spaces:** EVAWG organizations are facing coordinated cyberattacks, mass disinformation campaigns, and online surveillance, increasing both operational risks and direct threats.
- 5. Intensified political targeting, surveillance, and criminalization of feminist leaders** – Governments and extremist groups are increasingly using intimidation, legal threats, and even violence to suppress EVAWG advocacy and silence women human rights defenders.

The consequences of this backlash are deeply personal and far-reaching – it is not just an institutional issue; it is one that affects the lives and safety of women and girls, particularly those from marginalized communities. The stakes are higher than ever, and feminist organizations are already devising innovative, context-specific strategies to push back. But they cannot do this alone. The next section outlines critical actions needed from donors, policymakers, and the broader EVAWG ecosystem to sustain feminist movements and ensure that EVAWG work not only survives but thrives.

Calls to Action What Organizations Need Now

The frontline organizations and women’s rights movements resisting backlash against EVAWG are calling for urgent, concrete actions to sustain their work and counteract growing backlash. These calls to action, grounded in the experiences of CSOs and WROs worldwide, outline practical steps that donors, international organizations, policymakers, and civil society allies must take to ensure feminist movements are not just surviving but thriving in the face of backlash.

We request your solidarity with us to continue advocating for women’s human rights and the safety and security of human rights defenders around the region, enabling women victims and survivors to raise their voices and speak about what they are encountering.

— Grantee partner from Africa

1. SOLIDARITY Call for solidarity with WROs and women’s movements

- Grantee partners regularly reach for out to the UN system, donors and civil society organizations in other countries requesting solidarity and support during challenging times so that they can continue creating safe spaces for women and girls and their staff.
- » The UN Trust Fund continues to **amplify key moments of crisis and advocacy messages** grounded in the voices of grantee partners⁹.

2. FUNDING Provide Long-Term Core Funding

- The most resounding call from grantee partners is for **core, flexible, and long-term funding** to sustain EVAWG initiatives amidst rising backlash. Anti-gender movements are well-resourced, receiving unrestricted funding that allows them to adapt, expand, and amplify their influence. In contrast, WROs and feminist movements are forced to operate within short-term, restricted funding cycles that limit their ability to respond to backlash effectively. Grantee partners are calling for donors and international organizations to shift away from short-term project-based funding toward multi-year unrestricted support that allows organizations to sustain movements.
- » The UN Trust Fund continues to push internally within the UN system for **UN funding** models that prioritize flexible, core funding for WROs and CSOs working on EVAWG, ensuring they have the resources to withstand and push back against backlash.

9 This includes advocacy through the ACT to End Violence against Women and Girls programme funded by the EU and implemented jointly by UN Women and the UN Trust, and its Global CSO Platform and regional networks that are aimed to provide spaces for CSOs to convene, connect, network and strategize, expanding spaces of solidarity for women’s rights movements working to end violence against women and girls. See [here](#)

UN Trust Fund grantees have demonstrated that strengthened organizational resilience supports feminist movement building.



3. RESILIENCE Enable Adaptive and Feminist Funding Models

- Grantee partners are calling for funding practices that build resilience, flexibility and align with feminist principles
 - » The UN Trust Fund provides **wraparound support** and enabling programme adjustments in real time through **budget reallocations**, no-cost extensions, capacity development for programmatic and organizational effectiveness and activation of self- and collective care budgets for staff. For grantee partners this has shown tangible impacts in enhancing resilience and adaptability to withstand and push back against backlash ¹⁰.

4. TECH UP Strengthen technology infrastructure

- The increasing weaponization of digital spaces requires urgent investment in digital security, privacy protection, and technology infrastructure to safeguard the work of EVAWG organizations. UN Trust Fund grantee partners across several years and cohorts have ranked “ICT resilience” as a top attribute in their ability to adapt and remain resilient in the face of overlapping crises and backlash, especially since the pandemic.
 - » The UN Trust Fund recommends grantee partners use their **Equipment Budget line** and **Contingency Budget line**, for increasing technical and financial support for cybersecurity training, digital protection tools, safe communication channels, and security infrastructure.

¹⁰ See here UN Trust Fund’s work on organizational resilience: <https://untf.unwomen.org/en/organizational-resilience-series>

5. CONVENE Build cross-movement alliances and spaces for collective action

- Backlash against EVAWG is not isolated – it is part of a broader attack on democracy, human rights, and civic space. To counter this, CSOs/WROs and movements must be supported in forming stronger alliances with other social movements, including human rights, labor, climate justice, LGBTQ+ rights, disabilities rights and youth-led movements. Convening spaces allow feminist movements to share strategies, coordinate responses, and amplify collective action against the well-organized, transnational anti-gender movement
- » The UN Trust Fund supports its diverse portfolio of organizations and movements to come together in **cross-movement and cross-regional convenings** where activists and organizations representing diverse movements working on the same cause can strategize together, document backlash patterns, and coordinate collective responses. They also enable build partnerships with other CSOs to better leverage each other's complementary skills, capacities and approaches.

6. ASSESS RISKS Continuous Risk Monitoring and Response Mechanisms

- Backlash against EVAWG work is not static – it evolves, shifts, and escalates in response to political, social, and institutional changes. Many grantee partners report that backlash initially appears as institutional inertia before escalating into coordinated attacks. Enhancing internal risk management capacities and donors prioritizing funding for risk assessments, is essential according to grantees. This requires a comprehensive approach, both from the ground up and top down, that evaluates not only contextual risks but also the internal operational and adaptive capacity to effectively respond to change.
- » The UN Trust Fund's principled partnership management, including through its **demand driven grantmaking model and one-on-one tailored support**, encourages contextually appropriate upstream risk assessments as part of program monitoring frameworks. In its Capacity Enhancement workshops held at the beginning of each cycle, backlash and risk mitigation is now a standing module where grantee partners across all regions come together, discuss and map out risks and develop preemptive mitigation strategies.

7. BELIEVE WROS AND SURVIVORS Develop shared messaging and amplify CSO/WRO messaging and data

- A key manifestation of backlash is the deliberate distract and distort tactic via spread of misinformation – often amplified through mass media, social media, and trusted community leaders. These narratives frame women's rights as a “Western agenda,” distort data on VAWG, and attack the legitimacy of feminist organizations. To counter this, grantee partners call for accessible, localized, and community-driven messaging that directly challenges misinformation and is grounded in the data and voices of survivors. They also call for the international community to believe and amplify their data and messaging, including call on media, tech platforms, and policymakers to counter disinformation and amplify survivor-led narratives.
- » The UN Trust Fund continues to **listen and learn from its grantee partners** and practitioners to drive evidence-based advocacy for stronger prevention programmes, services, laws and policies.

8. DOCUMENT BACKLASH Create space, time and funding for documenting root causes and manifestations

- Grantee partners call on funders to create more spaces for open reflection in monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning components, so that organizations can reflect during a project's implementation alongside the requirements of programmatic reporting. This includes more analysis, monitoring and reporting on power dynamics and backlash, and space for discussing the risks and the trade-offs of visibilizing feminist work.
- » The UN Trust Fund will continue to support **documentation of grantee partners practice based knowledge on backlash particularly root causes and manifestations**. The Trust Fund will also continue working systematically within and inform the UN system and other funders to document, advocate and call for clear data and messaging grounded in the voices of practitioners.