

Strategies of Civil Society to Counter the Far-Right Backlash against Human Rights

About The Advocates for Human Rights

The mission of The Advocates is to implement international human rights standards to promote civil society and reinforce the rule of law. By involving volunteers in research, education, and advocacy, we build broad constituencies in the United States and select global communities. The Advocates produces reports documenting human rights practices in countries around the world and works with partners overseas and in the United States to restore and protect human rights. The Advocates for Human Rights holds Special Consultative Status with the United Nations.

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The Advocates dedicates this report to the courageous women's human rights defenders around the world.

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Introduction

The Advocates has partnered with women’s non-governmental organizations (NGOs) throughout Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Former Soviet Union (FSU) for decades on promoting women’s human rights through legal reform, advocacy, monitoring and documentation, and training. In recent years, our NGO partners have reported increasing challenges to carrying out their human rights work, such as: growing laws and practices designed to suppress civil society; rollbacks to laws and progress made on women’s human rights; attacks and threats by private actors against human rights defenders; and growing public misunderstanding of their work and human rights overall. In response to this development, The Advocates undertook fact-finding into the anti-gender movement, also referred to as the radical right or far-right movement, and produced a report on the backlash to the Istanbul Convention in 2021.¹

Since then, many stakeholders have expressed to The Advocates the need to document effective strategies that civil society is employing in the face of oppressive conditions and that frames these actions more specifically to each country’s unique context. The Advocates conducted several interviews with NGOs and Human Rights Defenders (“HRDs”) in countries affected by the anti-gender movement to document these strategies, as well as civil society’s needs. This report is intended to present those effective civil society strategies and supplement [A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack](#).

Executive Summary

This report describes the innovative strategies undertaken by civil society in response to anti-gender activity, including: (i) re-thinking strategies on ratification of the Istanbul Convention; (ii) focusing on the training and education of new activists and supporters, as well wider stakeholders and actors; (iii) increasing visibility in creative ways; (iv) monitoring and data collection to protect women and counter

¹ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 1-2, <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

disinformation; (v) building coalitions as well as creating unconventional alliances; (vi) finding allies with smaller, sympathetic groups within the opposition; (vii) determining alternative, innovative ways to engage with politicians and navigate the political system; (viii) establishing new creative ways to counter harmful messaging from the anti-gender movement; (ix) considering alternative, more flexible ways for HRDs to incorporate and assemble; and (x) staying resilient.

This report also describes the needs of civil society to continue working effectively and with enjoyment of freedom of association and assembly. In addition to financial resources, NGOs reported the following needs: (i) increased focus and support on the mental well-being of their employees; (ii) assistance in developing their training programs and employee know-how; (iii) decreasing the administrative burdens placed on them by certain funders; (iv) wider formal recognition for HRDs working in women's rights; and finally, (v) greater solidarity within society, including more external support.

Needs of NGOs in Addition to Financial Resources



Increased focus and support on the mental well-being of their employees



Assistance in developing their training programs and employee know-how



Decreasing the administrative burdens placed on them by certain funders



Wider formal recognition for HRDs and activists working in women's rights



Solidarity within society, including the need for more external support

Effective and Innovative Strategies



Re-thinking strategies on ratification of the Istanbul Convention



Focusing on training and education



Increasing visibility in creative and innovative ways



Monitoring and data collection protecting women and countering disinformation



Building coalitions and unexpected alliances



Finding allies with groups within the opposition



Determining new ways to engage with politicians and the political system



Establishing new creative ways to counter harmful messaging from the anti-gender movement



Considering alternative, more flexible ways for HRDs to incorporate and assemble



Staying resilient

Civil Society Strategies

1. Find Strategies Complementary to Ratification of the Istanbul Convention

(i) Focus on Reforming Domestic Laws

Instead of pushing for ratification in countries where far-right governments and the

FOCUS ON AMENDING EXISTING DOMESTIC LAWS TO ALIGN WITH INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS.

general public are currently hostile toward the Istanbul Convention or overall human rights, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have focused on reforming domestic laws to align them with the

convention’s provisions. In Italy, which has ratified the Istanbul Convention, NGOs strive to constantly lobby for human rights at all levels, using the convention as an interpretive tool in reviewing all potential legislation related to violence against women.² In Lithuania, which has not yet ratified the convention, an HRD explained how she and her colleagues refer to the convention’s concepts and principles without specifically mentioning the Istanbul Convention.³ This approach has enabled incremental progression of domestic lawmaking, without invoking any backlash or controversy from anti-gender groups.⁴

Interviewees identified long-time commitments to reforming local laws as one of the most effective strategies that led to ratifying the Istanbul Convention in Moldova.⁵

START EARLY AND COMMIT TO THE LONG-TERM.

A Moldovan NGO assessed that, by starting with reforms in domestic law, the government and parliament eventually became more amenable to an advocacy campaign on ratification.⁶ The lesson they offer is “the earlier you start, the better

² Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Italy Interviewees 1 and 2. March 4, 2022.

³ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Lithuania Interviewee 2. November 25, 2018.

⁴ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Latvia Interviewee 1. February 14, 2019.

⁵ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Moldova Interviewee 2. January 29, 2019.

⁶ *Id.*

chances you have” with ratification.⁷ In Lithuania, an HRD agreed ratification will be easier to achieve once the domestic law accords with the convention’s obligations.⁸

**BROADEN REFORMS BEYOND
VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN.**

Interviews revealed that, when proposed amendments address reform in areas beyond violence against women, they generally garner greater state support, even from more conservative governments.⁹ In

Armenia, civil society proposed amendments to the domestic violence law.¹⁰ To the surprise of Armenian civil society, the Ministry of Justice is considering its proposals. It recognizes these amendments as important not only in combating domestic violence, but also in promoting legal changes in areas more amenable to bipartisan support, like family and criminal law.¹¹ Similarly, civil society in Poland has reformed criminal prosecutions to become more victim-centred by removing the requirement for victim-initiated prosecution — a requirement that places an onerous burden on victims.¹² Instead, there is now an *ex officio* obligation on the prosecutor and police to bring a case in any circumstance where they have received sufficiently credible evidence that an act of violence occurred.¹³

In pushing for legal reforms, civil society is tactical about the language it uses for

**CHOOSE COMPROMISE
LANGUAGE THAT STILL
ACHIEVES LEGAL GOALS.**

amendments. Where there is resistance to major changes, NGOs have carefully chosen terminology that is less controversial for the public. For example, in Czech Republic where stakeholders sought to reform laws on sexual violence, there are no “consent-

based laws” in legislation; rape and other forms of sexual assault focus only on the nature of the act rather than on whether consent was given.¹⁴ Because of strong resistance to the concept of “consent,” civil society has considered using less inflammatory language in the Czech legislation that will still achieve their goals. For

⁷ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Moldova Interviewee 2. January 29, 2019.

⁸ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Lithuania Interviewee 2. November 25, 2018.

⁹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 1. February 2, 2022.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 1. February 2, 2022.

¹² Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Poland Interviewee 1. February 22, 2022.

¹³ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Poland Interviewee 1. November 9, 2018.

¹⁴ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Czech Republic Interviewee 3. February 23, 2022.

example, an interviewee noted an alternative strategy of using the term “involuntary intercourse,” which should still cover most instances of rape and sexual assault.¹⁵

In countries where the backlash against the Istanbul Convention and other human rights is strong, civil society has prioritized accepting the status quo. It leverages existing legislation rather than risking further regressions in law through reform attempts. In Turkey, following ratification of the Istanbul Convention, activists viewed the laws on violence against women as adequate enough at a time when human rights were becoming increasingly jeopardized.¹⁶ When Turkish President Erdoğan decided on March 20, 2021 to unilaterally withdraw Turkey from the convention, civil society maintained that, although his action was not legally effective, the focus should be on continued implementation of domestic law. In fact, the slogan of the coalition EŞİK — Women's Platform for Equality has been “[d]on't touch the laws, implement them,” which appears as a hashtag in all their social media posts.¹⁷ Reinforcing this strategy of using the laws on the books became even more pressing when, just days after Turkey's Council of State Tenth Chamber upheld the constitutionality of the president's withdrawal decision, Turkey formally withdrew from the Istanbul Convention on July 1, 2022.¹⁸

**FOCUS ON USING ALL
ACCEPTABLE EXISTING LAWS.**

(ii) Other Ratification Strategies

Public Pressure

NGOs have long leveraged public opinion to sway governments on issues about which they care. Using simple, time-tested tools, they can broaden their reach and gain more supporters for an initiative. For example, NGOs have found that petitions can readily garner additional signatures beyond a movement's traditional support base, especially when they use simple language and broaden their outreach. In

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Turkey Interviewee 1. February 4, 2022.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Kayahan Cantekin, *Turkey: Council of State Upholds President's Decision to Withdraw Turkey from Istanbul Convention*, The Library of Congress, July 26, 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2021-07-26/turkey-council-of-state-upholds-presidents-decision-to-withdraw-turkey-from-istanbul-convention/>

Moldova, an HRD noted how their online petition for the Istanbul Convention secured additional signatures from organizations with no connection to gender

SWAY LEGISLATORS BY GATHERING EVIDENCE OF POPULAR SUPPORT FOR PROPOSED CHANGES.

equality, domestic violence, or education.¹⁹ A petition can also dredge up unexpected support.²⁰ In the Czech Republic, the anti-gender movement had launched its own petition.

Nevertheless, a women's rights NGO

petition received almost as many signatures as the opposition's petition, despite indications of far less support among the public.²¹

International Pressure

UN human rights bodies issue recommendations to governments to ratify the Istanbul Convention, despite its being a Council of Europe (CoE) instrument. For those countries that have yet to ratify the Istanbul Convention, UN treaty body reviews and Universal Periodic Reviews can be powerful pressure points to compel governments to take that step. During Moldova's interactive dialogue at its Universal Periodic Review in 2016, Moldova received nine recommendations to ratify the Istanbul Convention. Upon accepting these recommendations, Moldova was under pressure to implement them before its next review.²² In 2020, the CEDAW Committee similarly expressed concern in its Concluding Observations that Moldova had not yet ratified the Istanbul Convention and recommended expediting its ratification.²³ A few months before its UPR Interactive Dialogue on January 28, 2022, Moldova ratified the Istanbul Convention.²⁴

¹⁹ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 139-144.

²⁰ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Czech Republic Interviewee 2. February 18, 2022.

²¹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Czech Republic Interviewee 2. November 23, 2018.

²² Human Rights Council, Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Moldova (Dec. 21, 2016), U.N. Doc. A/HRC/34/12. ¶¶121.8-121.13, 122.9 (Montenegro, Belgium, Spain, Sweden, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey, Slovenia, Italy, and Albania).

²³ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of the Republic of Moldova*, (10 March 2020), U.N. Doc. CEDAW/C/MDA/CO/6, ¶122.

²⁴ The subsequent Report of the Working Group included numerous comments by Member States welcoming Moldova's ratification, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/concluding-observations/committee-elimination-discrimination-against-women-concluding-2>.

2016 Recommendations to Moldova at its UPR, prior to its ratification in 2021

121.8 Ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Montenegro);

121.9 Ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence and take necessary measures to implement this on the ground (Belgium);

121.10 Implement “emergency protection orders” and ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) (Spain);

121.11 Ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) (Sweden);

121.12 Sign and ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Slovenia) (Turkey) (Bosnia and Herzegovina);

121.13 Sign and ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) (Italy);

In Italy, NGOs have also seen value in leveraging international instruments that the government has ratified. These instruments require governments to publicly justify why they have not implemented certain legislation or met certain targets during

LEVERAGE UN HUMAN RIGHTS REVIEWS TO PRESSURE GOVERNMENTS.

periodic reviews. This, in turn, allows NGOs to pressure their governments to make positive commitments to the international community in the field of women’s rights.²⁵ In Latvia, NGOs recognize the leverage CEDAW has and use those reviews to ensure the government makes

genuine commitments to the committee rather than mere “polite answers.”²⁶ In Croatia, after the government weakened laws on domestic violence, activists enjoyed similar success using UN advocacy. Specifically, in 2015, the Human Rights Council and the Human Rights Committee reviewed Croatia under the Universal Periodic Review and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, respectively. Joint advocacy by The Advocates and Autonomous Women’s House Zagreb brought attention to Croatia’s recent decriminalization of domestic violence.

²⁵ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Italy Interviewee 2 et al. December 6, 2018.

²⁶ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Latvia Interviewee 1. February 15, 2022.

Both the UPR Working Group and the Human Rights Committee made recommendations for Croatia to recriminalize domestic violence.²⁷ Within months of this international pressure, Croatia's Parliament amended the law to make domestic violence a crime again.²⁸

Finally, civil society should find ways to capitalize on changes in the political or domestic climate to renew efforts toward ratification. For example, with the Czech Republic taking over the EU Commission presidency in 2022, a Czech NGO sought to capitalize on the timing of this new international role as a means of persuading the government to ratify the Istanbul Convention.²⁹ Similarly, women's rights groups have been advocating for Ukraine to ratify the Istanbul Convention once it opened

**CAPITALIZE ON
INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE
POINTS AND MOMENTS.**

for signature in 2011.³⁰ Since the beginning of the conflict with Russia, urgency for EU candidacy has escalated for Ukraine.³¹ On February 28, 2022, a few days after the commencement of the conflict with Russia, President Zelensky applied for EU

membership.³² For Ukraine to obtain EU membership, it must demonstrate its

²⁷ Human Rights Council, Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Croatia, (July 20, 2015), U.N. Doc. A/HRC/30/14. ¶¶199.25, 99.28 (Czech Republic, Trinidad and Tobago); Human Rights Committee, *Concluding observations on the third periodic report on Croatia*, adopted by the Committee at its 113th session (16 March – 2 April 2015), U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/HRV/CO/3, ¶15.

²⁸ See generally "Gender-based Violence in Croatia," BaBe! (2020), available at https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/documents/2020-10/3_b.a.b.e._stmt.pdf.

²⁹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Czech Republic Interviewee 2. February 18, 2022.

³⁰ Hillary Margolis, *In Ukraine, Women Should Be Protected from Violence in War and Peace*, Human Rights Watch, June 21, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/21/ukraine-women-should-be-protected-violence-war-and-peace>.

³¹ Hillary Margolis, *In Ukraine, Women Should Be Protected from Violence in War and Peace*, Human Rights Watch, June 21, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/21/ukraine-women-should-be-protected-violence-war-and-peace>.

³² Rachel Treisman, *Ukraine Wants to Join the EU. Here's How That Would Work*, NPR, February 28, 2022, <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2022/02/28/npr-ukraine-european-union>; Emily Rauhala, Adela Suliman, and Quentin Aries, *Ukraine Should Get E.U. Candidate Status, European Commission Recommends*, The Washington Post, June 17, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/06/17/european-commission-candidate-eu-ukraine-war/>; Council of the European Union, *Conclusions on Ukraine, the Membership Applications of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, Western Balkans and External Relations*, European Council, 23 June 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/06/23/european-council->

commitment to respecting and protecting human rights.³³ Therefore, civil society has mobilized its resources to push Ukraine toward ratification of the convention, stressing in particular that implementation is more urgent than ever, given the additional violence against women perpetrated during the war.³⁴ On July 18, 2022, Ukraine ratified the Istanbul Convention.³⁵

2. Training and Education

The adoption of legislation that addresses violence against women is an important first step. It is crucial, however, that states commit to and support effective implementation through training and education. States should develop ongoing trainings for system actors on how to effectively implement those laws. Ideally, these trainings would be led by, or done in consultation with, NGOs that serve victims of violence and understand their needs. The state must also support public awareness efforts to educate communities about violence against women, the laws, their rights, and how to enforce them.

(i) Continuing Education of Systems Actors

Many women's rights NGOs have emphasized the need to train the judiciary, which does not always have specialized knowledge on violence against women. In some cases, in what can be a male-dominated profession, many judicial officers hold the same gender stereotypes that are reflected in wider society.³⁶ Interviewees reported these attitudes are particularly acute in Italy where high-achieving law students can become judges as early as their late twenties when they have limited life experience and may lack a professional understanding of the issues female victims of violence

conclusions-on-ukraine-the-membership-applications-of-ukraine-the-republic-of-moldova-and-georgia-western-balkans-and-external-relations-23-june-2022/

³³ Almut Rochowanski, *No, Joining the EU Isn't a Quick Fix for Violence against Women in Ukraine*, openDemocracy, June 30, 2022, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/ukraine-eu-membership-istanbul-convention/>.

³⁴ Amnesty International, *Ukraine: 'Historic Victory for Women's Rights' as Istanbul Convention Ratified*, June 22, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/06/ukraine-historic-victory-for-womens-rights-as-istanbul-convention-ratified/>.

³⁵ See <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=signatures-by-treaty&treatyenum=210> for a list of States and their status regarding recognition of the Istanbul Convention.

³⁶ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Czech Republic Interviewee 3. February 23, 2022.

face.³⁷ Compounding this problem in Italy is a pervasive judicial attitude that violence against women is an issue for social services to handle rather than the courts.³⁸

ADVOCATE FOR THE MANDATORY EDUCATION OF INSTITUTIONAL ACTORS (JUDGES, POLICE OFFICERS, AND OTHER SYSTEMS ACTORS), LED BY OR IN CONSULTATION WITH NGOs THAT SERVE VICTIMS.

Civil society must not only offer training, but also take steps to ensure robust and sustained participation in the training. In the Czech Republic, an interviewee reported that many judges hold harmful gender stereotypes. Those hearing cases of violence against women do not receive any specialized training on the topic.³⁹ NGOs provide optional training sessions to the judiciary on the experiences of women seeking justice,

but attendance is weak.⁴⁰ At times, poor attendance stems from judicial attitudes that NGOs are not capable of training judges.⁴¹ To address these misperceptions, a Czech NGO is advocating to make such judicial training legally mandatory.⁴²

Findings revealed that judicial training should also address the nuances of local translations of international instruments, including the Istanbul Convention. This training is crucial to counter the spread of “gender ideology” misinformation. In Bulgaria, the Constitutional Court concluded in July 2018 that the Istanbul Convention was incompatible with the Bulgarian Constitution.⁴³ As one HRD points out, an

CZECH REPUBLIC: WHEN SYSTEMS ACTORS DO NOT PERCEIVE NGOs AS HAVING THE EXPERTISE TO TRAIN THEM, CIVIL SOCIETY IS WORKING TO MAKE THOSE TRAININGS MANDATORY.

³⁷ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Italy Interviewee 2 et al. December 6, 2018.

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Czech Republic Interviewee 3. February 23, 2022.

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Italy Interviewee 2 et al. December 6, 2018.

⁴² Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Czech Republic Interviewee 3. February 23, 2022.

⁴³ Birn, *Bulgaria Court Says 'Istanbul Convention' Violates Constitution*, Balkan Insight, July 27, 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/07/27/bulgaria-s-constitutional-court-says-istanbul-convention-not-in-line-with-basic-law-07-27-2018/>.

impediment was the word “gender” in the Convention was translated into Bulgarian differently than other translations: the term was integrated under the word “sex.”⁴⁴ This terminology created problems with Articles 3(c) and 4(3) discussing both sex and gender discrimination as it enabled anti-gender groups to label it a new concept not in keeping with Bulgaria’s culture and traditions.⁴⁵ Ultimately, the Constitutional Court agreed with this argument by the anti-gender groups.⁴⁶

Civil society has directed similar efforts toward training police on women’s rights issues. In Poland, an interviewee described how police have little awareness about the realities of violence against women.⁴⁷ The HRD speculated that any training they receive is likely focused on protecting the family unit rather than any particular family member.⁴⁸ Therefore, one Polish NGO is currently advocating for more sophisticated training sessions to be provided to the police by NGOs that specialize in violence against women.⁴⁹

(ii) Raising Public Awareness

Civil society continues to educate the public about women’s human rights. Findings revealed that civil society should first identify the gaps in public knowledge to better target its educational efforts. For example, a Latvian NGO recognized that the public generally does not understand the international framework for women’s rights. It created an international feminist school to educate students on UN instruments for women and girls’ rights, such as CEDAW and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).⁵⁰

IDENTIFY AND ADDRESS GAPS IN PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE TO INFORM AND TAILOR ADVOCACY EFFORTS.

⁴⁴ Dubravka Simonovic, Feride Acar, Andrea Krizsan, and Conny Roggeband, "Virtual Seminar: Pushback Against the Istanbul Convention," December 10, 2020.

⁴⁵ See Istanbul Convention, Art. 3(c), 4(3).

⁴⁶ Dubravka Simonovic, Feride Acar, Andrea Krizsan, and Conny Roggeband, "Virtual Seminar: Pushback Against the Istanbul Convention," December 10, 2020.

⁴⁷ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Poland Interviewee 1. February 22, 2022.

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Latvia Interviewee 1. February 14, 2019.

Activists have also found innovative ways to raise public awareness on these issues. In Turkey, an artist created an installation of 440 pairs of shoes on the façade of an Istanbul building to mark the 440 femicides in 2018.⁵¹ The Women’s Network of Croatia also adapted traditional letter-writing campaigns to reach a larger share of the public. It developed colourful postcards with photos of Croatia, similar to those found in tourist shops. The postcards were addressed to the Government of Croatia with a pre-written message asking for ratification of the Convention⁵²

A great deal of civil society’s investment in education has focused on the importance of the Istanbul Convention, with NGOs recognizing that many government officials remain uninformed about it.⁵³ One activist opined that showing how the convention will connect the positive steps already taken to combat violence against women will demonstrate the convention’s merits to state officials.⁵⁴

Civil society groups have developed materials to inform NGO responders how best to advocate for the Istanbul Convention. Women Against Violence Europe (“WAVE”) Network, together with the CoE’s Gender Equality Division and UN Women, developed a methodology with advocacy resources and tools (the “WAVE Methodology Report”).⁵⁵ As WAVE explains: “[t]his methodology will assist [civil society organizations] in running national communication and advocacy campaigns on the Istanbul Convention. The Istanbul Convention will be the subject of positive narratives produced by [civil society organizations] using this methodology, which will also help debunk myths and false information about the convention.”⁵⁶ The WAVE Methodology Report includes a chapter setting out the common myths and misconceptions of the Istanbul Convention, as well as a brochure providing a positive narrative on the benefits of ratification.⁵⁷ At the same time, civil society has made a concerted effort to educate the wider public on the political and economic costs of violence against women. This will highlight the importance of pressuring

⁵¹ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 132,

<https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

⁵² Center for Women War Victims ROSA et al., postcards on file with The Advocates for Human Rights

⁵³ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 1. January 14, 2020.

⁵⁴ Dubravka Simonovic, Feride Acar, Andrea Krizsan, and Conny Roggeband, "Virtual Seminar: Pushback Against the Istanbul Convention," December 10, 2020.

⁵⁵ Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE), *New Methodology to Support CSOs in Advocating for the Istanbul Convention*, July 4, 2022, <https://wave-network.org/methodology-csos-istanbul-convention/>

⁵⁶ *Id.*

⁵⁷ *Id.*

politicians to develop effective long-term solutions to reduce incidents of such violence.⁵⁸

(iii) Building Capacity among HRDs

In addition to raising the general visibility of human rights issues, NGOs target select specific groups to teach and instill human rights values.⁵⁹ In the face of an anti-gender movement that has misappropriated human rights language for its own use,

EDUCATE AND ENGAGE KEY GROUPS, SUCH AS YOUTH, LAWYERS, AS WELL AS NGO STAFF, ON HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES.

NGOs are playing an important role in educating the next generation of activists on how to use a true human rights approach that includes principles of dignity, equality, and justice. In many ways, civil society is actively training the next generation of human rights defenders.⁶⁰ Center “Women’s

Perspectives” in Ukraine runs an annual Feminist Intensive Camp for young women from across Ukraine. The three-day training brings together more than 50 female activists who are involved with cross-cutting issues, such as internally displaced persons, climate change, media stereotypes, reproductive health, and violence against women. The camp brings domestic and international experts to teach and also enables participants to propose and deliver their own workshops to peers — thus building leadership capacity and training skills among these young women. With each annual Feminist Intensive Camp, Center “Women’s Perspectives” is

UKRAINE: TRAIN YOUNG WOMEN ACTIVISTS FROM A VARIETY OF SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES BY USING INTENSIVE CAMPS.

⁵⁸ Dubravka Simonovic, Feride Acar, Andrea Krizsan, and Conny Roggeband, "Virtual Seminar: Pushback Against the Istanbul Convention," December 10, 2020.

⁵⁹The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 137, <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

⁶⁰ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Poland Interviewee 2. February 16, 2022.

building and strengthening a countrywide cadre of connected, trained young women activists within Ukraine.⁶¹

Some groups use formal education to change attitudes and expand knowledge. In the Czech Republic, an NGO set up a gender education program with lesson plans and materials for teachers to use in schools.⁶² To avoid backlash in a country where gender ideology fictions are prevalent, the NGO has been careful not to refer to the word “gender” and instead markets the training as “sexual education for respectful partnerships between young people.”⁶³

Other groups focused on training lawyers who can defend women’s human rights in domestic courtrooms, as well as at the international and regional levels. In Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Gender

Research Foundation has trained generations of young lawyers from Central Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Former Soviet Union (FSU) to use international legal mechanisms to defend women’s rights when all domestic options have failed.

BULGARIA: TRAIN GENERATIONS OF LAWYERS TO STRENGTHEN THEIR LITIGATION SKILLS AND BUILD KNOWLEDGE ON HOW TO USE INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL MECHANISMS TO DEFEND WOMEN’S RIGHTS WHEN ALL DOMESTIC REMEDIES HAVE FAILED.

Since 2004, the Women’s Human Rights Training Institute (WHRTI) has trained more than 150 lawyers how to address issues of violence against women, including advocacy at the United Nations and the European Court of Human Rights. Throughout their careers, WHRTI graduates have successfully used this knowledge to change domestic laws, challenge harmful court decisions before international and regional bodies, and draw national attention to issues of women’s rights. One of the most important contributing factors to WHRTI’s success is that eight cohorts of trained lawyers remain networked across countries, which gives them a peer support community in addressing human rights challenges. They stay connected via

⁶¹ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 137, <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

⁶² Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Czech Republic Interviewee 3. February 23, 2022.

⁶³ *Id.*

social media to share new case law and developments, post resources, and seek legal advice from fellow peers.⁶⁴

Certain NGOs have also recognized the importance of capacity-building within their own organizations. A Polish NGO explained how its employees specialize on particular issues, with one employee responsible for the domestic violence contact network, another responsible for disinformation and the anti-gender networks, and a third responsible for all secularized projects that disconnect the country from the influence of the ultra-conservative religious establishment.⁶⁵ This division has been important in streamlining projects as well as attracting staff, volunteers, and interns who desire to focus on specific areas of women's rights.⁶⁶ Other NGOs strive to actively build connections with and expertise of marginalized communities of women. In Latvia, one NGO has used trainings to connect activists directly with specific affected populations, such as Roma women. In so doing, it seeks to empower marginalized women, overcome stereotypes and prejudices, and celebrate their unique cultures and values.⁶⁷

**INVEST IN AND DEVELOP
SPECIALIZED EXPERTISE AMONG
STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS.**

3. Enhance Visibility

Another strategy NGOs use is to heighten the public visibility of their activities, which in turn leads to greater success. A multi-faceted approach is the most successful way to enhance both visibility and impact.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 137,

<https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

⁶⁵ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Poland Interviewee 2. February 16, 2022.

⁶⁶ *Id.*

⁶⁷ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Latvia Interviewee 1. February 14, 2019.

⁶⁸ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 134,

<https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

(i) Media

The media is a crucial means of increasing visibility, especially when civil society's reach is limited. As a Lithuanian HRD explained, when NGOs do not have the capacity to target large audiences themselves, they must leverage media channels with national reach to spread their message and promote their activities.⁶⁹ This work can be challenging. NGOs in some countries face resistance from mainstream media, where certain news and other television channels refuse to run

**FIND ALTERNATIVE MEDIA
SOURCES TO REPORT WHEN
MAINSTREAM MEDIA GROUPS
REFUSE COVERAGE.**

advertisements and press releases of NGOs, including women's rights groups.⁷⁰ Hence, the organizations have found alternative media groups that will cover them. NGOs have created lists of media channels and news sources to correctly report the

content that the NGO sends to them, focusing on those with large followings.⁷¹ Other NGOs have successfully participated in roundtable discussions on national television. Through these discussions NGOs demonstrate their expertise in certain issues as they outline and explain policy solutions both to the government and to the public.⁷²

Across the board, activists agreed the key to working with media is to share individual stories and powerful imagery. As one HRD summarized, “[y]ou give [the media] stories ... they give you the coverage.” Another HRD in Poland suggested that a multimedia approach should incorporate images as well as words.⁷³

(ii) New Activities and Partners

Multiple interviewees stressed the importance of trying activities that are new and have never been seen in the country. Interviewees encouraged activists to be

⁶⁹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Lithuania Interviewee 1. February 11, 2022.

⁷⁰ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Turkey Interviewee 1. February 4, 2022.

⁷¹ *Id.*

⁷² *Id.*

⁷³ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 136,

<https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

fearless about trying something for the first time and to “build a bit further” out from the usual activities.⁷⁴ The Women’s Network of Croatia successfully garnered attention by creating several new activities to counter the opposition. Since these activities had never been done in Croatia, they readily drew the attention of the media and public. The network worked with a journalist and documentary film director to hold vigils in front of hospitals and to screen those videos on social media. They named the campaign “Master of My Own Body,” drawing from a 1957 Croatian feature film to attract public recognition.⁷⁵

TRY ACTIVITIES THAT HAVE NEVER BEEN DONE BEFORE IN THE COUNTRY TO DRAW ATTENTION.

Some NGOs invest in billboard campaigns in smaller localities, where billboards: are more visible and less costly than they are in big cities; are more heavily discussed by locals, and; improve the morale of those working on women’s rights issues in those areas.⁷⁶

DEVELOP ACTIVITIES THAT ARE NEW TO THE COUNTRY AND LOCALES TO ATTRACT ATTENTION.

Connecting with other sectors, such as the arts, entertainment, or technology industries, can also draw attention. The WAVE Methodology Report notes the benefit of working with artists who can

help with “designing infographics and can offer a creative perspective on promoting the main messages of campaigns accessible to the general public.”⁷⁷ In Lithuania, an NGO worked closely with an advertising company that had a strong corporate mission to help tackle social issues.⁷⁸

They jointly created a series of short, powerful videos on violence against women, telling stories of abuse from physical, sexual, and economic standpoints. One video was deliberately

CONNECT WITH OTHER INDUSTRIES TO ENHANCE VISIBILITY AND DRAW ATTENTION.

⁷⁴ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Moldova Interviewee 3. February 24, 2021.

⁷⁵ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 135, <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

⁷⁶ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Poland Interviewee 2. February 16, 2022.

⁷⁷ Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE), *New Methodology to Support CSOs in Advocating for the Istanbul Convention*, July 4, 2022, <https://wave-network.org/methodology-csos-istanbul-convention/>.

⁷⁸ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Lithuania Interviewee 2. February 23, 2022.

divided into several sections to depict each form of violence.⁷⁹ The videos' vivid format drew positive engagement from the media, private organizations, and the general public.⁸⁰

(iii) Social Media and Influencers

Multiple HRDs acknowledged the importance of social media and stressed the importance of finding innovative ways to increase visibility with online platforms. For some HRDs, social media impact is about engaging the right people. One NGO, with 16,000 followers, including “a lot of influential news people” on one of its social media accounts, emphasized that impact is about the quality, not the quantity, of the followers.⁸¹ Others use media outside of the traditional women’s rights sphere. When

**GET OUT OF THE “ACTIVIST BUBBLE”
AND USE MORE GENERAL SOCIAL
MEDIA PLATFORMS TO REACH THE
GENERAL POPULATION.**

a Ukrainian NGO needed 8,000 more signatures for its petition on ratification, it turned to a mainstream app for women. With the help of a local celebrity, the NGO posted an ad for signatures in a menstruation cycle app that has

thousands of women subscribers. By posting the ad on the app’s chat board, the NGO secured 7,000 signatures in two days. The HRD recounted, “It was shocking. We didn’t expect it. It was a great experience for us. We got out of our activist bubble and just got to women in Ukraine. Just [ordinary] women.”⁸²

Interviewees agreed that using imagery in social media can broaden their reach.⁸³ For example, a Lithuanian HRD explained how they first seize people’s attention by posting

**USE IMAGES AND VIDEOS
TO BOOST ENGAGEMENT.**

⁷⁹ *Id.*

⁸⁰ *Id.*

⁸¹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Turkey Interviewee 1. February 4, 2022.

⁸² The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 135-136, <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

⁸³ The WAVE Methodology Report provides a number of positive examples of social media campaigns in its “Knowledge Pack. WAVE Methodology Report, “Knowledge Pack (other visibility materials, documents, and examples)” – “Examples Step Up Campaign Social Media:” <https://wave-network.org/methodology-csos-istanbul-convention/>

eye-catching photos, then convey their message through captions.⁸⁴ After President Erdoğan announced Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, one NGO disseminated a series of videos on social media explaining their support for the convention and their refusal to give up on it.⁸⁵ The videos secured widespread attention and received approximately 100,000 tweets on Twitter in one day.⁸⁶

Civil society also taps into influencers, whether they are local celebrities or individuals with a large social media following.⁸⁷ As one HRD explained, celebrities usually attract a lot more attention than experts.⁸⁸ In Ukraine, an LGBTIQ+ NGO

USE INFLUENCERS TO
DISSEMINATE MESSAGES AND
ATTRACT NEW SUPPORTERS.

described how it frequently wrote to social media influencers about instances of gender-based and domestic violence. Eventually, one influencer decided to post herself reading these messages on her Instagram story. She also agreed to post herself talking about

signing a petition to ratify the Istanbul Convention.⁸⁹ The Ukrainian HRD stressed, however, that because their organization lacks the resources to continue such outreach for a single Instagram story, it would be worthwhile to build ongoing relationships with influencers.⁹⁰ Influencers need not be limited to just celebrities; NGOs have also tapped into local business executives and political leaders to garner attention.⁹¹

⁸⁴ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Lithuania Interviewee 1. February 11, 2022.

⁸⁵ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Turkey Interviewee 1. February 4, 2022.

⁸⁶ *Id.*

⁸⁷ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 148,

<https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

⁸⁸ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Croatia Interviewee 2. July 8-10, 2019.

⁸⁹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Ukraine Interviewee 1. February 3, 2022.

⁹⁰ *Id.*

⁹¹ The Advocates for Human Rights, "Experiential Engagement," Presentation: September 21-24, 2016, https://advrights.sharepoint.com/:p:/s/WomensRights/EVJZjU38v6ZXiEYkqLmdW-cBOby_8lCyaYJu6HLnK8SfAA?e=EumAig

(iv) Protests and Marches

Civil society has long used public protests and marches as a way of being visible. Protests and marches can be an effective psychological tool to show the public that a movement enjoys wide support.⁹² Marches can work especially well in more

PLAN PROTESTS AND MARCHES WITH LONG-TERM GOALS, WHETHER ADVOCACY OR PROTESTORS' NEEDS, IN MIND.

conservative towns and regions to demonstrate to residents that local people care about an issue.⁹³ A Croatian HRD stressed the importance of conducting these activities peacefully while at the same time being “loud and colourful” to enhance visibility and engage men as well as women.⁹⁴ In addition, march organizers

must plan their long-term strategy in advance to ensure the protest is not a one-time event but part of a long-term effort to achieve their advocacy goals.⁹⁵

In Croatia, the Church and secular NGOs have sought to appropriate the concept of family protection through an anti-gender lens. Protests have helped counter this messaging by creating a sense of “collective opinion” about the benefits of the Istanbul Convention as well as the importance of women’s sexual and reproductive rights.⁹⁶ These human rights counter-protests seek to co-opt the anti-gender space by organizing sit-in actions where volunteers sit on the ground in front of anti-gender marches and refuse to leave.⁹⁷

CROATIA: ORGANIZE COUNTER-PROTESTS TO COINCIDE WITH ANTI-GENDER MARCHES. PREPARE IN ADVANCE FOR CONSEQUENCES, INCLUDING ARRESTS.

⁹² Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Poland Interviewee 2. February 16, 2022.

⁹³ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 133, <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

⁹³ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Croatia Interviewee 2. March 1, 2022.

⁹⁴ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Croatia Interviewee 2. July 8-10, 2019.

⁹⁵ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 133, <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

⁹⁶ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Croatia Interviewee 2. March 1, 2022.

⁹⁷ *Id.*

Protestors' arrests often result in positive media attention, especially in Croatia when police arrested women dressed in red-stained white gowns protesting restrictive abortion laws.⁹⁸ Importantly, NGOs anticipate and prepare in advance for such arrests and other consequences. The Croatian NGO ensured funding was available to pay the fees to release the volunteers from jail.⁹⁹

In Lithuania, NGOs organized eye-catching protests to defeat a bill that would harm unmarried parents. The government proposed a family law that would only benefit married individuals, thereby discriminating against single parents. A Lithuanian NGO organized a protest where volunteers simply wore white dresses with the tag line: "we want a man to be married." The activity attracted media attention and fostered discussion on the ways single parents would experience discrimination under the bill. Ultimately, the public pressure and dissent resulted in the government deciding not to enact the law.¹⁰⁰

Protests and marches also provide bottom-up pressure in promoting the Istanbul Convention. Organizing public voices demonstrates to governments that society is ready for the implementation of laws on violence against women both through changes in domestic law and through ratification.¹⁰⁰ Such noise can also force certain issues onto the international agenda during negotiations, dove-tailing bottom-up pressure with top-down pressure. For instance, in Armenia, based in large part on the public uproar that an NGO had created, the EU conditioned the signing of the European Union Partnership Agreement on the Armenian government making certain commitments to adopt domestic violence laws.¹⁰¹

Tips for a Successful March:

1. Ensure the march is timely and has the most appropriate theme in light of the surrounding circumstances. For example, in 2019-2020, domestic violence was a major issue in Ukrainian news, so ratification of the Istanbul Convention was a timely theme.

⁹⁸ *Id.*

⁹⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰⁰ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Lithuania Interviewee 2. February 23, 2022. ¹⁰⁰ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 1. January 14, 2020.

¹⁰¹ *Id.*

2. Engage social media networks to promote the march. The organizers in Ukraine spread word of the march by targeting feminist bloggers who, in turn, persuaded their readers to march.
3. Highlight the stories of individual survivors of domestic violence and, with their consent, publish their stories, anonymous or not, in online and print media.
4. Use innovative and creative media to draw attention to your message through art, performance, and thought-provoking images.
5. Bring in local, national, and international celebrities to speak at the march. That will increase the media coverage and get the attention of political parties.
6. Work hard to get as much media coverage as possible.

4. Monitoring and Data Collection

Monitoring and data collection is another strategy both to protect women and counter disinformation, which has become increasingly prevalent in the backlash against human rights.

Interviews revealed how civil society focuses on the collection of data in state responses to violence against women. In Armenia, an NGO is working with domestic violence support centers, the Ministry of Justice, the prosecutor's office, and police to enter statistics on domestic violence into an online database.¹⁰² Given that perpetrators commit domestic violence with little accountability, the NGO compares the reported instances of domestic violence with the number of prosecuted cases and the number of withdrawn or cancelled cases due to "lack of evidence."¹⁰³ Such

INCREASE TRANSPARENCY ABOUT HOW THE LAWS AND SYSTEMS ARE FUNCTIONING BY MONITORING CASES, CHARGES, PROSECUTIONS, AND SENTENCES.

data comparisons help the NGO demonstrate the shortcomings in laws, as well as show how such laws are implemented in practice.¹⁰⁴ An NGO in the Czech Republic has adopted a similar strategy by lobbying the Minister of Justice to compile a register of all courtroom verdicts, including the

¹⁰² Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 1. February 2, 2022.

¹⁰³ *Id.*

¹⁰⁴ *Id.*

punishment delivered, to increase transparency.¹⁰⁵ In the Czech Republic, most convicted perpetrators are punished only with probation without receiving any custodial sentence.¹⁰⁶ By increasing public transparency on weak sentencing, the NGO hopes public pressure will persuade the government to implement more appropriate sentencing policies.¹⁰⁷ In Poland, where femicide is on the rise, an NGO monitors data on femicide and suicide to identify patterns and determine how many of these deaths are domestic violence-related. The NGO aims to present these patterns to the government to demonstrate that domestic violence is a systemic problem that is best rectified by implementing the Istanbul Convention.¹⁰⁸ Although Poland ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2015, there have been efforts to attempt to withdraw from the convention in recent years.

NGOs also conduct monitoring to identify and remedy the gaps in laws and their implementation. In Moldova, an NGO monitors how domestic violence legislation is working to understand what

SELF-ASSESS CONTINUOUSLY
AND ADJUST STRATEGIES
ACCORDINGLY.

gaps exist and propose relevant legislative amendments.¹⁰⁹ At the same time, the NGO monitors the work of various systems actors, including police, doctors, and social workers. This monitoring determines the extent to which policies need to be updated to afford sufficient protection to women.¹¹⁰ HRDs also stress the importance of looking inward by monitoring the effectiveness of an NGO's own activities not only to determine which of their own policies and strategies need updating, but also to educate judges, prosecutors, and government officials on their own experiences of what does or does not work.¹¹¹

USE VOLUNTEERS TO MONITOR
LEGISLATIVE DEVELOPMENTS.

Civil society also engages in ongoing monitoring of developments at the legislative and policy level. As one HRD in Turkey explained "Watching Parliament is

¹⁰⁵ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Czech Republic Interviewee 3. February 23, 2022.

¹⁰⁶ *Id.*

¹⁰⁷ *Id.*

¹⁰⁸ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Poland Interviewee 1. February 22, 2022.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Moldova Interviewees 2 and 4. January 29, 2019.

¹¹⁰ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Moldova Interviewees 1 and 2. February 18, 2022.

¹¹¹ *Id.*

a big part of what we do.”¹¹² Volunteers conduct the legislative monitoring in Turkey and gather news from parliamentary journalists, opposition party members, and other actors on the latest policy and legislative discussions and the agenda for each upcoming week.¹¹³ The NGO uses this information to bring opposition parties together to align goals and strategies as much as possible.¹¹⁴

5. Build Coalitions and Unconventional Alliances

COLLABORATE WITH A DIVERSE
ARRAY OF NGOs AND OTHER
STAKEHOLDERS.

HRDs generally agree that building coalitions and unconventional alliances is key to combatting the anti-gender movement. Collaboration allows NGOs to “combine expertise, experience and resources.”¹¹⁵ Each organization can offer a

different area of specialization and expertise, whether it be the organization’s gathering of evidence-based information, its knowledge of treaties, its understandings of best practices, or its use of successful communication strategies.¹¹⁶ While some women’s rights NGOs seek to cooperate with groups focusing on similar issues, many appreciate the value of collaborating with a diverse range of NGOs that address different issues affecting vulnerable populations, including disabilities and poverty,¹¹⁷ LGBTIQ+ rights and refugee rights,¹¹⁸ women with HIV/AIDS,¹¹⁹ minority and Roma women, mothers’ groups, women in sports, and internally displaced women.¹²⁰ In Ukraine, an LGBTIQ+ activist described how she and her colleagues collaborate with what she terms as the “new social wave” in her country, which encompasses climate change advocates, historical landmark preservationists, garbage sorters, and cyclists.¹²¹

¹¹² Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Turkey Interviewee 1. February 4, 2022.

¹¹³ *Id.*

¹¹⁴ *Id.*

¹¹⁵ Civicus, *Against the Wave: Civil Society Responses to Anti-rights Groups*, (November 2019), 89.

¹¹⁶ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 1. January 14, 2020.

¹¹⁷ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Latvia Interviewee 1. February 14, 2019.

¹¹⁸ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Lithuania Interviewee 2. February 23, 2022.

¹¹⁹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 1. January 14, 2020.

¹²⁰ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 138,

<https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

¹²¹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Ukraine Interviewee 1. February 3, 2022.

Coalition work also enables groups to collaborate more rapidly and effectively to address emerging threats. As a Turkish HRD explained:

*We formed as a platform because there's a precedent, a practice, a history of working in loose cooperation or women's organizations working in cooperation with one another without losing their own identity, their own focus and everything but then coming together whenever there's a threat. This has been done to reform the civil code, which the women's movement did manage to reform in 2002. This has been done when there was a threat of amnesty for sexual abusers. We have a history of coming together when there is something on the table we need to respond to.*¹²²

At the same time, civil society has not limited itself to coalitions with each other and has sought to collaborate with a range of stakeholders to respond to anti-gender activities. In Spain, the coalition *Defender a quien Defiende* (“Defending the Defenders”) brings together human rights defenders, journalists, psychologists, legal experts, and others to challenge restrictive gag laws enacted in 2015 that led to the criminalization of protesters. The coalition’s diverse membership means it can provide both legal and psychological support to those in need, as well as use the

POLAND: ADDRESS ORGANIZATIONAL NEEDS BY FORGING ALLIANCES WITH MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND UTILIZING THEIR UNIQUE RESOURCES AND SKILLSETS.

data collected for advocacy at the national and international levels.¹²³

Civil society has also used creative alliances with the public to defend women’s human rights. In Poland, NGOs looking to challenge abortion laws worked with taxi drivers, farmers, and other groups that did not typically protest in favor of women’s

¹²² Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Turkey Interviewee 1. February 4, 2022.

¹²³ Giada Negri, *How European Civil Society Is Pushing Back Against Democratic Erosion*, Carnegie Europe, March 12, 2020, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2020/03/12/how-european-civil-society-is-pushing-back-against-democratic-erosion-pub-81254>.

rights, much less in favor of abortion.¹²⁴ The protests led to incidents of police brutality, but the taxi drivers collaborating with the NGOs were available to transport protesters home.¹²⁵

(i) Private Sector

Civil society also strives to build recognition within the private sector that these social problems negatively impact all sectors of society. For example, NGOs have sought to build alliances with companies in the private sector. In Croatia, in cooperation with a few NGOs, IKEA provided furniture to shelters following an earthquake with the message: “Not every home is a safe place. Talking is the first step toward life without violence. Find out what you can do if you are in a relationship with an abuser.”¹²⁶ The message listed a phone number to call.¹²⁷ IKEA has also worked on a global domestic violence campaign, with one NGO in the Czech Republic noting its success was due largely to its visibility and engagement with the public on social media and with politicians who felt compelled to listen to the public noise.¹²⁸ The key to the success was messaging: the campaign focused on love and happiness, rather than rights and needs, which are more difficult for people, including the anti-gender movement, to oppose.¹²⁹ Civil society is beginning to recognize that private sector companies can be valuable partners in providing long-term support and resources, rather than simply assisting with one-time campaigns.¹³⁰

ACQUIRE RESOURCES AND
LONG-TERM SUPPORT THROUGH
STRATEGIC ALLIANCES WITH THE
PRIVATE SECTOR.

NGOs also recognize the need to find alternative ways to reach people wherever they are. For instance, another HRD mentioned it can be helpful to partner with

¹²⁴ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Brussels Interviewee 1. March 7, 2022.

¹²⁵ *Id.*

¹²⁶ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Croatia Interviewee 1, February 21, 2022.

¹²⁷ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Croatia Interviewee 1. February 21, 2022.

¹²⁸ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Czech Republic Interviewee 3. February 23, 2022.

¹²⁹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Czech Republic Interviewee 3. February 23, 2022.

¹³⁰ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Czech Republic Interviewee 1. April 11, 2022.

grocery stores to put messaging on grocery bags.¹³¹ A Bulgarian HRD similarly stressed the importance of using multiple platforms to reach their audience.¹³² In some countries, civil society has created advertisements to put on billboards, in subway stations, and on subway trains.¹³³

(ii) Benefits

Interviewees reported that building new allies outside their traditional circles brought many benefits in countering the opposition. Groups outside their usual orbit can increase public support and enhance credibility via additional name

LITHUANIA: EXPAND ONLINE REACH BY AGREEING TO RESHARE POSTS BY OTHER HRDs ON SOCIAL MEDIA.

recognition.¹³⁴ NGOs also found that, when one organization sends a letter to a government official or posts on social media, other organizations will instantly “jump to support,” boosting the messaging.¹³⁵ Building alliances also helps expand audience reach. For example, an

HRD explained how a misguided Lithuanian NGO posted disinformation about the Istanbul Convention which the HRD then refuted it with accurate facts.¹³⁶

Building alliances outside traditional orbits expands resources and lessens the work for any one organization. For example, in

Ukraine, organizers of the annual women’s march began collaborating with NGOs focused on issues beyond women’s rights. Another NGO works with organizations focused broadly on diverse issues. As a result, the combined

BUILD PARTNERSHIPS WITH HRDs WORKING TO ADVANCE HUMAN RIGHTS IN OTHER SPHERES.

¹³¹ WAVE, "Training Institute: Out of the Box Approaches for Tackling the Backlash Against Women's Human Rights," Online Presentation: December 1, 2021.

¹³² Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Bulgaria Interviewee 4. December 20, 2018.

¹³³ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Bulgaria Interviewees 4 and 6. December 19-20, 2018.

¹³⁴ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 138, <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

¹³⁵ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Lithuania Interviewee 2. February 23, 2022.

¹³⁶ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Lithuania Interviewee 1. February 11, 2022.

committee is now an umbrella of varied groups sharing the work. For the 2021 women’s march, they strategically defined the theme to include both Istanbul Convention ratification and COVID-19, thus broadening their reach even further.¹³⁷

The necessity of coalitions is becoming widely recognized, with one HRD noting that “you cannot do a lot of things alone.”¹³⁸ One NGO, which has established itself as a platform of more than 300 women’s and LGBTIQ+ rights organizations, highlights that effective communication between organizations can allow every member of the platform to understand what is happening in every region of the country. This, in turn, allows them to identify threats and patterns as soon as they emerge and prepare coordinated responses.¹³⁹

(iii) Transnational Alliances

When building these alliances, multiple HRDs emphasized the power of a transnational approach. In a country where laws and policies have constricted the space or funding for civil society, or where HRDs work at great personal risk to themselves, that country’s diaspora can be an effective resource to bolster women’s

MOLDOVA: LEVERAGE THE LOBBYING AND FINANCIAL STRENGTH OF THE DIASPORA WHEN IT SUPPORTS THE NGOS’ VALUES.

rights movements within the home country.¹⁴⁰ In Moldova, the women’s movement has leveraged the diaspora of Moldovan women. Activists in Moldova reached out to members of the Moldovan diaspora in EU countries, including France, Italy, and Poland. Virtual space allows the diaspora partnership to transcend distance,

discuss violence against women, and share strategies. The Moldovan diaspora not only sends financial support, but also exerts significant political pressure. For example, when the government failed to provide the diaspora access to voting,

¹³⁷ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 138, <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

¹³⁸ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Lithuania Interviewee 2. February 23, 2022.

¹³⁹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Turkey Interviewee 1. February 4, 2022.

¹⁴⁰ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 139-144, <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

members of the diaspora mobilized and contacted pro-European party activists in Moldova to change course. Because funds from the diaspora in the EU contribute to the country's public income, there is an underlying pressure to vote for pro-European parties. Given that one of the opposition's arguments is that the Istanbul Convention is also pro-EU, the diaspora may hold great potential for women's rights movements seeking additional support and political pressure to ratify the Istanbul Convention.¹⁴¹

NGOs have more broadly benefited from information-sharing with NGOs tackling similar issues in other countries. By sharing updates on legislation and policy, reporting anti-gender activity, and highlighting the effectiveness of the civil society strategies in one country, NGOs are better prepared when they encounter similar situations.¹⁴² Activists reported watching their counterparts in other countries to be better informed and prepared for anti-gender activities.¹⁴³

INVEST IN ONGOING
COMMUNICATION AND
INFORMATION-SHARING WITH
NGOs IN OTHER COUNTRIES.

Other HRDs have confirmed the importance of this cross-border communication and sharing. In Moldova, civil society was experiencing the same harmful strategies of sexist and gender-based propaganda as in other countries. The anti-gender movement sought to disinform citizens by instilling erroneous fears that their traditional values were at risk.¹⁴⁴ A Moldovan NGO learned from the experiences of civil society in other countries and their responses to this harmful messaging, including how to proactively rebut myths surrounding the Istanbul Convention before the anti-gender movement could disseminate them.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, an HRD in Italy explained that "the presence of foreign experts and activists helped Italian movements to better understand the strategies of ultra-conservative groups and

¹⁴¹ *Id.* at 141.

¹⁴² Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Czech Republic Interviewee 2. February 18, 2022.

¹⁴³ Civicus, *Anti-Rights Groups: Protesting Once Is Not Enough; We Need to Fight back Every Single Day*, February 6, 2020; Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Moldova Interviewee 1 et al. January 29, 2019; Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Italy Interviewees 1 and 2. March 4, 2022; Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Brussels Interviewee 1. March 7, 2022.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Moldova Interviewee 1 et al. January 29, 2019.

¹⁴⁵ *Id.*

their ability to function simultaneously at different levels.”¹⁴⁶ In other words, international cooperation helps foster a more efficient and enhanced learning process.¹⁴⁷

International cooperation can provide crucial validation, support, and empowerment to NGOs confronting resistance at the national level. At the same time, stakeholders should be aware that a lack of international support can drastically reduce morale. One HRD in Armenia described feeling deflated after they received little support during the Armenian war, with many NGOs within its international network remaining silent.¹⁴⁸ Her statement underscores the importance of ongoing communication and support within the movement on all challenges activists may be facing.

(jv) Building Alliances Aimed at Ratification

A Croatian HRD suggested partnering with organizations that work on a wider democracy agenda but that have not necessarily considered using a gendered lens.¹⁴⁹ On March 22, 2018, the Women’s Network of Croatia (WNC) organized a press conference including representatives of both right- and left-wing political parties, atheists, and Catholics, who were united by an issue important to all women: ratification of the convention. This press conference showed a unified front of diverse people in support of the convention and galvanized momentum in support of ratifying it. It demonstrated to the country that the issue was wide-ranging and impacted women from all backgrounds. A researcher on the backlash against the Istanbul Convention reiterated the importance of “widen[ing] the constituency” of organizations concerned about gender issues, including violence against women.

In Moldova, which recently ratified the convention, HRDs also recognized the importance of forming partnerships to build momentum toward ratification.¹⁵⁰ They worked with the Ministry of Social Protection to prepare conclusions and

¹⁴⁶ Civicus, *Anti-Rights Groups: Protesting Once Is Not Enough; We Need to Fight back Every Single Day*, February 6, 2020.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Lithuania Interviewee 2. February 23, 2022.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 2. February 16, 2022.

¹⁴⁹ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 139,

<https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

¹⁵⁰ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Moldova Interviewee 1 et al. January 29, 2019.

recommendations on violence against women. The Ministry added a powerful voice to the advocacy campaign promoting ratification. This strategy included working with parliament, the government, activists, the Church, and the general public to add as many strong voices as possible to build support.¹⁵¹

(v) Overcoming Challenges

It can be difficult to establish coalitions due to competition, lack of trust between different civil society groups, and, at times, NGOs' fixed agendas or limited resources.¹⁵² Indeed, one HRD acknowledged the challenges in sustaining solidarity between the feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements in Italy due to competition for resources and space within the progressive field.¹⁵³ This stands in stark contrast to diverse anti-gender groups that have

demonstrated strong solidarity in simultaneously attacking several rights under one frame, for example, using religion to attack abortion, LGBTIQ+ rights, and youth rights.¹⁵⁴ A Latvian HRD stressed the importance of NGOs establishing shared goals and

WHEN WORKING IN ALLIANCES,
ESTABLISH SHARED GOALS
EARLY ON TO AVOID POTENTIAL
CONFLICT WITH OTHER NGOs.

understandings at the outset to ensure transparent and mutually beneficial information-sharing and dialogue.¹⁵⁵ For example, when an NGO arranges a meeting with Members of Parliament to discuss certain human rights issues, it should also invite other members of its coalition that focus on similar issues.¹⁵⁶

6. Find Allies Within the Opposition

Every group has a “persuadable middle,” defined as those who can be brought along to support the cause when they share common values.¹⁵⁷ The human rights

¹⁵¹ *Id.*

¹⁵² Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Brussels Interviewee 1. March 7, 2022.

¹⁵³ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Brussels Interviewee 1. March 7, 2022.

¹⁵⁴ Civicus, *Against the Wave: Civil Society Responses to Anti-rights Groups*, (November 2019), 61.

¹⁵⁵ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Latvia Interviewee 1. February 14, 2019.

¹⁵⁶ *Id.*

¹⁵⁷ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 141,

<https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

movement may face powerful opposition forces — often government or religion — in their countries. When the dominant government or religion opposes rights that civil society is working to protect, HRDs have creatively found “sub-allies” within these groups and erred on the side of inclusion over exclusion. One Croatian activist explained that, while it is important to be “fierce” about maintaining human rights standards, it is equally important to avoid a mindset that could exclude certain allies, such as faith-based activists. Another HRD in Turkey emphasized the need to partner with “reasonable men’s groups.” This approach might involve collaborating with an organization that focuses on men’s rights or issues but that is not strictly opposed to women’s rights.¹⁵⁸

INCLUDE MODERATES AND MIDDLE-OF-THE-ROAD MEMBERS OF OPPOSITIONAL GROUPS TO EXPAND THE SUPPORTER BASE.

Other women’s HRDs cautioned that too much division could weaken the NGO strategy to promote the Istanbul Convention or other rights. In Turkey, women’s rights NGOs included women in conservative groups despite their differences. When it became clear the Turkish government was considering

withdrawal from the convention, women’s groups across Turkey spoke up in support of the convention. Women in conservative groups and in the ruling party joined feminist women’s organizations to oppose withdrawal.¹⁵⁹

(i) Finding Allies within the Church

ENGAGE, EDUCATE, AND ENLIST ALLY GROUPS OR MEMBERS OF THE FAITH-BASED INSTITUTIONS WHEN POSSIBLE.

In countries where the church-at-large is not an ally, civil society has found ways to engage with individual religious leaders. For example, a Moldovan HRD found individual priests who quietly supported domestic violence victims in their locales.¹⁶⁰

Bringing individual priests on board to support specific women’s rights causes and educating them on the benefits of the

¹⁵⁸ *Id.* at 140.

¹⁵⁹ *Id.*

¹⁶⁰ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 2. February 16, 2022.

Istanbul Convention resulted in the priests spreading this messaging through the language and context of the Bible in a way their followers understood.¹⁶¹

HRDs have also found ways to blend church principles with their own human rights goals. For example, one NGO worked with faith leaders to develop a pastoral letter that conformed to their language. It included selected scripture ideas and verses but also addressed the NGO's advocacy agenda, including access to services and vital information on sexuality education.¹⁶² In 2017, leaders from Cyprus' five main faith-based communities — Cyprus, Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Armenian Orthodox, Maronite and Latin Catholic — issued a joint statement condemning violence against women and girls.¹⁶³

WORK WITH FAITH LEADERS
TO PROCURE RELIGIOUS
ENDORSEMENTS FOR
ADVOCACY AGENDAS.

In the United States, NETWORK, also known as Nuns on the Bus, is a group of Catholic sisters that stands for “justice and peace” and “educates, organizes and lobbies for economic and social transformation.” NETWORK was founded in the spirit of Vatican II and is rooted in principles that value women's leadership. This includes welcoming members of the LGBTIQ+ community, accepting people from all religious and secular backgrounds, and working to become a multicultural, anti-racist organization. NETWORK is an example of an organization rooted in the Catholic Church and actively advocating on federal policies, including immigration reform, economic justice, and voting rights.¹⁶⁴

7. Find Alternative Channels to Navigate Within the Political Arena

At present, the political field is challenging for many human rights activists. Determining how best to engage with politicians and navigate the political system is important to the success of civil society in every country. Central to the efforts of

¹⁶¹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Moldova Interviewee 1 et al. January 29, 2019.

¹⁶² Civicus, *Against the Wave: Civil Society Responses to Anti-rights Groups*, (November 2019), 104.

¹⁶³ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 42,

<https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

¹⁶⁴ *Id.* at 140.

many NGOs, as discussed above, has been crafting the proper messaging to convince their respective governments to ratify the Istanbul Convention. One successful technique has been to highlight positive examples from the countries where the Istanbul Convention has been ratified.¹⁶⁵

Persuading a government or any target audience requires groups to tailor the message to issues important to the specific audience. Civil society has enjoyed success focusing governments on aligning with international commitments to eliminate violence against women. Governments often recognize the negative consequences of being out of step with international human rights standards, including risks to receiving foreign aid and foreign economic investment, which may be tied to compliance with these standards.

PERSUADE GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS BY FOCUSING ON THE BENEFITS TO ALL SECTORS THROUGH REFORMS.

International and regional bodies, including the CoE, EU, and UN, have laws or policies aimed at combating violence against women. In addition to the Istanbul Convention and Recommendation 2002(5) of the Committee of Ministers on the Protection of Women against Violence, the

CoE has promulgated several tools and studies on violence against women.¹⁶⁶ The United Nations treaty body Concluding Observations and Universal Periodic Reviews frequently recommend ratification of the Istanbul Convention to UN Member States in their outcome documents. In an opinion adopted on July 13, 2022, the European Economic and Social Committee reiterated the urgency and importance of ratification by all member states and the EU.¹⁶⁷ Although some member states have blocked its ratification, the EU itself has taken steps to ratify the Istanbul Convention, and on June 1, 2023, the Council of the EU approved its accession.¹⁶⁸ This decision will

¹⁶⁵ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Moldova Interviewee 1 et al. January 29, 2019.

¹⁶⁶ See [https://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/violence-against-women#{%2216800160%22:\[!\]}](https://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/violence-against-women#{%2216800160%22:[!]}) for a list of CoE resources on violence against women and domestic violence.

¹⁶⁷ European Economic and Social Committee Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, Doc. SOC/726-EESC-2022 (July 7, 2022). Also available online at <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/combating-violence-against-women>.

¹⁶⁸ Council of the European Union, *Combating Violence Against Women: Council Adopts Decision about EU's Accession to Istanbul Convention*, European Council, June 1, 2023,

prioritize the principles of the convention for member states and institution's decisions in the EU moving forward. These instruments provide an important yardstick for civil society to hold governments accountable.

In another example, civil society has found that highlighting the financial incentives associated with complying with international human rights standards is another persuasive point for ratification. NGOs remind their respective governments that, if international organizations see the government has made progress on violence against women, these organizations will be more inclined to provide the government with additional aid and grants to further this goal.¹⁶⁹ When speaking to the President of the Moldovan Parliamentarian Commission to push for ratification, an HRD explained the economic benefits that ratification could bring from donors that value the country's commitment to ending violence against women.¹⁷⁰ She also highlighted the international political capital that ratification will bring Moldova. One MP, tasked with assessing the Convention, asked what the benefit to the country and himself was if his commission took up the draft law. Her response was it would bring favorable international visibility in the current negotiations with Sweden on commercial matters, and if ratified, the Convention would bring outside funding for the services for which his commission was responsible.¹⁷¹

NGOs have also focused on building structures that bridge civil society with

LATVIA: PROMOTE MECHANISMS TO FOSTER COLLABORATION BETWEEN CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE GOVERNMENT.

government and decision-makers. In Latvia, a council of cooperation between NGOs and the Cabinet of Ministers fosters collaboration, with the council being chaired by the head of state and vice-chaired by an elected NGO representative.¹⁷² This mechanism allows

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/06/01/combating-violence-against-women-council-adopts-decision-about-eu-s-accession-to-istanbul-convention/#:~:text=The%20Council%20today%20approved%20the,and%20a%20catalyst%20for%20action.>

¹⁶⁹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 1. January 14, 2020.

¹⁷⁰ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 144,

<https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

¹⁷¹ *Id.*

¹⁷² Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Latvia Interviewee 1. February 15, 2022.

civil society to consult with the government and provide feedback on policy issues impacting women’s rights. Latvia also enjoys greater open dialogue between civil society and MPs through the Declaration on Collaboration with Civil Society.¹⁷³ The Declaration provides for a civil society liaison on every parliamentary committee. Hence, an NGO can better engage in the committee’s meetings and activities on various issues.¹⁷⁴ The Declaration also provides for an annual forum where members of Parliament and NGOs meet to discuss a specific agenda.¹⁷⁵ At the same time, one HRD reported that her NGO achieves even better results by establishing parliamentary committee relationships with more frequent communication, allowing the NGO to actively drive the agenda and provide input on proposed legislation.¹⁷⁶ In the Czech Republic, civil society has worked with the Gender Equality department to publish a leaflet funded by the department, which seeks to debunk myths surrounding the Istanbul Convention as well as map out its implementation in practice.¹⁷⁷

There has also been a conscious effort to work on domestic violence issues with female government officials and parliamentarians on both the left and the right.¹⁷⁸ HRDs have made efforts to find women allies who understand the issues.¹⁷⁹ When the dominant

WHEN POSSIBLE, WORK WITH GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS WHO HAVE PERSONAL TIES TO, OR AN INVESTMENT IN, THE ISSUE.

government or religion opposes ratification, HRDs have creatively found “sub-allies” within these groups. For example, a Moldovan HRD described how she lost her connections with political parties over the years. She decided to narrow her target from political parties to women parliamentarian caucuses in order to hold discussions about the Istanbul Convention.¹⁸⁰ One Czech HRD identified MPs and ministry officials who will promote the proposals themselves. The NGO proposals are

¹⁷³ *Id.*

¹⁷⁴ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Latvia Interviewee 1. February 14, 2019.

¹⁷⁵ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Latvia Interviewee 1. February 15, 2022.

¹⁷⁶ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Latvia Interviewee 1. February 14, 2019.

¹⁷⁷ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Czech Republic Interviewee 2. February 18, 2022.

¹⁷⁸ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Croatia Interviewee 1. February 21, 2022.

¹⁷⁹ *Id.*

¹⁸⁰ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 139,

<https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

then seen as government and parliamentary initiatives and gain greater credibility.¹⁸¹

8. Re-Imagine Responses to Harmful Anti-Gender Messaging

Civil society has begun to recognize the need to regain control of the narrative. In the past, civil society has often used language not relatable to the general public. Common mistakes include relying on jargon, legalese, or words that fail to evoke emotions. In addition, activists often make the mistake of putting out a story talking to people who already hold similar views as them.¹⁸² As an ad agency director stated, “the people you are trying to convince are not yourselves.”¹⁸³ In turn, building a narrative infrastructure involves not only developing the ideas, but also conducting the research to know who the audience is and how to message to them.¹⁸⁴ HRDs in the Czech Republic partnered with an international NGO, which helped research public opinion on ratification, including how much the public understood the benefits of ratifying the Convention.¹⁸⁵ While 84 percent of respondents considered violence against women to be a serious problem, a slight majority still opposed ratification.¹⁸⁶ This resistance prevailed despite the fact that only 16 percent of respondents had a solid understanding of the Convention’s provisions.¹⁸⁷

IDENTIFY THE AUDIENCE
AND TAILOR NARRATIVES
TOWARDS THEM.

Civil society is working to take back the very human rights language the anti-gender movement has co-opted for itself. The traditional response from certain left-wing organizations has been to directly confront the harmful, often inaccurate messaging emanating from the anti-gender movement. One HRD highlighted the tension this

¹⁸¹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Czech Republic Interviewee 2. February 18, 2022.

¹⁸² Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Sheldon Clay, Minneapolis-based Creative Director. August 5, 2022.

¹⁸³ *Id.*

¹⁸⁴ *Id.*

¹⁸⁵ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Czech Republic Interviewee 2. February 18, 2022.

¹⁸⁶ *Id.*

¹⁸⁷ *Id.*

has created, with the left and the far-right speaking “different languages.”¹⁸⁸ One of the most effective manipulations by the anti-gender movement is its purported goal to protect the “traditional” family, i.e., a biological male husband, his biological female wife, and their children. Civil society, however, can seek to reframe the family to show that gender equality is essential to a good family life.¹⁸⁹ In the United States, civil society reclaimed the “family” through the “Love is Love” campaign to counter the referenda that sought to restrict marriage to opposite-sex couples in four states.¹⁹⁰ The movement rebranded and reframed the language from the opposition in a positive way. It used the same anti-gender tactic rhetoric of protecting the family but promoted the human rights goal of protecting every version of the family and parenthood, thereby winning public opinion from the anti-gender movement.¹⁹¹ In Poland, an HRD stressed the importance of reframing the word “tradition” to argue that violence against women is contrary to tradition, not the Istanbul Convention.¹⁹²

REBRAND LANGUAGE USED BY THE ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENT AND RECLAIM LANGUAGE THAT HAS BEEN CO-OPTED.

Where the government is more resistant, civil society has been careful not to agitate the government with controversial topics. As a Czech HRD observed, being loud does not always result in positive publicity.¹⁹³ An Armenian HRD elaborated on this, explaining it is sometimes better not to be vocal, as it may provoke a backlash from a government seeking to avoid controversy. It may be more effective to advance the issues behind the scenes

AVOID ALIENATING A GOVERNMENT THAT HAS THE POTENTIAL TO BE AN ALLY ON CERTAIN ISSUES.

¹⁸⁸ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 1. January 14, 2020.

¹⁸⁹ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 147, <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

¹⁹⁰ See e.g., <https://it.usembassy.gov/love-is-love-how-same-sex-marriage-became-a-right-in-the-united-states/>.

¹⁹¹ Online International Feminist School, "Overview of the Backlash to Human Rights," Online Presentation: November 17, 2020.

¹⁹² Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Poland Interviewee 1. February 2, 2022.

¹⁹³ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Czech Republic Interviewee 1. April 11, 2022.

in order to improve protection for victims.¹⁹⁴ She also opined that a better long-term approach is to use imagery versus being “unduly provocative” that may have the adverse effect of alienating officials from the cause.¹⁹⁵

HRDs agreed they must be poised to act swiftly in response to new developments. This requires raising awareness and developing positive messaging before the opposition takes control of the narrative. For example, Czech activists swiftly developed the narrative on solo Ukrainian women refugees from the war to ensure the Czech public understood their vulnerability. They also included suggestions on how society can protect them.¹⁹⁶ This effort included collecting petition signatures to pressure the government to protect these women, which was an easy means of empowering what can be passive members of the public to make a positive impact.¹⁹⁷

WHEN NARRATIVES EMERGE, TAKE CONTROL AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE BY CREATING AN ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE AND ENGAGING THE PUBLIC.

Civil society’s response should strive “to tell positive stories, rather than simply state the negatives.”¹⁹⁸ As one stakeholder explained, instead of trying to name and shame the anti-gender groups, “we need to find ways of communicating empathy in the

FRAME ISSUES USING POSITIVE AND UNIFYING LANGUAGE.

face of hatred and reasserting the power of compassion and shared humanity. Our messages can be optimistic and make a positive case for rights.”¹⁹⁹ Following ratification of the Istanbul Convention by

Moldova, NGOs have enjoyed better outcomes not by addressing every negative comment made by the conservative Church, but by focusing instead on positive messaging and explaining the benefits of the Istanbul Convention and why its ratification should be celebrated.²⁰⁰ Similarly, in Ukraine, civil society countered anti-gender messaging with facts about how the Convention would positively reform

¹⁹⁴ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 1. January 14, 2020.

¹⁹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁹⁶ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Czech Republic Interviewee 1. April 11, 2022.

¹⁹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁹⁸ Civicus, *Against the Wave: Civil Society Responses to Anti-rights Groups*, (November 2019), 88.

¹⁹⁹ *Id.* at 95.

²⁰⁰ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Moldova Interviewee 1 et al. January 29, 2019.

laws on violence against women, such as adding a new stalking offence to existing laws.²⁰¹

Interviewees agreed that, above all, the message should be simple. The anti-gender movement has employed simple language in its messaging, which many NGOs have historically countered with more nuanced terms, such as “gender equality,” that many people do not understand.²⁰² One HRD stressed the importance of using “an accessible language” in messaging, adding that people do not always read the news to understand current events.²⁰³

USE SIMPLE, ACCESSIBLE LANGUAGE.

EMPLOY NON-TRADITIONAL MEANS, SUCH AS HUMOR AND POP CULTURE, TO CONNECT WITH THE PUBLIC.

At times, NGOs have also leveraged humor and striking imagery online and on the streets, particularly in response to harmful anti-gender messaging. A Lithuanian NGO noted the inspiration for this new approach came from younger staff members, student volunteers and interns,

who “bring new ideas, are more technologically advanced, know how social media works, what messages should be written, and what communication should be used.”²⁰⁴ In Poland, for Valentine’s Day, an NGO created postcards with ironic greetings to be sent to Ordo Iuris, a prominent anti-gender group.²⁰⁵ Any person could take and mail a postcard to Ordo Iuris physically or virtually, making it easy to engage the public.²⁰⁶ Other tactics have involved making references to popular culture. In Croatia, a number of women’s rights groups frequently dressed in costumes from Margaret Atwood’s novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and marched through public squares.²⁰⁷ The power of the imagery is that it seeks to draw parallels

²⁰¹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Ukraine Interviewee 1. February 3, 2022.

²⁰² Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 1. January 14, 2020.

²⁰³ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 144, <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

²⁰⁴ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Lithuania Interviewee 2. February 23, 2022.

²⁰⁵ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Poland Interviewee 2. February 16, 2022.

²⁰⁶ *Id.*

²⁰⁷ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 136, <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

with the novel which “portrays a world in which women have become stripped of rights and relegated to reproductive roles.”²⁰⁸

9. Formal vs Informal Incorporation

Many groups have been forced into organizing on an informal basis by difficult political conditions which can create a new set of challenges. For example, there

WHEN FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION AND ASSEMBLY IS UNDER THREAT, INFORMAL ORGANIZATION MAY HELP CURB THE RISK OF LAWSUITS, FINES, AND ACCUSATIONS OF DISLOYALTY.

may be legal restrictions on an informal organization’s ability to raise funding. They may be prohibited from including a “donate” button on their website, receiving private foundation funding, or selling goods to raise revenue.²⁰⁹ As an HRD whose coalition is not formally incorporated explained, “it has a lot of costs, of course. It comes at a cost because doing all that we do on

volunteer labor is very hard.... If we are a formal organization and received funding for instance that might be easier. But then we open ourselves up for criticism that we are an EU or, god forbid, U.S.-funded organization that is just trying to destroy the country.”²¹⁰ Another HRD from the same country summarized that, given the risk of applying for EU or Western funding:

*It is difficult for us to find real funds and finance for our associations. We mainly do some small courses like chores, singing groups, dancing groups, story writing workshops. We take some small monies from all those activities or some festivals. Or some selling second-hand goods for some money for our association. Or we sell some bags, some t-shirts. These are our main financial sources.*²¹¹

²⁰⁸ Civicus, *Against the Wave: Civil Society Responses to Anti-rights Groups*, (November 2019), 95.

²⁰⁹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Turkey Interviewee 1. February 4, 2022.

²¹⁰ *Id.*

²¹¹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Turkey Interviewee 2. February 22, 2022.

Without access to larger, formal funding sources, they rely on crowdfunding platforms that fund individuals, not organizations, to carry out specific projects.²¹²

Despite these challenges, HRDs have found unexpected benefits from informal incorporation, including the flexibility to bring together different stakeholders to respond to threats when they arise.²¹³ This informality also prevents opening up an organization to public scrutiny, including its possible connections to the EU and the United States, which, at least in Eastern Europe, may not be well perceived in the public eye.²¹⁴ As one HRD explained:

*We realized there was this opportunity and we could have formed into something more formal, but the political conditions are not conducive to it. So, we said this is actually better. We can keep in close touch without formalizing ourselves and then opening up scrutiny, or having some people serve on a board risk lawsuits or fines and things like that.*²¹⁵

Informal organizing may also help avoid potential lawsuits and fines.²¹⁶

10. Stay Resilient

Many HRDs affirmed the need to stay resilient and keep pushing forward even in the face of setbacks. When governments or anti-gender groups seek to undermine the rights of women, civil society must continue to fight for all aspects of gender equality and not back down or disappear.²¹⁷

HRDs and activists recognized the need to provide psychological support to one another. One HRD noted how encouraging it was to see all the support. It kept their

CELEBRATE VICTORIES AND
PROVIDE PSYCHOLOGICAL
SUPPORT TO OTHER HRDs.

²¹² *Id.*

²¹³ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Turkey Interviewee 1. February 4, 2022.

²¹⁴ *Id.*

²¹⁵ *Id.*

²¹⁶ *Id.*

²¹⁷ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Latvia Interviewee 1. February 14, 2019.

organization moving forward.²¹⁸ Other HRDs emphasized they need to keep reminding themselves how far they have come and what they have achieved, finding solace in the fact that many things are slowly changing for the better.²¹⁹ One HRD feels that the continuing existence of their organization and others focusing on women's rights in their country is to be regarded as a success story in itself.²²⁰ As an activist summarized, "[c]ourage is contagious."²²¹

11. Leverage Resources

All stakeholders should recognize that no single NGO can take on this work alone. Most human rights NGOs are set up to serve victims of violence, conduct training and public awareness activities, and advocate for law and policy change. They have very little time or resources left to take on what is a well-financed, highly networked, global anti-gender movement. In contrast, anti-gender groups are set up for an ideological purpose – their very mission is to promote their agenda and undermine human rights. Given this dichotomy, it will take a broad coalition to effectively counter the anti-gender movement and continue protecting human rights. In times of limited funding, civil society must think strategically to leverage all available resources to expand the movement.

CONSERVE RESOURCES AND
BROADEN THE SUPPORT BASE
BY BUILDING NETWORKS OF
VOLUNTEERS.

NGOs have developed creative ways to leverage their resources and expand their reach. Several interviewees shared successful strategies to meet their program goals. Volunteers are a key component to supplement resources to promote the Istanbul Convention and women's rights. For example, a Ukrainian HRD acknowledged that, because NGOs are unlikely to get funding to organize a march, volunteers are crucial at all stages of planning and implementation. Further, when gathering signatures or distributing leaflets, volunteers are crucial to expanding

²¹⁸ The Advocates for Human Rights, "Human Rights Defender Coalition Meeting," July 8-9, 2019 (unpublished meeting notes).

²¹⁹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Moldova Interviewee 1 et al. January 29, 2019.

²²⁰ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 2. February 16, 2022.

²²¹ Personal Communication from Volunteer to Rosalyn Park, The Advocates for Human Rights (July 18, 2022) (on file with authors).

their reach.²²² One NGO engaged the pro bono services of a marketing company to create a professional video on domestic violence. This was part of the NGO's anti-femicide campaign, and it was well-received on national television.²²³ Moreover, in the face of attacks and lawsuits against HRDs, obtaining the support of volunteer lawyers is particularly important to ensure strong legal support for any cases that may go to court.²²⁴ A Polish HRD explained how they began to organize systemic legal aid for active supporters on a national level.²²⁵ While her organization has one paid lawyer to represent protestors as a first call, it has a national network of pro bono lawyers to help. She explained:

*This is working very well. It's quick, it's very effective, there's nobody who's left alone. Anybody who needs help can be provided with it. And we achieved such a level of protection...and we still have the ability to defend the people. Anybody.*²²⁶

Perhaps surprisingly, the conflict between the women's human rights movement and the opposition has a silver lining for pro-Istanbul Convention supporters. The tensions are drawing attention and renewed support, which civil society can

TREAT SETBACKS AND CONFLICTS AS OPPORTUNITIES TO ENERGIZE THE POPULATION AND DRAW ATTENTION TO IMPORTANT ISSUES.

harness. In Croatia, women's HRDs noted that the fight with the opposition over the Istanbul Convention helped energize the women's movement in their country. One advocate explained that "it's become a huge issue, and it's brought to front and center women's rights. We are talking about domestic violence like never before because we are talking about the Istanbul

²²² The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 148,

<https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

²²³ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Poland Interviewee 1. February 22, 2022.

²²⁴ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 2. February 16, 2022.

²²⁵ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Poland Interviewee 2. February 16, 2022.

²²⁶ *Id.*

Convention.”²²⁷ Recently, in particularly notorious cases of rape and domestic violence, people are consciously aware of them, and such cases are sparking protests across Croatia. Although the opposition is strong, the voices of civil society and HRDs are becoming stronger. After Turkey announced its intention to withdraw from the Convention, the Istanbul Convention garnered international media attention, and the hashtag #IstanbulConventionSavesLives began trending on social media.²²⁸

Civil Society Needs

As expected, all HRDs indicated the need for additional financial resources to continue their activities. The anti-gender groups are established for the very purpose of attacking human rights long-term. In contrast, human rights groups are often set up to provide victims with psychological counselling, legal assistance, and shelter. They often lack the capacity to take on the additional and enormous task of countering the anti-gender movement’s activities. Countering the anti-gender movement effectively will require coalitions of NGOs, as no one NGO can do it alone. This section seeks to present the other needs of civil society, as described by HRDs, to strengthen NGOs and build their capacity in the face of these attacks.

1. Mental Health

A primary priority for NGOs is caring for the mental health of their employees. Many HRDs reported employee burnout from being overstretched while simultaneously working in hostile environments.²²⁹ Others have cited overwhelming emotions of

HRDs NEED FUNDING TO ESTABLISH PROGRAMMING THAT CAN ADDRESS THE MENTAL HEALTH OF ACTIVISTS.

devastation and exhaustion.²³⁰ HRDs also cited the toll that disasters, including the pandemic and armed conflict, have on their mental health. One Armenian HRD stated, “[a] lot of people lost relatives in the war and during COVID. I think this war

²²⁷ The Advocates for Human Rights, “Human Rights Defender Coalition Meeting,” July 8-9, 2019 (unpublished meeting notes).

²²⁸ The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 148, <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

²²⁹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Lithuania Interviewee 2. February 23, 2022.

²³⁰ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Poland Interviewee 2. February 16, 2022.

destroyed all of us really. ...Such a horrible, horrible situation. And until now it still, you can feel the depression, the apathy, the anger. All types of negative emotions are there, and civil society is not an exclusion.”²³¹

Interviews revealed that funders often overlook mental health care needs, leaving NGOs on their own to find resources. In Armenia, activists took it upon themselves to start a foundation specifically to “develop this more of a mental wellbeing” for activists. She added that they undertook this work “because no other donor would do that. It’s something irrelevant for a lot.”²³² Another HRD reported high burnout and mental health decline within her NGO, particularly following trauma caused by physical and emotional violence including assaults, online attacks, physical threats, property validation, and other violence.²³³ The NGO created a crowdfunding campaign called “Defend the Defenders” to build resources to provide psychological and legal support for its employees so they can continue performing their activities.²³⁴ Another organization in Poland has set up a network of psychologists, which it refers to as “psycho-emergency.”²³⁵ Access to therapy, however, has not proven sufficient with the NGO suggesting its employees would also benefit from group therapy in addition to the private sessions. Such sessions should also include training on how to deal with many of the actors they encounter, i.e., law enforcement, and how to respond to aggressive personal attacks from anti-gender groups.²³⁶ An Armenian HRD added that trainings should include guidance on building support networks with each other to protect their physical security.²³⁷

2. Training and Know-How

Many HRDs in the domestic violence area indicated they require assistance to develop their training programs and staff capacity, including continuing education on women’s rights issues. As one HRD explained, employees are already incredibly busy with their day-to-day activities, especially in terms of providing direct

²³¹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 2. February 16, 2022.

²³² *Id.*

²³³ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Brussels Interviewee 1. March 7, 2022.

²³⁴ *Id.*

²³⁵ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Poland Interviewee 2. February 16, 2022.

²³⁶ *Id.*

²³⁷ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 2. February 16, 2022.

assistance to victims of violence. Therefore, they lack the time to stay abreast of emerging domestic legislation and international instruments, including the Istanbul Convention and its mechanisms.²³⁸ Interviewees also expressed the need for advice on domestic law and legal procedure. Civil society needs legal advice to understand the pioneering cases prompted by their advocacy being brought before the courts. Similarly, legal assistance is needed for lawsuits filed against them individually and their organizations by anti-gender groups.²³⁹ Training sessions should also include guidance on lobbying and reporting requirements under international instruments, as well as a deeper understanding of international institutions and structures.²⁴⁰ One HRD suggested that funders provide external sponsorship to fund retreats and workshops to develop this know-how, with such events taking place in a safe environment.²⁴¹

HRDs NEED RESOURCES TO HELP FINANCE, ORGANIZE, AND DEVELOP TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS.

FOCUS ON MODES OF TRAINING THAT CAN BE RE-USED FOR INCOMING STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS AND THAT, BY BEING RE-USABLE, WILL ALSO CONSERVE RESOURCES.

Professional development for staff and volunteers at NGOs is particularly important when civil society relies on volunteers who may lack the technical knowledge and skills to fully meet NGOs' needs. A Czech HRD noted that online training sessions that can be re-used for each batch of incoming volunteers are useful.²⁴²

As mentioned above, certain HRDs indicated that publicly-funded training sessions on all aspects of women's rights are also necessary for stakeholders, i.e., government officials, members of parliament, police, and the judiciary, so that civil society can see improved results from the activities of those stakeholders.²⁴³

²³⁸ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 1. January 14, 2020.

²³⁹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Poland Interviewee 2. February 16, 2022.

²⁴⁰ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Croatia Interviewee 1. February 21, 2022.

²⁴¹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 1. January 14, 2020.

²⁴² Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Czech Republic Interviewee 2. February 18, 2022.

²⁴³ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 1. January 14, 2020.

Another common request is for greater international assistance with training. One HRD expressed the need for external sponsorship to bring in international experts to develop know-how and strategies. This is key in developing an advocacy strategy with NGOs to promote the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in their home countries.²⁴⁴ One interviewee cited the example of a CoE-led program to prepare civil society to resume lobbying for ratification once the pandemic restrictions were lifted.²⁴⁵ At the same time, civil society welcomes any guidance in identifying experts who will be sensitive to the various issues the NGOs are addressing, have an understanding of the domestic political climate and the situation on the ground, and have a good working knowledge of the domestic laws and cultures.²⁴⁶ Beyond targeted training, some HRDs noted the benefits of access to well-structured, reader-friendly reports prepared by other civil society organizations.²⁴⁷

HRDs WANT GREATER SUPPORT FROM, AND ENGAGEMENT WITH, INTERNATIONAL BODIES AND EXPERTS.

3. Easing of Administrative Burdens

The anti-gender movement enjoys abundant and often unrestricted resources to carry out its work. Unlike formal funding, much of the financing for the anti-gender movement is “dark money” that remains unregulated and invisible to the public. This opaqueness, coupled with laws such as those that exempt churches from disclosure

²⁴⁴ *Id.*

²⁴⁵ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Czech Republic Interviewee 3. February 23, 2022.

²⁴⁶ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Armenia Interviewee 1. January 14, 2020.

²⁴⁷ Interviewee with The Advocates for Human Rights, Poland Interviewee 1. February 22, 2022; The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 122, <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>; European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, *Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe*, (June 2021), <https://www.epfweb.org/node/837>.

requirements, often allows recipients to operate without restrictions, scrutiny, or obligations to report how they use that money.²⁴⁸

The amounts of dark money funding the anti-gender movement are enormous. The European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights found that anti-gender groups in Europe channeled more than \$707 million of dark money in the ten years leading up to 2018 to support their work.²⁴⁹ In that decade, such anti-gender funding in Europe has quadrupled.²⁵⁰ Dark money in Europe portrays only part of the picture. Open Democracy documented how U.S.-based Christian Right organizations have channeled an additional \$280 million used to attack women's and LGBTIQ+ rights around the world.²⁵¹

In sharp contrast to the anti-gender groups, human rights NGOs struggle to secure adequate, flexible funding to support their core operations. Funding is generally precarious for women's rights NGOs, many of which operate on extremely limited budgets. Civil society is often highly dependent on grants, which are frequently short-term, for a specific program, or for delivery of specific services.²⁵² In addition, HRDs reported how they experienced cuts in funding for their work in recent years.²⁵³ Activists partly attributed the decreased funding to the emergence of anti-

²⁴⁸ Nandini Archer and Claire Provost, *Revealed: \$280m 'Dark Money' Spent by US Christian Right Groups Globally*, openDemocracy, October 27, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/trump-us-christian-spending-global-revealed/>.

²⁴⁹ European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, *Tip of the Iceberg: Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe*, June 2021, 12.

²⁵⁰ *Id.*

²⁵¹ Nandini Archer and Claire Provost, *Revealed: \$280m 'Dark Money' Spent by US Christian Right Groups Globally*, openDemocracy, October 27, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/trump-us-christian-spending-global-revealed/>.

²⁵² The Advocates for Human Rights, *A Rollback for Human Rights: The Istanbul Convention Under Attack*, (December 2, 2021), 122, <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Publications/A/Index?id=510>.

²⁵³ The Advocates for Human Rights, "Human Rights Defender Coalition Meeting," July 8-9, 2019 (unpublished meeting notes).

gender groups that masquerade as human rights groups and compete for legitimate funding—on top of the dark money they already receive.²⁵⁴

The funding that human rights NGOs do receive often carries onerous reporting requirements, which further consumes their time and energy. While all HRDs expressed their gratitude for the funding they receive, many indicated that they experience difficulty with the administrative burdens placed on them by some

THE FINANCIALLY PERILOUS OPERATING CIRCUMSTANCES THAT CONFRONT WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS DO NOT AFFLICT ANTI-GENDER GROUPS. FUNDERS OF THE ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENT ENGAGE IN WHAT THEY SEE AS AN EXISTENTIAL BATTLE, TO WHICH THEY COMMIT FOR DECADES, IF NOT GENERATIONS, TO TRANSFORM SOCIETIES.

funders both in preparing proposals and in reporting on grants. The consequence of these more significant administrative burdens is that NGOs are left with even less time and resources to devote to their program activities.²⁵⁵

Funding for human rights NGOs may also be restricted to specific projects. Some HRDs expressed frustration with the limited freedom

afforded to them to spend money as they deem necessary. Instead, they find themselves adapting their future projects to meet the specific mandates of funders.²⁵⁶ One HRD recalled how a funder explained that it would give them ample money but would also mandate administrative obligations, which, it turned out, made her “stay out of the streets, because you are doing paperwork.”²⁵⁷ She explained:

And that is what happened. They made us work huge percentages of our time doing administrative issues, making copies of bills, explaining every single receipt, and writing a narrative or financial report every three months. When you are doing this, you cannot

²⁵⁴ *Id.*

²⁵⁵ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Croatia Interviewee 2. March 1, 2022.

²⁵⁶ *Id.*

²⁵⁷ *Id.*

*plan future actions and you cannot be spontaneous. We became like slaves to the projects, because we had to think about how to design our projects into what they were financing. So, we need more freedom in that way.*²⁵⁸

In light of this situation, HRDs expressed the desire for greater flexibility to design and adapt their programs, rather than having to implement projects designed in places far-removed from the situation on the ground and with little flexibility to adapt to changing contexts.²⁵⁹ The HRD overburdened by paperwork stated, “It’s not about the money. It’s about the way you are giving to us.”²⁶⁰ As one HRD put it, such programs often cannot “adequately channel and respond to local aspirations in ways that locally designed efforts can.”²⁶¹

4. Solidarity and Support

Many HRDs spoke of the need for solidarity and mutual support within civil society, not just in women’s rights but collectively among all human rights advocates.²⁶²

HRDs HAVE EXPRESSED A NEED FOR A SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND SOLIDARITY AMONG VARIOUS TYPES OF ACTIVISTS.

Providing support can be as simple as sharing an important post or message from another NGO with members of their own organization, or sharing it on their website.²⁶³ To this end, multiple HRDs have continually expressed the importance of coming together in person

²⁵⁸ *Id.*

²⁵⁹ Leanne Erdberg Steadman and Bridget Moix, *How Civil Society Can Help Prevent Violence and Extremism*, United States Institute of Peace, June 6, 2019.

²⁶⁰ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Croatia Interviewee 2. March 1, 2022.

²⁶¹ Leanne Erdberg Steadman and Bridget Moix, *How Civil Society Can Help Prevent Violence and Extremism*, United States Institute of Peace, June 6, 2019.

²⁶² Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Turkey Interviewee 1. February 4, 2022.

²⁶³ *Id.*

to share successes, strategies, and setbacks, and to create solidarity with their peers.

Formally recognizing and appreciating HRDs' work is also important to address the needs of civil society. One HRD suggested establishing more awards to recognize outstanding work and commitment in the area of women's human rights, which would in turn empower activists working in the area.²⁶⁴ One HRD in Latvia provided the example of a "Women Leader" award presented to women, usually politicians, whose work contributes toward gender equality. Many local politicians who have received this award did not understand what gender equality was until someone explained the meaning of the award to them and described how their work promoted gender equality.²⁶⁵ Establishing more awards for activities in women's

AWARDS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
WORK CAN RE-ENERGIZE
HRDs AND DRAW ATTENTION
TO RELEVANT ISSUES.

rights can be both empowering and educational.²⁶⁶

Recognizing the work that HRDs are doing, especially in the face of the backlash, is also important. For example, The Advocates honors outstanding contributions to the

human rights movement with its annual Don and Arvonne Fraser Award.²⁶⁷

Civil society also needs greater external support and resources. In particular, it requires a commitment of legal aid or pro bono assistance to respond to frivolous lawsuits, either as a form of intimidation (SLAPPs),²⁶⁸ or as a governmental attempt to use the courts to restrict civil society's right to associate and/or protest against policy and legislative measures.²⁶⁹

CIVIL SOCIETY NEEDS
GREATER LEGAL RESOURCES
TO ADDRESS STATE
REPRESSION AND BAD FAITH
LAWSUITS.

²⁶⁴ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Latvia Interviewee 1. February 14, 2019.

²⁶⁵ *Id.*

²⁶⁶ *Id.*

²⁶⁷ The Advocates for Human Rights, "Neil Datta's Speech | 2022 HRAD." Online video clip. Youtube, July 8, 2022. Accessed July 21, 2023.

²⁶⁸ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Poland Interviewee 2. February 16, 2022

²⁶⁹ Interview with The Advocates for Human Rights, Turkey Interviewee 1. February 4, 2022.

Conclusion

December 10, 2023, marks the 75th anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Among myriad important pillars of human rights, the UDHR recognizes “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”²⁷⁰

The anti-gender movement seeks to dismantle the very dignity, freedom, justice, equality, and peace with which all persons deserve to live and is growing in strength. Far-right actors have sought to not only attack the human rights of women, LGBTIQ+ persons, children, immigrants, and others, but they have also actively undermined civil society and human rights defenders who strive every day to safeguard these rights and fundamental freedoms.

In the face of these attacks, diminishing space, and limited funding, civil society must be creative, resourceful and persistent. Human rights defenders across the region shared the innovative strategies they are using to promote women’s human rights as well as tactics they are deploying to counter the anti-gender movement. This report compiles those strategies as blueprints for many types of activities, to be initiated and adapted by individuals or organizations, in small places, homes, communities, towns and cities throughout the world. Ultimately, broad alliances within civil society must not only carry out their own tactics, but also share their strategies and come together as a movement to counter the global AGM, safeguard our basic human rights and fundamental freedoms, and realize the UDHR’s true meaning.

²⁷⁰ UN General Assembly, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948, Art. 1.