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FROM CONSENSUS TO CONTESTATION

Anti-Gender Backlash and the Politics of Care in Global Multilateral Governance

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Resisting anti-gender ideology and feminist backlash, 12-13 October, 2026

The empirical puzzle: What happened in the G20 and CSW70?

G20 EWWG | Johannesburg, 2025

South Africa's Presidency sought a Ministerial Declaration centred on **care, women's financial inclusion**, and **GBV/femicide**.

Negotiations became highly contested over established gender-equality language.

Outcome → No consensus on the Ministerial Declaration; a Chair's Statement was issued instead.



CSW70 | New York, 2026

Negotiations were similarly marked by contestation over established language and procedures

Outcome → **For the first time in CSW history, the Agreed Conclusions were adopted by a vote (37–6–1) rather than by consensus.**



Why are concepts and language that have become embedded in multilateral gender governance being reopened to negotiation, and what is being proposed in their place?

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G20 EWWG | From resistance to normative substitution

Norm resistance/spoiling → Norm reinterpretation/substitution → Counter-norm entrepreneurship



1. Norm resistance / spoiling: Opposing or seeking to remove established norms and agreed language

- Opposition to “gender”, “unpaid care” and “all women and girls”
- Resistance to **SRHR**, **the Beijing Declaration**, and references to **bodily autonomy**



2. Norm reinterpretation / substitution: Replacing established concepts with narrower or alternative formulations

- “Gender” → “sex-based” / “equality between women and men”
- “Gender-based violence” → “violence against women and girls”
- “Women and girls in all their diversity” → “women and girls in diverse situations and conditions”
- **SRHR** → maternal health and essential healthcare services



3. Counter-norm entrepreneurship: Advancing alternative normative understandings of women, care and family

- Proposed recognition of the “significance of women's maternity/motherhood”
- Promotion of “family-friendly and family-oriented policies”



The backlash is not only resisting established gender-equality norms.
It is increasingly contesting their meaning and advancing alternative normative frameworks.

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CSW70 | From normative consensus to open contestation

Contestation moved from substance to definition and procedure

1. Established language, including **gender, sexual and reproductive health, and broader rights-based language,** challenged

2. **Norm contestation through procedure:**
   - The US sought **additional time and delayed adoption**, arguing that the draft had not received sufficient review.
   - It subsequently introduced **eight amendments** targeting established language on gender and SRHR.
   - On the final day, it proposed defining **“gender” exclusively as “men and women.”**
   - An EU-sponsored **no-action motion** prevented the proposal from proceeding.

3. **Consensus gave way to voting**
   - For the **first time in CSW history**, the Agreed Conclusions were adopted by formal vote: **37 in favour | 6 abstentions | 1 against**

Procedure itself became a site of normative struggle.

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Beyond resistance: constructing a rival normative framework

Parallel spaces became platforms for transnational norm building

Alongside formal CSW70 negotiations, parallel and side events promoted **family-, motherhood- and pro-life-centred alternatives** to rights-based gender-equality frameworks.

Example:

1. **Family Watch International,** with actors linked to Burundi and Nigeria
   "Justice and equality begin in the womb" and "Motherhood as a global priority"
2. **United Families International and a coalition of conservative organizations**
   a "pro-family, pro-life" event
3. **NGO CSW70 Forum**
   "When Motherhood Disappears: Global Costs to Justice and Women's Identity"

Anti-gender actors can therefore be understood not only as norm spoilers, but potentially as counter-norm entrepreneurs seeking legitimacy for rival understandings of gender, family and rights.

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From isolated interventions to organised norm building



- CSW and its parallel spaces are functioning **as organisational platforms** through which **norm entrepreneurs** frame and advance new normative claims in relation to existing norms and understandings *(Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998)*



- **Actor continuity: Family Watch International,** active in the CSW70 spaces examined here, is also identified in the literature on transnational **pro-family/reactionary norm building** *(Sanders & Jenkins, 2025)*



These anti-feminist CSW70 interventions may therefore be understood not simply as isolated resistance, but as part of a broader process of norm building.
More broadly, multilateral institutions are not simply sites against which these actors mobilise from outside; they are also being used to advance and seek legitimacy for alternative normative claims.

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Why care is a critical site of normative contestation ?

Competing understandings of care

1. Transformative care framing

- Care as a **collective social and economic responsibility**
- **Recognise and redistribute** unpaid care
- **Decent conditions** for paid care workers
- Responsibility shared across **women and men**, households, state and other institutions

VS

2. Family/motherhood-centred framing

- Care associated more closely with **maternity and motherhood**
- **Family** positioned more centrally as a site of care
- **Care responsibility located more strongly within households and women's roles**

What is at stake is not simply how care is valued, but who is expected to provide it and where responsibility for care should lie.

From consensus to contestation: What does this mean for feminist multilateralism?

Anti-gender backlash is increasingly operating **within multilateral institutions**, moving beyond resistance towards:

Norm resistance → **Norm substitution** → **Counter-norm entrepreneurship**

Care is a critical site of this struggle because competing frames have implications for **women's roles and where responsibility for care should lie.**

Resilience alongside fragility

G20: failure to reach consensus did not translate into acceptance of contested/regressive formulations; established gender and care commitments retained broad support.

CSW70: despite unprecedented contestation, a large majority supported the Agreed Conclusions and resisted attempts to narrow *gender.*

- **Established norms remain resilient, but the consensus sustaining them can no longer be taken for granted.**
- **If the meaning of gender, care and equality can be reopened and rewritten inside the institutions that helped institutionalise them, then multilateralism itself has become a central terrain of feminist political struggle.**

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