

# TURNING THE TIDE

KEY LEARNINGS AND  
STRATEGIC PATH FOR  
NAVIGATING ANTI-GENDER  
BACKLASH IN THE  
EURO-MEDITERRANEAN  
REGION



**In  
2023 -  
2024,**

the EuroMed region has faced significant political shifts that have stalled progress towards gender equality and, in many cases, reinforced gendered and racialized inequalities. This regression reflects a broader trend of conservative authoritarian rollbacks in global democracy, characterized by a strategic campaign against feminism and LGBTQIA+ diversity. State-led reaffirmations of patriarchal norms and religious ideologies have targeted feminist movements and LGBTQIA+ communities, with governments increasingly manipulating cybercrime laws and law enforcement to exert censorship. This has led to crackdowns on women human rights defenders and the suppression of basic civic and cultural rights. Both shores of the Mediterranean have witnessed large-scale attacks on LGBTQIA+ individuals' rights and safety.

Gender equality backlashes, while part of a global patriarchal order, are fundamentally shaped by post-colonial structural disparities. In the so-called "Global North", such backlashes often manifest through restrictive institutional changes and legislative shifts. In contrast, in the "Global South", they are often intertwined in developmental challenges, war, and conflict, which can make the gendered nature of these attacks more complex to identify, as women's rights are often linked to broader economic justice and basic rights struggles. Despite these differing manifestations, the issues are interconnected; with Global North interventionism and geopolitical and economic influence structurally exacerbating the challenges and political faced in the Global South.

**“ Taking a regional and critical perspective to understand GEBs.**

A gender equality backlash (GEB), from EuroMed Rights' critical feminist and intersectional viewpoint, refers to any resistance against any form of progress made towards achieving gender equality. EuroMed Rights' regional perspective underscores that these backlashes are deeply interconnected, as they are rooted in shared patriarchal, racist, and capitalist ideologies that cross national borders. Global movements opposing gender equality often adopt similar tactics, rhetoric, and political alliances, creating a transnational network that bolsters resistance to women's and LGBTQIA+ rights. As such, advances or setbacks in one country or region can influence and inspire similar trends elsewhere. Therefore, understanding GEBs in the Euro-Mediterranean region requires a global and critical perspective to recognise and address these interconnected challenges effectively.



The following sections provide an overview of the key patterns observed through EuroMed Rights' monitoring of Gender equality backlashes (GEB) from July 2023 to October 2024.

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This report is based on an analysis of backlash dynamics observed in the Euro-Mediterranean region between July 2023 and July 2024. To access the full list of sources used in this work, please visit EuroMed Rights Backlash Map: <https://backlashmap.euromedrights.org/en/>

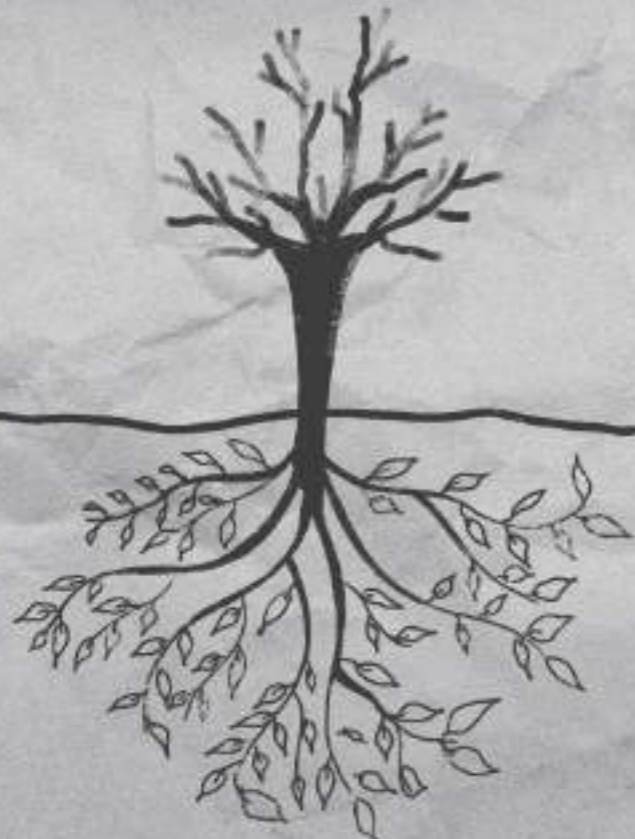
01.

## THE FAR-RIGHT'S RISE IN EUROPE

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In Europe, far-right and ultra-conservative movements have gained traction at both national and regional electoral levels. The rise of far-right parties, particularly France's Rassemblement National and Italy's Fratelli d'Italia under Giorgia Meloni who have gained significant power in domestic and EU elections. These parties have increasingly positioned gender equality initiatives as threats to traditional values and national identity, leading to a resurgence of patriarchal norms and anti-feminist rhetoric. In Italy, Meloni's government has moved to restrict reproductive rights and push back against progressive gender policies, notably opting out of endorsing a declaration promoting European policies supporting LGBTQIA+ communities.

In France, Rassemblement National has fiercely opposed gender-sensitive education and LGBTQIA+ rights. The growing power of these movements could steer the European Union's foreign policy in a more conservative direction, potentially undermining global gender equality and human rights initiatives.



02.

## ZIONIST VIOLENCE ON PALESTINIAN WOMEN AND WOMEN ADVOCATES

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Israel's war on Gaza and the surge in attacks in the West Bank since October 2023 have led to severe humanitarian crises with devastating short and long-term consequences, particularly for Palestinian women. The demolition of homes, arbitrary detentions, and the forced removal of headscarves during invasive searches are not only violations of fundamental human rights but also deliberate tactics aimed at humiliating and dehumanizing Palestinian women.

The systematic use of sexual violence and deprivation as tools of war further entrenches gender inequality, making the already harsh conditions of life under occupation even more unbearable for women and girls. UN special rapporteurs have notably expressed outrage at the deliberate, vicious and disproportionate attacks against women by Israel - including sexual violence and alleged enforced disappearances.



This intersection of gender, activism, and state violence demands a nuanced understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where the suppression of women's voices is both a symptom and a deliberate tool of broader power dynamics.



In neighboring Lebanon, the escalation of hostilities with increasingly intensive airstrikes and bombardments by Israeli forces since September 2024 has exposed national and refugee women and LGBTQIA+ people to significant violence with gendered consequences. The destruction and displacement caused by the war have restricted their access to humanitarian aid and essential services, including sexual and reproductive health care. In October 2024, an Israeli bombing destroyed the office of FEMALE, a Lebanese feminist collective that provides critical support to over 600 women and girls annually, highlighting the gendered toll of the conflict, as essential support structures for vulnerable groups are systematically dismantled amid the escalating violence.

In parallel, across both shores of the Mediterranean, a disturbing strategy to intimidate and suppress the voices of women advocating for Palestinian rights has emerged. In France, politicians and activists such as Claire Touzard, Mathilde Panot, Rima Hassan, and Rania Talala have been subjected to cyber-harassment and police interrogations for «advocating terrorism».

In the course of six months since October 7, there has been a surge in such cases, with the Paris Prosecutor's Office currently investigating 386 related to the Palestinian cause, compared to 500 total cases in 2022. This pattern of repression was mirrored in Egypt, where 16 women were detained following a peaceful protest in solidarity with Palestinian and Sudanese women.

Reports of sexual violence during their detention reveal the likely use of gendered police violence as a tool to punish and deter women activists. In Jordan, Hiba Abu Taha, a Jordanian journalist, was sentenced to one year in prison under the country's contentious cybercrime law after publishing an investigative report alleging Jordan's involvement in facilitating trade with Israel during the Gaza conflict. Initially arrested and handed a three-month sentence, her term was extended upon appeal. She was charged with "inciting strife and spreading false news." The case has drawn criticism from international human rights organisations denouncing Jordan's targeting of journalists and pro-Palestine activists.

## ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN TURKEY AND TUNISIA

### TURKEY & TUNISIA

Turkey and Tunisia, once seen as regional leaders in women's rights, are experiencing significant regressions under electoral authoritarianism, threatening gender equality.

In Turkey, President Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) are eroding state secularism by promoting policies that restrict women's rights under the guise of religious conservatism. Erdoğan's emphasis on boosting birth rates pressures women into traditional roles, and new legislation may force them to adopt their husband's surname after marriage, disregarding a Constitutional Court ruling. His government also weaponizes hate speech against the LGBTQIA+ community to marginalize them further.

In Tunisia, President Saied's 2021 coup has led to a marked decline in gender equality, with his regime targeting feminists and queer activists and arresting female activists and politicians. A draft law proposed in October 2023 threatens to stifle civil society, particularly feminist organisations, by imposing government control over their operations and funding. This legal crackdown accompanies a rise in hate speech, femicides, and the marginalization of women, particularly in rural areas, as well as a decline in healthcare services. As in Turkey, LGBTQIA+ activists in Tunisia are facing an intensified crackdown. Recent incidents include increased police harassment, arbitrary arrests, and the forced outing of individuals suspected of same-sex relationships or gender nonconformity. Authorities have amplified public denunciations, framing LGBTQIA+ rights as a threat to «Tunisian identity» and calling for the community to be monitored and suppressed.

Both leaders exploit anti-gender policies to bolster their authority, using the guise of protecting traditional values to entrench their power. This reflects a broader trend where authoritarian regimes suppress women's rights as a means to consolidate control.



PROGRESS STOPPED

Across the region, backlashes in Gender Equality have manifested through a pattern of resistance to legislative progress, reflecting a broadening undercurrent of societal, religious, and political conservatism.

France has offered glaring examples of resistance to incorporating feminist principles into legal frameworks, opposing EU efforts to define rape as lack of consent and rejecting a menstrual leave draft law.

In Lebanon, initial efforts to decriminalize same-sex intercourse met with strong opposition, leading to counter-legislation aimed at reinforcing existing discriminatory norms. Less controversial feminist proposals to reform the Moudawana (Family Code) in Morocco have also faced harsh resistance from conservatives and from men's groups intent on preserving patriarchal structures, with activists subjected to harassment and threats.

In Cyprus, resistance to LGBTQIA+ rights is evident in the government's refusal to discuss the legalisation of same-sex marriage. The Turkish government is attempting to enshrine a heteronormative definition of family in its constitution, further marginalising LGBTQIA+ communities.

In the monitored period, European governments have increasingly adopted restrictive, ideologically-driven policies aimed at undermining women's bodily autonomy, reproductive rights, and LGBTQIA+ equality. Meloni's far-right government in Italy, has become a notable example of this trend. In 2023, the government ordered a halt to the registration of children born to same-sex couples. By early 2024, the Senate approved an amendment allowing anti-abortion groups to participate in abortion counseling services and family planning centers. In Ireland, a publicly funded IVF scheme has excluded same-sex couples, single individuals, and heterosexual couples requiring donor eggs or sperm, marginalising those outside traditional family structures. Meanwhile, in France, President Macron's call for «demographic rearmament» signals a shift toward pro-natal policies that may prioritize population growth over reproductive autonomy.

Outside of Europe, Turkish president Erdoğan has similarly expressed concerns over declining birth rates and suggested upcoming measures that could further encroach on women's reproductive choices and autonomy.





The region is witnessing a troubling increase in violence against Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs), with cases emerging across multiple countries like Algeria, Tunisia, and beyond (notably in France, Jordan, Morocco as addressed elsewhere in this document).

In Algeria, authorities detained two journalists for covering protests by women entrepreneurs against governmental mistreatment, signaling a clampdown on free expression. The arrest of 'artist' Djamila Ben Touis on terrorism charges underscores the escalating repression against dissent, particularly towards those supporting peaceful democratic movements.

In Tunisia, under President Kais Saied's authoritarian regime, the persecution of WHRDs and feminists has intensified. The arrests have included political figures (Abir Moussi), journalists such as Chadha Haj M'barek, lawyers and columnists such as Sonia Dahmani, defenders of migrants' rights (Saadia Mosbah et Shérifa Riahi). Others are being prosecuted for undermining state security (Bochra Bel Haj H'mida, in exile and Chaima Issa arrested and then released) or for crimes of opinion, including the lawyers (Dalila M'saddek et Islam hamza).

Organized political, police and civil violence against LGBTQIA+ communities has been another consistent trend in GE backlashes across the EuroMed region. In Spain, particularly in Madrid, recent legislative changes have significantly weakened protections for transgender individuals, making discrimination and minor assaults based on gender identity or sexual orientation non-punishable offenses. These changes also undermine the legal framework for trans and intersex individuals, particularly in education and public administration. Similarly, Lebanon and Morocco have seen extremist religious groups openly calling for violence against LGBTQIA+ communities, with human rights organisations documenting state-enforced threats, arrests, and smear campaigns aimed at silencing activists. In Turkey, the political landscape ahead of the 2024 elections is increasingly hostile, with petitions and bills seeking to criminalise LGBTQIA+ organizations and their activities.

In Egypt, legal studies have exposed how the authorities systematically persecute LGBTQIA+ individuals under the guise of custom morality, eroding constitutional protections and due process rights. In August 2023, Jordan's new Cybercrime Law introduced vague provisions that endanger LGBTQIA+ individuals by threatening rights to free expression and privacy. The law penalises content deemed «pornographic» or that «incites immorality,» potentially targeting digital content related to gender and sexuality, and putting those advocating for LGBTQIA+ rights at risk.

## FRANCE'S ANTI-MUSLIM "LAÏCITÉ" AND THE RISE OF FEMONATIONALISM IN EUROPE

In 2023 and 2024, France continued to enforce its long-controversial notion of «laïcité,» or secularism, through policies that specifically targeted visible expressions of Islamic faith. The French government implemented a ban on wearing headscarves in sports competitions, which disproportionately affects Muslim women and athletes. In 2024, this restriction was further expanded to include abayas—traditional long dresses worn by a minority of female Muslim students in schools. These measures not only single out Muslim women but also infringe upon individual freedoms, raising significant concerns about religious discrimination. The enforcement of such policies exacerbates the climate of Islamophobia in the country, reinforcing negative stereotypes and marginalising Muslim communities.



Femonationalism refers to the use of feminist discourse to justify xenophobic or racist discourses, actions, or policies, particularly towards immigrants. This concept highlights how certain groups use the defence of women's rights as a pretext to reinforce anti-immigration and security discourses or measures, by suggesting that migrant men represent a threat to local women.

This trend aligns with a broader wave of femonationalism sweeping across Europe, where the rhetoric of women's rights is increasingly weaponised to justify anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim policies. For instance, in Italy, the far-right government led by Giorgia Meloni has implemented measures aimed at curbing immigration while framing these actions as protective of Italian women and families. Meloni has openly criticised practices associated with Islamic culture, linking them to gender oppression, and has sought to restrict the rights of migrants and asylum seekers in the name of safeguarding women's rights.

Similarly, in Denmark and Sweden, the rise of far-right parties in recent years has led to proposals aimed at limiting the wearing of hijabs and other religious symbols in public spaces, invoking the need to «protect» women's freedom and autonomy from perceived patriarchal oppression. Such framing often overlooks the intersectional realities of those affected, particularly Muslim women, who navigate a complex landscape of discrimination and exclusion. The ongoing debate over laïcité in France thus reflects deep societal divisions across Europe and highlights the urgent need for a more inclusive approach to religious diversity in public life—one that genuinely prioritises the rights and freedoms of all women, regardless of their background.

1. Frisk, S., & Gillette, M. B. (2019). Sweden's Burka Ban: Policy Proposals, Problematisations, and the Production of Swedishness. *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 27(4), 271–284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2019.1668847>; *The Local*. 2018. «Danish parliament passes ban on burqa and niqab». See: <https://www.thelocal.dk/20180531/danish-parliament-passes-ban-on-burqa-and-niqab>

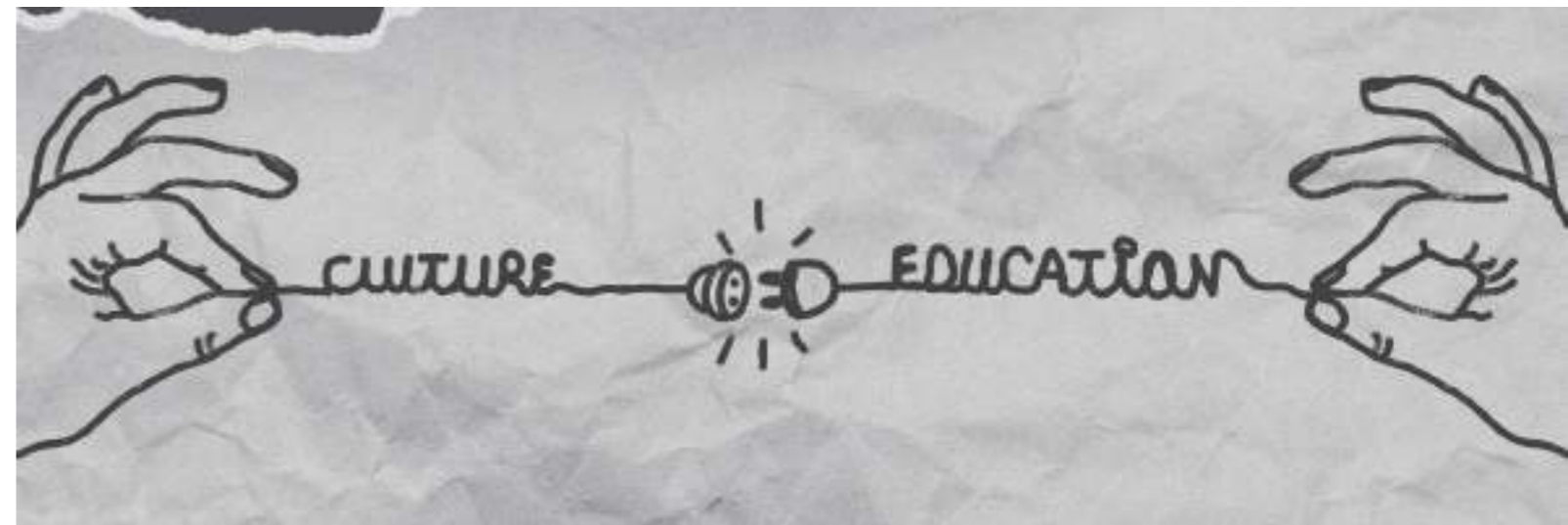
## CONTROL OVER SOCIO-CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

Governments and anti-rights organizations are increasingly tightening their grip on socio-cultural and educational content in resistance to progress in gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights. This backlash is manifest in divisive a global rhetoric that exploit fears around gender and sexual diversity. In France, the Senate's decision to ban gender-inclusive language, supported by President Macron's call to resist the «tides of time,» highlights a resistance to progressive changes.

In Italy, the Education Ministry's withdrawal of LGBTQIA+ advocate, Anna Paola Concia's appointment, following pressure from conservative factions, reflects a broader push to roll back inclusive education. In Morocco, the government has taken steps to prevent foreign educational institutions from addressing homosexuality, reflecting a broader effort to suppress non-heteronormative content. In a similar vain, Turkey has gone introduced school courses aimed at promoting so-called traditional family values.

In the realm of entertainment, the film «Barbie» faced ban requests in Lebanon and Algeria, with authorities claiming it contradicts moral and religious values by promoting homosexuality and gender change. Meanwhile, Turkey has escalated its censorship of content that challenges traditional norms, imposing fines on streaming services and cancelling events related to LGBTQIA+ issues. In France, President Macron's controversial defense of actor Gérard Depardieu, accused of sexual assault and harassment, reflects a vehement resistance to accountability when it involves cultural icons.

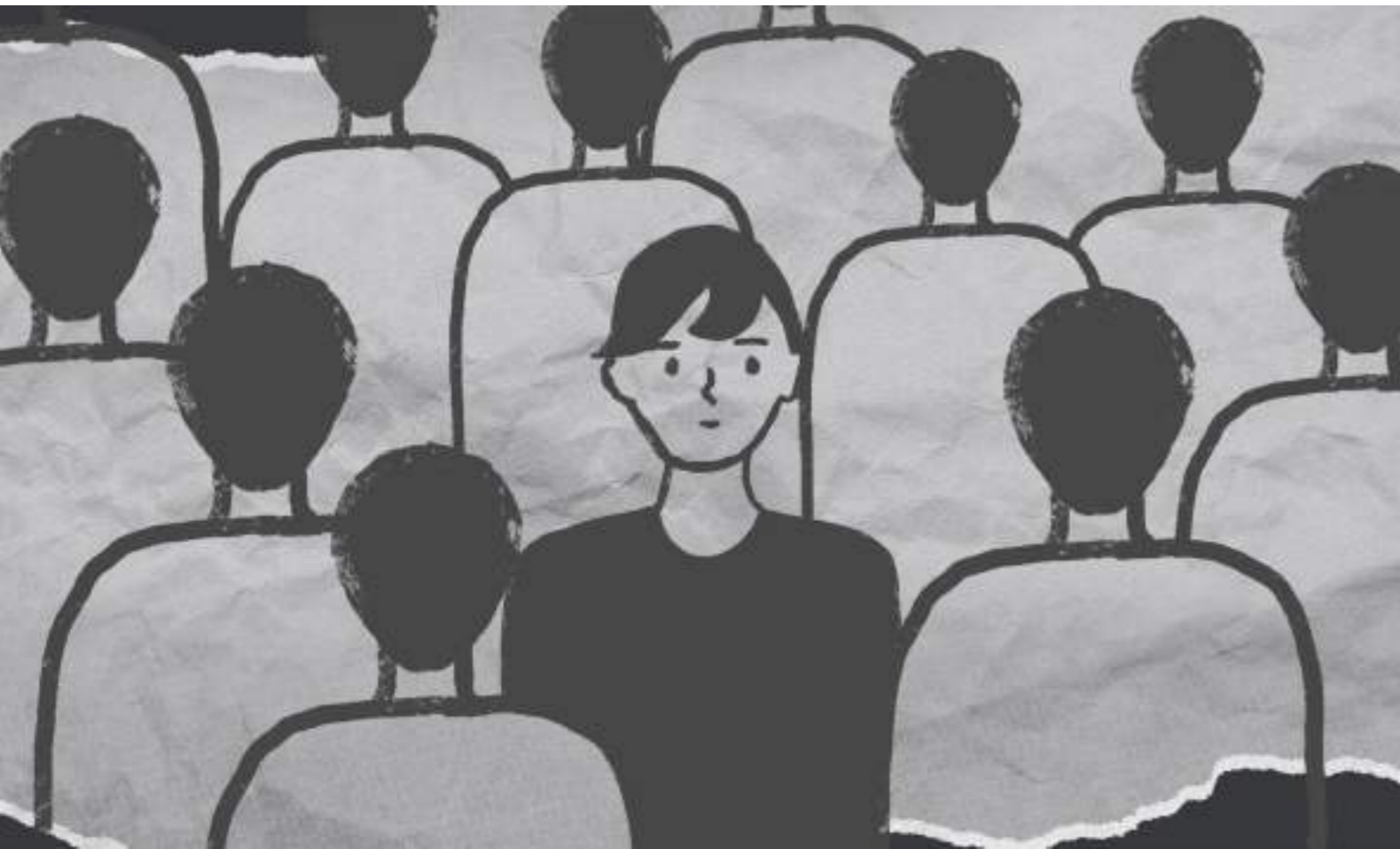
This widespread effort to control educational and cultural narratives underscores a determined attempt to reverse advances in gender equality and reinforce conservative social structures.



## SECURITY FORCES' GENDERED VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT SETTINGS AND DISPUTED TERRITORIES

One trend observed in the monitoring of GE backlashes in regions like Palestine (see trend n.6 above) and Syria, has been the difficulty in identifying security forces' gendered abuses in conflict zones or disputed territories. While in such contexts, women, girls, and LGBTQIA+ individuals face increased risks of violence – including sexual, restrictions on freedom of expression and limited information access make documenting these abuses difficult. While some cases, like the reported attacks on vocal Sahrawi activist Sultana Khaya by Moroccan security forces, gain attention, many such incidents likely go unreported.

In Syria, media coverage of gender equality backlashes is scarce, hampered by state control over reporting. In-depth investigations reveal that 74% of those in urgent need of nutritional aid are women and girls, and female-headed households are particularly vulnerable. Reports also document that women activists and those linked to male activists are frequently detained and subjected to sexual violence in makeshift detention sites, where they endure sexual violence and torture.



## WAY FORWARD

This section presents recommendations for EuroMed Rights (and/or other feminist organizations) to pursue monitoring, research and advocacy efforts in addressing some of the multifaceted GEB trends identified above.

### Mapping and Supporting Resistance Strategies

Complement the GEB mapping by monitoring and documenting resistance strategies employed by women's rights and LGBTQIA+ movements across the region. By connecting struggles and insights and learning across different regions, EuroMed Rights can enhance the understanding of how feminist movements innovate and adapt to intensifying GEBs. This can contribute to building strong alliances among WHRDs and LGBTQIA+ groups across the region.

### Respond to Gendered Violence and Backlash in Conflict Zones

Advocate against and raise awareness of gendered violence perpetrated by state and non-state actors in conflict zones and disputed territories like Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon. Support and build alliances with feminists and feminist groups working in these areas, and expose the targeting of women advocates defending these causes - notably pro-Palestine WHRDs censored and targeted across the region.

### In-depth analysis of Foreign Policy and Funding Streams in relation to GEBs

To effectively counter the global rollback of women's and LGBTQIA+ rights, it is essential to scrutinize how the foreign policies of European Institutions and State Members can be leveraged for this purpose. Strategic collaboration with WROs and Feminist groups to document the gendered impact of European far-right movements in both domestic and foreign policy contexts would be particularly beneficial. Given that the backlash against gender equality is significantly fueled by international funding—far exceeding the financial support available to progressive movements—further research into the unscrutinized funding streams that underpin these anti-rights movements is needed.<sup>(2)</sup> Disturbingly, some organizations promoting anti-LGBTQIA+ narratives in Africa have been found to receive funding from Global North bilateral donors, whose own policies ostensibly support LGBTQIA+ rights, highlighting a critical disconnect and the urgent need for more rigorous research on such funding sources in the EuroMed region.<sup>(3)</sup>





### **Amplify the voices and Protect Women Human Rights Defenders**

Develop platforms and safe spaces for Women Human Rights Defenders to share their experiences and struggles. Amplify their voices internationally, ensuring they receive visibility and support, particularly those facing violence and persecution under authoritarian states. Potentially provide financial and legal support to WHRDs in countries with shrinking civic space, or support structures that do so.

### **Engage in Strategic Policy Advocacy by Proactively Alerting on GEB**

Leverage the Backlash Map as a strategic tool to alert on and counteract regressive gender policies. Mobilize key political, media, and civil society actors to collectively challenge backlash movements and apply targeted pressure on responsible social actors. Develop an alert mechanism that contributes to coordinated strategic interventions that protect human rights and advance gender equality. Simultaneously, reposition feminist perspectives and transformative policies at the heart of political debates in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

### **Research and Counter Backlashes in Educational Spaces**

Conduct in-depth, locally grounded research to uncover how anti-rights groups and governments challenge comprehensive sexuality education and push for the de-secularization of curricula. Use this research to advocate for the protection of gender equality content in academic spaces and to resist efforts to roll back educational progress.

Push for the inclusion of comprehensive sexuality education and gender studies in school curricula across the region. Advocate against media censorship and control of socio-cultural and educational content that undermines gender equality. Promote inclusive and diverse narratives in media and education to counteract regressive policies.

2. ALIGN. 2023. "Facing the backlash: What is fuelling anti-feminist and anti-democratic forces?," Page 7. Provost, C. (2023) Progressive cash for the anti-LGBTQI backlash? How aid donors and 'feminist' governments have funded backers of Uganda's deadly Anti-Homosexuality Bill. Berlin: Institute for Journalism and Social Change and Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy Report ([centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Progressive-cash-for-the-anti-LGBTQI-backlash\\_.pdf](https://centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Progressive-cash-for-the-anti-LGBTQI-backlash_.pdf))

3. Ibid.



## ACRONYMS

### **AKP:**

Justice and Development Party

### **EU:**

European Union

### **FIV:**

Euro mediterranean

### **GE:**

Gender Equality

### **GEB:**

Gender Equality Backlash

### **IVF:**

In Vitro Fertilization

### **LGBTQIA+:**

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual / Aromantic, Plus other sexual and gender identities

### **UN:**

United Nations

### **WHRD:**

Women Human Rights Defender

### **WRO:**

Women Rights Organisation



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