

Transnational Tactics and National Pushback: The Two-Level Strategy of Anti-Gender Movements in Latin America

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Abstract

This paper examines the strategic two-level approach employed by anti-gender movements in Latin America to counter progressive legislation and human rights frameworks. At the national level, these movements target gender equality initiatives through discursive attacks on the so-called “gender ideology,” while at the international level, they work to undermine the very human rights bodies that guarantee these protections. Through comparative case studies of Guatemala and Paraguay, the research analyzes how these movements mobilize religious and secular arguments to frame gender equality as a foreign imposition, threatening national sovereignty and traditional values. The paper demonstrates how these movements have evolved from religious opposition to strategic secularism, allowing them to broaden their appeal beyond reproductive rights to oppose diverse gender equality initiatives. The findings reveal coordinated transnational networks that simultaneously dismantle progressive policies domestically while strategically infiltrating international organizations to weaken human rights protections from within.

Keywords: Anti-gender Activism; Conservative Backlash; Gender Equality; Gender Ideology; Human Rights; Inter-American System of Human Rights; Latin America; Public Policy; Transnational Social Movements

Introduction

Over the past decade, Latin America¹ has witnessed the emergence of politically influential movements that mobilize support through emotional appeals. These movements—referred to by scholars as “anti-gender” or “anti-rights” groups—attack what they label “gender ideology” to

¹ This paper refers to Latin America as the set of countries on the American continent where languages derived from Latin (Spanish, Portuguese, and French) are spoken, as opposed to English-speaking America. Historically, Latin America was defined in opposition to Anglo-America, not simply as a matter of the principal language of government but as a consequence of competing imperial ambitions. Throughout time, Latin America has consolidated as a political-cultural continent (Ardao 2019) with shared struggles and social victories.

discredit social science research on gender-based inequality (CIM 2017). Formed by religious and secular groups, these movements work as political actors seeking to roll back policy and legal advances related to human rights, feminism, and social justice across the American continent.

Campaigns by these movements promote fear about any Latin American government initiatives supporting gender equality. Their agenda opposes openly progressive legislation, including same-sex marriage and adoption by same-sex couples, transgender rights, comprehensive sex education in schools, sexual and reproductive rights, and abortion access. Importantly, their impact expands beyond these issues to other policy areas, such as national security—evidenced by their opposition to Colombia’s 2017 peace accords—and democratic governance—shown in their attacks on a gender parity bill in Paraguay in 2018.

This paper shows anti-rights groups use a two-level strategy to repeal progressive legislation and policies throughout Latin America. The first level is discrediting rights guaranteed and advanced primarily by ratified international human rights treaties. These groups argue that progressive legal frameworks are impositions from foreign powers and, therefore, represent a modern type of colonialism. Following this logic, their mission is not only to defend patriarchal values—the so-called “traditional values,” rooted in religious interpretations of “family”—but also to protect national sovereignty (Motta et al. 2018).

At the second level, these groups seek to undermine the international bodies that created the human rights treaties they oppose. This weakening is accomplished by registering their own civil society organizations or placing representatives to lobby in the same institutions they reject, like the United Nations (UN) or the Organization of American States (OAS) (McEwen and Narayanaswamy 2023). By adopting this strategy, they transform their rhetoric from explicitly religious arguments to more secular language designed to block human rights resolutions. This transition allows them to navigate the political landscape more effectively while advancing their agenda.

Methodology

This study adopts qualitative research design to examine the strategies and impacts of anti-gender movements in Latin America. The methodology is structured into three main components: a historical overview, exploratory case studies, and desk research on transnational dynamics. Following Robert K. Yin (2018), these research strategies were selected based on the needs of the three different sections: the first section—historical analysis—establishes the context of the main discussion; the second section presents case studies, which serve as the optimal strategy to examine a contemporary

set of events happening at a national level; and the third section employs desk research, to demonstrate evidence of anti-gender strategies used in international human rights organizations.

The research starts with an overview of recent historical events to establish the background surrounding the emergence and evolution of what anti-gender movements now label as “gender ideology.” This involves tracing its roots from religious discourse and its posterior transition to secular frameworks, focusing on both pro and anti-gender ideological shifts since the 1990s. While this topic is extensively discussed in existing literature, this section provides essential context for understanding the subsequent case studies and analyses.

The focus then shifts to two case studies: Guatemala and Paraguay. Despite significant differences in population composition, dominant religions, and historical contexts, these countries were selected because they consistently promote domestic and international anti-gender policies. The case studies utilize various secondary sources, including bills and approved laws, policy papers, governmental documents such as national policy programs, media coverage, and scholarly works, to evaluate how these countries limit or roll back gender-related policies. Particular attention is given to their rejection of incorporating gender perspectives into education and governmental programs.

These case studies focus exclusively on national policymaking. However, part of the rationale for selecting Guatemala and Paraguay is that their similar strategies to resist gender equality do not stop at the national level but are also expressed through foreign policy in international forums. One example is their consistent use of footnotes to challenge progressive language in international human rights resolutions.²

Finally, the paper conducts desk research for an impact analysis at the level of the inter-American system of human rights. This section looks into transnational relations between anti-gender actors, exploring how these movements lobby and influence decision-making inside international human rights bodies. This final section uses a literature review of academic papers, official documents from international organizations, and institutional reports to identify and analyze the strategies employed by anti-gender movements at the regional level. By examining domestic and regional dimensions, this methodology provides a robust framework for understanding how anti-gender movements operate across multiple levels.

² Both states have similar stances in international forums. Guatemala and Paraguay show a pattern of adding footnotes to resolutions that resist the adoption of progressive gender and human rights language, emphasizing their adherence to national laws and rejecting terms like “gender,” “intersectionality,” and “reproductive rights” as undefined or non-consensual. This action seeks to limit the scope and impact of international agreements on gender equality and feminist policies within their domestic legal frameworks. An example can be found in the footnotes of the Declaration of Panama from the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM 2022, 2).

From Religious Opposition to Strategic Secularism: The Evolution of Anti-Gender Movements in Latin America

The 1990s marked significant milestones for gender equality. Globally, the UN's 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo saw 179 countries adopt a program recognizing reproductive rights as fundamental human rights (UNFPA 2014). The 1995 Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women resulted in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, advocating shared power between women and men in all spheres as key to achieving gender equality (UN 1995). In Latin America, advocacy efforts at OAS succeeded in approving the Belém do Pará Convention in 1994, the first international treaty addressing violence against women as a human rights violation rather than a domestic matter (Poole 2013).

These advances caused important opposition, with the Catholic church emerging as one of the key opponents. The Vatican viewed the UN's institutionalization of gender mainstreaming as a threat to its traditional theology and doctrine. Ahead of the 1994 Cairo Conference, the Holy See condemned the event's focus, accusing it of promoting abortion and homosexuality (Cowell 1994). Joseph Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI, introduced the term "gender ideology" for the first time in *Salt of the Earth* (1997) and expanded on it in subsequent writings (2004). He argued that gender equality had turned into an ideology, undermining traditional family structures and promoting a view of sexuality that contradicted Christian teachings.

Meanwhile, Latin American feminists and broader human rights movements emerged as influential forces in the public sphere in the early 2000s, achieving significant advancements in sexual and reproductive rights and LGBTQ+ issues. These developments coincided with a wave of elected left-wing governments across Latin America (Tabbush and Caminotti 2020). However, as these leftist governments were replaced by right-wing candidates in the mid-2010s, the anti-gender backlash began to gain momentum.

This political shift created the perfect environment for anti-gender movements to flourish. In the 2010s, conservative movements, initially prominent in Europe, spread to Latin America and made the fight against the so-called "gender ideology" their primary goal. The anti-gender discourse, no longer confined to the institution of the Catholic Church, intersected with other political projects and a more extensive set of actors. During this period, this discourse transitioned from the religious sphere to a nonreligious one. Religious activists learned to blend religious and secular arguments, impacting political interventions more effectively. While Christian and Catholic values remained a fundamental

pillar for the public to bond with these movements, their public articulation was increasingly built on secular justifications. The literature describes this blend as “strategic secularism” (Vaggione 2005).

An example of this secularization was the transnational movement *Con mis hijos no te metas* (CMHNTM), which emerged in Peru in 2016 to protest the inclusion of gender perspectives in the national educational plan. The movement’s key message, translated to English as “Do not mess with my children,” resonates emotionally with many parents (Carpio Obando 2023). The power of this message lies in its simplicity and ability to trigger moral panic—after all, how come caring parents could neglect “obscure forces” trying to harm their children and even inflict sexual violence on them? This movement and its methods for massive in-person and online mobilizations rapidly spread to other countries, including Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, and Paraguay (Ipas 2023).

According to Quequejana (2021), the CMHNTM movement has established significant links with other conservative and anti-gender movements through its alliances with local “pro-life” and “pro-family” organizations across various Latin American countries. These connections are not incidental but are part of a deliberate strategy to bolster the movement’s visibility and political influence. For instance, in Ecuador and Mexico, national “pro-life” marches led by the National Front for the Family and other religious groups prominently featured the CMHNTM slogan and colors (López Pacheco 2021). Such partnerships enhance the impact of anti-gender activism by uniting diverse groups under a common banner, fostering a transnational network. Additionally, the movement receives support from conservative organizations from Europe, such as CitizenGo and HazteOír, which provide funding and strategic assistance (Martínez 2021; Righetti et al. 2025). This cross-border cooperation facilitates the adaptation of effective tactics and the creation of local replicas, ensuring a wider and more coordinated impact.

Anti-gender movements in Latin America also have strong ties with conservative and evangelical groups from the United States, such as Capitol Ministries, forming a coordinated front against gender and LGBTQ+ rights (Acuña 2019; Segnini and Cordero 2019). These alliances are built on shared ideological commitments to traditional family values and opposition to what these groups term “gender ideology.” US evangelical groups have exported the “know-hows”—their strategies and resources, including financial support and advocacy training—to Latin American counterparts, helping to amplify their influence (McEwen and Narayanaswamy 2023). Such transnational advocacy networks influence national, regional, and international political dynamics, shape public discussions,

and position policy agendas across borders, leveraging religious and secular arguments to resist progressive gender policies (Righetti et al. 2025).

In sum, carrying out conservative agendas under the banner of children's rights and the protection of traditional families from "gender ideology" offers a plasticity that unites religious and non-religious actors against feminist and LGBTQ+ movements. Moreover, it serves to justify discrimination and gender-based violence. It is also a tool to legitimize the opposition to progressive laws and public policies, targeting the efforts to promote women's autonomy for decision-making in every aspect of life, intersectionality, and sexual orientation and gender identity-related protections.

Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Anti-Gender Movements: Belonging, Backlash, and Transnational Resistance

The recent conservative wave in Latin America has reframed gender-related human rights issues as threats to traditional values and religious doctrines, positioning them within the broader narrative of "gender ideology" as a cultural and moral danger (Biroli and Caminotti 2020). This discourse labels gender equality initiatives and policies as foreign impositions, undermining national sovereignty and societal values (Biroli 2020). To examine this phenomenon, this section analyzes the two-level strategy employed by anti-gender movements: attacking progressive policies at the national level while simultaneously undermining international human rights institutions that protect or expand these rights. Understanding the sociopolitical and cultural factors driving this resistance is crucial to contextualizing the broader conservative backlash against gender equality.

The available literature highlights the interplay of nationalist identity, fear of societal change, and the framing of gender norms as threats to cultural integrity and state sovereignty. This paper draws on two key theoretical frameworks to analyze these dynamics. First, Nira Yuval-Davis's concept of the politics of belonging (2006) explains how inclusion and exclusion are socially constructed through narratives of identity and nationhood. Second, Susan Faludi's backlash theory (1991) interprets opposition to gender equality as a reactionary response to feminist advancements. More recent analyses by Zaremborg, Tabbush, and Friedman (2021) further apply backlash theory to Latin America, showing how anti-gender movements mobilize against progressive norms as part of a broader reaction to social change.

These frameworks offer distinct yet complementary insights into how resistance to gender equality is structured and sustained. As Yuval-Davis (2006) explains, the politics of belonging focuses

on defining who belongs within a national or cultural identity. In anti-gender mobilizations, this framework helps explain how traditional gender roles are framed as essential to national identity, while progressive gender norms are depicted as foreign threats. The following section will examine how this occurs in Guatemala and Paraguay, where gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights are framed as external impositions undermining societal values. Internationally, this rhetoric aligns with broader nationalist discourses, allowing transnational movements to position their resistance as a defense against Western cultural imperialism (Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Kuteleva 2024).

While the politics of belonging emphasizes identity and cultural narratives, backlash theory highlights the reactionary nature of anti-gender movements. These movements often emerge in response to perceived threats to traditional structures, particularly in periods of rapid social change. For instance, backlash movements frequently employ securitization strategies, portraying gender equality initiatives as existential dangers to national stability and family values (Zaremborg, Tabbush, and Friedman 2021). This is particularly evident in Latin America, where international organizations such as the UN are accused of imposing “gender ideology” on sovereign nations (McEwen and Narayanaswamy 2023).

Despite their differences, both frameworks converge in recognizing how anti-gender movements instrumentalize discourses of “protection” and “sovereignty” to mobilize support. At the national level, these movements use cultural nationalism to consolidate power and resist progressive norms. Internationally, they exploit transnational networks and media to propagate anti-gender rhetoric and build alliances, as seen in campaigns against comprehensive sexual education and reproductive rights across Latin America and Eastern Europe (Kováts and Pető 2017). By applying both the politics of belonging and backlash theory, this analysis sheds light on the mechanisms that sustain anti-gender mobilization and the broader ideological strategies used to resist gender equality.

Gender Backlash and Policy Reversals: Comparative Analysis of Guatemala and Paraguay

The countries in the Americas are experiencing a reversal of legal principles that were once taken for granted, fueled by disinformation campaigns linking anything related to the term “gender” to threats against society. Transnational anti-gender movements affect nations with diverse economic sizes, whether predominantly Catholic or Evangelical, spanning from the Southern to the Northern regions of the continent. Beyond being just a trend, the boogeyman of “gender ideology” has become part of everyday political life, dictating decisions taken in the legislative, judicial, and executive spheres.

This section examines two Latin American countries that are not only geographically distant from each other but also differ in several aspects, such as population composition, dominant religion, and historical context. Although Paraguay is four times larger than Guatemala in terms of landmass, the latter has nearly three times the population. Guatemala's religious landscape is nearly evenly split between Evangelical Christianity (44%) and Catholicism (42%) (Statista 2024a) with a large Indigenous population (44%) according to the 2018 census (IWIGIA 2024), while Paraguay is predominantly Catholic (80%) with minimal Evangelical presence (Statista 2024b) and a much smaller Indigenous population (2%), as reported in the 2022 census (INE 2024).

Despite these demographic differences, both Guatemala and Paraguay have pursued parallel paths to strengthen legal frameworks protecting women's human rights and combating gender-based violence over the past three decades. Their legislative evolution follows similar trajectories, beginning with adopting international conventions before developing increasingly specialized domestic legislation. While this paper does not explore the underlying causes of these progressive advances, it is worth noting that this pattern reflects a broader regional trend across Latin America (see Colmán 2022 for a comprehensive analysis of successful feminist movements in the region). Table 1 illustrates the chronological development of women's rights legislation in both countries.

Table 1. Comparative Evolution of Women's Rights Legislation in Guatemala and Paraguay (1982-2016)

<i>Thematic Area</i>	Guatemala		Paraguay	
	<i>Year</i>	<i>Law</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Law</i>
International Treaty Implementation	1982	CEDAW Convention, approved by Decree-Law 49-82	1986	CEDAW Convention, approved by Law 1215/86
Regional Treaty Implementation	1994	Belém do Pará Convention, approved by Decree 69-94	1995	Belém do Pará Convention, approved by Law 605/95
Domestic Violence	1996	Law to Prevent, Punish and Eradicate Domestic Violence (Decree 97-96)	2000	Law Against Domestic Violence (Law 1600/00)
Women's Promotion and Development	1999	Law for the Dignification and Integral Promotion of Women (Decree 7-99)	2015	Law Public Policies for Rural Women (Law 5446/15)
Gender-Based Violence	2008	Law against Femicide and Other Forms of Violence Against Women (Decree 22-2008)	2016	Comprehensive Protection of Women against All Forms of Violence (Law 5777/16)
Sexual Violence and Human Trafficking	2009	Law against Sexual Violence, Exploitation and Trafficking of Persons (Decree 9-2009)	2012	Comprehensive Law against Human Trafficking (Law 4788/12)
Missing Women	2016	Law for the Immediate Search for Missing Women (Decree Number 9-2016)	-	-

Source: Author

Evangelical Influence and Legislative Rollbacks in Guatemala

Anti-gender movements have notably impacted Guatemalan public policy through their influence on legislation and public opinion. These movements often draw on religious and conservative values, emphasizing preserving traditional family structures. In recent years, anti-gender movements in Guatemala have actively proposed legislative measures that aim to influence public policy by challenging gender and sexual diversity rights. Further analysis indicates that these movements utilize fear-based strategies, portraying gender equality initiatives as threats to traditional values and societal stability (Vaggione 2022).

In 2015, the evangelical theologian Jimmy Morales ran for office on a platform opposing abortion and same-sex marriage, promising to uphold these values as part of his governmental agenda (Páramo Bernal 2020). With over 67% of the votes, he became President of Guatemala for the term 2016-2020. Morales publicly supported the controversial Law for the Protection of Life and Family (also known as Initiative 5272), introduced in Congress in 2017 (Barrueto 2018). This bill proposed severe penalties, including imprisonment for involuntary abortions, stricter punishments for other abortion cases, a ban on same-sex marriage, and the prohibition of sexual education (Congreso de Guatemala 2017). Although it came close to approval on March 8, 2022, with the vote of 152 of the 160 deputies, then-President Alejandro Giammattei refrained from ratifying it.

In 2020, President Giammattei announced the elimination of the Secretariat for Women (Secretaría Presidencial de la Mujer - Seprem), to be replaced with a Presidential Commission on Women. He claimed that Seprem's creation in 2000 was unconstitutional because it was established by executive order rather than legislative approval. This change left Seprem without leadership for four months, resulting in the loss of forty jobs and the exclusion of gender-related issues from key COVID-19 response meetings (Quintela 2020a).

This move generated significant criticism from women's organizations, demanding that the government either preserve or strengthen the Seprem instead of replacing it with a commission with fewer functions and lower status, arguing that this would weaken support for women's rights (UN OHCHR 2020). Legal experts also disputed the government's claim of unconstitutionality, stating that the executive had the authority to create such agencies through agreements. While the government justified its decision as a matter of legality, it faced criticism for potentially undermining women's rights and diminishing the effectiveness of gender policy implementation (Quintela 2020b).

Another example is the Law to Guarantee the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents against Gender Identity Disorders (also known as Initiative 5940), led by a group of

twenty-one Congress members in 2021. The bill, which has not passed, aimed to impose restrictions on gender identity and sexual orientation education in schools and would also require media outlets to identify programs with transgender content—which the bill equates to pornography—as content that is “not recommended” for those under eighteen years of age. The proposal faced criticism from LGBTQ+ advocacy groups and international human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, but has not been archived yet (HRW 2022).

Along the same line, the government recently approved the Public Policy for Safeguarding Life and Strengthening Family Structures for 2021-2032 (Gobierno de Guatemala 2021). Spearheaded by Gianmattei, this initiative garnered support from governmental figures, representatives of religious groups, academic institutions, and international collaborators. It focuses on protecting life from conception and across all life stages—this protection is mentioned twenty-three times throughout the document. Although education is not the primary focus of this initiative, the Ministry of Education is the leading authority responsible for implementing this policy (López Molina 2023). Given that this initiative encompasses all life stages from conception through elderly adulthood, the assignment of “family protection” to the Ministry of Education represents an unusual policy decision.

The initiative claims Guatemala’s legal framework for women’s rights as part of its foundation and supporting its strategic objectives, despite completely omitting the term “gender” throughout the document.³ This reflects a broader regional trend of separating gender equality from policies and laws intended to promote it. By grounding this policy in women’s rights legislation while shifting focus to family rights, it ultimately fails to address the root causes of gender inequality.

Catholic Conservatism and the “Gender Ideology” Pushback in Paraguay

In Paraguay, opposition to gender-related policies gained momentum during Fernando Lugo’s presidency (2008-2012), when “pro-family” groups and conservative actors heavily criticized a comprehensive sexual education framework. The National Council of Education and Culture opposed the proposed Comprehensive Sexuality Education framework, citing violations of fundamental rights such as freedom of teaching and the irreplaceable responsibility of the family in education. Amplified by religious groups, this opposition led to the framework’s suspension (Tabbush and Caminotti 2020).

³ The Public Policy for the Protection of Life and Institutionality of the Family is based on, among other laws, the Law for the Dignity and Comprehensive Promotion of Women (Decree 7-99), the Law against Femicide and Other Forms of Violence against Women (Decree 22-2008), and the Law against Sexual Violence, Exploitation, and Trafficking in Persons (Number 09-2009).

In 2017, under the President Horacio Cartes's administration, Paraguay banned materials related to gender theory in schools. Education Minister Enrique Riera announced the elimination of all gender-related educational content (Ministerio de Educación 2017). This responded to pressure from conservative and religious groups who opposed what they called "gender ideology," viewing it as a threat to traditional family values and national identity. Human rights organizations and educational advocates strongly criticized the prohibition, arguing it restricted comprehensive sexual education and reinforced discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community (IACHR, 2017).

By 2018, under President Mario Abdo Benítez, the discourse against "gender ideology" expanded to oppose a gender parity law in political participation. This marked a significant shift, as previously, political participation and electoral equality for women had not faced religious or moral opposition (Tabbush and Caminotti 2020). Opponents linked gender parity with cultural colonialism and threats to what they consider "traditional family." Influential public figures like former Archbishop Edmundo Valenzuela actively campaigned against the law, connecting it to broader issues like same-sex marriage and abortion rights (ABC Color 2018). This expansion of conservative activism beyond reproductive issues created new challenges to feminist movements, complicating reform efforts and intensifying the obstacles to advancing gender equality policies.

More recently, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs instructed its officials to avoid using certain gender-related terminologies unless explicitly instructed otherwise. This directive, issued via circular on November 1, 2022, targeted vice ministers, general directors, department heads, and diplomatic and consular representatives. The circular identified terms like "women and girls in all their diversity," "intersectionality," "sexual and reproductive rights," and "full autonomy" as lacking universally accepted definitions and recommended alternatives. For terms such as "gender identity" and "sexual orientation," the circular suggested that official communications should specify that Paraguay interprets "gender" to refer strictly to male and female sexes, aligning with national documentation (Última Hora 2022). The Coordinating Body of Paraguayan Women (Coordinación de Mujeres del Paraguay, CMP) criticized the directive, arguing it reflects a lack of understanding of international law and jeopardizes Paraguay's international image (CMP, 2022).

Impacts on public policy at an international level: Attempts to weaken the Inter-American System of Human Rights

To understand the obstacles and opposition to implementing foreign policies that support gender equality, it is necessary to acknowledge the existence of underlying structures and hierarchical,

patriarchal ideas that have traditionally been embedded into state identities, diplomacy, and international order (Aggestam and True 2020). Although norms supporting gender equality have advanced in several international fora, individual state foreign policies, and their international relations, there is also an opposing trend of global politics becoming more antagonistic, showing strong opposition and backlash of gender-advancing norms (Ayoub and Chetaille 2017; Mouffe 2005; UN WGDAGW, 2018).

Similarly, David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar (2018) note there is scholarly consensus on the idea of a global backlash against gender equality and sexual rights, with powerful actors joining forces to oppose women's and LGBTQ+ rights—though they present a more nuanced perspective. At a global level, the UN has warned that in the last decade, there has been a decline in establishing gender-sensitive processes (UN SG 2017). This is also true in the case of OAS and the Inter-American system of human rights, which is part of the OAS. In this section, the research focuses on two clear strategies from conservative movements: funding cuts to undermine gender equality initiatives and strategic infiltration to undermine human rights institutions from within.

Funding Cuts to Undermine Regional Gender Equality Initiatives

The 2017 reinstatement and expansion of the Mexico City Policy in the US, also known as the “global gag rule,” illustrates the opposition to pro-gender norms. It prohibits the use of US foreign aid funds to non-governmental healthcare organizations that discuss abortion, support abortion rights, or perform abortions—even if such organizations use non-US funds (Tanyag 2017). The “gag rule” expands and compounds current anti-abortion regulations with the 1973 Helms Amendment, which prevents the US from giving foreign aid for the “performance of abortion as a method of family planning.” This policy is further strengthened by the 1981 Siljander Amendment, which prohibits US funding from being used to lobby either for or against abortion, and the 1985 Kemp-Kasten Amendment, which restricts financing for any entity that the president determines related to abortion or involuntary sterilization (Ahmed 2020).

On December 21, 2018, US Senator James Lankford and eight other Republican senators urged Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to stop US funding to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM) (Lankford 2018).⁴ They argued that these organizations violated the Siljander Amendment by advocating for abortion

⁴ The US senators who signed the letter to the State Department were James Lankford, Thom Tillis, Michael B. Enzi, Michael S. Lee, James M. Inhofe, John Kennedy, Roy Blunt, Ted Cruz, and Joni K. Ernst.

access in Latin American countries such as Argentina, Chile, and El Salvador. The group of senators claimed that these activities not only contravened US law but also infringed upon the sovereignty of “pro-life” nations in the region (Castaldi 2019). They requested the State Department to implement new guidelines to ensure compliance with the Siljander Amendment and suspend US contributions until IACHR and CIM ceased their reproductive rights advocacy. Notably, the word “abortion” does not appear in any CIM publications, resolutions, or public statements from its Executive Secretaries since its founding in 1928.

In March 2019, the US Department of State, under Donald Trump’s administration, announced significant funding cuts to CIM and the IACHR. These cuts primarily stemmed from the administration’s opposition to IACHR’s positions on reproductive rights and other social issues, aligning with the earlier request from Republican senators (Morello 2019). These funding cuts represented a strategic effort by the US to pressure IACHR into aligning with conservative viewpoints, undermining both the Commission’s autonomy and its capacity to effectively protect human rights throughout the Americas.

Similarly, by cutting financial support, the US targeted CIM’s capacity to advocate for women’s rights, particularly regarding gender-based violence and women’s political participation. This action formed part of a broader pattern of the US administration’s withdrawal from international human rights commitments and oversight mechanisms. Critics argued these cuts threatened progress in human rights and gender equality across the Americas, as both IACHR and CIM serve crucial roles in monitoring, advocacy, and expert guidance on these issues (IJRC 2019).

Strategic Infiltration to Undermine Human Rights Institutions from Within

The involvement of anti-gender movements in human rights bodies raises concerns about their ability to uphold the foundational principles of international human rights frameworks. By strategically positioning candidates or representatives in influential roles, these movements aim to shift priorities of international organizations toward conservative ideologies that challenge gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights, potentially affecting the credibility and integrity of these institutions. Once inside, activists can roll back protections for marginalized communities by influencing policies and decisions. This strategy threatens principles like non-discrimination, equality, and bodily autonomy. Consequently, anti-gender activists can erode hard-won rights, hinder inclusive policies, and embolden similar movements globally, undermining human rights advancements worldwide.

During the right-wing administration of former Colombian president Iván Duque (2018-2022), the government endorsed lawyer Margarita Rey Anaya, a figure closely associated with anti-

gender movements in Colombia and across Latin America. In 2019, she was one of the six candidates for Executive Secretary of CIM, with the support of OAS Member States Colombia and the US—then under Trump’s presidency. She also received letters of support from anti-LGBTQ+ and religious civil society organizations, such as the Association of Ex-Gay, Lesbians, and Transexuals, the National Network of Lawyers for the Defense of the Family, and the Center for Restoration and Care of the Family (*Fundación Vínculo*) (CIM 2019). Although not elected to lead CIM, Colombia still appointed her to the Committee of Experts of the Follow-up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention⁵ in May 2020 (MESECVI 2020).

In 2019, the conservative government of Guatemala presented lawyer Edgar Ralón’s candidacy for IACHR. Ralón, who won the election and became a commissioner at IACHR in 2020 and later reelected in 2023, had been criticized for his dissenting votes on critical cases, including those involving transgender rights, as well as the landmark *Beatriz vs. El Salvador* case, which addresses the impact of total abortion bans. His reelection in 2023 happened amidst concerns from civil society organizations and a negative opinion from the Independent Panel to Evaluate Candidacies to IACHR Bodies (Panel SIDH). In particular, Panel SIDH raised concerns about Ralón’s understanding of IACHR’s role, suggesting his approach could absolve states of responsibility for human rights violations stemming from judicial decisions in 2019 and 2023.

The candidacy of an anti-gender activist like Ralón to the IACHR was not an isolated episode. In 2023, the Panel SIDH issued its Sixth Report evaluating six nominees presented by OAS Member States for the 2024-2027 term at the IACHR. Among these candidates, Edgar Ralón was again deemed unsuitable for the position, as was Pier Pigozzi from Ecuador—who, unlike Ralón, did not secure appointment. The panel explicitly warned that appointing Ralón and Pigozzi would constitute a significant regression in the protection of hard-won rights, particularly regarding Indigenous peoples, the LGBTQ+ community, sexual and reproductive rights, marriage equality, and freedom of expression. The panel found Pigozzi’s positions especially concerning, noting they represented a retreat from established international human rights standards, particularly on marriage equality and same-sex adoption rights (Panel SIDH, 2023). Human rights advocates have expressed growing alarm that continued state efforts to promote conservative candidates could shift the IACHR toward more restrictive interpretations of rights, potentially diminishing the diversity of perspectives and

⁵ The Committee of Experts (CEVI) is the technical body of the MESECVI and is responsible for analyzing and evaluating the implementation of the Convention. It is formed by independent experts appointed by each of the states' parties, who serve the MESECVI in a personal capacity. The MESECVI is the regional mechanism to follow up on the implementation of the Belém do Pará Convention for the eradication of violence against women.

compromising the Commission's historical role in advancing human rights protections throughout the Americas.

Conclusions

The cases analyzed through this paper shed light on the two-level strategy employed by anti-gender movements in Latin America: dismantling progressive laws and policies at the national level while undermining international human rights bodies. This innovative perspective demonstrates how these movements simultaneously engage in domestic and international arenas, creating a coordinated resistance to gender equality and human rights. At the national level, Guatemala and Paraguay reveal how anti-gender actors target gender-inclusive education, reproductive rights, and other progressive initiatives. These actions are coupled with efforts from anti-gender actors at the international level, where they cut resources for human rights bodies and infiltrate these institutions by nominating representatives who align with their conservative ideologies.

The historical analysis highlights the unified language and tactics of anti-gender movements across the Latin American region. By exploiting the narrative of “gender ideology,” these movements position progressive norms as foreign impositions that threaten cultural and national identities. The concept of “strategic secularization” explains how religious movements adapt their discourse to secular terms, broadening their appeal and influence in both political and public spheres. This phenomenon is evident across Latin America but is particularly visible in Guatemala and Paraguay, where the analysis of these two case studies demonstrates how anti-gender movements operationalize their strategies in real-life contexts. These movements capitalize on nationalist and cultural narratives to oppose international frameworks and advance their agenda domestically.

Theoretical frameworks such as the politics of belonging and backlash theory provide essential tools for understanding these dynamics. The politics of belonging explains how anti-gender actors create an “us versus them” narrative, framing progressive gender norms as existential threats to societal cohesion. Backlash theory highlights how these movements emerge in response to rapid social changes, leveraging fear and uncertainty to galvanize support. Guatemala and Paraguay offer concrete examples of how these frameworks manifest, demonstrating the coordinated efforts of anti-gender movements to reshape laws and policies while undermining international human rights institutions.

At the international level, anti-gender movements employ strategies that extend beyond resistance to proactive disruption. They use funding cuts to weaken organizations such as IACHR and CIM, while simultaneously embedding their representatives in these bodies to influence their agendas.

This dual approach ensures that progressive norms face challenges not only from external resistance but also from within the very institutions designed to protect and promote them.

This paper opens the door for further exploration into the evolving tactics of anti-gender movements. Future studies could examine the role of digital media and transnational networks in amplifying their reach and effectiveness. Additionally, investigating the responses of feminist and human rights organizations to these challenges could offer valuable insights into counter-strategies. Comparative analyses across different regions could also shed light on the global dimensions of these movements, highlighting similarities and divergences in their methods.

In conclusion, this paper underscores the need for coordinated responses to the multifaceted strategies of anti-gender movements. By understanding their tactics and narratives, policymakers, activists, and scholars can develop more effective measures to safeguard human rights and gender equality in Latin America and beyond. The findings serve as a foundation for deeper inquiry and action, emphasizing the importance of resilience and collaboration in the face of coordinated resistance.

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