

THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG: DECODING ANTI-GENDER/ANTI-DEMOCRACY NARRATIVES

Just Futures Collaborative | Feminist Leadership Convening 2025

We are witnessing a growing movement of anti-rights actors, authoritarianism and anti-democracy narratives. This has had a direct impact on resourcing within civil society, with feminist leaders, activists, and civil society workers finding themselves navigating challenging political and financial terrain. This convening focused on bringing in practitioners from diverse backgrounds to collectively strategise and exchange learnings from their perspectives and contexts.

This session on Decoding Anti-Gender/Anti-Democracy Narratives was hosted by Susana Fried and Subha Wijesiriwardena from [Just Futures Collaborative](#), a feminist initiative cultivating global cross-movement strategies for challenging criminalisation, promoting human rights, and protecting democracy.



Key takeaways

The session was designed as a workshop to enable participants to explore the tactics, stories and underlying values promoted by anti-gender and anti-democracy movements. Some of the key insights that emerged from this session are as follows:

- A note on terminology: The terms anti-gender and anti-democracy instead of anti-rights have been used intentionally, as the latter can feel individualistic and limited to communities that are viewed as “rights-holders.” The anti-gender and anti-democracy framings are broader, often overlapping historically, though it’s important to note that actors in these spaces are not always explicitly anti-rights.

Understanding the tactics used by anti-gender and anti-democracy actors:

- Authoritative determination of identity and culture that challenges pro-gender and pro-democracy narratives with statements like “this is not us” or “this is not our culture”, leaving little room for societal evolution and change.
- Promoting narratives of ‘protection’ by actively portraying certain communities as dangerous, and/or harmful, such as immigrants and trans people.



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Key takeaways

- Attack on bodily autonomy in the form of abortion bans, restricted access to healthcare and opposition to Comprehensive Sexuality Education is deeply intertwined with the questioning of decision-making capabilities of women, young people and LGBTQIA+ communities.
- Systematic campaigns that discredit feminists, gender justice, and trans rights groups are not new. They have long been tied to efforts that criminalise behaviours or communities seen as “deviant” or as threats to traditional, patriarchal, and colonial systems of power.

How can we counter these narratives?

- Rooted in the wave model (by [the Narrative Initiative](#)), we need to recognise that the anti-gender messaging that we hear is only the tip of the iceberg that is being held together by underlying values and worldviews.
- Our strategies to counteract these narratives must target those underlying values and worldviews, instead of focusing solely on the messaging.
- When we can identify, contextualise and understand the dogwhistle messaging, we can counteract it more effectively.

“We know that these [anti-gender] messages and stories are tip of the iceberg, they are really what’s on top, the most visible, the most sort of tangible things that we hear, for example “trans women are really just men in dresses”, ... the underlying narrative is really about demonising trans people... It is casting doubt on trans people’s realities. And underneath that ... is the worldview that everything is binary, that everything should be categorised, that the people in power get to determine how we live, and that we should all conform to the categories that they have determined for us ... We need to look beneath the narratives to really identify the worldview that it is promoting, because what we are challenging is that worldview, we should not be challenging the message ... We need to meet them at the level of the values, at the level of the worldview.

Subha Wijesiriwardena (Co-founder and Co-Director, Just Futures Collaborative)

We invite you to reflect on these questions and start a conversation on the Hub! It’s free to join, and you can also access the recording of the session in the Resource Library.

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Reflection Exercise

During the session, we explored some key messaging with the following questions in mind:

- What's the subtext of this statement?
- What's the dog whistle piece of it?
- What are the hidden assumptions, subtextual messages?
- What kinds of images or emotions does that evoke?
- What is it trying to restrict or change? And what do those mean to us?

We invite you to explore these statements and ponder the above questions!

- "Being LGBTQ+ is a Western concept; it is un-African".
- "Advancing Comprehensive Sexuality Education promotes promiscuity among young people."
- "Only people who are irresponsible and careless contract HIV."
- "Immigrants/refugees steal our jobs."

You can access the full recording of this panel in the Feminist Leadership Hub.
Signing up is completely free!

