



**PUSH FORWARD DIALOGUES: SERIES 2 REFLECTIONS • August 2026**

# Effective Practices in Advancing Rights, Equality and Justice in a Constrained and Contested Global Context

Photo: UN Women / Ryan Brown

## Summary

This paper draws on insights and examples shared during Series 2 of the Push Forward Dialogues (as part of UN Women's Push Forward Strategy<sup>1</sup>), co-sponsored by UN Women, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), convened on the margins of the 70<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW70) in March 2026.

Efforts to advance gender equality are unfolding in a context marked by intensifying backlash and deepening political constraint. Across regions, civic space is shrinking through the increased criminalization of activism, legal and financial restrictions on civil society, and heightened risks for those defending rights. At the same time, multilateral institutions are facing growing strains, from resource limitations to rising political polarization that weakens consensus and undermines the implementation of global commitments.

Yet this moment is not defined by regression alone. Across diverse contexts, a set of adaptive and politically grounded strategies is emerging that is reshaping how progress is pursued. These approaches reflect a shift in how actors navigate contested environments, sustain momentum and expand influence, despite tightening constraints.

This paper examines three areas where these *push forward practices*<sup>2</sup> are most visible:

- Broad-based coalitions
- Access to justice in constrained contexts
- Narrative change.

While distinct in form, these domains reveal a shared strategic orientation. Effective approaches are grounded in distributed leadership, combine multiple and reinforcing strategies, and operate across both formal and informal systems of influence.

Together, these practices point to a broader shift in how change is being driven. Progress increasingly depends on the ability to build alliances beyond traditional constituencies, adapt rapidly to changing political and institutional conditions, and actively shape the narratives that define what is seen as legitimate and possible.

1. UN Women's Push Forward Strategy focuses on identifying and amplifying effective practices advancing gender equality carried out by communities in constrained contexts to understand what makes them impactful and to support their replication and adoption across other settings.
2. The strategies examined in this report are not always described by those advancing them as "*push forward*" practices. Rather, they represent context-specific responses to shifting constraints and opportunities.

For multilateral actors, including United Nations entities, Member States and donors, these shifts carry clear implications. Supporting gender equality in the current context requires moving beyond implementation alone toward roles that enable, connect and amplify these emerging practices.

This includes investing in flexible approaches, strengthening protection for those operating under risk, and creating space for locally grounded strategies to inform and influence global processes.

## Repositioning gender equality in a shifting landscape

The current global context is characterized by a widening gap between normative commitments and their implementation. The situation is bad for both democracy and gender equality. V-Dem, an organization monitoring democracy, reports that the level of democracy experienced by the average person has declined to levels last seen in the late 1970s.<sup>3</sup> More than half of the world's population reports little or no trust in their government.<sup>4</sup> Funding cuts have resulted in 25 per cent less gender data available globally. Less than 5 per cent of women and girls live in countries where they are nearing full legal equality.

All of this is in the context of one in four governments reporting backlash against women's rights as undermining the implementation of gender equality commitments in 2024. The backlash against gender equality is no longer episodic or sector-specific; it has become structural, operating across political, economic, cultural and digital domains. These dynamics reflect resistance to specific rights claims and a contestation of gender equality itself as a legitimate project of social and political transformation.

At the same time, pathways for advancing gender equality are evolving. Agency is becoming more distributed, with movements, civil society actors and a wider range of allies advancing change through networked, context-driven strategies. These approaches signal a shift away from an overreliance on formal institutions, linear policy change and singular entry points, toward more plural, adaptive and politically grounded forms of engagement.

The Push Forward framework provides a way of interpreting these efforts, finding common strategic features from diverse contexts. It reflects the understanding that operating in a polarized landscape requires working across formal and informal systems of influence, investing in relationships and coalitions as political infrastructure, and mobilizing narratives that expand the boundaries of what is seen as legitimate and possible. In this sense, Push Forward is a lens through which to understand how change is being pragmatically pursued in contested environments.

The three domains explored in this paper—coalition-building, access to justice and narrative change—emerged consistently as sites where actors are generating tangible influence and sustaining progress under pressure. They should be understood not as exhaustive categories but as indicative of a broader set of impactful approaches that are shaping how gender equality is advanced in practice despite challenging contexts.

Across these domains, key tensions define the moment. Institutional fragility coexists with movement resilience. Norms are increasingly contested even as local innovation expands. Civic space may be narrowing in formal terms, yet new pathways for influence are emerging through hybrid, cultural and community-based strategies. Together, these dynamics point to a reconfiguration of how gender equality is pursued and where leadership, authority and legitimacy are located.

3. M. Nord, D. Altman, T. Fernandes, A. Good God and S.I. Lindberg. 2026. [Democracy Report 2026: Unraveling The Democratic Era?](#) University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute.

4. United Nations. 2025. [World Social Report 2025: A New Policy Consensus to Accelerate Social Progress](#). UN DESA and UNU-WIDER.

## Push forward practices in action

### Broad-based coalitions: Rebuilding political infrastructure

In a context where obligations and formal commitments to gender equality are increasingly contested, diluted and unevenly applied, coalition-building has emerged as a central practice to push forward. These coalitions function as more than coordination platforms; they are evolving into forms of political infrastructure that protect participating actors while expanding their influence across priority issue

areas. They enable actors to navigate contested environments by pooling power, broadening constituencies and maintaining continuity across shifting political conditions.

Key characteristics of effective broad-based coalitions include:

- **Longer-term orientation:** Coalitions are sustained over time, with actors investing in shared agendas and collective positioning rather than coalescing around single policy wins. This allows for continuity in the face of political volatility.
- **Collective protection:** Coalitions provide safety in numbers. By anchoring actors within a broader collective, they mitigate isolation and diffuse risk, making members less vulnerable to targeting while enhancing the legitimacy and visibility of their demands.
- **Multi-level coordination:** Effective coalitions link community-based evidence and lived experience with regional and global advocacy. This ensures that international norms remain grounded in implementation, while fostering cross-regional learning and solidarity.
- **Pooled and flexible resourcing:** Access to flexible funding supports coalition-defined priorities and allows actors to respond quickly to changing contexts. It also enables investment in long-term movement infrastructure rather than short-term, project-based outputs.
- **Values-based alignment (with strategic flexibility):** Coalitions are anchored in shared political commitments, core principles and accountability, while retaining the adaptability needed to navigate shifting opportunities and challenges.
- **Cross-movement alliances:** Coalitions intentionally connect feminist actors with partners across human rights, climate, disability, faith, LGBTIQ+ and other movements. This broadens reach and strengthens responses to intersecting forms of marginalization, discrimination and violence.
- **Intergenerational leadership:** Young feminists are engaged as leaders and agenda-setters, alongside more established actors. This supports innovation and the transfer of institutional knowledge.

These characteristics shift coalitions from instruments of coordination to platforms for distributed power, capable of operating across formal and informal arenas and responding dynamically to evolving conditions. In an environment of backlash, coalition-building therefore functions as a strategy for resilience and continuity, reducing reliance on single institutions or entry points while creating multiple, reinforcing pathways for influence. By expanding alliances, strengthening relationships and investing in shared infrastructure, these coalitions enable gender equality efforts to persist, adapt and retain legitimacy even when individual channels of engagement become constrained or closed.

## CASE STUDY 1

### COALITION-BASED LEGAL REFORM ACROSS REGIONS

Work led by an international women's rights organization illustrates how coalition-building can function as political infrastructure. Since the early 2010s, this organization has helped anchor a global coalition focused on eliminating gender-discriminatory nationality laws. What began as a small partnership among a few organizations has grown into a multi-actor global effort advocating for legal reform across diverse contexts. By centring the lived experiences of affected women, including a mother whose public advocacy highlighted how discriminatory laws prevented her daughter from accessing education, the coalition has combined grassroots storytelling with treaty body engagement, strategic litigation and sustained media outreach. This integrated approach has contributed to 18 full and partial nationality law reforms<sup>5</sup> and the adoption of two Human Rights Council resolutions<sup>6</sup> reinforcing equal nationality rights.

In Latin America, this global strategy has been adapted to national and regional contexts through coalition-based legal reform efforts that bring together feminist organizations, legal advocates, civil society actors and institutional partners around clearly defined legislative objectives. By aligning diverse actors around specific reforms, these coalitions have been able to translate advocacy into measurable legal change while maintaining momentum across shifting political landscapes. The inclusion of organizations with formal access to legislative and judicial processes has strengthened legitimacy and facilitated engagement with decision-makers, while grassroots groups have ensured that reform efforts remain grounded in lived realities and community demands.

This example highlights how coalitions can extend beyond traditional alliances to include a broader range of actors, while remaining anchored in shared principles and goals. It also underscores the importance of actively managing internal dynamics, addressing power imbalances and sustaining long-term engagement to ensure that coalitions remain both effective and accountable over time.

### Access to justice in constrained contexts: Expanding pathways through adaptation

In contexts where legal systems are weakened, politicized or unevenly accessible, advancing access to justice requires approaches that are flexible, layered and responsive to shifting political conditions. As a *push forward* practice, expanding access to justice is no longer pursued through a single institutional pathway. Instead, actors are broadening the range of mechanisms through which justice can be claimed, negotiated and realized. This shift reflects a broader understanding of justice that prioritizes safety, dignity and agency alongside formal accountability. Communities play a more active role in defining harm and remedy, while institutions are engaged as one actor among many in shaping

outcomes. Impact is understood as cumulative and iterative, built over time rather than tied to a single legal outcome.

Key characteristics of expanding justice pathways include:

- **Layered and multi-level strategies:** Justice efforts combine legal, institutional and community-based interventions, connecting local experiences with national, regional and international mechanisms to create multiple entry points for influence.
- **Integrated security approaches:** Physical, digital and psychosocial protection are embedded into justice strategies, reflecting growing risks of surveillance, reprisals and online harassment, while ensuring safety is treated as foundational rather than supplementary.

5. From 2014 to 2025, nationality law reforms took place in Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Liberia, Madagascar, Malaysia, Morocco, Sierra Leone, Suriname, Togo, Tunisia and Yemen.

6. United Nations Human Rights Council. 2016. [The right to a nationality: women's equal nationality rights in law and in practice](#). 18 July. A/HRC/RES/32/7; United Nations Human Rights Council. 2023. [The right to a nationality: equality in nationality rights in law and in practice](#). 24 July. A/HRC/RES/53/16.

- **Transnational solidarity and action:** Actors utilize regional and international human rights mechanisms, campaigns and networks to sustain pressure and visibility when domestic avenues are restricted or unreliable.
- **Hybrid advocacy models:** Online and offline approaches are combined to maintain organizing and engagement in contexts where public participation is constrained, while adapting to risks in digital spaces.
- **Alternative organizing spaces:** Informal, community-based and culturally grounded spaces are used to sustain dialogue, build trust and mobilize action where formal engagement is not possible.
- **Expanded definitions of justice and impact:** Success is measured through incremental gains in protection, awareness, agency and deterrence, rather than relying solely on formal rulings or institutional decisions.

These characteristics reposition access to justice from a system-centred process to a more distributed and adaptive practice, capable of operating across formal and informal arenas and adjusting to shifting constraints. By expanding and diversifying justice pathways, embedding protection and linking local action with broader systems of accountability, these efforts enable rights claims to persist and evolve, even when formal justice mechanisms are limited, delayed or contested.

## CASE STUDY 2

### EXPANDING ACCESS TO JUSTICE IN MALAWI

The work of a national civil society organization in Malawi provides a clear example of how access to justice can be expanded within constrained environments. In a context where gender equality legislation exists but is unevenly implemented, the organization has focused on translating legal frameworks into practice through a combination of strategies.

This approach includes community legal education to raise awareness of rights, collaboration with the Malawi Human Rights Commission to strengthen institutional engagement, and the use of strategic litigation to establish legal precedent. It has also involved engagement with international human rights mechanisms, including treaty bodies and the Universal Periodic Review, to reinforce accountability.

One outcome of this approach has been the use of litigation to expand access to sexual and reproductive health services for minors. While incremental, this achievement demonstrates how targeted interventions can generate broader shifts in interpretation and application of the law.

This example highlights the importance of working through existing systems while also building pressure from multiple directions. By combining community-based engagement, institutional partnerships and international advocacy, the organization has been able to expand justice pathways over time. It also underscores that even in constrained contexts, sustained and adaptive strategies can generate meaningful, cumulative progress even where systemic barriers remain.

## Narrative change: Shifting the terms of debate

Narrative contestation is a defining feature of the current political landscape. Backlash against gender equality operates through moral panic, misinformation and deliberate efforts to delegitimize feminist actors and agendas. As a push forward practice, narrative change is understood as a central arena of power, shaping what is seen as legitimate,

whose voices are credible and which futures are considered possible. The aim is to influence not only individual attitudes but the broader conditions under which ideas gain traction and authority. By shifting who tells stories, whose experiences are centred and how key concepts are defined, narrative strategies reshape agenda-setting power and contribute to an environment in which gender equality claims are more difficult to dismiss and more likely to endure.

Key characteristics of effective narrative change strategies include:

- **Community-led narratives:** Grassroots actors, including feminist, LGBTQ+, Indigenous and faith-based movements, define their own priorities, language and messaging. This moves away from extractive storytelling towards approaches rooted in agency and lived experience.
- **Power and resource distribution:** Decision-making authority and funding are shifted towards local actors, while maintaining clear commitments to universal rights and resisting the use of culture or tradition to justify exclusion and discrimination.
- **Structural framing:** Narrative strategies explicitly address the systems that drive inequality, including patriarchy, colonialism and intersecting forms of discrimination. This deepens analysis and moves beyond surface-level representation.
- **Faith and cultural engagement:** Religious leaders and cultural actors are engaged as partners in advancing inclusive interpretations from within trusted institutions. This expands legitimacy and embeds change within community structures.

- **Creative approaches:** Storytelling, theatre, comics and other forms are used to build emotional resonance, reach wider audiences and sustain engagement over time.
- **Reclaiming contested narratives:** Concepts such as “family” and “tradition” are actively reinterpreted to reflect inclusive, rights-based principles, preventing their capture by exclusionary agendas.
- **Engaging men with accountability:** Men are encouraged to act as allies while recognizing their responsibilities within existing power structures, supporting their role as active participants in advancing inclusive and justice-oriented narratives.

These characteristics reposition narrative change from a supporting communications function to a central mechanism for exercising power and shaping the terms of debate. In a context where pushback is driven as much through ideas and discourse as through policy, narrative strategies function as a means of resilience and forward momentum. By redistributing narrative authority, engaging trusted actors and investing in long-term shifts in meaning, these approaches enable gender equality efforts to expand legitimacy, counter exclusionary agendas and sustain influence in contested environments.

### CASE STUDY 3

#### FAITH-BASED NARRATIVE CHANGE

The work of a global faith-based advocacy organization provides a compelling example of how narrative change can be advanced through religious engagement. Through a structured training initiative, the organization has engaged and equipped thousands of religious leaders to integrate gender equality into sermons, teachings and community outreach.

This approach is grounded in the recognition that religious leaders play a central role in shaping social norms and moral frameworks within their communities. By working within established religious traditions, the initiative has been able to articulate gender equality in ways that are culturally and spiritually resonant, increasing acceptance and relevance among diverse audiences.

The impact of this work has included increased engagement within religious spaces and gradual shifts in community attitudes, as messages are delivered by trusted and credible figures. However, the approach has encountered resistance, including backlash against leaders promoting inclusive interpretations. This underscores both the transformative potential and the risks associated with engaging in contested narrative spaces.

This case highlights the importance of cultural legitimacy, long-term engagement and the strategic use of trusted voices in advancing narrative change. It also demonstrates how reframing narratives within existing belief systems can expand the boundaries of what is perceived as acceptable within specific social contexts, helping to embed gender equality within widely recognized social and cultural norms.

## A shared strategic logic

Across these areas, a common strategic logic is evident. Push forward practices assume that power is fragmented, progress is uneven and legitimacy is contested. They prioritize resilience over visibility, relationships over formal arrangements and long-term positioning over short-term gains. Rather than seeking to restore earlier models of progress, these approaches accept that the conditions for change have shifted. Advancing gender equality now requires working within, around and beyond formal systems simultaneously.

## Implications for multilateral actors

These practices point to the need for governments, UN entities and donors to adapt both their roles and their modes of engagement. Rather than acting primarily as implementers or standard-setters, there is an increasing need to function as enablers, connectors and protective actors within a wider ecosystem of change.

Concretely, this implies greater investment in flexible and adaptive funding models that allow partners to respond to shifting political conditions, support long-term coalition-building and sustain work that does not align neatly with short project cycles. Funding approaches should recognize the value of relationship-building, narrative work and incremental influence, even when outcomes are non-linear or difficult to attribute.

Multilateral actors also have a critical role to play in protection. This includes strengthening safeguarding and accompaniment mechanisms for social justice movements and individuals operating under heightened risk, as well as using institutional voice and diplomatic leverage to prevent reprisals, deter repression and signal legitimacy. Protection support should be treated as integral to gender equality programming rather than as an exceptional or auxiliary function.

Furthermore, the most effective approaches combine multiple strategies in ways that reinforce one another. Coalition-building is linked to legal advocacy, narrative change is integrated with policy engagement, and local action is connected to regional and global processes. This layering enables strategies to operate across different levels, creating multiple pathways for influence and reflecting an understanding that no single intervention is sufficient in complex and constrained environments.

Moreover, multilateral institutions can help bridge local innovation with global norm-setting processes. This involves creating channels through which social justice movement-led practices, informal justice strategies and locally grounded narratives can inform policy debates and global frameworks, without forcing them into narrow or standardized formats.

Finally, supporting *push forward* practices requires institutional humility and a shift in how success is understood. Multilateral actors may need to cede visibility, share agenda-setting power and tolerate political ambiguity to remain relevant partners. By aligning their systems, incentives and engagement practices with the realities highlighted in this paper, multilateral institutions can help create the conditions in which push forward approaches can take root, endure and expand.

## CONCLUSION: What it means to push forward now

The current moment is marked by deep constraints but also by strategic possibilities. While the backlash against gender equality and pressure on multilateral institutions are real and intensifying, they are accompanied by the emergence of practices that are reshaping how change is generated and sustained.

To push forward in this context is not simply to defend past gains or adapt tactically to shrinking space. It is to recalibrate how progress is understood and pursued. This means investing in coalitions that function as durable political infrastructure rather than temporary alliances; advancing justice through layered and adaptive strategies that work across legal, institutional and community pathways; and engaging in narrative change as a core dimension of power-building, not a complementary activity.

Pushing forward also requires recognizing that leadership is increasingly distributed. Change is being driven by actors operating across social justice movements, sectors and belief systems, often at the margins of formal power. Supporting these efforts demands a shift away from centralized control toward relational, enabling and connective roles.

For multilateral actors, this moment presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Institutions should position themselves as partners within a broader ecosystem of change, rather than as the primary drivers, embracing humility and flexibility in how they engage, and being clear and transparent. By supporting, protecting and amplifying push forward practices, multilateral institutions can help to create the conditions under which rights, equality and justice remain both possible and meaningful in a contest

UN Women exists to advance women's rights, gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. As the lead United Nations entity on gender equality, we shift laws, institutions, social norms and services to close the gender gap and build an equal world for all women and girls. We keep the rights of women and girls at the centre of global progress – always, everywhere. Because gender equality is not just what we do. It is who we are.

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