

Abortion, Contraception, and LGBTQ+ Rights: Examining the anti-SRHR agenda in sub-Saharan Africa

SHORT ABSTRACT

Background and purpose: The decades-long global trend toward policies and programs supporting sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) has come under threat in recent years. This project examines the anti-SRHR work underway in sub-Saharan Africa, attempting to further restrict access to abortion, contraception for unmarried individuals and LGBTQ+ rights, and Global North influences on these efforts.

Methods: We are undertaking in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation in Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia with policymakers, activists, providers and other key stakeholders to understand the forces influencing domains including advocacy, laws, policies, court decisions, funding allocations, and implementation of SRHR programs.

Findings and implications: By identifying the social and political pressures that are having the greatest impact, and the sources of these pressures, this project will provide new evidence on why, how and with whom these attacks on rights are being popularized. We will compare strategies across the three countries and pay particular attention to the ripple effects of the anti-abortion advocacy that led to the *Dobbs* decision in the U.S. overturning *Roe v. Wade*. The influence of the language of the *incel* movement on social conservatism and their misogynistic rhetoric including the threats and harassment of female lawmakers will also be considered.¹

LONG ABSTRACT

Background

While many countries recognize that sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) underpins social and economic progress, in this era of growing political polarization, policy makers in some countries are seeking to enact restrictive legislation related to SRHR. Since 2022, several Sub-Saharan African countries have seen a rise in anti-SRHR advocacy and policies. Examples include Kenya, where debates around the inclusion of comprehensive sexuality education in schools have intensified, with conservative groups opposing its expansion.² Another example is Ethiopia, where SRHR advocates and providers are registering an uptick in anti-abortion advocacy and organizing.³ And in Uganda, the Constitutional Court has upheld one of the harshest anti-LGBTQ+ laws in the world, the Anti-Homosexuality Act.⁴ These advocacy efforts have also impacted SRHR policies in other countries on the continent; Ghana is considering a policy which would criminalize LGBTQ+ identities which is almost identical to the anti-LGBTQ+ bill passed in Uganda⁵ and Zambian parliamentarians deleted the word “sexual” from the commonly used term SRHR because it was seen to be code for supporting LGBTQ+ rights.⁶ These events reflect a growing conservative pushback against SRHR across the region.

The United States, a major donor country on the global stage, joined the group of nations rolling back reproductive rights when the Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to abortion in 2022 in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (colloquially referred to as “*Dobbs*”).⁷ Many stakeholders

engaged in international SRHR advocacy expect that this decision to have impacts far beyond US borders. Specifically, that the *Dobbs* decision is emboldening anti-abortion lawmakers in other countries to push for restrictions to abortion access; inspire anti-choice advocates to borrow from the “playbooks” or strategies of anti-choice advocates in the US; and mobilize activists opposed to other aspects of SRHR, such as women’s access to contraception and the protection of LGBTQ+ rights. Taking advantage of this new receptivity to oppressive laws, countries with authoritarian regimes (i.e. Russia) are supporting of this move to the right.⁸⁹

Purpose and scope of the study

The aim of this research project is to investigate the anti-SRHR strategies currently in use in the African subcontinent, and whether those have gained momentum since 2022. In particular, we are paying attention to anti-abortion strategies, opposition to contraception for unmarried individuals, and anti-LGBTQ+ strategies. We also examine the threats, humiliation and harassment of female lawmakers and the misogynistic language of the *incel* culture^{*10} is being strategically deployed.^{11,12} As a secondary objective, we aim to examine how Global North actors have contributed to shaping the anti-rights discourse, advocacy and policy landscape.

Our study focuses on anti-SRHR strategies in Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia as well as within the African Union due to the significant threats these countries face in their sexual and reproductive health and rights. In Kenya, the constitutional protection for abortion is under attack; Ethiopia is seeing increasing opposition to its moderately liberal abortion law; and the bill criminalizing same sex conduct in Uganda was upheld by the Constitutional Court in 2024. We will also look at how these countries are treating their commitments made in the Maputo Protocol and outcome documents from UN bodies such as the Commission on Population and Development and the Commission on the Status of Women. In the African Union, we will engage with relevant members to capture how countries are using the African Union to further their anti-SRHR agenda and the broader impact this has on the treatment of SRHR in the region.

Study methodology

Our approach entails two key phases. In phase one which took place between March and September 2024, the formative phase of this work, we engaged with experts in the field to obtain their insights on the countries where anti-SRHR strategies are gaining the most traction, the components of SRHR that are most under attack, and the key actors in these unfolding events. These conversations informed the final scope of our study and our priority questions for stakeholders.

The second phase of this work is in-depth work in the three study countries plus the African Union. In this phase taking place October 2024-March 2025, we are partnering with local high level, policy experts and qualitative interviewers to conduct in-depth interviews with 15-20 stakeholders per country. Through these interviews, we are exploring respondents’ understandings of the global SRHR landscape, perceived political power that can be earned through supporting restrictions on the SRHR topics of interest (abortion, contraception for unmarried individuals, and LGBTQ+ rights), negative repercussions for expressing support for SRHR, the forces impacting the political will to enact restrictive laws and/or block the implementation of liberal laws, and how the advocacy community has adapted to the growing

* While there are elements of incel culture which is affiliated with white supremacy, there are other misogynistic elements which are the ones that are relevant in this context.

political support for restrictive laws and policies on SRHR. We will also seek to understand how threats and harassment intimidate and silence more progressive voices, and the personal cost this extracts from advocates.

In addition, the fieldworkers are engaging in ethnographic observation of relevant spaces in which social forces impacting SRHR are made visible, such as parliamentary hearings, lobbying activities, activist meetings, provider conferences, church services, public statements, and meeting spaces of relevant groups. This component of fieldwork is seeking to understand the forces at play and the relevant political strategies being used by actors within the country as well as external actors attempting to influence country-level and regional-level SRHR policies and practices that reduce and restrict people's access to protections and healthcare.

Respondents will include government officials such as those working for health and women's ministries and working groups; feminist and civil society organizations and coalitions; relevant international non-governmental organizations (e.g., International Planned Parenthood Federation-affiliates, Ipas, Marie Stopes, International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO) regional partners); multilateral agencies (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the World Health Organization (WHO)); and representatives of anti-choice movements and funders, if possible (Heartbeat International; Family Watch International, and local pregnancy crisis centers). We are identifying respondents through professional networks and the networks of in-country partners as well as using a snowball sampling approach.

Our outcomes of interest include:

- The agenda of the anti-SRHR activists and how they are shoring up support for this in-country
- How the current SRHR landscape has (a) emboldened lawmakers to push for anti-SRHR laws and policies and/or (b) disincentivized lawmakers from pushing for pro-SRHR laws and policies
- How influence is exerted, and how gatekeeping takes place to marginalize voices that don't cohere with social narrative that is being pushed to garner support for anti-SRHR policies
- Reasons why it is politically appealing to support anti-SRHR activities and the consequences of not supporting anti-SRHR activities
- Who they believe is harmed by these anti-SRHR activities, who they believe benefits
- The perceived influence of foreign anti-SRHR advocacy strategies on these countries (e.g. the work of anti-rights NGOs, and political stances of government stakeholders)
- The effects of anti-SRHR activities on the process of establishing services where those services are legally allowed.

We will use our results to produce a set of case studies as well as a cross-country comparison of findings. We will have completed data collection and analyzed our results from phase two by Q2 2025.

Policy implications

We expect to identify ways that activists seek to influence policymakers and reasons why policymakers are receptive to encroachments on sexual and reproductive rights in their countries, as well as possibly their regional and international commitments. Raising awareness of the ways that anti-SRHR activities are promulgated, influence service provision, take root, and become guidance and even law in sub-Saharan Africa will help make clear why we see these conservative policy shifts occurring on the

continent. Understanding the roles of the various actors of consequence in these policy shifts in these three different contexts will allow us to compare and contrast variations across the countries. These results will shed light on the reasons why there is receptivity at this point in time to a rollback of previously accepted sexual and reproductive rights. They also have the potential to inform the actions of funders and activists, as well as policymakers who are the target of these efforts.

¹ UNESCO. 2023. African Women Parliamentarians Learn from UNESCO's "The Chilling" Project to Combat Online Attacks. UNESCO. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/african-women-parliamentarians-learn-unescos-chilling-project-combat-online-attacks>

² Lidigu, L. (2023) *Alarm as Kenya pulls out of regional accord on Teen Sex Education*, Nation. Available at: <https://nation.africa/kenya/health/alarm-as-kenya-pulls-out-of-regional-accord-on-teen-sex-education-4237324?s=03>

³ Rielly, B., Betteridge-Moes, M. and Misikir, M. (2024) 'FERTILE GROUND', *New Internationalist* (Abortion: Why is your body still a battleground?), pp. 27–31. Available at: <https://newint.org/issues/2024/08/27/abortion-why-your-body-still-battleground>.

⁴ Kasasira, R. (2024) *Ugandan court upholds anti-gay law that allows the death penalty in some cases*, AP News. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/uganda-antigay-law-constitution-court-651623657b0a971e755080c7bda40a8b>

⁵ McKenzie, D. (2024) *Ghana's Parliament passes anti-homosexuality Bill*, CNN. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/28/africa/ghana-passes-anti-homosexuality-bill-intl/index.html>

⁶ Fallon, Amy. 2023. Zambia deletes 'sexual' from SRHR in blow to LGBTQ+ and rights groups. Devex. <https://www.devex.com/news/zambia-deletes-sexual-from-srhr-in-blow-to-lgbtq-and-rights-groups-106434>

⁷ *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, 597 U.S. ____ (2022). https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/19-1392_6j37.pdf

⁸ McEwen, Haley; Narayanaswamy, Lata (2023): The international anti-gender movement: Understanding the rise of anti-gender discourses in the context of development, human rights and social protection, UNRISD Working Paper, No. 2023-06, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), Geneva. <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/278575/1/1853775924.pdf>

⁹ Datta, Neil. 2024. Sticky Fingers: How the Christian Right influences Africa's abortion laws. July 23rd. Webinar.

¹⁰ Sparks, Brandon; Zidenberg, Alexandra M. and Olver, Mark E. (2022) Involuntary Celibacy: A Review of Incel Ideology and Experiences with Dating, Rejection, and Associated Mental Health and Emotional Sequelae. *Curr Psychiatry Rep.* 24(12): 731–740. doi: [10.1007/s11920-022-01382-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-022-01382-9)

¹¹ Zimmerman, Shannon; Ryan, Luisa, and Duriesmith, David. 2018. Recognizing the Violent Extremist Ideology of 'Incels.' Women in International Security Policy Brief. September.

¹² UNESCO. 2023. African Women Parliamentarians Learn from UNESCO's "The Chilling" Project to Combat Online Attacks. UNESCO. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/african-women-parliamentarians-learn-unescos-chilling-project-combat-online-attacks>