

Dealing with the anti-rights movement

Opposition in international spaces

**Tips and tricks for advocates
in international spaces**

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Introduction

Over the last few years, an increasingly vocal and effective conservative movement that opposes the human rights of women and LGBTQI+ people has entered the global political arena. This movement is against sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and is now a visible presence in spaces that govern international and regional human-rights systems.

If you are an SRHR advocate attending international processes at the United Nations, such as the Commission on the Status of Women, the Commission on Population and Development or Human Rights Council sessions, you are now likely to face a lot of opposition. But there are things you can do to ensure your voice, what you are advocating for and the evidence you are presenting, are heard and understood. The opposition you encounter might present itself in the form of a large number of opposition groups and opposition campaigns, or from conservative governments coordinating their pushback. Increasingly, opposition groups are recruiting young people then using them to derail side events run by SRHR organisations and progressive states.

In the face of such solid and coordinated opposition regarding SRHR, what can we – as human rights and SRHR advocates – do? This toolkit provides the answers. It will help you recognise opposition tactics in international spaces and deal with them effectively. It will show you how to prepare and respond to questions and confrontations from people who fundamentally oppose SRHR.

When you are in an international space and dealing with those who are anti-rights, it is essential to provide factual information, take a human-rights based approach, defend consensus and progressive UN language, and adhere to multilateralism. These are the things that will help you succeed. But in order to counter opposition, advocates need to be safe and feel secure.

This toolkit will show you how to protect and care for yourself and other advocates in what can sometimes be pressured and stressful situations.



Understanding tactics

SRHR opponents are now adopting many of the same strategies that human right activists have been using for a long time. This includes applying for ECOSOC status, so they can access international human rights spaces and organise side events, and joining state delegations as advisors.

Here are the main tactics opposition groups are using:

- 1 Using neutral names.** By using neutral names and covering their activities, some anti-rights organisations have gained ECOSOC status and are able to access human rights spaces. Be aware of this and try to identify anti-rights organisations in advance. By doing this you will be able to recognise anti-rights organisations if they lobby 'your' delegation or attend your side-event. You can also make other people aware of these organisations' agendas. Organisations working on youth issues, development or women's health can may have much different agendas than you would expect.
- 2 Adopting an alternative and parallel track or parallel human rights framework.** Opposition groups tend to interpret the UN system and the human rights framework in ways that suit their agendas. They do this, for example, by distorting the concept of agreed language, or using the right to development, the right to religion or the right to life to counter other human rights. To cause confusion on what human rights entail, the opposition has done things such as present the Geneva Declaration as an alternative framework and initiate a resolution on the right of the family at the Human Rights Council.
- 3 Misusing multilateralism.** The UN system is based on multilateralism (**the process of organising relations between multiple countries**), intergovernmental negotiations and agreement. Conservative governments are now attacking these foundations by hindering consensus and weakening agreements. So how do they do this? By making long contributions that end up lengthening negotiations, changing their tactics and redlines during negotiations and in the final states of them, submitting many amendments to agreements, denying past agreements and applying reservations to paragraphs and resolutions (a reservation means **a government can accept an agreement but not comply to certain things in it**), among other tactics. All these things weaken intergovernmental agreements which are necessary to protect human rights and ensure progress on development goals.
- 4 Norm spoiling.** The opposition will regularly attempt to block and reverse norms, such as the right to life, family rights and the 'natural' family. The opposition clearly has its own interpretations of international agreements and human rights treaties when it comes to the family and the understanding of what life entails, despite expert interpretations and definitions (such as from a UN institution) included in original agreements.

Agreed language is the language that UN member states agree can be used in UN concepts and resolutions. As such, it helps to define issues and debates. To read more about this, see [Choice's The Advocate's Guide to UN Language](#).

- 5 Training UN delegates.** Anti-rights NGOs work with UN delegations and diplomats to influence decision-making, just as pro-rights NGOs do. With diplomats they are working closely with, anti-rights organisations tend to share false information, unagreed UN language or conspiracy theories on SRHR and gender.
- 6 Using alternative scientific sources.** Evidence that opposition groups share, and on which they base some of their arguments, can seem legitimate due to how it is presented. Yet the sources they use will not actually include any peer-reviewed academic research.
- 7 Forum spoiling – reducing civic space or exploiting division within SRHR, LGBTQI+ and feminist movements:** The effectiveness of our advocacy in international spaces is highly dependent on the civic space, such as our speaking rights, the opportunities to register for written and oral statements, and the access we have to negotiations and meeting rooms. The need to register for ECOSOC status, and the process to get this status, can already be an obstacle for our movements. Especially, when elements in the name of an organization are sensitive. By overcrowding registration to events and statements, hindering improvements in civic space or exploiting already existing differing opinions within our own movement, opposition groups can sabotage our advocacy.
- 8 Claiming language:** hijacking words like 'family', 'mothers' and 'natural' fundamentally weakens existing language. Anti-SRHR organisations often uses words, values and references in their language that many people hold dear. By claiming these terms they monopolise them, yet families, parents and caregivers come in many varieties. We need to prevent language or values that harm the width of resolutions and their application. A clear example of this is the move to make 'family planning' only accessible to married heterosexual couples.
- 9 Derailing panels and side-events.** If you hold in-person or virtual events they can be disrupted in a number of ways. Tactics include placing opposition figures in the audience to make aggressive remarks and questions, ranging from asking questions based on misleading 'facts' to spreading misinformation, plain harassment and hate speech. It also includes, spamming the chat function of online events and making noise to stop events from running smoothly.

For more tactics and an in-depth analysis of cases, take a look at the [Rights at Risk Report 2021](#) from the Observatory on the Universality of Rights.



Before you go

When attending international processes, either in-person or online, it is important to be well prepared. This increases the chances of getting stronger outcomes and it might help you if situations get tense.

It is vital to know beforehand which actors and stakeholders will be there, and to have your messages prepared and your back-up plans ready in case the context changes. It is also important to get involved with a broader group of like-minded CSOs beforehand and to attend their preparation calls and strategy meetings to ensure you are not alone in your advocacy. This is also a great way to find out about what sort of opposition will be present.

Here are some tips on how to prepare to handle opposition in international spaces:

- ▶ **Set clear advocacy goals.** What is it that you want to achieve in the long-term? What do you want to achieve during the event that can help you reach these long-term goals?
- ▶ **Conduct a stakeholder mapping.** This involves making a list of key attendees, such as SRHR civil society organisations, like-minded governments, opposition groups, fence-sitters and middle-ground countries (that do not speak out or are moderately in favour of SRHR), and conservative governments.
- ▶ **Find out roles in advance.** It is important to find out what roles attendees have. This includes who is a member of the commission or council you are attending and can vote, who sits on the bureau such as the facilitators of negotiations (a bureau helps run and manage a committee or council), and who is the penholder of a resolution (penholders lead the negotiation and drafting of resolutions)
- ▶ **Make a list of people you want to approach.** It helps to know their faces in advance so you can recognise them in a crowd.
- ▶ **Know the facts within your area of expertise and bring sourced materials.** This might be useful when working on text proposals and to convince the stakeholders you want approach.
- ▶ Two sentence arguments on the relevant theme that is being negotiated could help your advocacy in the (virtual) hallways of the UN.
- ▶ **Join alliance listservs and attend their preparatory calls** as well as webinars, such as those run by the [International Sexual and Reproductive Rights Coalition](#), the [Women's Rights Caucus](#) and the [Women's Major Group](#). This will give you access to a lot of information, such as the latest draft texts, input for your stakeholder mapping, intelligence on the opposition and updates on relevant meetings and side events.
- ▶ **Know your language.** Know what kind of language you want to propose for possible outcome documents or resolutions, and be up to date about the language that SRHR opponents are using. The exact meaning of seemingly innocent words is not always clear, so understanding definitions can really make the difference between strong and weak language. Attending preparatory calls or language working groups run by pro-SRHR coalitions will help you to get familiar with UN language.
- ▶ **Safety and security.** Getting prepared also includes making plans to stay safe. It's important to think about this in advance. This will ensure you arrive safely and help you to deal with any unexpected situations more effectively (See the chapter below for more on this).

How to travel safely

When travelling always take safety and security measures to protect yourself and your organisation. Here are some things to consider when travelling to international events and meetings:



Prepare. When planning for advocacy activities, see if your budget allows for a number of people to travel, as this will increase safety. Analyse the local security situation, health prerequisites and safe means of transport before you travel. You can do this by researching online, or by asking experienced colleagues or trusted partners. Book a hotel in a safe area where colleagues are staying and pre-arrange your airport transfer if necessary.



Travel. Ensure that you have travel and health insurance before you go. Apply for a visa at the earliest possible opportunity and bring a copy of all required documents with you when travelling. Plan your schedule to make time for self-care.



Contacts. Prepare all the contact information of organisations based in the city where the event takes place ([OutRight Action](#), [DefendDefenders](#), local colleagues etc.). If you think it might be needed, prepare the details of an embassy where you can request consular help.



Documents. Bring a copy of your passport and other related important documents. Ensure you store a copy of your passport securely online, in a way that you can access from your destination. Do not bring confidential documents unless you are sure you can keep them securely, and do not distribute them to unfamiliar parties.

At the event

If you are attending an international meeting or event as an SRHR advocate, there are several things to consider that will help you deal with opposition effectively and safely.

Building resilience



Make it a team effort. Join alliances and try to do advocacy within a group. This will strengthen your advocacy, and it will also reduce your chances of being harassed. This can be as simple as having lunch with allies, or moving between sessions with them. It might even mean visiting the restrooms with allies if you feel like you could be harassed if you go on your own.



Think about self-care. Self-care practices are any actions you take to improve your mental, physical or emotional well-being. Sometimes, self-care is easily forgotten when you are working, but it can help you do your job better. Some self-care practices that are worth remembering, even when you are busy, is to eat and drink well, get enough sleep, take breaks, speak to friends and loved ones and ask others for help. Try to be mindful about how you are feeling and what you need in that moment.



Trust yourself – you’ve got this! During processes, opposition groups as well as delegations from conservative states or your own country might approach you to try to influence your position or prevent you from speaking out. It is important to feel as empowered and secure about your cause as you can if they do – trust yourself to know that what you are advocating for is right. This isn’t always easy, but practicing self-care and supporting others around you can help.

Encountering opposition

When confronted, questioned or challenged by an anti-rights activist or delegate, consider the following:

► **What's their motivation?**

Where is this person coming from? Are they misinformed about (an aspect of) SRHR or are they fundamentally opposed to the things you are advocating for? Opposition actors should not distract us from our purpose of advocating for SRHR. You do not have to persuade anyone who is fundamentally opposed to your topic. Rather, focus your energy on those who can support your cause and those you might be able to convince.

► **Are they just misinformed?**

Sometimes people are against things because they don't understand them. If someone is merely misinformed, provide them with accurate information and credible sources to help them understand what's really happening.

► **Be respectful.** Don't laugh, mock or be aggressive towards the people challenging you.

► **Agree to disagree and move on.** Always return to your talking points when you are speaking publicly.

► **Cite your own sources and arguments.** Do not take the bait by arguing about the credibility of studies or sources that opposition groups cite when they make inaccurate claims.

► **Don't get hijacked.** Think of ways to move back to your own arguments. Helpful statements include:

- "People have diverse personal experiences with sexuality/pregnancy/abortion/sexual identity."
- "The important thing to remember is..."
- "Thank you for your observation."

► **Pause.** Just because someone asks you a question does not mean you have to answer. If you don't know how to respond, then it is probably best not to give an answer. If you decide to answer, be sure you stick to your message.

► **Find support.** Look to a neighbour, such as another advocate, a panellist or a moderator (when you are at a side event), who might be able to diffuse or speak to the situation.

► **Stay calm.** Sometimes accusations are directly aimed at a speaker or advocate, and this can hurt. If someone says something personal, such as "You have blood on your hands", respond objectively, without engaging in an emotional battle. Ignore the personal attack and refer to the topic you are discussing. For instance, refocus on the wellbeing of women and young people with access to quality information and services. Then repeat your messages and arguments.

► **Know you can walk away.** If things get too heated, move to the hallway or another public space; this may be the best option.

► **Share your message.** Encourage allies and communications staff to share your messages on social media to counter misleading or inflammatory social media content and comments.

► **Report.** Please report any opposition activities to event organisers, your colleagues and allies.



Making statements

In international spaces written and oral statements can be a great way for you to share your expertise or policy recommendations as an SRHR. For diplomats following the process, which organisations make statements, and therefore what the balance is between progressive and conservative NGOs, is fairly visible. This means it is important that progressive, pro-SRHR voices are heard. However, making a statement can make you vulnerable because it increases the visibility of your advocacy, which might attract responses from the opposition.

When making statements, it is a good idea to consider the following things:

- ▶ **Get yourself high up on the list of speakers.** You can do this by registering early, or registering as part of a coalition. This will boost your chance of getting a (good) speaking slot, which are often limited.
- ▶ **Make sure statements are spoken by people with agency.** It is powerful for people from the affected region, country or marginalised group, or those with direct expertise, speak as these voices carry more weight. But you must make sure the person making the statement has consented to doing so and is fully aware of the possible risks of speaking out.
- ▶ **When mentioning situations in countries, or organisations and individuals, be aware of the risks in doing so,** and ensure consent is given or names are changed. The UN has a system in place to prevent, investigate and hold member states accountable for intimidation and reprisals.¹ If you experience intimidation or any form of reprisal, report it. You can call on allies or other UN institutions to support you to do this if it would help.
- ▶ **When speaking, always bring a colleague with you and accompany other speakers in your coalition.** Speakers are sometimes approached by opposition groups or diplomats, especially on the way in and out of meeting rooms. Sometimes, these encounters are just done to compliment the speaker. But they can also be used to signal that your presence is noted or to intimidate the speaker.
- ▶ **Practice confidence, breathing exercises or other tricks that make you feel secure.** This will improve your statement, and it will also ensure you can politely deal with approaches from the opposition without giving away information.
- ▶ **Never share information that you do not want to share or that can harm your safety.** You are not obliged to share business cards, your hotel, plans in and around the UN, or other information about where you live or work. Have an excuse ready if you need to leave a conversation immediately (you could start coughing and look for the restrooms, for example 😊).

1 OHCHR, '[OHCHR and intimidation and reprisals for cooperation with the United Nations in the field of human rights](#)'

Side events

During international processes many side events take place. You might (co-) organise a side event yourself, or sit on a panel in someone else's event, or just attend them. Having opposition actors in the room is not a problem, but we have seen cases where opponents try to take over the event by asking negative questions and trying to ensure their arguments take up a lot of space. There have also been cases where speakers have been harassed and threatened during online events.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Here are some tips for dealing with in-person or side events that people to avoid or deal with disruption:

Organising side events

If you are organising a side event you might be the moderator or a speaker/panellist, but often you invite others to take these roles. It is wise to prepare yourself for possible opposition and also prepare the people you have invited to speak. You can do this by considering the following:



Risks. Discuss possible risks for the speakers you invite in advance. Ensure speakers are aware of the risks of speaking publicly and consent to the way in which their identity and their name is visible. For online events, they can keep their video off and use an alias to stay anonymous if they would like. Of course, speakers can also choose to avoid these risks by not participating, or you could discuss how to mitigate certain risks.



Invites. When sharing information and invitations to your side event, you can choose to leave out the names of the speaker(s) to avoid any unwanted attention.



Pictures. Before taking screenshots or photos of the event, get consent from your audience. If someone does not want to be in the photo or recording, they can keep their video off or leave the event, or you can decide not to take pictures of your audience at all.

In-person side events

Even sessions with the potential to draw a significant opposition presence can be carried out with minimal disruption and successfully convey your messages and experiences. To run an event smoothly, consider:

- **Registering your audience.** Register the audience beforehand and at the entrance of the meeting room. If this is not possible (for instance, if you are at an open events at the UN), take note of those who enter and inform the event moderator if you see people you recognise from anti-rights movements.
- **Inviting allies.** Ensure like-minded people are in the audience. Reach out to your network beforehand, mentioning the need for support and positive questions during a Q&A section.
- **Choosing your moderator wisely.** Appoint a strong moderator who is both familiar with potential audience members and knowledgeable about the range of SRHR issues that may arise. Prepare the moderator for dealing with certain challenging situations in the room.
- **Pre-planning the Q&A.** Hand out note cards for audience members to write down questions before the Q&A starts. The moderator can then select the questions that get asked, which will enable them to balance the different types of questions being posed.
- **Making well-researched materials.** Ensure hand-outs and other supporting materials are well-researched, thoroughly cited and readily available. Don't share sensitive materials; only distribute materials that you feel comfortable sharing with a broad audience.
- **Being smart in how you respond.** Respond to opposition questions and statements without repeating their questions or arguments, especially avoiding any myths or misinformation in the questions. Always state facts and evidence that support SRHR and steer back to your main message.
- **Choosing whether to have an open or closed event.** Consider what kind of discussions you want to have in open spaces, and what you want to discuss with smaller groups. For example, hold closed, invitation-only sessions to discuss strategy. Use public forums to share practiced messages and compelling examples.

Online events

If you are planning an event on a sensitive or controversial topic, it may be best to limit participant interaction during your event. While doing this is the easiest way to prevent an online event being disrupted, you can also go for full participant engagement and still have a successful, secure event. Here's how:

- **Prepare your team.** Assign members of your team to manage and monitor the chat. Or you could hire a tech-host if your budget allows (or ask one to volunteer). This enables you to keep an eye on the participants and the chat. Have members of your team ready to remove any disruptors from your event if needed.
- **Register your participants.** Require people to register for your event, which includes signing an event code of conduct. For a good example of an online code of conduct, [see this one from CIVICUS](#).
- **Use safety guidelines.** Develop safety guidelines and enforce them when needed. Know what to do in case anyone violates the event code of conduct and report them if possible.
- **Use tech to your advantage.** If you are using Zoom, have a webinar instead of a meeting. This allows you to only show panellists. Don't publish the direct link to your event online.
- **Manage participants.** Consider changing the settings so participants cannot unmute themselves and/or turn their video on. You can also disable participants' ability to rename themselves and to share their screen.
- **Manage the chat.** Consider disabling the chat or changing the settings so only moderators can read the chat.
- **Control Q&As.** Use the Q&A function to pre-select questions before making them public to the audience.

After the event

When you return home, inform organisations and your constituents in your country about the agreements between countries or the specific commitments your country made. Save the text of their statements and continue monitoring the implementation of these commitments. Publishing information about the proceedings can make the government actors who made the commitments more accountable. It also prevents false messages gaining ground back home or in the media.

Follow-up activities could include²:

- **Write a blog** and/or social media posts about your impressions, the consensus reached and the commitments your government made. Link to sources with your government's statement, your own statements, and possible resolutions being adopted. By doing this you are helping the facts be known and supporting the concept of multilateralism.
- **Organise a de-briefing** with civil society and/or civil servants. During the debriefing you can discuss the presence of opposition groups, share best practices and agree the process for monitoring the implementation of government commitments.
- **Check in with the speakers of your events** and any (youth) advocates that you travelled with. Check that everyone has arrived home safely and recovered from the mission.
- **Update your stakeholder mapping** and monitor the opposition's reports, press engagements and social media after the process. This analysis, and the learnings you take from it, will help you to strategize in following years.
- **Don't forget self-care.** Attending an international event is bound to leave a mark on your energy levels. It is important to take some rest physically and mentally before returning to business as usual.

2 Right Here Right Now (Rutgers International) (2020), [Localizing accountability mechanisms toolkit](#) [pdf].





Rutgers has worked with young people on sexual and reproductive rights for more than 50 years. In 29 countries, we work on sexuality education and information, access to contraception and safe abortion and the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence. At Rutgers, we talk about sexuality openly, positively and practically. We want young people to be free to enjoy their sexuality and relationships while respecting the rights of others in a gender-inclusive society.

Our mission is to connect, support and engage with young people and those around them to make this a reality.

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