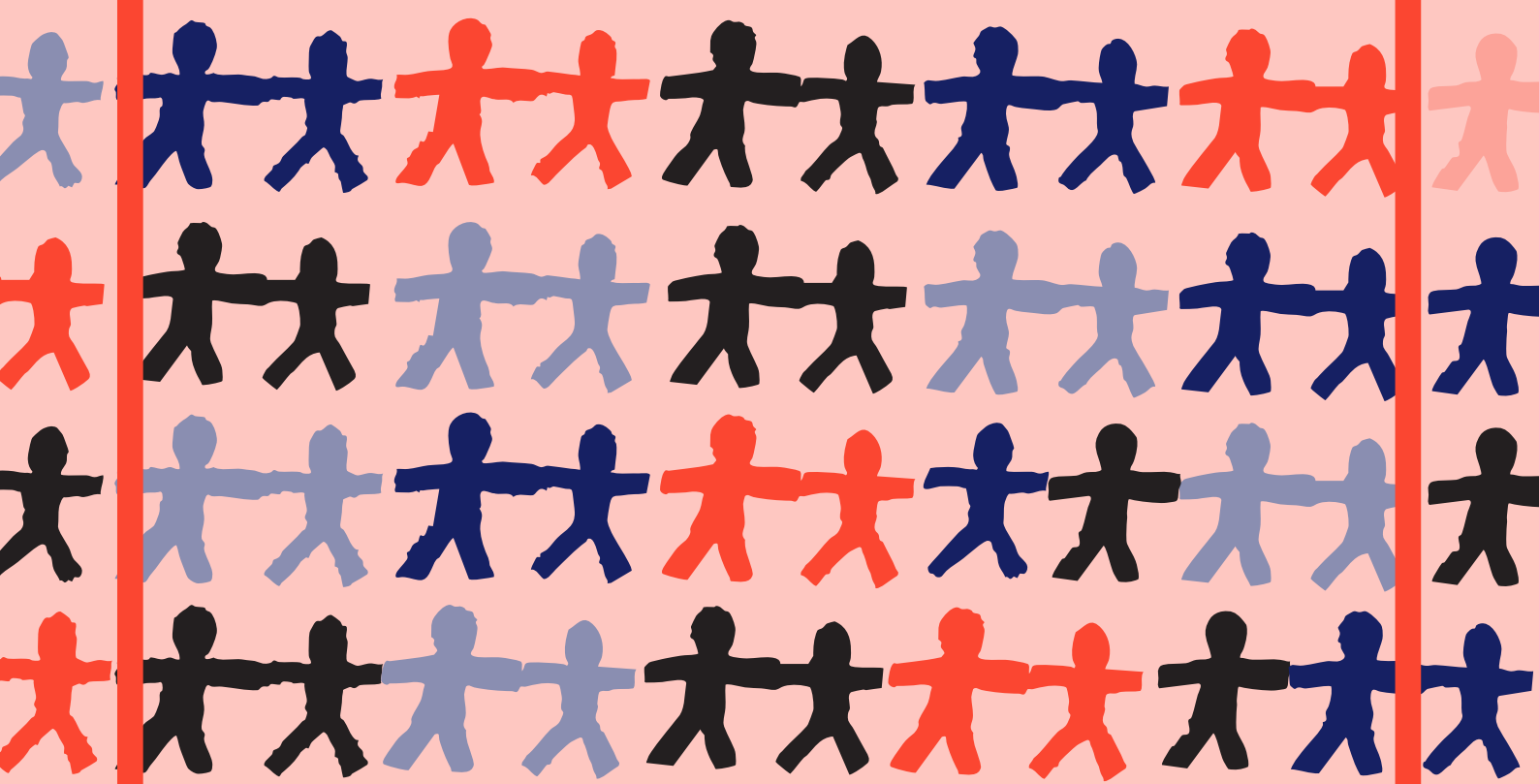


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Women's activism in the context of religious counter-mobilisation: Lessons from The Gambia

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The Gambia's recent struggle over the FGM ban demonstrates how women's rights reforms can face coordinated resistance across multiple institutions. This brief examines how activists responded and identifies four lessons for defending rights in the face of organised backlash.

Summary

Efforts to advance women's rights in The Gambia face counter-mobilisation from religious and traditional authorities embedded within the state. The 2023–2026 crisis surrounding the Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) ban demonstrates that top-down legislation alone is insufficient where competing sources of authority shape compliance. In response, Gambian women's rights actors have developed adaptive strategies on how to counter religious backlash. Four transferable lessons emerge:

- Build anticipatory, multi-level coalitions that link grassroots actors, diaspora, media and legal networks before crises emerge, enabling rapid and coordinated response.
- Engage and reshape religious narratives to counter doctrinal claims used to legitimise harmful practices while recognizing the long-term risks of reinforcing religious authority over rights.
- Adapt strategies across institutional arenas as religious counter-mobilisation shifts from communities to parliament and the courts.
- Centre survivor voices in advocacy while ensuring strong trauma-informed protections.

Customary, religious, and state power structures in The Gambia

To understand resistance to women's rights in The Gambia, religious and traditional leaders must be recognised as powerful political actors whose authority is deeply embedded within state structures. Gender equality policies are shaped by whether issues are understood as 'doctrinal', that is questions tied to religion and culture or not.¹ When framed as doctrinal, state action is constrained by the institutional relationship between government authorities and religious and traditional bodies. This gives religious and traditional leaders authority to use religious interpretations or cultural tradition to enable or block the enhancement of women's rights.

This power is politically institutionalised. Traditional authorities, including Paramount Chiefs (Seyfolu) and village heads (Alkalo), act as formal administrative and judicial arms of local governance. Seyfolu preside over District Tribunals (informal customary courts), which serve as the primary justice mechanism in rural areas. Because these tribunals control family law and local dispute resolution, traditional leaders act as gatekeepers of compliance. When they defy or ignore statutory bans, laws in practice become ineffective at the community level.

Parallel to this customary structure is the religious pillar, institutionalised through the Supreme Islamic Council (SIC). SIC occupies a unique position as a religious authority that often commands greater public trust than formal political institutions.² As a result, when SIC issues a Fatwa (religious ruling), it carries near-legal authority for the majority Muslim population.

Together, these customary and religious structures form a highly organised anti-rights coalition that extends into formal politics and civil society. This ecosystem includes ultra-conservative non-state actors, groups framing rights as foreign interference, and conservative legislators. Together,

they command higher public legitimacy than the secular state, and that has on more than one occasion contested women's rights reforms.

Triggering backlash

The experience in The Gambia shows how a single judicial enforcement action can trigger a predictable, multi-institutional regression cycle across a system of overlapping legal and political authorities.

In 2015, years of campaigning culminated in the introduction of a ban on FGM. But it took years for the law to be put into practice and following the first successful prosecutions under the FGM ban in 2023, organised resistance rapidly emerged. Sparked by these convictions, the period from 2023 to 2026 was characterised by an intense and evolving struggle over the future of the law. As different actors mobilised in support of or opposition to the ban, the conflict moved through religious, political, legislative, and judicial arenas.

While religious and traditional leaders frame FGM as a question of religious obligation and culture, conservative political figures increasingly portray anti-FGM initiatives as foreign interference and an attack on Gambian sovereignty.³ What began as a judicial enforcement action developed into a broader struggle over the legitimacy of the ban and the authority to define and regulate the practice.

The developments during these three years, from the first convictions to the current time, illustrate how resistance to women's rights can move strategically between religious, political, legislative, and judicial arenas. Together, they reveal both the resilience of anti-rights mobilisation and the ongoing fragility of legal protections when enforcement is contested by influential actors both within and outside of the state.

1 See for example, M, Htun & SL, Weldon. Religious Power, the State, Women's Rights, and Family Law. *Politics & Gender*. 2015;11(3):451-477.

2 Gambians report declining trust in institutions amid rising concerns over corruption, according to new Afrobarometer survey' 17 October 2024 <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/News-release-Gambians-report-declining-trust-in-institutions-amid-rising-corruption-Afrobarometer-17oct24.pdf>

3 See S Nabaneh et al. Contester le genre et la colonialité: Une analyse des mobilisations conservatrices en Afrique du Sud, au Kenya et au Ghana. *Politique Africaine* 2022; 4(168): 25-51.

The lessons listed below examine how women's rights activists adapted their strategies as the battleground shifted across public debate, parliament and ultimately the courts.

Four strategic lessons for advocacy and resistance

Lesson 1: Early strategic alliance building

One of the most important lessons from The Gambia is the value of proactive coalition-building. Following the 2023 crisis, women's rights advocates recognised that reactive mobilisation alone would be insufficient against an organised and institutionalised backlash. Civil society actors therefore strengthened and expanded the Civil Society Coalition Against FGM, anchored by the Network Against Gender-Based Violence (NGBV), creating what participants described as a 'web of protection' linking grassroots organisations, activists, legal experts, journalists and international allies. This web was designed to pre-empt predictable anti-rights attacks through rigorous, multi-sectoral baseline data.

A particularly important feature of this strategy was the integration of the Gambian diaspora and independent media. Diaspora networks provided both financial resources and access to international advocacy platforms, helping to shield local activists from political pressure and economic retaliation. At the same time, partnerships with community radio, independent journalists and digital media outlets allowed women's rights organisations to challenge misinformation and broadcast progressive theological interpretations directly to rural audiences in local languages.

The coalition also recognised the importance of evidence as a strategic resource. Prior to parliamentary deliberations, activists assembled legal analyses, medical research, survivor testimonies and documentation of The Gambia's obligations under regional and international human rights instruments. By embedding these resources within a network of community organisations, youth groups and media actors, the movement was able to prevent anti-rights actors from defining the terms of public debate.

The Gambian experience demonstrates that broad alliances are not simply support mechanisms; they function as protective infrastructure that enables movements to respond rapidly when backlash emerges.

Lesson 2: Reclaim theological narratives

A defining feature of the anti-rights campaign was its attempt to frame FGM as a religious obligation. This posed a significant challenge for many women's rights organisations, particularly because secular human rights arguments alone were often unable to effectively counter claims presented as religious truths.

Rather than avoiding theological debates, activists entered them strategically. A key move during the 2024 legislative debate was when influential Gambian parliamentarians engaged with scholars at Al-Azhar

University in Cairo. These scholars challenged assertions that FGM is required by Islam and emphasised longstanding Islamic principles prohibiting harm. Combined with contributions from local progressive religious leaders, this engagement helped reclaim the narrative for the pro-rights camp and undermined the Supreme Islamic Council's claim that FGM is a religious duty.

The strategy was effective because it combined religious reasoning with medical evidence and human rights arguments. Activists did not merely contest the health implications of FGM; they also contested the underlying premise that support for women's rights was somehow incompatible with Islam. In doing so, they disrupted the anti-rights movement's framing of the issue as a conflict between religion and rights.

However, using religious arguments introduces complex long-term dilemmas for human rights movements. While religious arguments can produce important political victories, they may also reinforce the broader idea that women's rights require religious validation. Human rights actors must therefore continuously balance strategic engagement with religion against the risk of strengthening religious gatekeeping over rights claims.

Lesson 3: Coordinate multi-institutional lawfare

The defeat of efforts to repeal the FGM ban in parliament did not end the struggle. Instead, opposition shifted from the legislative arena to the judiciary, demonstrating how organised backlash adapts when confronted with political defeat.

Women's rights actors responded by developing what can best be described as a multi-institutional legal strategy. Rather than treating litigation as the sole responsibility of lawyers or state institutions, civil society organisations, legal professionals and government actors coordinated their efforts. The Ministry of Justice worked alongside organisations such as the Female Lawyers Association of The Gambia, while broader civil society networks contributed legal expertise, advocacy and public engagement.

An important element of this strategy was the use of regional human rights jurisprudence. The ECOWAS Court judgment in *Forum Against Harmful Practices & Others v. Sierra Leone* strengthened arguments that FGM should be understood as a violation of bodily integrity and protection from cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment rather than as a protected cultural practice. Activists used this precedent to challenge attempts to frame the issue solely through the lenses of culture and religion.

Within the courtroom, pro-rights lawyers also adopted a focused and incremental strategy. Rather than engaging in broad theological debates, they concentrated on the legal doctrine of informed consent, arguing that parental religious preferences cannot override the state's constitutional duty to protect children from harm. This strategy isolated ultra-conservative actors, proving that terms like 'God's will'

are legally invalid and cannot supersede protection for vulnerable citizens.

The lesson is not simply that litigation matters, but that successful rights defence requires movements to adapt as resistance shifts between institutions.

Lesson 4: Centre survivor voices

One of the most influential aspects of the campaign to defend the FGM ban was the mobilisation of survivor testimony. During parliamentary consultations in 2024, over 15 survivors broke deeply entrenched taboos and spoke publicly about the physical, emotional and social consequences of FGM. A key strength of this approach was that leaders of the pro-rights movement, including organisers within the NGBV and grassroots networks such as Think Young Women (TYW), are themselves survivors of FGM, lending the advocacy profound legitimacy. Their experiences provided credibility and moral authority that could not easily be dismissed by opponents. Survivor narratives helped challenge claims that FGM is a harmless tradition and played a significant role in influencing undecided lawmakers.

Yet the Gambian experience also highlights the risks inherent in survivor-centred advocacy. Public testimony can expose individuals to stigma, retraumatisation and political attack. Recognising these dangers, organisations developed trauma-informed approaches that combined counselling, peer support, anonymous submissions and carefully managed public participation.

For movements elsewhere, the lesson is clear. Survivor voices can be transformative, but only when accompanied by robust structures that protect the dignity, safety and well-being of those who choose to speak.

Conclusion

The ongoing constitutional challenge over FGM in The Gambia demonstrates that the gains made by pro-rights advocates remain fragile. The case illustrates a broader reality facing rights movements globally: organised backlash rarely disappears when defeated in one arena. Instead, it adapts and re-emerges through new institutions and new forms of mobilisation.

The Gambian experience shows that defending rights requires more than legislation. It demands anticipatory coalition-building, the ability to contest powerful narratives, coordinated action across institutions and careful centring of the people most directly affected. Ultimately, the resilience of women's rights depends on movements' capacity to adapt under conditions of political uncertainty while maintaining broad social legitimacy.

Key insights for stakeholders

For pro-right actors

- Build anticipatory, multi-level coalitions that can operate across institutions. Proactive alliance-building enables rights defenders to respond rapidly to organised backlash and adapt as resistance moves between public debate, legislative processes and the courts.
- Strategically engaging and reshaping religious narratives can be decisive in countering religious based backlash. But there is a trade-off: theology as a tool for rights advocacy can unlock short-term political wins but may entrench long-term dependence on religious gatekeeping for rights legitimacy.
- Centering survivor voices can powerfully shift political outcomes by grounding abstract debates in lived reality, but it must be done with strong protective measures whereby the dignity, safety, and well-being of those who speak are protected.

For donors

- Pre-existing networks, trust, and organisational infrastructure are preconditions for effective responses to backlash. This implies a shift in donor funding priorities towards core and flexible fundings, long term support and investments in networks.
- Donors can support political protection and strategic flexibility in movements by funding cross-border networks and regional legal mechanisms

For research community

- Combining legal, medical, and lived-experience evidence creates a more robust knowledge base than single-discipline research.
- Research functions as "protective infrastructure" helping movements resist rollback. For example, linking domestic research to regional and global expertise increases legitimacy and constrains counter-arguments grounded in local interpretations of religion
- Research has the greatest impact when it is embedded within and responsive to movement needs, which makes co-production of knowledge essential. This evidence is most effective when generated pre-emptively, allowing movements to shape the terms of debate before backlash actors do

Project information

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