An Exploratory Research of

# Anti-Gender Narratives in Kenya's Digital Media Spaces

# Acknowledgments

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# Executive Summary



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This research examines how anti-gender narratives function within Kenya's digital media spaces. Instead of appearing as isolated expressions of cultural discomfort, these narratives function as a coordinated, adaptable system of resistance to gender justice.

**In this study, anti-gender narratives refer to digital discourses that oppose or distort gender equality, bodily autonomy, and feminist or queer perspectives by framing reform as a moral, cultural, or national threat.**

The research asks a key question: **how do anti-gender narratives function as a form of power in Kenya's digital sphere, and how are communities responding to them?** It employs a mixed-methods approach that includes desk reviews, the scraping of digital data, and focus group discussions with feminist, youth, and digital rights stakeholders. These combined methods enable the tracing of how anti-gender narratives are created, amplified, timed, and experienced, as well as how those targeted by backlash adapt, resist, and endure.

The findings indicate that anti-gender discourse in Kenya is not evenly spread. It is highly concentrated, emotionally charged, and strategically used. Analysis of 27,022 scraped posts shows that anti-LGBTQ+ content makes up the core of the dataset. Telegram serves as a key coordination hub, accounting for 44 per cent of the scraped content. It serves as a staging area for long-form posts, religious audio clips, image collections, and ready-made documents, all assembled and prepared for redistribution. These materials then circulate across platforms like X and WhatsApp, often appearing in nearly identical forms, especially during times of political or policy prominence.

The dominant narratives are closely clustered and often layered.

↘LGBTQ+ rights are consistently portrayed as foreign impositions and existential threats to children, families, and national values. These frames are frequently reinforced through religious language and conspiracy theories.

↘Masculinity backlash and anti-feminist rhetoric may be less frequent in raw terms, but they wield disproportionate influence because they are linked to high-profile influencers and aspirational identity content.

↘Narratives concerning gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health rights appear in smaller quantities. Yet, they play a significant role during reform periods, when survivor testimonies and policy debates are dismissed as immoral, donor-driven, or culturally harmful.

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**Emotion and format are vital to the spread** of these narratives. Scraped data shows a heavy reliance on fear- and outrage-oriented framing, conveyed through short visual assets, voice notes, and one-page briefs made for quick sharing. Focus group participants consistently reported seeing the same materials across different platforms, confirming coordinated cross-platform circulation. Instead of persuading through debate, these dynamics flood digital spaces with repetition and volume, limiting engagement due to exhaustion and emotional saturation.

Research indicates that **anti-gender narratives tend to heighten during specific trigger moments.** These surges in narratives closely coincide with reform windows, legislative debates, public protests, and international events. Messaging is typically introduced in advance, amplified as events unfold, and reinforced afterwards through repetition. Participants described these cycles as predictable, noting that backlash often occurs in private groups and semi-private digital spaces before reforms are publicly announced. This timing creates a sense of being watched and pre-empted, leading to strategic withdrawal and diminished public engagement among reform advocates.

The **actor networks sustaining this ecosystem are dense and interconnected.** Religious leaders, political figures, digital influencers, and aligned institutions operate in ways that reinforce each other's messaging. Religious authority provides moral framing, political actors lend legitimacy at key moments, and influencers translate talking points into platform-specific formats. Scraped data indicates coordinated amplification during peak moments, including hashtag storms and clusters of newly created accounts. Universities and media outlets also serve as passive amplifiers, either through biased framing or by platforming anti-gender voices without scrutiny, extending the reach of these narratives beyond explicitly digital spaces.

Although anti-gender narratives are often portrayed as culturally local, research indicates that **many of their terms, frames, and tactics are actually transnational in origin**. Concepts such as *"gender ideology"* and *"family sovereignty,"* along with strategies like hashtag flooding and meme warfare, reflect patterns seen in Europe, North America, and parts of Latin America. These ideas are adapted into local languages, religious idioms, and political contexts, enabling anti-gender groups to claim cultural authenticity while accusing feminist and LGBTQ+ movements of foreign influence. This contradiction is seldom analysed in public debate.

The impact of this narrative system goes beyond online discussions. **Anti-gender narratives lead to institutional hesitation, semantic confusion, and biased media reporting.** Civil servants, community leaders, and even private actors often delay or avoid implementing legally mandated reforms out of fear of reputational harm, which is intensified by digital backlash. Emotionally charged content consistently outperforms factual reporting, undermining public understanding and trust. Over time, rights-based language becomes questionable, and survivor-centred advocacy is delegitimised, weakening both policy enforcement and civic engagement.

At the same time, **resistance is active and adaptable. Communities respond through encrypted networks, peer-led safety practices, creative storytelling, and strategic counter-messaging.** Focus group discussions highlight withdrawal from hostile spaces as a survival strategy, alongside cultural production that reclaims dignity through humour, art, and lived experience. Digital analysis indicates that counter-messaging can disrupt narrative dominance, especially when grounded in personal testimony and locally resonant language. These practices serve as vital infrastructures of care and resilience, although they remain under-resourced and emotionally demanding.

What this research makes clear is that countering anti-gender narratives requires more than reactive messaging. Backlash functions as a patterned, anticipatory system rather than a series of isolated incidents. Effective responses must therefore focus on building narrative infrastructure, emotional resilience, and institutional clarity. Recognising this rhythm is crucial for maintaining reform momentum, supporting survivor-led advocacy, and reshaping Kenya's digital narrative landscape in ways that make justice more complicated to reverse.

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# Introduction

In Kenya, efforts towards gender justice develop within a politically volatile and deeply patriarchal landscape characterised by recurring waves of public backlash. Over the past decade, initiatives aimed at promoting gender equity, sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), and protecting LGBTQ+ communities have consistently faced organised resistance. These reactions are driven by anti-gender narratives that portray gender justice as a threat to children, culture, and national identity, diverting public debate from policy substance to emotionally charged moral claims.

In this report, anti-gender narratives refer to forms of digital discourse that oppose gender equality and related reforms. These narratives primarily circulate through online media spaces and aim to delegitimise feminist, queer, and survivor-centred perspectives by portraying them as dangerous, foreign, or morally corrupt. Instead of engaging with reform on legal or civic grounds, anti-gender narratives reframe policy debates as struggles over values, belonging, and social order.

A key tactic used by these narratives is moral panic. Moral panic involves the deliberate amplification of fear-driven messaging that exaggerates or fabricates social threats to justify exclusion and mobilisation of opposition. It simplifies complex debates into straightforward questions of danger and cultural survival, allowing backlash actors to rally support without engaging with evidence or policy details. In contemporary Kenya, these dynamics are increasingly mediated through digital platforms, where speed, repetition, and emotional intensity amplify their political impact.

Kenya offers a particularly salient context for examining these dynamics. The country's progressive constitutional framework coexists with strong religious influence, polarised politics, and highly interconnected media ecosystems. Debates on gender justice are therefore not marginal but central to broader struggles over citizenship, belonging, and governance. Digital media spaces play a crucial role in shaping these struggles, providing both the infrastructure through which backlash spreads and the terrain on which it is challenged.

One early flashpoint was the rollout of Kenya's Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) framework. Introduced as an evidence-based, age-appropriate response to adolescent health and well-being, the framework quickly became the target of coordinated resistance. Within months of its introduction, public discourse shifted from questions of curriculum design and health outcomes to alarmist claims about child corruption and moral decay. Soon afterwards, Kenya withdrew from international commitments linked to sexuality education, demonstrating how moral panic can result in concrete policy retreat.

Around the same period, increased visibility of LGBTQ+ organising and legal advocacy sparked similar dynamics. The Supreme Court's affirmation of the right of LGBTQ+ organisations to register marked an important legal milestone, but it also heightened public backlash. Queer identities were increasingly portrayed as foreign impositions and moral threats, with religious and political figures using the language of cultural defence to challenge constitutional protections. These reactions followed a familiar pattern: legal or institutional progress prompted a moralised counterattack aimed at reasserting normative boundaries through fear and stigma.

By 2024, this logic had expanded beyond explicitly gendered policy arenas. During protests against the Finance Bill, widely referred to as *"maandamano,"* narratives opposing gender justice and LGBTQ+ rights were incorporated into broader expressions of economic grievance and political dissatisfaction. Feminist and queer movements were repositioned as distractions from *"real"* national concerns, indicating that anti-gender narratives were no longer limited to social policy debates but had become part of a broader range of political mobilisation. This expansion signalled a shift from issue-specific backlash to a more diffuse strategy of delegitimisation.

These developments highlight a recurring pattern where moments of visible reform are met with coordinated increases in narrative escalation. Instead of isolated controversies, they raise wider questions about how anti-gender narratives are created, amplified, and experienced within Kenya's digital media spaces, and how these processes influence both institutional responses and the everyday realities of those facing backlash. It is these questions that this research aims to investigate.

# 1.2 Rationale, Research Questions, Scope and Structure

This research stems from a growing realisation that anti-gender narratives in Kenya are part of a transnational backlash framework that is strategically coordinated and emotionally calculated, with digital deployment that is increasingly anticipatory. These narratives are utilised to undermine reform, delegitimise survivor-centred advocacy, and reassert control over civic discourse. While global scholarship has traced the rise of anti-gender movements in Europe and Latin America, there remains limited documentation of how these logics are adapted and operationalised in East African contexts (McEwen & Towns, 2025; Judge, 2024).

Kenya's political and media landscape, characterised by the convergence of religious conservatism, entrenched patriarchy, and rapidly evolving digital networks, offers a critical site for this inquiry. The interaction between deeply rooted cultural norms and high-speed online platforms has created a volatile environment where gender justice actors are routinely targeted, and moral panic can be weaponised to delay even legally mandated reforms. Nonetheless, existing analyses tend to view backlash as episodic or reactive rather than as a systematic power structure that operates through narrative and emotional saturation. This research aims to fill that gap by mapping the structure, timing, and emotional impact of anti-gender narratives in Kenya, while also highlighting the strategies communities use to resist, adapt, and survive within hostile narrative environments.

At its core, the research asks:

**How do anti-gender narratives operate as a power infrastructure in Kenya, and what counter-narratives can disrupt them?**

To operationalise this inquiry, the research was guided by six interrelated questions:

1. What narrative frames, emotional hooks, and linguistic tactics are used to legitimise anti-gender discourse in Kenya?

2. Who are the key actors, institutions, and interests driving these narratives, locally and transnationally?

3. Under what social, political, and cultural conditions do these narratives gain traction and legitimacy?

4. How do political and legal events (e.g. elections, court rulings, policy reforms) amplify anti-gender narratives?

5. What impacts do these narratives have on public attitudes, online discourse, and gender justice advocacy?

6. Where and how are community-led counter-narratives emerging, and what emotional and strategic tools do they use?

The **scope of the study** covers Kenya from 2022 to 2025. The desk review covers this entire period, while scraped social media data focuses on 2024-2025, selected for its relevance and manageability. Focus group discussions were held in 2025, providing real-time insights into survivor-led resistance. The study focuses on digital platforms, reform windows, and community responses, without attempting to document all incidents of backlash or to represent all identities exhaustively.

The report is organised into **six** chapters. The first chapter presents the background, rationale, and research design. The second chapter describes the methodology, including data sources and limitations. The third chapter provides a unified overview of findings, integrating insights from desk research, scraped data, and focus group discussions. The fourth chapter synthesises implications, while the fifth offers strategic recommendations for reform, advocacy, and movement resilience. The final chapter concludes the research.

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# Methodology
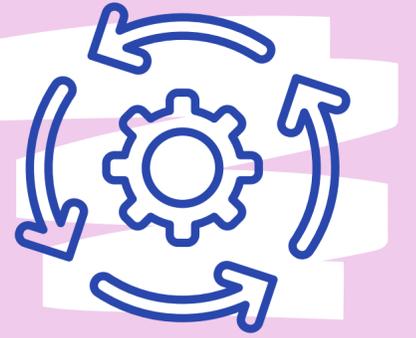
This study employed a mixed-methods approach to examine how anti-gender narratives spread, escalate, and are challenged within Kenya's digital media landscape. The research combined desk-based analysis, social media scraping, and qualitative focus group discussions to capture both observable patterns of narrative creation and the lived experiences of those targeted by backlash. Combined, these methods allowed for an analysis of narrative structure, timing, and amplification, while grounding digital findings in community testimony.

# 2.1 Data Sources and Collection

Data was generated through three interconnected sources: a desk review, targeted digital scraping, and focus group discussions (FGDs). The desk review analysed academic literature, policy documents, media reports, and civil society publications produced between 2022 and 2025. This material was utilised to position Kenyan anti-gender narratives within broader regional and transnational contexts, identify recurring framings, and trace institutional and ideological lineages. Sources were selected for their relevance to narrative construction, backlash dynamics, and gender-justice advocacy.

Digital data was gathered through a targeted scraping exercise focused on capturing high-profile narrative activity rather than typical everyday discourse. A total of 27,022 posts were collected from Telegram, X (formerly Twitter), Reddit, and Google Search between August 2024 and August 2025. This period was chosen to reflect a recent cycle of heightened digital mobilisation within the wider study timeframe.

Keyword-based extraction was carried out using custom Python scripts and open-source scraping tools, focusing on terms related to gender, sexuality, morality, religion, and national identity. Each post was exported into structured CSV files that included metadata such as platform, date, language, content type, engagement metrics, and evidence of cross-platform circulation. Telegram accounted for the largest share of content (12,000 posts; 44%), mainly sourced from two high-traffic public channels that served as coordination hubs. X data showed sharp spikes aligned with political events and policy moments. Reddit and Google Search yielded fewer volumes but offered insights into narrative adoption beyond activist or influencer spaces.

Focus group discussions were held with 24 participants in Nairobi in 2025. Participants included youth activists, SRHR advocates, digital rights defenders, and community organisers with direct experience of online backlash. FGDs examined how anti-gender narratives are encountered, interpreted, and navigated, as well as the emotional and strategic responses they elicit. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. All sessions were anonymised and transcribed. Analysis focused on identifying thematic patterns rather than representativeness, with particular attention to emotional impact, withdrawal strategies, and forms of resistance. Ethical considerations centred on non-extractive practices, participant safety, and survivor-centred interpretation.

# 2.2 Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings.

↘ First, the scraping exercise was limited to Telegram, X, Reddit, and Google Search. Meta platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, along with TikTok and private WhatsApp groups, were excluded due to technical and access constraints, including API restrictions and encryption. These platforms are known to host significant anti-gender activity, which suggests that some forms of coordination and amplification are likely underrepresented.

↘ Secondly, platform bias influenced the dataset. Telegram and X dominate the scraped content, which may overemphasise dynamics specific to those platforms compared to Facebook or TikTok. Access to Telegram data depended on prior membership in selected channels, providing insight into semi-public spaces but also introducing access bias. The dataset represents content visible within those networks, not the entire range of Telegram discourse.

↘ Third, the scraping strategy prioritised known high-impact actors, channels, and keywords. As a result, the dataset highlights the strategic core of narrative production rather than diffuse, everyday social media expression. This was a deliberate choice aligned with the research focus on coordination and amplification, but it limits the generalisability of prevalence or incidence claims. Engagement metrics also varied substantially across platforms. Telegram provides views and forwards, while X offers likes, reposts, and replies. These metrics are not directly comparable, restricting cross-platform measurement of reach or impact. Analysis, therefore, interpreted resonance in platform-specific terms rather than attempting standardised comparisons.

↘ Finally, the research was conducted within a condensed timeframe, with data collection and analysis completed in three months in 2025. Only one round of FGD was conducted, limiting the ability to observe longer-term changes in experience or strategy. Digital tactics also evolve rapidly, meaning some specific formats or hashtags may change after publication. To address this, the analysis focused on underlying patterns, such as timing around reform moments and emotional mobilisation, rather than transient artefacts. These limitations reflect the exploratory nature of the study and highlight areas for further research, especially longitudinal analysis and deeper access to closed digital spaces.

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# Findings

## 3.1 Dominant Narratives in Kenya's Digital Anti-Gender Discourse

The findings reveal that anti-gender discourse is heavily focused on queer identities and portrayed as an existential threat to children, the family, and national values. Of the 1,315 items used for thematic counts, 1,280 (97%) were coded as anti-LGBTQ+. Across the entire dataset, there are 27,022 posts, of which 12,000 (44%) are from Telegram, which serves as the primary repository for lengthy posts, media packs, and toolkits. This numerical concentration clearly indicates that anti-LGBTQ+ content is not a marginal theme but the core of the dataset, maintained by high-volume activity on a limited number of platforms and channels.

The narratives are closely grouped and often layered.

↘ The dominant frame portrays **LGBTQ+ rights** as a foreign agenda and a threat to children; this is often combined with religious language and conspiracy theories. Religious and traditional morality language overlaps significantly with anti-LGBTQ+ content; approximately 895 items in the scraped sample contain religious framing, and the word 'sin' appears in about 45% of messages (590 posts). Focus group participants described common reframing, such as 'protect our children' and 'this is un-African', and several reported receiving identical voice notes and image cards across WhatsApp groups after first seeing them on Telegram or X, which confirms the cross-platform flow observed in the scrape.

↘ **A smaller but highly impactful cluster of narratives focuses on masculinity backlash and anti-feminist rhetoric.** Although explicitly coded masculinity backlash has about 43 items in the coded sample, these posts are often created by high-reach influencers (e.g., channels associated with Amerix) and are amplified through coordinated hashtags. Participants in the FGD described how the masculinity content, testimonials, motivational posts, and mockery of women function to attract and retain followers by offering a positive identity, like pride and belonging, alongside attacks on feminism.

↘ **Gender-based violence (GBV) disinformation and SRHR moral panic are less frequent in raw counts but have significant discursive effects.** The dataset includes 115 posts coded as GBV disinformation and 43 labelled as SRHR

panic; these items tend to cluster around policy moments and protests, where they reframe survivor testimony and sex-education debates as donor-driven or immoral. The CitizenGo online petition, started in July 2025, urging the Kenyan president to withdraw or disavow Kenya's vote in favour of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolution supporting the mandate of the Independent Expert on sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI), gained 12,620 signatures. Kenya's affirmative vote prompted a coordinated digital surge: over 1,200 nearly identical tweets using hashtags like **#GayZ** and **#Right2Kiss** were posted within 48 hours, many from accounts created that same month, indicating planned mobilisation rather than an organic response. This petition demonstrates how online narratives can quickly translate into mainstream and media attention, reinforcing the perception that these frames have widespread public support.

**Emotion and packaging are central to how narratives spread.** 229 posts were coded with explicit emotional framing; within that subset, fear and outrage dominate at 45% and 42% respectively, while authority-based religious appeals make up about 20%. Telegram's content is highly designed for reuse; around 53% of Telegram posts include images, and approximately 8% are documents. Short, visual assets and one-page briefs circulate easily as screenshots, quote cards, and forwarded PDFs. One Telegram post in January 2025 recorded 37,000 views and 140 shares, showing how a single hub post can trigger rapid spreading across platforms.

Actors named in the FGD map to these narrative clusters. Religious leaders and faith-based institutions provide moral framing and local credibility; influencers and online opinion shapers like Amerix, Andrew Kibe, and Cyprian Nyakundi turn talking points into memes and conversational content; political figures and aligned accounts offer episodic legitimacy and moments of extended reach; and networks and coalitions, including anti-rights CSOs and traditional conservative actors, supply templates and coordination. The FGD also flagged inauthentic activity on X. About 11% of X accounts in the July 2025 CitizenGo petition thread were less than one month old, indicating coordinated account creation around trigger events.

# 3.2 Strategic Framing of Moral Crisis in Anti-Gender Narratives

Anti-gender narratives in Kenya were strategically employed to divert public attention, strengthen political legitimacy, and hinder institutional reform. These narratives emerged during moments when gender justice initiatives gained prominence, especially around legislative proposals, curriculum reforms, and international commemorations. Hörter (2025) describes how political elites and religious leaders used emotionally charged frames such as *"protect our children," "defend African values,"* and *"resist Western moral decay"* to recast technical policy debates as existential threats to national identity.

The 2023 controversy over Kenya's revised sex-education curriculum highlights this pattern. Although the curriculum was based on age-appropriate, rights-based health education, conservative actors launched coordinated campaigns across radio, television, and social media, falsely claiming that children would be taught to *"reject their gender"* and *"embrace immorality"* (UNESCO, 2023; IDS, 2022). Focus group participants explained how these claims spread quickly through religious and community spaces, often before official communication from education authorities. According to the data gathered, 63% of messages sampled during this period used the phrase *"protect our children,"* reinforcing fears about parental authority and cultural decline. Religious institutions and political figures amplified these narratives, framing the reform as a foreign imposition that threatened the sanctity of the African family. FEMNET (2021) notes that similar moral narratives have been used to delay the implementation of the two-thirds gender rule, with opponents citing cultural preservation to justify non-compliance with constitutional duties.

Emotion plays a crucial role in the effectiveness of this framing. UNESCO (2023) and Access Now (2024) emphasise how anti-gender actors depend on emotionally charged formats, including WhatsApp prayer chains, voice notes, and dramatised short-form content, to intensify moral anxiety and personalise perceived threats. The data shows that 70% of emotionally loaded content circulates on semi-private platforms such as WhatsApp and TikTok. These formats are intentionally designed to avoid critical scrutiny and instead cultivate a sense of communal urgency. The use of religious idioms and family metaphors enhances the emotional authority of the message, making it challenging for reform advocates to respond without risking disrespect or cultural alienation.

Relocating debate from civic and legal grounds to a moral register, anti-gender narratives allow political actors to divert attention from governance failures such as underfunded education systems, rising gender-based violence, economic insecurity, and stalled judicial reforms. Nyabola (2018) argues that this form of discursive redirection characterises Kenya's digital political culture, in which moral panic is used to conceal structural inertia and secure consent. Focus group participants echoed this view, noting that moments of policy visibility were often accompanied by sudden waves of alarmist messaging that redefined reform as a crisis rather than governance.

Participants also described the anticipatory nature of these deployments. Prayer chains, sermon excerpts, and warning messages were often circulated before curriculum announcements or policy debates, priming communities to reject reforms before they entered public deliberation. The data shows that Telegram and X posts were pre-scheduled to align with Ministry announcements, supporting the claim that anti-gender actors seed narratives early to dominate first impressions. Youth activists and SRHR advocates characterised this pattern as destabilising and disorienting, with one participant noting, *"The moment we start gaining ground, the backlash floods in, it's like they're watching us and waiting to strike."* This anticipatory mobilisation narrows the space for evidence-based engagement and shifts the burden of response onto reform advocates' legitimacy rather than the substance of their work.

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# 3.3 Rhetorical Engineering and Symbolic Framing

Analysis of scraped data and focus group discussions reveals that, following the strategic framing of gender justice as a moral and cultural crisis, anti-gender actors in Kenya heavily rely on rhetorical engineering and symbolic framing to stabilise and normalise exclusionary ideas. These tactics do not introduce new arguments; instead, they embed earlier framings into everyday communication, making them familiar, engaging, and difficult to challenge.

**Rhetorical engineering involves the deliberate crafting of language through humour, metaphor, anecdote, and moralised speech to present gender hierarchy as natural and desirable. Symbolic framing refers to the encoding of meaning through culturally resonant symbols, labels, and associations that shape perceptions of gender justice without explicit argument. Euphemisms, metaphors, and normalisations serve as powerful tools of anti-gender discourse, embedding exclusionary meanings into everyday language practices.**

**Rhetorical engineering** is evident throughout Kenya's media landscape, especially in popular radio programmes and influencer-driven digital content. Wambura (2021) documents how shows like Classic 105's Morning Show rely on humour and metaphors to reinforce patriarchal norms. Phrases such as *"women are like phones, always switching apps"* serve as humour, while statements that *"a man must be the head of the household"* function as moral anecdotes. Scraped web search data also confirms that Classic 105 was among the top 10 most circulated gender-related media clips on TikTok and WhatsApp during the analysis period, with humour-based segments garnering higher engagement than policy-oriented messages.

Although presented as harmless banter, these rhetorical devices perform ideological work by framing male authority as common sense and female autonomy as instability. For context, this show airs each morning, with recorded segments replayed throughout the day. Notably, key and often controversial segments are also disseminated via social media platforms like YouTube and Tiktok,

broadening the reach of the messages to diverse audiences. Across the scraped dataset and FGD testimony, similar devices frequently appeared in discussions of feminism, sexuality education, and women's leadership, indicating that rhetorical engineering is not incidental but a recurring tactic. Focus group participants noted that such language circulates widely online as clipped audio, memes, and casual quotes, making it difficult to challenge without appearing humourless or culturally disconnected.

**Symbolic framing** involves attaching gender justice claims to symbols that already carry moral significance. In the scraped dataset and FGD, feminist and LGBTQ+ advocacy are repeatedly linked with symbols of danger, disorder, or foreign intrusion, while terms like *"family,"* *"children,"* and *"faith"* are portrayed as areas under threat. Participants described how labels such as *"un-African,"* *"anti-God,"* or *"gender confusion"* serve symbolically, reducing complex policy debates to moral shorthand. One participant explained, *"They don't argue with you, they name/label you, and that name/label does the work."* In this way, symbolic language alters meaning by making certain positions seem inherently suspicious before any discussion begins.

**Rhetorical engineering and symbolic framing are mutually reinforcing but not interchangeable.** Rhetorical engineering influences how messages are delivered, using humour, ridicule, or moral storytelling, while symbolic framing shapes what those messages signify by anchoring them in culturally loaded associations. Together, they create a discursive environment where exclusion becomes normalised and critique is socially costly. FEMNET (2021) documents how this dynamic disproportionately targets women in public life.

Female politicians and activists are portrayed through a symbolic double bind: they are celebrated as moral guardians when compliant but cast as deviant or dangerous when assertive. Focus group participants cited recurring labels such as *"unmarriageable,"* *"broken,"* or *"lesbian by default,"* which reduce political engagement to moral failure. The analysis supports this, showing that over 45% of sampled

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commentary on women leaders contained some form of moral judgment or symbolic insult, often unrelated to their policy positions.

These tactics also manipulate legal and policy language. Terms like comprehensive sexuality education or bodily autonomy are symbolically reframed as *"child sexualisation"* or moral collapse, detaching them from their legal and educational meanings. Participants observed that this semantic distortion creates confusion, especially among young people and community leaders with limited access to accurate information. As one participant said, *"They take our language and twist it, now even saying 'rights' makes people suspicious."* Instead of persuading through evidence, rhetorical engineering works by reshaping the debate itself.

This was especially clear in discussions on X, where videos tagged with terms like **#ProtectOurChildren** or **#AfricanValues** often misrepresented policy texts. Nearly 6 out of 10 such videos featured partial or entirely false reinterpretations of terms such as *"gender identity"* or *"autonomy"*.

FGD participants consistently described exposure to ridicule, moral shaming, and symbolic inversion as emotionally draining and socially isolating. Several reported withdrawing from online engagement, muting keywords, or avoiding public commentary altogether to shield themselves from humiliation and fatigue. Instead of silencing dissent through formal censorship, rhetorical engineering suppresses participation through emotional fatigue, reducing who can speak and how they can do so.
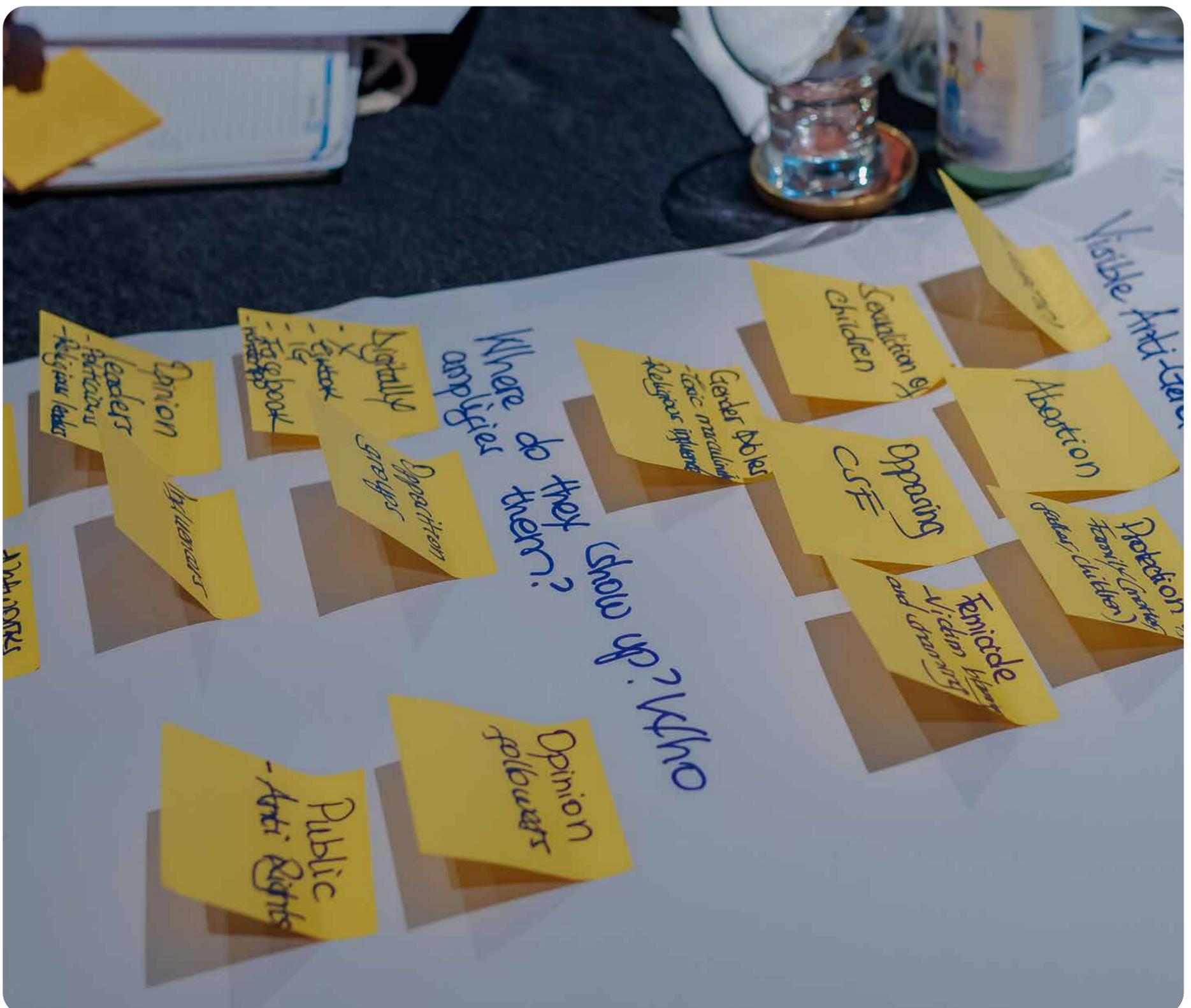
# 3.4 Temporal Surge Logic and Narrative Escalation

Anti-gender narratives in Kenya do not circulate uniformly. Instead, they rise in noticeable surges that align with political, legislative, and cultural trigger points. These surges closely follow moments when gender justice initiatives increase visibility or near implementation. Hörter (2025) identifies a recurring pattern where anti-gender rhetoric intensifies around parliamentary hearings on gender-related bills, curriculum reform announcements, and international events such as Pride Month or International Women's Day. The escalation follows a consistent pattern: narratives are introduced beforehand, amplified during the event period, and reinforced afterwards through repetition and emotional appeal.

The 2023 rollout of Kenya's revised sex education curriculum illustrates this surge dynamic. Although the curriculum was based on rights-based, age-appropriate education, conservative actors launched a coordinated backlash when public attention intensified. Claims that children would be taught to *"reject their gender"* or *"embrace immorality"* circulated widely despite being factually inaccurate (UNESCO, 2023; IDS, 2022). The timing of this backlash was not coincidental. Messaging peaked during curriculum announcements and implementation discussions, rather than during earlier technical consultations, indicating that escalation is timed to coincide with moments of maximum public visibility.

This anticipatory pattern extends beyond education policy. Access Now (2024) documents similar cycles in digital hate campaigns targeting LGBTQ+ individuals, where spikes in abuse follow advocacy gains, court rulings, or policy advances. Instead of responding to opposition after reforms are implemented, anti-gender actors preemptively escalate narratives,

aiming to disrupt momentum before reforms become normalised. Temporal escalation thus acts as a preventative tactic, designed to regain narrative control at crucial moments.

Scraped data and FGD findings confirm the link between narrative escalation and political flashpoints. The July 2025 UN Human Rights Council vote on renewing the mandate of the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity triggered a sharp rise in anti-gender messaging across platforms. A similar increase happened during the **#RejectFinanceBill2024** protests, where gender justice and LGBTQ+ advocacy were portrayed as distractions from economic issues. In both cases, anti-gender narratives grew stronger exactly when public debate expanded, and reformist actors became more visible. Analysis from Telegram groups showed meme templates and short videos linking LGBTQ+ advocacy to *"foreign puppeteering"* spiked in the 48 hours after each flashpoint.

FGD participants consistently described these surges as predictable rather than spontaneous. Religious groups and aligned influencers were reported to circulate messaging days before anticipated announcements, priming communities to reject reforms before public deliberation began. One participant observed, *"They know when something is coming, and they prepare the backlash in advance. It's like a script."* This perception is supported by scraped data showing that certain phrases and memes appear shortly before policy moments and then spike across platforms during the event window.

# 3.5 Platform Manipulation and Coordinated Digital Amplification

Anti-gender narratives in Kenya are amplified through intentional manipulation of digital platform infrastructures rather than purely organic transmission.

Scraped data and focus group discussions indicate that amplification depends on coordinated seeding, format optimisation, and cross-platform circulation, allowing a relatively small group of actors to create scale, urgency, and a sense of consensus.

Telegram became the main hub for coordination and sharing within this ecosystem. Out of the 27,022 posts analysed across platforms, around 12,000 (44%) originated on Telegram, where long-form commentary, religious audio clips, memes, screenshots, and pseudo-reports were prepared for redistribution. More than half of Telegram posts included images or visual assets. Meanwhile, about 8% consisted of documents or PDFs, such as sermon templates, policy briefs, and fake reports designed for easy sharing across platforms. One Telegram post in January 2025 garnered over 37,000 views and more than 140 shares, showing how a single post could rapidly spread beyond its initial channel.

These materials originating from Telegram were routinely circulated across X, WhatsApp, and Facebook in nearly identical forms. Quantitative data indicates that 73% of visual media shared on X during peak periods came from Telegram within 6–18 hours earlier, suggesting rapid transfer cycles. Focus group participants consistently reported encountering the same voice notes, memes, and image cards across multiple platforms, often within short timeframes, reinforcing a perception of widespread consensus. This repetition created a *"flooding"* effect, where volume, rather than argument, dominated digital spaces.

**Hashtag manipulation and coordinated posting waves played a key role in amplification on X.** During the July 2025 backlash following Kenya's UN vote on renewing the Independent Expert mandate on sexual orientation and gender identity, over 1,200 nearly identical tweets using hashtags like **#GayZ** and **#Right2Kiss** were posted within 48 hours. About 11% of the accounts involved in this surge were less than one month old, indicating deliberate account creation linked to the event rather than spontaneous mobilisation. These waves temporarily dominated timelines, crowding out alternative narratives and making real-time counter-messaging more difficult.

Platform-specific format optimisation further boosted reach. On TikTok and short-form video platforms, anti-gender narratives were turned into skits, remix challenges, and exaggerated visual performances that transformed moral panic into entertainment. Mozilla Foundation analysis indicates that emotionally charged content is algorithmically given priority, resulting in higher visibility for outrage-driven material compared to factual or policy-based content. Although TikTok was not directly scraped, it was frequently mentioned in FGDs as a downstream amplification space where narratives seeded elsewhere gained cultural traction.

WhatsApp served as a semi-private amplification channel, especially effective for moralised messaging. Prayer chains, sermon excerpts, and voice notes circulated through church, family, and community groups, embedding political narratives within trusted social relationships. FGD participants observed that such content often appeared days before public announcements, priming communities to reject reforms before formal debate began. This anticipatory circulation blurred the boundaries between personal communication and political mobilisation, increasing the social cost of contestation.

Language and register were carefully aligned with platform capabilities and target audiences. English-dominated longer pseudo-reports, legal distortions, and religious commentary aimed at authority and legitimacy, while Swahili, Sheng, and code-switched combinations were common in mocking, youth-focused, or emotionally charged content. This multilingual approach allowed narratives to connect across demographic groups while bypassing moderation systems less adept at detecting local slang and coded expressions.

Across platforms, amplification acted less as persuasion and more as saturation. By flooding digital spaces with repetitive, emotionally charged content across multiple channels, anti-gender actors induced fatigue, disorientation, and withdrawal rather than providing factual counters or debate. FGD participants described disengaging from online spaces not because of a lack of counterarguments, but because the narrative environment became overwhelming and hostile.
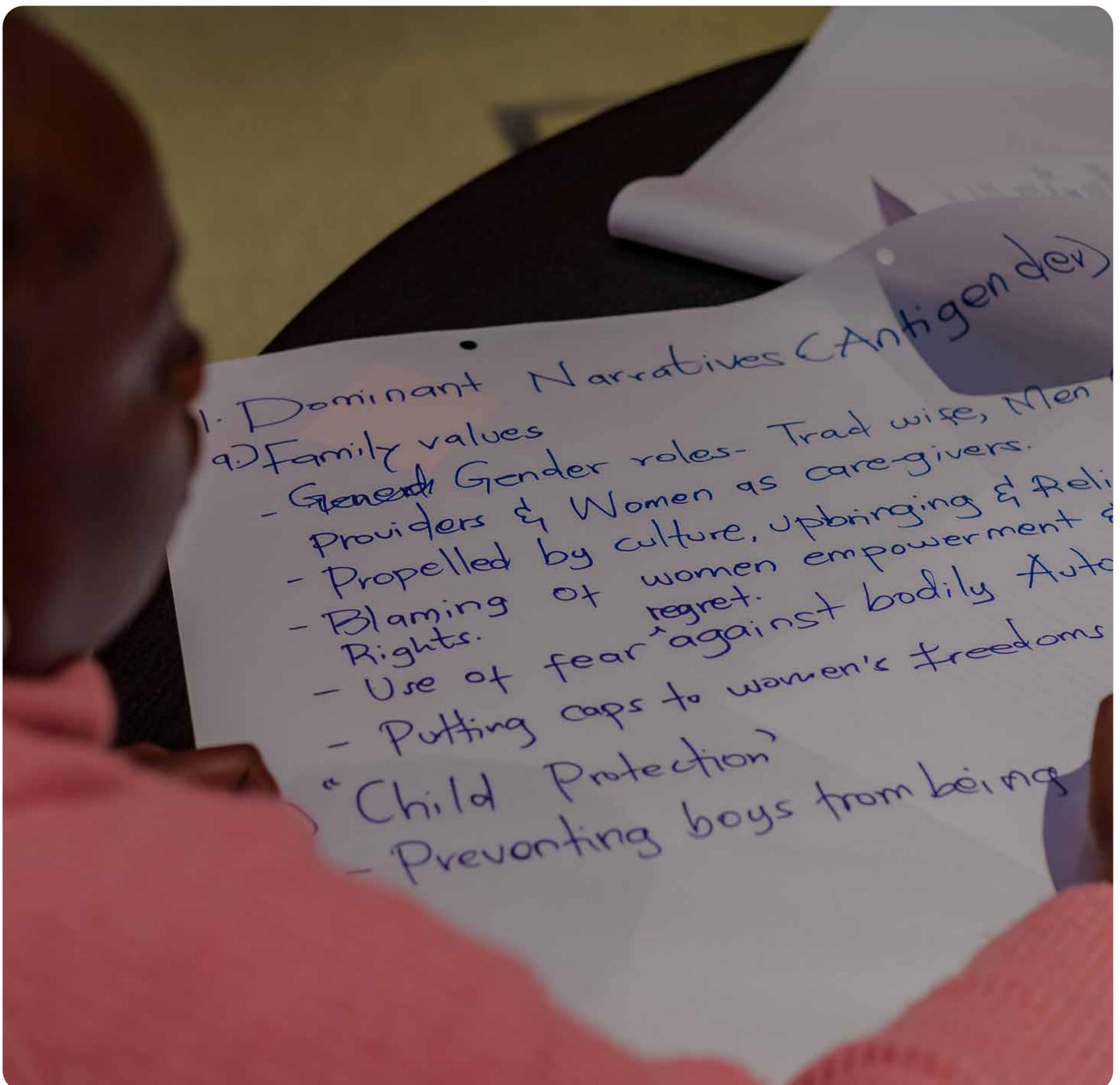
# 3.6 Actor Networks and Amplification Ecosystems

Anti-gender narratives in Kenya are maintained through coordinated actor networks that include religious institutions, political elites, media actors, and digital influencers. These networks mainly function within digital media spaces, where roles vary across content creation, amplification, and legitimisation. These networks are not random; they operate through distinct but complementary roles that enable narratives to circulate across sectors while maintaining ideological coherence. Hörter (2025) describes this setup as a layered ecosystem, in which moral framing, political legitimation, and cultural translation are spread among actors rather than housed in a single source.

**Religious institutions play a vital role in this ecosystem by providing moral authority and ethical context.** Sermons delivered in churches and mosques introduce and normalise anti-gender tropes, often portraying feminist advocacy as rebellion and LGBTQ+ existence as spiritual corruption (IDS, 2022; UNESCO, 2023; Access Now, 2024). These messages become part of routine spiritual practices through sermons, radio broadcasts, and faith-based gatherings, giving them legitimacy and staying in power. UNESCO (2023) reports that religious leaders in Nairobi and Kisumu shared sermons warning against *"gender confusion"* and *"Western immorality"* ahead of curriculum reforms, anchoring resistance in faith-based discourse before policy debates began. Scraped Telegram data confirms the pre-circulation of sermon excerpts and prayer chains prior to major policy events.

**Political actors reinforce these frames by turning moral language into policy justification.** Members of Parliament and other political figures invoke religious doctrine, cultural values, and *"African identity"* in legislative debates to oppose gender equality reforms, including repeated failures to enforce the constitutional two-thirds gender rule (IDS, 2022). These actions give institutional credibility to anti-gender narratives, enabling them to circulate as both moral opinion and legitimate political reasoning. In the July 2025 backlash following Kenya's UN vote on LGBTQ+ protections, scraped data showed MP statements as some of the most widely shared URLs, highlighting how digital amplification reflects political flashpoints.

**Digital influencers and content creators hold a unique position within networks, acting as intermediaries between elite discourse and popular culture.** They turn anti-gender messages into emotionally engaging formats, e.g., video skits and remix reels, that connect with younger audiences while maintaining their ideological message. About one in four of the most-shared short videos in the dataset contained explicit references to MPs or church leaders, often edited into stylised montages that combine religious doctrine with pop-cultural idioms. Mozilla Foundation (2023) demonstrates how influencers adapt anti-gender messaging into accessible, emotionally resonant formats that appeal to younger viewers. The Guardian (2023) highlights that Kenya's manosphere influencers, in particular, mix moral panic with aspirational masculinity, portraying gender justice as emasculation, a loss of status, or cultural decline. Influencers frequently mention religious leaders and political figures directly, reinforcing credibility across sectors and creating feedback loops that help sustain the narrative among different audiences.

FGD participants also identified universities and media outlets as passive amplifiers within the actor ecosystem. Participants noted that academic institutions and mainstream media sometimes reproduce anti-gender framings through biased commentary, selective sourcing, or by platforming anti-gender voices without scrutiny. Although these actors were not always central to narrative production, their institutional credibility and reach helped normalise and circulate exclusionary frames.

This actor's network is adaptable rather than fixed. When direct attacks on LGBTQ+ rights or feminist actors face legal, institutional, or reputational limitations, actors adjust their language. Access Now (2024) and Mozilla Foundation (2023) document how coded terms such as *"family values"* and *"child protection"* are employed to promote exclusionary messages while avoiding direct conflict or moderation. Several pseudo-reports and PDFs scraped from Telegram between January and March 2025 reframe earlier sermon rhetoric into legalistic language, removing explicit homophobia but maintaining the structure of delegitimisation. CIPESA (2023) notes similar cross-sector coordination in Uganda, indicating that this form of adaptive relay is a regional trend rather than an isolated national phenomenon.

FGD participants consistently described this ecosystem as coordinated rather than coincidental. Participants identified religious commentators, political figures, and influencers whose content appeared sequentially and referentially, with one amplifying the other's messaging. As one participant explained, *"It's like a relay system, each one picks up the baton and runs with it in their lane."* This perceived coordination shaped how participants interpreted the scale and legitimacy of anti-gender narratives, even when the underlying actors were relatively few.

# 3.7 Transnational Ideological Imports Masked as Local Values

A key aspect of Kenya's anti-gender discourse is that many of its central ideas, slogans, and mobilisation frameworks originate from outside the country, even as they are portrayed as indigenous or *"African"* values. These ideological imports mainly come from far-right movements and conservative advocacy networks in Europe, North America, and Russia. They are subsequently adapted for use in Kenyan religious, political, and digital discussions (McEwen & Narayan Aaswamy, 2023). Hörter (2025) and IDS (2022) demonstrate how terms such as *"gender ideology,"* *"globalist immorality,"* and *"family sovereignty"* entered Kenyan debates through transnational evangelical coalitions, conservative think tanks, and international advocacy infrastructures.

The phrase gender ideology, initially popularised by Vatican-affiliated scholars and later adopted by European populist parties, exemplifies this process of ideological transfer. In Kenya, the term has been reinterpreted to oppose sexuality education, LGBTQ+ rights, and feminist legal reforms. This transfer functions asymmetrically. Feminist and queer movements engaging with global frameworks such as CEDAW, the Yogyakarta Principles, or UNFPA guidelines are frequently accused of importing Western values. Anti-gender actors, on the other hand, rely heavily on transnational conservative playbooks while presenting these ideas as locally rooted and culturally authentic. Of the 27,022 posts analysed, approximately 18% referenced external sources, including U.S.-based evangelical organisations, European conservative influencers, or policy documents from transnational anti-gender alliances. These references were often decontextualised, making them appear as if they were local critiques.

Comparative research demonstrates that many of the narrative frameworks and mobilisation strategies seen in Kenyan digital spaces were initially developed and tested in other countries before being adapted locally. Access Now (2024) and Mozilla Foundation (2023) document how anti-LGBTQ+ campaigns in Kenya replicate framing conventions and moral panic scripts previously employed in Hungary, Poland, and Brazil. The Guardian (2023) similarly notes that Kenyan manosphere influencers often reference American and British figures such as Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson, even as they frame their content as expressions of African cultural values.

These references suggest ideological borrowing rather than independent narrative creation.

Religious institutions serve as key entry points for the introduction of these transnational ideologies into the Kenyan context. UNESCO (2023) reports that Kenyan church leaders have taken part in regional meetings funded by U.S.-based evangelical organisations, where they are exposed to specific framing strategies that portray gender justice as spiritual warfare. These meetings distribute sermon templates, media toolkits, and policy briefs aimed at resisting UN-backed gender frameworks. IDS (2022) notes that such materials are later localised through translation into Kiswahili, alignment with Kenyan political timelines, and contextual adaptation before becoming publicly available. Scraped data from Telegram confirmed the existence of sermon PDFs and prayer scripts originally shared by regional evangelical coalitions, later republished with slight edits and Kiswahili headers for distribution in Kenyan churches and WhatsApp groups.

This process of localisation allows foreign ideological material to be reframed as indigenous moral knowledge. Tamale (2013) warns that invocations of *"African tradition"* in such contexts often serve as political manoeuvres rather than genuine reflections of lived cultural plurality. In the Kenyan context, appeals to culture act as a legitimising shield, enabling imported narratives to circulate while reformist actors rooted in constitutional mandates are portrayed as culturally illegitimate.

Scraped data and FGD testimony highlight how these ideological imports are experienced within communities. Participants described encountering identical slogans, sermon scripts, and fabricated reports that seemed to originate outside Kenya but were later adapted and shared within local digital and religious spaces. As one participant remarked, *"They say it's African, but it's coming from outside. You can tell by the language and the timing."* Others noted that specific hashtags and memes appeared simultaneously across Kenyan and Nigerian online platforms, indicating regional coordination rather than isolated national development.

# 3.8 Strategic Recalibration in Response to Feminist Gains

Anti-gender narratives in Kenya intensify and change form when feminist and gender justice initiatives gain public visibility or institutional support. Instead of remaining ideologically fixed, anti-gender actors adjust their rhetoric, tone, and framing in response to perceived reform momentum. Hörter (2025) describes this as a pattern of adaptive backlash, where moral panic discourse is heightened or reformulated to delegitimise feminist advances, delay implementation, and reassert patriarchal control over public discourse.

One persistent area for recalibration is women's political representation. Despite the constitutional mandate to implement the two-thirds gender rule, women's representation in Parliament has remained steady at approximately 23.3 per cent since 2018 (FEMNET, 2021). Instead of tackling structural barriers to women's political participation, political actors increasingly portray gender quotas as foreign impositions incompatible with Kenyan cultural values. IDS (2022) documents how parliamentary debates are repeatedly disrupted by appeals to *"natural gender roles"* and *"God's design,"* reframing constitutional compliance as moral transgression rather than a legal duty. This reinterpretation allows resistance to persist while avoiding outright rejection of constitutional principles.

Gendered disinformation serves both as a messaging strategy and a means of suppression, delegitimising women's candidacies by depicting them as unfit or immoral, and deterring participation through repeated reputational and psychological costs. Data analysis identified over 1,000 posts during the March 2025 parliamentary session on gender representation, where hashtags like **#ForcedEquality** and **#GodsOrder** circulated alongside memes comparing women leaders to chaos or family breakdown. Beyond legislative contexts, recalibration is evident in shifts in rhetorical style. As feminist campaigns gain momentum, overt misogyny is often replaced by coded language that depicts women's ambition as destabilising or socially corrosive. Mozilla Foundation (2023) and Access Now (2024) show how digital influencers and religious commentators shift from direct attacks to tropes of *"family breakdown," "loss of respect,"* or *"spiritual imbalance."* These framings maintain plausible deniability while embedding exclusion within emotional and moral registers that are hard to contest without social repercussions.

Education reforms have been particularly susceptible to this adaptive strategy. During the rollout of sexuality education reforms, anti-gender actors did not oppose the curriculum entirely. Instead, they isolated specific modules on consent, bodily autonomy, and gender identity, framing them as threats to parental authority or cultural purity (UNESCO, 2023). This selective targeting reflects a detailed understanding of reform structure, enabling disruption of implementation while giving the appearance of supporting education more broadly. Tamale (2013) argues that such responses illustrate anxiety over power redistribution, where gender justice is seen not as inclusion but as the erosion of patriarchal privileges. Telegram data confirms this focus: of the 12,000 posts collected, nearly 3,200 addressed the education curriculum specifically, with over 65 percent concentrating on three concepts, *'consent,' 'gender identity,'* and *'family planning'*, often misrepresented or emotionally charged.

Scraped data and focus group discussions indicate that recalibration occurs most sharply during moments of feminist visibility. During the Finance Bill protests, for example, anti-gender content reframed feminist and LGBTQ+ advocacy as distractions from economic grievances, portraying gender justice movements as morally suspect or economically irresponsible. The data confirms this, showing a content burst of over 700 tweets in July 2025 that deployed hashtags like **#TaxReformNotTransReform** and memes depicting feminist protestors as foreign-sponsored or economically reckless. Similar shifts were observed during femicide awareness campaigns, where narratives of protection were repurposed to redirect blame toward women's behaviour or feminist activism. Posts circulating during these periods suggested that *"women should be careful"* or that *"feminism fuels violence,"* reframing structural harm as individual recklessness.

Participants consistently described this recalibration as disorienting. As narratives shift, language that was previously neutral or rights-based becomes suspect. Terms such as *"bodily autonomy"* or *"gender equity"* are recorded as signals of moral danger, creating what participants described as a sense of gaslighting. One participant noted, *"They change the rules mid-game; what was okay yesterday becomes dangerous today."* This aligns with desk research that frames backlash not as episodic opposition but as adaptive resistance, recalibrated whenever power begins to shift.

# 3.9 Systemic Impact on Institutions and Media Architecture

Beyond their rhetorical scope, anti-gender narratives in Kenya had tangible effects on institutional coherence, media practices, and civic literacy. These narratives influenced public opinion, hindered governance processes, delayed policy implementation, and limited how state and civil society actors communicated their mandates. Hörter (2025) describes this as a form of discursive governance in which moral panic is used to manage political risk and to hide institutional inertia.

One immediate effect was the destabilisation of semantics within public institutions. Core policy terms such as *"gender mainstreaming," "affirmative action,"* and *"bodily autonomy"* were routinely reinterpreted as signs of deviance, foreign influence, or moral decline. FEMNET (2021) describes how civil servants and educators became hesitant to implement gender-sensitive reforms due to expected backlash and reputational risks shaped in online and mediated spaces. In Kisii and Machakos, for example, school administrators delayed installing gender-segregated sanitation facilities after local religious leaders spread warnings through WhatsApp groups, community radio call-ins, and church-linked digital forums, framing the measures as part of a "gender ideology agenda" (FEMNET, 2021; IDS, 2022). These digitally amplified framings increased local pressure, making routine infrastructure decisions seem both politically and morally risky. These delays reflected institutional uncertainty caused by narrative pressure.

This semantic disruption extended into legislative and judicial domains. IDS (2022) demonstrates how parliamentary debates on gender equity were repeatedly diverted by moral-panic framings, thereby restricting sustained, evidence-based deliberation. Even where constitutional or statutory mandates existed, including the two-thirds gender principle, implementation stalled because compliance was reframed as cultural betrayal rather than a legal obligation. Consequently, reform remained formally valid but politically costly, undermining the authority of institutions responsible for enforcement.

Media architecture intensified these effects. Digital platforms favour sensational and emotionally charged content, amplifying anti-gender narratives while marginalising procedural or rights-based explanations. Research by the Mozilla Foundation (2023) and Access Now (2024) shows how coordinated actors leveraged platform features, such as trending formats, dramatic visuals, and urgency cues, to boost the visibility of moral panic narratives. Advocacy content, by contrast, was structurally disadvantaged: it spread less widely, lacked emotional immediacy, and was sometimes misclassified by moderation systems that flagged gender justice language as controversial.

The cumulative effect was a decline in civic literacy. Citizens encountered distorted portrayals of gender policy more often than official curriculum documents, parliamentary records, or institutional guidance. Mozilla Foundation (2023) found that misinformation related to sexuality education and gender quotas circulated more broadly than verified sources, restricting public understanding and hindering meaningful engagement with reform agendas.

Scraped data confirms the extent of this distortion. Across platforms, terms such as *"comprehensive sexuality education," "bodily autonomy,"* and *"gender equity"* were routinely recast as *"child sexualisation," "abortion promotion,"* or *"Western corruption."* These framings appeared in false reports, memes, and dramatised voice notes, often clustered around policy announcements. Focus group participants described how this narrative environment paralysed institutional actors. Teachers, civil servants, and community leaders hesitated to act, not because mandates were unclear, but because implementation had been deemed a moral wrong. As one participant explained, *"Even when the law is clear, people are scared to act because the narrative makes it look like they're doing something wrong."*

Participants also identified legacy media as worsening this disruption. Traditional outlets were described as heightening moral panic by platforming anti-gender voices without proper context or by favouring controversy over clarification. Emotionally charged content consistently drew more engagement than fact-based reporting, making it hard for corrective information to spread. In this environment, institutional messaging struggled to compete, and public trust declined when narrative framings clashed with official policy positions.

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# 3.10 Resistance in Practice: Community-Led Counter-Narratives

While anti-gender narratives in Kenya are strategically created and digitally amplified, they do not operate without challenge. Communities, especially youth, LGBTQ+ individuals, and feminist organisers, have developed adaptive responses that are influenced by, and often originate within, online environments but extend beyond them. These responses include emotional withdrawal from hostile platforms, narrative subversion within digital spaces, infrastructural innovations for safety and coordination, and selective engagement with legal and policy systems. Together, they form a multi-modal system of care, critique, and cultural production that directly addresses the conditions caused by digital narrative saturation.

UHAI EASHRI's Defiant Bodies report (2020), based on participatory research with queer and sex worker communities in Nairobi, Kisumu, and Mombasa, documents how individuals actively curate their digital environments to reduce exposure to hostile narratives. Participants described muting keywords, exiting antagonistic platforms, and forming encrypted WhatsApp and Signal groups to circulate affirming content. This withdrawal is not disengagement from advocacy work and politics but serves as a protective response to digitally mediated harm. The report describes online hostility as a form of ambient violence, where repeated exposure to moral panic content produces anxiety, shame, and self-censorship even in the absence of direct targeting.

FEMNET (2021) identifies similar patterns among youth and feminist groups in Nairobi and Kabete. Participants described digital anti-gender narratives as emotionally draining and socially isolating, especially when online framing depicted their identities or advocacy as threats to national culture. Importantly, participants observed that the effects of digital hostility often extended offline. Survivors of online abuse reported dismissive responses from police, school administrators, and religious leaders, who regarded digitally mediated harassment as trivial or self-inflicted (FEMNET, 2021; Access Now, 2024). In this sense, online narratives influence offline institutional responses, reinforcing isolation and silencing.

**Within this constrained environment, communities have also crafted digitally grounded counter-narratives that are culturally fluent and strategically subversive.** UHAI EASHRI (2020) documents how visual art, poetry, humour, and remix culture circulate online to reclaim agency and challenge dominant narratives. Parody sermons, satirical videos, and remix clips reveal contradictions in moral absolutism. At the same time, locally rooted idioms, such as Ukweli si utovu wa nidhamu (truth is not indiscipline), are reinterpreted to support feminist and queer dignity. These interventions depend on tonal inversion and symbolic play rather than direct confrontation, reflecting what Tamale (2013) describes as a decolonial feminist ethic rooted in lived experience and cultural specificity.

Resistance also manifests in infrastructural forms within digital spaces. Kenyan feminist collectives have adapted digital safety tools to address local types of narrative harm. Mozilla Foundation (2023) details how Kenyan groups modified digital safety resources to respond to moral panic memes, coordinated harassment, and emerging threats such as deepfakes targeting activists. These resources are mainly shared through WhatsApp networks and peer-led workshops, reflecting the same semi-private digital spaces used for anti-gender mobilisation.

**Strategic counter-messaging has also been implemented within platform systems.** During Kenya's 2022 elections, feminist and LGBTQ+ groups coordinated hashtag campaigns that flooded hostile digital spaces with affirming content, satire, and fact-checks (Mozilla Foundation, 2023). These efforts temporarily changed algorithmic visibility, ranking harmful narratives lower in trending feeds. Comparable examples from Uganda, such as the reclaiming of hashtags like **#ProtectOurChildren** (Access Now, 2024), demonstrate shared regional tactics within similar platform environments.

**Community-based media production extends resistance beyond mainstream platforms.** Feminist radio collectives, zine networks, podcasts, and audio storytelling projects operate at the intersection of digital and offline spaces. UHAI EASHRI (2020) notes that queer and sex worker communities in Nairobi produce audio dramas and visual storytelling that centre joy, survival, and critique. These formats circulate digitally but are often consumed communally, blurring the boundary between online media and offline relational spaces. Legal and policy engagement also remains part of this ecosystem. IDS (2022) shows that legal and policy mobilisation around the two-thirds gender rule, while repeatedly stalled, have sustained public discourse and institutional pressure, even when outcomes are delayed.

Scraped data and FGD findings reinforce these patterns. Participants described affective withdrawal from hostile platforms as a key survival strategy, alongside the creation of encrypted digital spaces for mutual support. At the same time, evidence of tactical engagement emerged. During the July 2025 narrative surge, counter-messaging campaigns flooded anti-gender hashtags with satire and fact-checks, briefly disrupting algorithmic dominance. Posts featuring personal testimony, visual art, and localised slogans such as *"Mwili wangu, chaguo langu"* (*"My body, my choice"*) consistently achieved higher engagement than abstract rights language, highlighting the importance of lived experience within digital contestation.

Participants highlighted that resistance is intergenerational, relational, and emotionally demanding. Burnout, surveillance, and donor fatigue were recurring themes, yet these issues were seen as part of a larger struggle for narrative sovereignty. Workshops bringing together elders, youth, and religious leaders, often organised through digital coordination but held offline, were described as spaces for rebuilding trust and shared understanding. Scraped data indicates that content focused on community care and relational dialogue had longer engagement periods than reactive counter-speech, suggesting deeper resonance.

# Synthesis and Implications
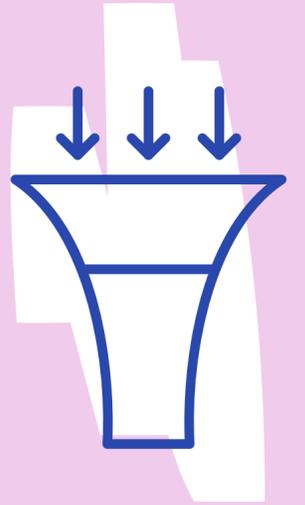
The findings from the desk review, scraped data, and lived experiences reveal a coordinated and adaptable architecture of anti-gender resistance in Kenya. This structure functions across emotional, institutional, semantic, and temporal levels, adjusting in response to feminist visibility, policy momentum, and moments of narrative disruption. Backlash manifests as a patterned system that anticipates reform, saturates public space, and limits the conditions under which gender justice can be promoted.

Across this architecture, narratives are employed by political actors, religious leaders, and digital influencers. While these narratives are presented as culturally indigenous, their formats, framings, and mobilisation logics are often transnational. Imported strategies are reworded in local idioms, creating a double standard where feminist and LGBTQ+ actors are delegitimised as foreign, while anti-gender coalitions leverage global alignments without scrutiny. Evidence from scraping and FGD indicates that surges in anti-gender content coincide with key political or policy moments, including elections, curriculum reforms, and international votes. Instead of engaging directly with reform content, these narratives rely on pre-emptive circulation, repetition, and emotional framing to restrict the space for debate.

The language in these narratives is intentionally familiar and hard to challenge. Phrases like *"protect our children"* and *"defend African values"* present reform as an outsider's interference, while humour and metaphor deflect criticism. Gendered harms are embedded in local slang and platform-specific idioms that bypass moderation and complicate response. The strategic use of Kiswahili and Sheng reinforces claims of authenticity while concealing manipulation. In this environment, institutions are not impartial. Narrative pressure transforms legal mandates into reputational risks, delaying policy implementation and undermining institutional trust. Schools hesitate to introduce sexuality education, media outlets amplify moral panic without scrutiny, and even constitutionally mandated reforms are undermined through semantic distortion and emotional manipulation. The result is a civic landscape where rights-based language is doubted, survivor-centred framing is delegitimised, and institutional clarity diminishes.

The actor ecosystem supporting this architecture is dense and multi-layered. Influencers, religious leaders, political figures, and institutional amplifiers operate in synchrony, referencing and reinforcing each other's content. These networks are coordinated, maintained, and strategically timed. Digital evidence showed hashtag storms and meme virality that matched reform milestones, while the FGD described the emotional toll of this system as emotional exhaustion, confusion, and strategic withdrawal. Participants reported a constant feeling of being surveilled and pre-empted, with content circulating in church groups and WhatsApp circles before reforms were publicly announced. The sense of being watched heightened fatigue and withdrawal, a form of strategic suppression with real effects on visibility, mental health, and civic participation.

At the same time, resistance to this architecture is intentional and adaptive. Communities have developed encrypted networks, peer-led safety systems, and storytelling platforms that focus on care, belonging, and reclamation. These practices are forward-looking and based on an understanding of how backlash functions and how reputational harm is weaponised. Digital analysis reveals that counter-messaging campaigns can temporarily reduce anti-gender visibility, while focus group participants highlighted artivism, workshops, and secure online spaces as essential infrastructures of resilience rather than mere acts of response.

Collectively, the findings suggest that responses limited to counter-content are structurally mismatched with a system organised around anticipation saturation and emotional pressure. Anti-gender backlash in Kenya operates as a rhythm rather than a single event, adjusting tone, format, and intensity as reform gains momentum. Recognising this rhythm clarifies why gender justice efforts are repeatedly stalled despite legal mandates and public support. It emphasises the need to develop responses that can withstand narrative saturation, protect visibility, and sustain participation over time.

# Recommen-dations
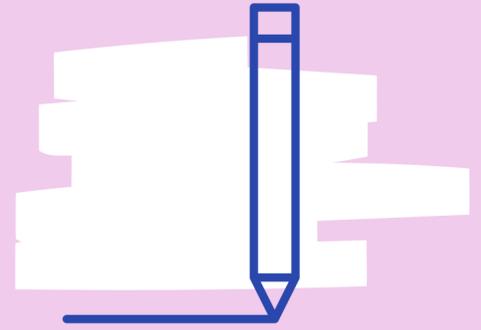
This research demonstrates that anti-gender narratives in Kenya are anticipatory, emotionally crafted, and deeply embedded across digital platforms, institutions, and media ecosystems. Effective responses must therefore go beyond reactive messaging and tackle the underlying conditions that enable these narratives to gain traction, visibility, and legitimacy. The following recommendations turn the findings into strategic actions for civil society organisations, institutional stakeholders, media organisations, and funders.

## a Reframe Gender Justice as a Constitutional and Lived Reality

Anti-gender actors have effectively portrayed feminist and LGBTQ+ advocacy as external impositions, heavily drawing on transnational conservative strategies. This imbalance has allowed them to assert cultural legitimacy and portray reform as a foreign interference.

Civil society and reform actors should focus on discursive reframing that grounds gender justice in constitutional mandates, everyday lived experience, and locally resonant language. This involves explicitly revealing the foreign origins and coordinated nature of anti-gender rhetoric, not to incite moral panic, but to clarify ideological inconsistencies. Reframing must challenge the binary of *"local versus foreign"* and instead highlight the plurality and contestation inherent in Kenyan cultural life. Survivor-led narratives and community testimony should be regarded as epistemic authority rather than supplementary evidence.

## b Build Anticipation into Advocacy and Communication Strategies

Research indicates that backlash sharpens around predictable moments: policy debates, reform announcements, elections, and international votes. These surges are planned beforehand and boosted through coordinated digital activity.

Advocacy strategies must therefore include temporal foresight. Coalitions should identify reform timelines and potential flashpoints, preparing responses before narratives escalate. This involves pre-positioning trusted messengers, using emotionally impactful formats such as storytelling and satire, and synchronising timing across platforms. Anticipation should be a fundamental part of campaign planning, media engagement, and community mobilisation, rather than an improvised reaction to backlash once it begins.

# c Invest in the Infrastructure of Care, Safety, and Continuity

Resistance is already happening, but it is unevenly resourced and emotionally draining. Participants described encrypted networks, peer-led safety protocols, and creative platforms as vital for survival in hostile digital environments.

Funders and movement allies should focus on long-term infrastructural support rather than short-term visibility. This involves providing resources for emotional labour, addressing burnout and surveillance-related stress, and backing platforms that facilitate layered, survivor-led storytelling without requiring constant public exposure. Infrastructure must be built to sustain participation over time, protect the visibility of reform, and handle complexity, rather than simplifying narratives for virality.

# d Strengthen Institutional and Media Capacity to Resist Narrative Distortion

Anti-gender narratives have undermined institutional trust and media transparency, transforming legal requirements into reputational hazards. Schools, civil servants, and service providers often postpone actions due to expected online backlash rather than legal uncertainty.

Institutional actors need clear guidance that connects their mandates to constitutional obligations and protects them from moral panic. Media organisations should be involved as active collaborators in preventing distortion, with a focus on context, accountability, and responsible amplification. Civic literacy should be incorporated into reform implementations, ensuring communities understand policy content and can differentiate between legal mandates and narrative manipulation.

## e Coordinate Across Sectors and Document Resistance Practices

Backlash operates across platforms and institutions; responses must do the same. Donors should align funding with the realities of narrative suppression by supporting coordination, foresight, and infrastructure rather than fragmented interventions. Civil society coalitions should systematically document resistance practices, including surge mapping, safety strategies, and creative interventions, to build shared learning and prevent duplication. These efforts must remain grounded in lived experience, be context-specific, and be attentive to power. Simplistic solutions risk reproducing the very dynamics they seek to challenge.

These recommendations should not be viewed as separate or sequential actions. Reframing without anticipation leaves reform vulnerable to expected backlash; anticipation without sustained infrastructure wears out those implementing it; and infrastructure without clear institutional support risks recreating the confusion that anti-gender narratives take advantage of. Effective responses require managing these tensions simultaneously and designing resilience across all of them. This demands strategies that move in tune with backlash, safeguarding those most targeted, while maintaining reform momentum and avoiding reaction to each surge in isolation.



RNW Media Team Members including Sam Moseti Nyamwange, Regional Manager, Sub-Saharan Africa; Wouter van Tongeren, CEO; and Surabhi Srivastava, Director of Media Innovation

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# Conclusion

This research demonstrates that anti-gender narratives in Kenya are not isolated or solely responses to cultural discomfort or moral disagreement. Instead, they operate as a coordinated system of resistance to gender justice, strategically structured, timed, and emotionally manipulated to delay reform, divert public attention, and reassert control over the construction of meaning. These narratives are systematically organised to hinder progress, redirect focus, and reinforce control over societal narratives. Through desk reviews, data scraping, and lived experiences, the findings show that backlash is not merely reactive but anticipatory, patterned, and sustained through repetition, moral panic, and semantic distortion.

The analysis reveals how this system functions across digital platforms, institutions, and everyday social spaces simultaneously. Narrative surges coincide with reform efforts. Familiar language and humour are employed to deflect criticism. Platform features are exploited to generate visibility and consensus. Institutions tend to hesitate under reputational pressure, while media ecosystems amplify moral panic and silence nuance. The cumulative effect leads to emotional exhaustion, withdrawal from public discourse, and a gradual loss of reform momentum.

Simultaneously, research shows continued resistance. Communities targeted by anti-gender narratives are not passive victims; they actively create encrypted networks, peer-led safety practices, and culturally fluent storytelling spaces that protect dignity and sustain voice. These actions demonstrate a deep understanding of how backlash functions and how reputational harm is used to silence participation. The implication is that tackling anti-gender backlash requires more than counter-messaging or fact-checking. Reform strategies need to be resilient against saturation, distortion, and emotional manipulation. Advocacy should be rooted in lived experience and supported by systems that safeguard visibility and emotional resilience. Institutions must be prepared to resist narrative pressure and uphold mandates with clarity and confidence. Digital interventions should engage with platform dynamics rather than view them as neutral channels.

This study highlights the necessity of recognising backlash as a recurring aspect of reform. Building sustainable gender justice demands foresight, coordination, and investment in the infrastructures that support ongoing participation. Future research should continue to develop practical tools based on these insights to enhance reform resilience and empower survivor-led leadership to reclaim the narrative space in Kenya's digital and civic spheres.

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