

Human Rights Centre Clinic

Challenging anti-rights movements in West Africa

Partners: Frontline AIDS

About

Frontline AIDS has been on the frontline of the world's response to AIDS for 30 years. The organisation was founded in 1993 as the International HIV/AIDS Alliance to support the work of existing community-led organisations responding to HIV and AIDS. Frontline AIDS has a rich history of working with partners to reach marginalised communities. Today, their global partnership works in more than 100 countries to support local, national and global community action on HIV, health and human rights. Frontline AIDS is made up of some of the leading figures in the global response to the HIV epidemic, who bring extensive experience of community responses across multiple regions, as well as expertise in human rights, family planning, international development, finance and communications.

Project overview

This project will investigate anti-rights movements in West Africa, a region underexplored in anti-rights research due to language barriers, funding shortages and the distinct socio-religious dynamics shaping how these movements operate. Unlike countries such as Uganda, where Christian evangelical networks are well-documented as key drivers of rights rollbacks, West African contexts are shaped more prominently by Islamic actors and anti-West discourse, producing a different landscape of opposition to sexual, gender, and bodily rights that requires dedicated analysis. The research will situate anti-rights movements in West Africa within the broader international human rights architecture, examining how anti-rights actors engage with and seek to undermine regional and international mechanisms, including by instrumentalising anti-colonial and sovereignty narratives to delegitimise international human rights standards as foreign impositions – a tactic particularly prevalent in Francophone contexts.

This project will support the human rights advocacy work of Frontline AIDS and their partners. It will do this by providing regional analysis of the relevant actors and their tactics as well as creating a practical toolkit to help steer future actions.

Background

A loose constellation of socially conservative actors has, over recent years, begun to consolidate into something more purposeful. The groups and governments now broadly described as [anti-rights movements](#) share infrastructure, coordinate messaging, and maintain documented ties to state and non-state actors across multiple continents – spanning US-based evangelical networks, religious coalitions, nationalist civil society groups, and sympathetic governments, distinct in origin but increasingly aligned in purpose. At the national level, they lobby for punitive legislation criminalising LGBTQ+ people, sex workers and people living with HIV. At the international level, they work to capture or neutralise human rights mechanisms. Across both, they have developed a common rhetorical playbook: framing rights protections as cultural impositions and casting themselves as defenders of sovereignty and tradition against a form of progressive imperialism. In postcolonial contexts, that framing can land particularly well, often with devastating consequences.

Uganda is perhaps the starkest recent illustration of what this looks like in practice, where the Anti-Homosexuality Act was signed into law in 2023 and upheld when challenged in the [Constitutional Court in 2024](#). It was not simply a product of domestic politics. [US evangelical organisations poured over \\$54 million into African countries between 2007 and 2020](#), with Uganda receiving a disproportionate share, and the fingerprints of that investment are visible throughout the legislative process. The passage of this law can be [directly connected](#) with [Family Watch International](#), a far-right religious organisation based in the US. The resulting law – prescribing life imprisonment for same-sex conduct and the death penalty for “aggravated homosexuality” – drew international condemnation and put into sharp relief just how effectively transnational anti-rights networks can shape national law.

Similar dynamics have since been observed in Ghana, where the Human Sexual Rights and Family Values Bill has been [reintroduced in parliament in 2026](#), with President Mahama having pledged to sign it into law. The bill would impose up to three years in prison for identifying as LGBT, and up to ten years for advocacy or support – including for healthcare workers, journalists, and human rights defenders. The role of foreign anti-rights actors in shaping this legislation is well-documented: [Ipas tracked](#) how the World Congress of Families and other US evangelical groups contributed to [mobilisation behind the original 2021 bill](#), and US conservative groups spent [\\$5.2 million across Africa](#) in 2022 alone. Ghana is also set to host the fourth African [Inter-Parliamentary Conference on Family and Sovereignty](#) in Accra in May 2026, a platform with documented ties to US far-right advocacy networks.

Most other parts of West Africa have [received far less attention](#), whether because of language barriers or because francophone LGBTQ+ organisations have historically been under-resourced and less connected to global advocacy networks compared to their more established anglophone counterparts. This region has a distinct character and the actors driving opposition to rights may look quite different from those in Uganda or Ghana for example. Religious actors and nationalist political figures operate within contexts shaped often by French colonialism, Islam, and a rapidly shifting geopolitical environment.

In Senegal for example, the Islamic coalition [And Samm Jikko Yi](#) has sustained years of mass demonstrations and parliamentary pressure for tougher anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, culminating in a law signed by President Faye in March 2026 that [doubles](#) prison sentences for same-sex conduct to up to

ten years and criminalises the promotion or funding of LGBTQ+ identities and relationships – passed by Parliament 135 votes to zero. The transnational dimension of this campaign has since been exposed with another clear link to US-based organisations. A [Reuters investigation](#) confirmed that And Samm Jikko Yi worked directly with US [hate group MassResistance](#) (designated as such by the Southern Poverty Law Center) receiving strategic and campaigning advice as they pushed for the legislation.

This project takes francophone and West Africa as its focus precisely because it remains in some ways a blind spot. Mapping the actors, tactics, and narratives at work in the region, and connecting that analysis to international human rights mechanisms will produce practical evidence that civil society organisations in the region urgently need, but have so far had limited access to.

Project output

Frontline AIDS will work with a project team from the Essex Human Rights Centre Clinic to produce a report (totalling 9,000 words maximum) and an accompanying advocacy toolkit (3,000 words maximum) about anti-rights movements in West Africa focused on the following research questions:

- Who are the key anti-rights actors or networks operating across West Africa?
- What are the key anti-rights narratives appearing across West Africa?
- What is the most effective and ineffective messaging for challenging these narratives?
- How do anti-rights actors engage with and seek to undermine regional and international mechanisms?
- How are in-country defenders and civil society actors challenging anti-rights actors and the rollback of rights?
- Which of these tactics are the most effective and ineffective strategies CSOs are implementing or have implemented?

The research will draw on desk-based review, legal and policy analysis, and interviews with in-country and regional defenders and civil society actors that Frontline AIDS partners with closely.

Alongside a research report responding to the above research questions, key findings will be distilled into an advocacy toolkit which will identify the most effective strategies for civil society to challenge anti-rights movements.

Frontline AIDS will share the advocacy toolkit among its partner organisations for use in human rights advocacy work across West Africa and other regions. We will use the report to: inform our advocacy; disseminate the information captured with our partners, both directly through sharing the report but also potentially through a webinar where we invite interviewees as panellists; and have the toolkit professionally designed and share this with partners to help inform their own advocacy.

The team will also submit a 1,000-2,000 word blog post in May 2027.

Timeline

Phase 1: November – December 2026:

- Preliminary research, understanding the project and developing the report outline.
- Identifying a list of experts or advocates for interviews and questionnaires.
- Securing ethical approval for interviews.
- Outline and bibliography to be submitted to the partner organisation for comments.

Phase 2: January – March 2027:

- Carrying out the interviews online.
- Research and data gathering.
- Submission of the first full draft to the partner.

Phase 3: April – May 2027:

- Revision and finalising the report.
- Blog for Frontline AIDS, on their site or another platform, about the main findings of the project.
- Presentation of project to the partner organisation.

Initial reading

- There are a number of internal research documents and communications from relevant partners which are available on request.
- [Power Over Rights: Understanding and Countering the Transnational Anti-Gender Movement \(Vols. 1 and 2\)](#) - Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, 2023
- ["Gender Ideology" Narratives: A Threat to Human Rights](#) - AWID, 2022
- [Revealed: \\$280m 'Dark Money' Spent by US Christian Right Groups Globally](#) - openDemocracy, 2020
- [Exclusive: US Christian Right Pours More than \\$50m into Africa](#) - openDemocracy, 2020
- [Out of Bounds: Foreign and Digital Influence Targeting LGBTI Rights in Ghana](#) - Ipas, 2022

- [US 'Pro-Family' Group Helps Senegal Activists Pushing Anti-LGBTQ+ Law](#) - Reuters via Times Live, March 2026
- [We Will Not End AIDS: Addressing the Anti-Rights Movements](#) - Journal of the International AIDS Society, 2025
- [Existing in a World Trying to Erase You: Struggles and Strength of LGBTQIA+ Communities in French-Speaking Africa](#) - African Feminism, 2025
- [Human Rights and Religion in Africa's Sexuality Politics](#) - International Journal of Constitutional Law, 2023

Focal point

- Paddy Lawrance, Advisor: Human Rights Advocacy, Frontline AIDS, plawrance@frontlineaids.org

Desirable skills

- At least a couple of the members will need to speak French – there is plenty of desk research available in English, and potentially a couple of the focus countries will be anglophone (TBD on specific focus countries) – but the majority of focus countries will be Francophone and so it will be necessary to have French speaking students to conduct some of the interviews and areas of research.
- The skills that will be used during this project: desk research, interviews with partners, report writing, condensing large volume of research into practical & bitesize toolkit
- Particular sensitivities will need to be paid to the safety and security of some partners – we will provide guidance and organise interviews where needed, but some partners work in contexts where their communications may be monitored or seized, or they may be arrested, attacked, fined or harassed if their work on this project is discovered. Students need to be aware of this.
- Any students with existing regional knowledge would be most welcome!