



RESIST

Fostering Queer Feminist Intersectional Resistances against Transnational Anti-Gender Politics

The RESIST Project Report

Effects of, and Resistances to 'Anti-Gender' Mobilisations Across Europe: A Report on Switzerland



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Switzerland

Ekaterina Filep (Université de Fribourg) and Gaé Colussi (Université de Lausanne)

Executive summary

Switzerland has recently enacted legislative changes in the realm of gender equality, largely as a response to social movements advocating for these reforms. Extending hate speech laws to cover sexual orientation and legalising same-sex marriage are some of the examples that mark progress. Both laws faced opposition through popular referendums but were supported by a wide majority of the voters. Other topics remain heatedly debated, both in parliamentary processes and in the media, with significant opposition, for example the introduction of a third gender option in official records. Despite considerable support for the legislative changes in public referendums, 'anti-gender' mobilisation manifests itself strongly in Switzerland, with the right-wing SVP party campaigning against what it calls 'gender terror' and right-wing media fuelling hostility by associating gender ideology with threats to freedom, to moral values and to minors.¹ Far-right extremist groups have disrupted events like Drag Story Time, opposing 'gender ideology'²; and existing reports indicate a rise in hate crimes targeting the LGBTIQ+ community, with transgender individuals being made particularly vulnerable to verbal harassment, physical assaults, and social media attacks.³

Participants in the case study on Switzerland reported various ways in which they experience 'anti-gender' politics in their everyday lives and described heightened fears of physical violence and increased precautions at public events. The effects of 'anti-gender' politics were also discussed in terms of online hate, which is reported to be prevalent, with participants regularly receiving hate emails and threats. The constant exposure to online hostility forces many to take breaks from their personal and professional online presence. There is a significant fear that online violence could translate into physical attacks.

Activists and professionals working on gender issues reported feeling pressure in light of growing hostility, leading to self-censorship and careful preparation for public appearances. Negative media coverage and the rise of 'anti-woke' and conspiracy theories undermine advocacy efforts by attaching negative connotations to human rights activism, contributing to emotional distress and burnout among pro-equality activists. Effective resistance strategies against 'anti-gender' rhetoric include fostering political alliances; enhancing solidarity and friendships; raising public awareness through education and patient dialogues; seeking supportive cultural contexts; and prioritising self-care and safe spaces to preserve mental health and ensure the resilience and sustainability of advocacy efforts.

Keywords: Hostility; online harassment; fear; solidarity; support, Switzerland.

¹ Washington, O. (2023) Warum hat die SVP ein Problem mit der Gender-Thematik?, srf, available at: <https://www.srf.ch/audio/samstagsrundschaue/warum-hat-die-svp-ein-problem-mit-der-gender-thematik?id=12393943> (Accessed: 11 July 2024).

See also the result of the RESIST project on 'Anti-gender' politics in Europe: the RESIST Project (2024) Ergebnisse der Schweizer Fallstudie. Available at: https://theresistproject.eu/sdc_download/576/?key=2mh8162vosolmu9l9ly33nhsrg3m2 (Accessed: 3 July 2024).

² Glaus, D. (2022) «Friedlicher Aktivismus» als blanker Hohn srf, available at: <https://www.srf.ch/news/schweiz/aktionen-der-jungen-tat-friedlicher-aktivismus-als-blanker-hohn> (Accessed: 11 July 2024).

³ Hate Crime Report (2023) Pink Cross, LOS, TGNS, available at: https://www.pinkcross.ch/unser-einsatz/politik/hate-crime/hatecrime_bericht_2023_de.pdf, (Accessed: 3 July 2024)

Introduction

This case study report explores the effects of ‘anti-gender’ politics in Switzerland and discusses how individuals navigate, confront, and resist assaults on their identities, lives, politics, and work within the spheres of sexuality and gender. 31 participants in Switzerland took part in four focus groups—with 21 participants in total (3-7 per group)—and in 12 individual interviews with people, two of whom participated in a focus-group before also taking part in an interview. Participants were recruited through targeted emails; please see [Table 1: Respondent profiles Switzerland](#) for more details.

The report starts with an overview of the national context and then presents key findings from the focus groups and interviews. The study includes people with diverse gender identities, sexual orientations, and racial and ethnic backgrounds. Participants are involved in various gender-related fields such as activism, academia, state equality bodies, sexual health and education, politics, sex work activism, trans activism, queer/LGBTIQ+ counseling, anti-racism, drag, and online activism. Their rich insights illuminate a wide range of experiences with ‘anti-gender’ mobilisations in Switzerland.

Context

Switzerland's semi-direct democratic system blends representative and direct democracy, granting significant power to its citizens. This system relies on two main mechanisms: the popular initiative and the optional referendum. The popular initiative allows citizens to propose constitutional changes. If a proposal gathers 100,000 signatures within 18 months, it is brought to a national vote. This mechanism enables citizens to directly influence the legislative agenda, bypassing parliamentary procedures when there is enough public support.⁴

The optional referendum permits citizens to challenge laws passed by the Federal Assembly. If 50,000 signatures are collected within 100 days of the law's publication, a national vote is held to accept or reject the law. This provides a check on parliamentary decisions, ensuring that contentious issues can be decided by the eligible electorate rather than solely by elected representatives, putting pressure on elected politicians to reach a “socially acceptable” result that could find a majority in the public, resulting in ambiguous influence on the human rights struggle.

Thus, this system has significantly impacted the progress of gender and sexual equality in Switzerland. Women's suffrage is a notable example, as women only gained the right to vote in federal elections in 1971 due to the requirement of a national referendum, where the male electorate repeatedly voted against it until the 1970s.⁵ Some cantons lagged further, with Appenzell Innerrhoden granting women the right to vote only in 1991 after a federal court decision.

Many gender-related issues in Switzerland have thus been decided by popular referendums, most recently marriage equality (accepted in 2021), and the extension of hate speech laws to cover sexual orientation. While both topics were supported by over 60% of the voters, there remains significant opposition to gender rights issues in Switzerland.

⁴ Linder, W. and Mueller, S. (2021) *Swiss Democracy: Possible Solutions to Conflict in Multicultural Societies*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, p.p. 127-151. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-63266-3>.

⁵ Linder, W. and Mueller, S. (2021), p. 99.

Previous research by the RESIST project indicates that the counter-positions to gender and sexual equalities in Swiss parliamentary discourses often manifest not through open opposition, but through technocratic or legalist arguments.⁶ RESIST research also showed that the right-wing and conservative media fuel hostility to diversity and inclusion issues by framing 'gender ideology' as a threat to freedom of speech and by associating trans and LGBTIQ+ activism with 'wokeism' and 'cancel culture'. Common narratives include the protection of minors from 'early sexualisation' and the perceived dangers of gender-affirming care.

Reports by other civil society organisations, such as the Transgender Network Switzerland, have noted high levels of transphobic content in Swiss media.⁷ The annual Hate Crime Report published by LGBTIQ+ NGOs raises alarms about a noticeable increase in hate crimes targeting the LGBTIQ+ community over the last few years, with incidents of violence and discrimination reported across various regions. Notably, these crimes often included verbal harassment, physical assaults, and social media attacks, primarily directed at transgender individuals and those perceived as non-conforming to traditional gender roles.⁸ Apart from that, organisations involved in gender equality projects, such as Santé Sexuelle Suisse, report regular confrontations with 'anti-gender' and anti-abortion movements, indicating that sexual and reproductive rights are also affected by 'anti-gender' mobilisations in Switzerland.⁹

Findings

1. Media and politics appear to be the main channels of 'anti-gender' politics

While the term 'anti-gender' is not widely recognised in Switzerland, participants identified its effects through various hostilities. They noted a growing resistance to progressive movements like anti-racism, feminism, and struggles for queer and trans rights. Media and politics emerged as primary arenas for these mobilisations, with misinformation fuelling fear and hostility. Participants also highlighted that the current hostilities are shifting from the far-right to the political centre and are often framed as concerns for young people.

Even though the term 'anti-gender' is not widely used in Switzerland, participants in the study recognised its implications based on their encounters with various hostilities. Instead of using the term 'anti-gender,' participants observed a growing resistance to progressive movements such as anti-racism, feminism, woke culture, and queer and trans rights, reflecting a broader opposition to equal rights, often expressed through the concept of backlash, anti-feminist, anti-queer, anti-trans hostilities.

Key themes that most participants associated with 'anti-gender' mobilisation in Switzerland included opposition to inclusive language, sex education, moral panic around trans issues, and sex work. Trans-exclusionary feminism was highlighted as a significant form of 'anti-gender' hostility. However, it was noted that the targets of these hostilities are not fixed, but shifting.

⁶ The RESIST Project (2024) Ergebnisse der Schweizer Fallstudie, available at https://theresistproject.eu/sdc_download/576/?key=2mhb8162vosolmu9l9ly33nhsrg3m2

⁷ Kraus, J (2021) Keine Ruhe Geben, available at: <https://www.equality.ch/f/Membres.htm> (Accessed: 16 June 2024).

⁸ Hate Crime Report (2023) Pink Cross, LOS, TGNS, available at: https://www.pinkcross.ch/unser-einsatz/politik/hate-crime/hatecrime_bericht_2023_de.pdf, (Accessed 3 July 2024).

⁹ Rohner, S., Weiss, C. (2023) *Sexual Health and Rights under pressure: resistance and challenge*, MMS Bulletin #167s, available at: <https://www.medicusmundi.ch/de/austausch-und-vernetzung/veranstaltungen/mms-fachtagung/sexual-hhealth-and-r-rights-under-pressure-res/> (Accessed: 20 June 2024).

Media and politics were addressed by most participants as the primary arenas for such mobilisations. Religious circles, particularly evangelists, were also noted for their opposition to gender equality and attempts at conversion regarding sexual orientation and gender identity.

Misinformation emerged as a critical factor in fostering hostility. Media and political narratives sensationalising topics such as sex education or transgender issues were discussed as key factors in fostering hostility and fear even among previously uninformed or neutral individuals. Most participants expressed their frustration and concern over the spread of false information and the resulting public confusion. As Alex noted: “I always notice when I haven't spoken to my mother about [LGBTIQ+/trans issues] for six months, how the newspaper discourses have come in”.

Some participants, such as Momo Regen, noted that hostilities to equality and diversity have deep historical roots and are driven by societal and cultural dissent, while others noticed an increase in organised opposition to equality and diversity in recent years.

Participants from the German-speaking parts of Switzerland pointed to a longer history of organised resistance to gender equality in these regions, referencing attacks on gender studies as early as 2010, which intensified in 2015–16. This contrasts with the French-speaking areas, where such debates appear less prominent. One interviewee recalled opposition to gender studies as an example of 'anti-gender' politics dating back to 2010, marked by mutual criticism between the discipline and right-wing populist policies: gender studies academics criticised right-wing politics, which in turn portrayed gender studies as an unscientific discipline and its academics as disconnected elites (SWIINT06). Alex pointed out that these debates originated in Germany and travelled to Switzerland, manifesting in discourses about “elites who want to dismantle gender from the top” and “academics in their ivory tower who lost contact with reality”.

Other participants identified the 2019 feminist strike as a turning point, suggesting that increased visibility of feminist and queer issues triggered a backlash. The COVID-19 pandemic and related conspiracy theories further fuelled 'anti-gender' narratives.

Several participants also noted, that while the 2021 marriage equality campaign sparked hostile discourses, current hostility is expressed without extensive debates and has shifted from the far-right to the political centre, **becoming more socially acceptable** and often presented under the guise of concern for young people. The recent campaign by the right-wing Swiss People's Party highlighted the political significance of these movements, as voiced by many participants.

2. 'Anti-gender' led to heightened fears of physical violence and necessitated increased precautions

Generally, most participants felt that hostility has been increasing in recent years, manifested as fears and anticipation of physical violence.

Violent attacks **from right-wing extremist groups** at feminist or queer events, as well as the hostile rhetoric of **masculinist/incel** movements on social media were said to contribute to the general hostility towards equality issues and lead to a **heightened fear and pressure amongst people targeted by 'anti-gender'**. As Mo said:

At events where I had no fear at all in Switzerland—queer events—that something could happen, I now go with an uncomfortable feeling, e.g. at Drag Story Time. A few years ago, I never had the feeling that something would happen when I went to a queer event.

The discussions highlighted a rise in hate comments and security threats during events such as Pride parades, leading to heightened police presence and emergency protocols. Increasing fear has resulted in a loss of 'naive confidence' among community members, as illustrated by participants' experiences of discomfort and their **anticipation of violence**.

Another participant shared how, following their public condemnation of a recent homophobic verbal assault of a lesbian journalist,¹⁰ she, and members of her collective reacted with fear whenever the doorbell rang in their office. The large number of hate emails they receive makes them fearfully anticipate that the assaults could materialise in real life. As Alex said: "But if digital hatred in its smallest measure turns into physical violence, then we are living very dangerously".

Despite noting growing concerns, this participant said that, as a cis lesbian woman, she felt less targeted than trans and non-binary people. The anticipation of physical and verbal violence among the trans participants was expressed particularly acutely. As SWIINT03 said:

It's as if we're collectively going through things together. But personally, I don't experience it very badly. But it weighs on me to know that at any moment, I can experience it.

Other trans participants confirmed this heightened feeling of fear and anticipation of violence. 'Anti-gender' politics has a significant impact on transgender and gender-diverse individuals. One participant, Luna, emphasised that 'anti-gender' politics is often perceived as a rhetoric, or a discourse, whereas it is **more than just a discourse**, and should be seen as something that has tangible effects on trans people's lives, leading notably to a higher prevalence of suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts amongst young trans people. Another participant further confirmed that increased visibility of gender identity issues has heightened the risk of direct violence for some groups (Urs Vanessa).

Furthermore, participants reported experiencing **mixed feelings towards the police**. Some felt that police violence against feminist and so-called 'unauthorised demonstrations' has increased, citing examples like the feminist strike on March 8, 2020, where protesters were trapped by police on a bridge for several hours without water or access to toilets (Alex). Conversely, during certain events—such as a counter-demonstration to right-wing extremist targeting of Drag Story Time for kids in Zurich—the presence of police was said to provide a sense of security against potential attacks from right-wing extremist groups.

3. Online hate and targeting were reported as prevalent in Switzerland

Most participants reported experiencing online hate and targeting, highlighting the significant role masculinist groups play in spreading hostile rhetoric, often transnationally. Constant exposure to online hostility is mentally draining, forcing many to take breaks from their personal and professional online presence to protect their well-being.

Direct attacks on individuals and organisations are commonplace, with many participants reporting that regular hate emails and other threats are sent to their personal and professional accounts. One participant mentioned that their organisation maintains a dedicated 'hate mail' folder in their mailbox to manage the influx (SWIFG1.6). A German scholar was even cited for having a specific mailbox on their website solely for hate emails, which people utilised.

¹⁰ Swissinfo (2023)

<https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/society/far-right-essayist-jailed-in-switzerland-for-homophobic-remarks/48855206>, (Accessed: 8 June 2024).

Most of these attacks, participants observed, are transphobic and misogynistic, noting that much of the hostile rhetoric seems to be 'recycled' from media and social media coverage in the United States, UK, and other contexts.

Participants shared personal experiences to illustrate the intensity of online hostility. For example, Jade, an activist using Instagram to denounce violence, recounted being targeted and harassed by far-right men. After reporting a cultural venue with cases of sexual abuse, Jade received messages from white cisgender heterosexual men asserting they would continue to frequent the venue. Some of these men followed Jade's feminist accounts but still sent violent messages whenever, as they believed, they felt threatened. Jade also faced harassment having added they/she pronouns to her account page.

Participants specifically remarked on **the rise of masculinism on social networks**. Emmy, who engages with various age groups, expressed shock at the regressive views young women hear from their male peers, such as “women should stay in the kitchen”. Emmy believes more engagement is needed to counteract these views, though a lack of funding and resources pose significant barriers. Sam also noted the rise of ultra-masculinist discourse on social media, describing it as a “bubble” that fosters radicalisation within certain circles.

Similarly, Adèle talked about the constant exposure to masculinist content on social media, emphasising how discourses idealising the past or promoting group-belonging are commonly used by masculinists. As she says, confronting this content is almost inevitable, especially on platforms like TikTok. Alex also shared how she recently spoke publicly about gender-inclusive language—which she defines as a 'very dividing theme'—and afterwards receiving direct emails and messages on her Instagram account. Another participant, SWIFG2.6, reported how being a gay and racialised person leads him to receive racist and/or homophobic comments on social networks.

Participants expressed **pervasive fear that online violence could materialise offline**, adding to their stress and fatigue from constant exposure to hostile content. This fear has led some to withdraw from personal and professional online activities to protect their mental health.

In addition to threatening, intimidating, and discriminatory content, participants also described encountering specific trolling tactics designed to consume activists' energy and time. For example, SWIINT09 spoke about dealing with trolls, who repeatedly ask detailed questions to exhaust and frustrate activists. These trolls exploit the organisation's values of being willing to inform and educate, asking for detailed answers over and over again to intentionally waste resources. While some participants avoid engaging with such trolls, others, especially in state institutions, feel compelled to respond, wasting valuable time.

Generally, participants expressed **an ambiguous relation to social media**: on the one hand, it provides a platform for marginalised voices to gain support and speak up. For example, Luna mentioned that in Switzerland, figures like Anna Rosenwasser¹¹ would not be as well-known without Instagram. At the same time, she said that the impersonal nature of online interactions makes it easier for people to engage in hate and discrimination, which she, as a trans woman, has experienced extensively. However, she also acknowledged experiencing violent attacks on the street.

¹¹ Anna Rosenwasser is a well-known queer feminist activist, well-known through her social media activity, who got elected to Parliament during the 2023 federal election for the Socialist Party.

4. The pervasiveness of 'anti-gender' rhetoric: from public discourse to personal interactions

'Anti-gender' rhetoric disseminated by the media—including online platforms—and political discourse permeates everyday life, participants reported encountering hostility in diverse and often unexpected settings.

Participants concurred that 'anti-gender' rhetoric is far more pervasive than media portrayals suggest. As Sacha observed, "The far-right, they're just more vocal". Participants stressed that, arising from these dominant sources of 'anti-gender', hostile discourses **trickle down into everyday life**, leading to unexpected confrontations and aggression, often in "close" familial, professional or friendships circles.

For instance, Granaina recounted a casual lunch with a long-time friend that escalated into a contentious exchange, with her views as an individual and professional advocate for inclusivity being aggressively challenged. Similarly, family gatherings emerged as anticipated battlegrounds for hostile discussions. Alex described the difficulty of countering hostile narratives within her family:

My mother now shows a very conservative attitude towards trans people or simply repeats what she hears in the media, which is primarily anti-trans. She lacks the education and sensitivity to recognise this as trans-hostile reporting. It's challenging for me to counter her, even though it's part of my professional work.

In another example, S.N., involved in the ballroom scene, also noted that 'anti-gender' discourses predominantly arise from politics and media, which he referred to as 'bourgeois spheres'. In his opinion, people in the ballroom scene are often removed from these circles, and yet encounter anti-queer, anti-trans, anti-feminist hostilities through family, religious institutions, and other community interactions. On a different level, the same participant—with a background in natural sciences—also noted the presence of 'anti-gender' discourse in natural sciences, particularly biology, and being regularly confronted amongst their former study and work colleagues with 'anti-gender' discourses reaffirming the gender binary in the name of 'natural science'.

Many participants pointed out that occasionally, individuals with leftist political views, including self-identified feminists, also perpetuate 'anti-gender' rhetoric, particularly through discourses that victimise or deny agency to sex workers and trans people (Granaina). Some participants referred to these individuals as 'reactionary feminists', noting their promotion of anti-sex work discourse and victimisation narratives in relation to sex workers and trans people.

Intra-community targeting was also reported. Participants involved in sex work activism shared that even those in precarious environments, who are themselves affected by 'anti-gender' politics, can propagate hostile messages from dominant 'anti-gender' actors. SWIINT03 recounted witnessing a trans sex worker being harassed by her cis colleagues, and expressed sadness at seeing 'anti-gender' hostility reproduced within marginalised social groups. As an activist, she highlighted the complexity and difficulty of combating 'anti-gender' politics in such environments.

5. Contested competence and professionalism: advocating for equality and diversity while navigating hostility

The increasing hostility towards issues of equality and diversity has created significant challenges for activists, gender studies researchers, civil servants, and others involved in these areas. Participants reported experiencing fatigue, heightened scrutiny of their public image, a need to use more simplified language, and a struggle against the negative framing attached to their (paid or unpaid) work.

Many participants shared that they meticulously prepare their words for public events, anticipating potential attacks and being acutely aware of constant surveillance. This environment has fostered hyper-vigilance and a “latent pressure” among activists. As SWIINT09 expressed, the fear of potential attacks looms even in the absence of any direct incidents:

And it's so difficult, it always exerts latent pressure—and that's what I'm getting at—at the consequences. That means that here, we haven't yet experienced any attacks on our work [...] But we don't know when that might be.

Widespread online hostility has caused significant emotional distress among participants. One participant, a trans woman who is a trans rights activist, questioned her ability to continue her work, contemplating whether a different job might alleviate some of the stress from constant exposure to online hate. SWIINT03 reflected: “Would having a normal job, not being in the field, help me more? Because then, when it comes to social networks, I don't get involved”.

Negative media coverage has also impacted advocacy efforts, with **fears of not being heard** and the rise of ‘anti-woke’ and conspiracy theories undermining the credibility of the LGBTIQ+ community. As one participant, SWIINT03, involved in providing gender trainings, noted, there was a period of increased interest among professionals in equality and diversity trainings, followed by a period when the influence of ‘anti-woke’ themes became pronounced:

There were professionals who came to us, who wanted to be trained, to understand better, to do better. And now, there's a bit of a turnaround. Because people are saying to themselves, this is woke stuff, it's going too far, they want to replace us all. But not at all!

Participants spoke about how ‘activism’ can be framed in a negative way, and how they have to counteract pre-existing negative images of their work as “too radical”, “too militant”, “unprofessional” and are forced to “justify” what they are doing. Abdurahman for example said that in their association they strategically clearly state their job title or level of study of the people involved to prove their legitimacy and to “erase this perception they have of the LGBTIQ+ movement”. In a similar vein, Manu shared that in training sessions, they emphasise that it's okay to make mistakes, such as unintentionally misgendering someone, to counteract the ‘we can't say anything anymore’ discourse.

Other strategies that activists described using in response to hostile discourse is to simplify their language and control their public image. For example, some participants involved in educational projects have chosen to appear “less militant” to avoid backlash. Sacha described their organisation as framing itself as “politically committed” but not “militant” to avoid backlash and possible financial cuts. In a similar vein, Adèle added:

But that, I find, is the whole dimension between fantasy and reality. There's a lot of fantasy about what's going on, and I regularly, if not all the time, at the conferences or training courses I give to professionals, I get lots of people saying “but in fact it's not at all militant, it's very measured what you're bringing”. But that's the reality. What you see is what clicks in the media, because it's much more media-friendly to say “we're transitioning young people”, but then when I explain to people that, in fact, on average, they take about 22 months to get endocrinologist treatment, because that's the average in French-speaking Switzerland, they [the audience] say “but in fact it's fine”.

Another participant, (SWIINT06), a gender studies scholar, avoids terms that could trigger strong reactions—for example ‘patriarchy’—as she knows such terms are likely to be picked up on and can lead

to strong negative responses. In contrast to other sciences, she considered that gender studies “can always be attacked”, because people do not understand what it is about, or they feel they already know it all, and because any critical discourse to power structures can be disqualified as “ideological”. She feared that even her research could be disqualified as “ideological”, especially if related to her political engagement, and as a result actively avoided posting content related to her research on her political channels, to avoid her political engagement being misused to undermine her academic work.

Lorena also recounted a recent controversy which led to **fear of potential funding repercussions for their association**. A women-only jam session was organised by a jazz association, which faced far-right attacks and media scrutiny, with resulting political attempts to ‘re-discuss’ funding of the association. She felt angered that the discourse centred on men's feelings of exclusion rather than the event's positive impact on participants, and that the fear of losing the funding dominated the discussion.

Academics also spoke about carefully weighing their words for public appearances, anticipating a wave of hate or harsh criticism. Additionally, participants highlighted a lack of support from universities in protecting individual academics from political attacks, as Momo Regen noted, and academic freedom in general..

6. 'Anti-gender' politics complicates allyship and hinders complex discussions

Hostile 'anti-gender' rhetoric complicates activism, fosters divisions, and hinders meaningful discussions within affected communities.

Participants underscored that a climate in which the opposition to gender and diversity issues is becoming more pronounced complicates activism and allyship, while continuing with activism is requiring higher levels of commitment. It was suggested that some may abandon activism altogether, feeling that their efforts are futile against the opposition, which they view as stronger, meaning that those who persist might need to take extended breaks to maintain that activism.

Activists in some communities, such as intersex communities, feel particularly affected. As Urs Vanessa described, the prolonged struggle against pervasive hostility is frustrating, with progress often feeling slow and insignificant. They expressed their feeling of discouragement when learning about parliament's decision last winter to turn down a bill to better protect intersex kids from unconsented operations:¹²

And if you're active in the community and fight for rights, it's an enormously long battle against windmills.¹³ Enormously frustrating. With very, very, very, very small steps forward. And there are a lot of people who stop activism because of that, because it's no use, what can I do, they're just stronger. And the people who go through with it like I do, they suffer too. And for the last two years [...] before that, I didn't have to, I had to take two months off every year for the last two years so that I could keep going.

Apart from the fatigue and emotional exhaustion of activists, it was also remarked that the **fear of backlash** causes tensions within LGBTIQ+ circles. Some LGB individuals distance themselves from trans and non-binary minorities, fearing that backlash against these groups might extend to them. As Jade said,

¹² Information on the parliamentary decision regarding the motion "Improving the treatment of children born with a variation of sexual development (DSD)" can be accessed at

<https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaefte?AffairId=20233967>

¹³ In German, “fighting against windmills” is an expression used to describe endless fights with little rewards (since the windmills will keep moving despite one's best efforts).

this 'not claiming too much' narrative feeds into a reluctance to advocate strongly for rights, perpetuating internal divisions and weakening collective efforts: "In fact, it's a fear. As trans people are more victims than if we associate ourselves with them, we'll be more victims by extension".

Other participants noted the presence of trans-exclusionary LGB people within some circles, and that their organisations were confronted with demands to exclude trans issues from their agendas. In a similar vein, SWIINT03 pointed out what they consider a lack of support for transgender individuals and collectives, by formerly equally marginalised groups:

People no longer want to be associated with problems, especially gay men, who have come a long way. It's true that their situation has come a long way, they're a little more comfortable, a little more integrated into society, and it's less and less of a problem in itself [...] less of a concern compared to being a trans person, you see.

One more negative effect of hostile 'anti-gender' discourse is that it often oversimplifies gender-related topics, **making nuanced discussions difficult**. For example, S.N. said that topics like regret and post-transition dysphoria are challenging to address within the trans community due to fears of feeding into 'anti-gender' narratives.

You can regret it. And that's okay. [...] Certainly, it can be very stressful. [...] It's an emotion that we can deal with well in society. And we can't even talk about that. Again, it serves this anti-gender theory or the idea that you can force trans people to make the right decision.

In a similar vein, the focus on the corporal dimension of gender by 'anti-gender' movements makes it hard to discuss the complex interplay of gender identity and expression, as these discussions risk being weaponised by hostile groups.

Other participants highlighted divisions within the feminist community, which became particularly evident in the context of drafting the new gender equality law in Basel. The inclusion of LGBTIQ+ issues in the new law triggered acute reactions from some corners of the feminist movement—some fearing a dilution of limited financial and personal resources for significant issues, such as wage-equality, while some trans-exclusionary discourses were also heavily mobilised. Several participants mentioned that attempts at dialogue failed from the outset, as the discussion quickly became polarised. However, the subsequent commission discussions provided a valuable learning experience: it became clear that a well-informed, differentiated discussion, protected from media attention by confidentiality rules, could lead to constructive outcomes. One participant in particular added that the assumption should not be made that opponents share the same knowledge as proponents and there must be a willingness to educate.

7. Participants unveiled the impact of misinformation in the media

The impact of misinformation and manipulation in the media was a central theme in the research. According to participants, media, including social media, serves as one of the primary vessels for perpetuating 'anti-gender' rhetoric.

Misinformation and manipulation in the media, particularly social media, have emerged as pivotal issues in discussions surrounding 'anti-gender'. Participants share personal experiences, shedding light on the effects of biased media coverage on trans, intersex, and queer communities. Sacha spoke about journalistic responsibility and transphobia. She highlighted issues within journalism, citing examples of transphobia disguised as 'truth-telling.' Some participants were upset seeing how some journalists insist on disclosing whether an interviewee is cisgender or transgender, regardless of its relevance to the topic

at hand. This practice, Sacha noted, underscores a harmful obsession with gender identity that detracts from the actual discourse.

Several participants spoke about navigating misinformation in the media as a personal battle. Marianne reflected on the pervasive nature of misinformation and its impact on even the most supportive individuals. She remarked:

I realise in myself that I must keep fighting against being taken in by this zeitgeist¹⁴ so that I don't fall into doubt myself. And because I know a lot of trans people and their stories, I can reassure myself. But I understand that people without personal experience with the topic can get insecure in their opinions.

She emphasised the need for continuous vigilance against this zeitgeist to avoid falling into doubt, particularly for those without personal connections to the trans community.

Another participant, Urs Vanessa, spoke about the poor quality of media coverage from the perspective of an intersex person. Their contributions to a TV documentary were heavily edited, leading to criticism from the intersex community and exacerbating the lack of visibility for intersex individuals. Similarly, Marius expressed frustration with media treatment of their interventions. They noted that rapid editing often leads to significant cuts, altering the intended message.

Another example of media manipulation that was discussed involved the Gender Studies department in Basel, where a workshop about sex toys organised by researchers was sensationalised by a local newspaper, leading to far-right complaints about the misuse of public funds and forcing women professors to publicly justify their work (Alex). Alex remarked how a single event was turned into a type of 'anti-gender' argument, intentionally undermining Gender Studies for "using people's money for such things."

Another participant, Valentina, expressed fear that misinformation and manipulation of public opinion by 'anti-gender' actors could further harm vulnerable groups, particularly LGBTIQ+ asylum seekers. The participant worried that they might face stricter scrutiny and reduced support due to budget cuts and gendered and racialised rhetoric, fueling economic insecurity among the public, thus framing queer asylum seekers as a financial burden.

8. The heavy toll of negative media coverage on activists' discourses and thematics

Activists in Switzerland face significant challenges as 'anti-gender' narratives saturate public discussions, forcing them to navigate misinformation about their topics, and simultaneously addressing the misinformation while keeping up with their core issues.

The negative coverage of certain topics imposes a significant burden on equality activists in Switzerland. Participants observed that 'anti-gender' rhetoric has saturated discussions with specific issues such as trans and non-binary identities, sex education, gender-inclusive language, and gender itself. This oversaturation drains the resources and energy of activists, diverting attention from other important matters.

¹⁴ Zeitgeist refers to the prevailing cultural, intellectual, and moral climate of a particular period in history. It encapsulates the dominant ideas, beliefs, and values that characterise and shape the social and cultural landscape of that time.

Activists advocating for sex education in schools are particularly frustrated by the consequences of 'anti-gender' rhetoric. They face opposition from self-proclaimed 'concerned parents,' parliamentary interventions,¹⁵ and actions from anti-sex education groups. One participant from French-speaking Switzerland shared that these efforts even extend to legal actions, such as a recent criminal lawsuit for "inciting children to sexual activity" which was filed against educators in relation to a sex education brochure (SWIINT09). She noted that the lawsuit was ultimately dropped, and that the organisation chose to protect the educators who were targeted, by keeping them out of the spotlight and maintaining a low profile on the issue.

Due to the heightened focus on sex education in media and political discourse, participants said educators and organisations overseeing sex education are feeling pressured. This pressure leads to concerns about securing funding and causes some educators to resort to self-censorship to avoid conflicts. For example, educators often avoid mentioning topics like 'private parts,' masturbation, and gender to prevent backlash from religious and conservative groups. As SWIINT09 explained:

There are usually two themes: it's unimaginable to talk about masturbation in a sex education class [...]. That's one point. And the second point is everything to do with gender. [...] These movements attack both themes in the same way.

The interviewee noted that opposition often comes from diverse religious and conservative groups, resulting in heterogeneous 'anti-gender' discourses.

SWIINT09, who educates professionals on LGBTIQ+ issues, noted that opposition to sex education frequently surfaces during their gender equality training to adult professionals. They often encounter participants who say, "I agree with you, but I don't think children should be taught that". Additionally, training requests sometimes ask to dilute the LGBTIQ+ subject within broader topics, such as general discrimination, to make it more acceptable to audiences.

Gender-inclusive language is another frequent target of 'anti-gender' discourse. The oversaturation of critiques has led some funding bodies to require its exclusion in project proposals. Abdurahman from SWIINT05 reported that a funding body explicitly requested applicants not to use inclusive language, citing concerns about comprehensibility and alignment with the French Academy's stance. This condition was viewed as discriminatory and obstructive for proposals involving gender minorities, creating uncertainty about how to proceed.

9. Trans and gender diverse people are most vulnerable to 'anti-gender'

'Anti-gender' rhetoric has significantly impacted trans, non-binary and gender diverse individuals, leading to more acceptable hostile discourses, and heightened fear and urgency regarding access to gender-affirming treatments.

Participants highlighted how media coverage of trans issues has grown increasingly negative since the pandemic, focusing on detransition and other adverse themes. This visibility fosters stereotypes and preconceived notions. As one participant, S.N., noted:

I think the increased visibility [...] has the advantage that more people can imagine something under the term trans. The disadvantage is that there are more stereotypes and

¹⁵ Please visit <https://theresistproject.eu/what-we-have-found/> to see the RESIST case-study findings for Switzerland, including parliamentary debates analysis.

more preconceived opinions. It's no longer simply "I perceive you as you are and it's just weird", but "see, you're trans and as a result you're x, y, z".

Participants particularly in SWIFG2 criticised sensationalist detransitioning reportages that often exclude input from gender professionals, resulting in misinformed public opinions. Sensationalism as a tactic exploits polarising topics, selling them as reliable to an uninformed public.

Hostile media discourses materially affect trans individuals' daily lives and well-being. One trans participant recounted the emotional toll of transphobic debates on television, which led her to seek counselling. She explained how media negativity made her more cautious about disclosing her trans identity, compelling her to adopt a cis-passing appearance to avoid danger, thus adding strain to her life (SWIINT03). She said she used to believe she was unaffected by such debates, and that the realisation of the significant toll it had on her emotional well-being was important.

Even those who haven't experienced direct abuse report a pervasive sense of insecurity and concern about potential transphobic encounters. This "community mental load" affects the overall well-being of trans individuals.

Several participants also addressed internal community pressures, as an effect of 'anti-gender'. For example, a trans activist noted that negative discourses pressure the trans community to fit specific identities, causing divisions between 'visible' and 'less visible' members. This division sometimes leads to a 'romanticisation of marginalisation'—Romantisierung der Marginalisierung—where those who fully medically transition are criticised as complicit in the system, despite having the right to make their own choices. In the words of one participant, S.N.:

And I think it ['anti-gender'] very much has this influence that you have to fit into a box again within the trans community [...] I think it leads to tensions. [...] Who is visible then? Are you visible and therefore openly suffering from this anti-gender debate or do you perhaps have a passing [...] and don't suffer from it.

Participants observed that hostile discourses have become more acceptable. As Alex pointed out, while some sexist remarks are less tolerated, attacks against trans people have become common, especially from far-right politicians and media. Dehumanising narratives against trans individuals are now more "sayable", as she said, reflecting a troubling shift in societal attitudes.

Participants also pointed to the feeling of urgency in relation to gender-affirming health care as another negative effect of 'anti-gender'. The 'anti-gender' climate has heightened fear among trans individuals about losing access to gender-affirming care, causing increased stress and urgency to undergo medical procedures before they potentially become inaccessible. Valentina, who provides social counselling for LGBTIQ+ people, noticed that some trans people feel pressured to act quickly, fearing that gender-affirming care might soon be restricted or no longer reimbursed by the healthcare system.

At the same time, Marianne remarked that a shift in attitude is noticeable among professionals working with young people, particularly in schools and social work. Queerness is now a significant topic, but recent negative media coverage regarding trans-affirmative care has led to increased insecurity regarding what the proper professional approach regarding trans and non-binary youth should be, especially among psychologists. She observed a move from direct acceptance towards scepticism, with common complaints about the lack of parental involvement.

10. Navigating hostilities: strategies from equality activists

Facing increased hostilities, equality activists in Switzerland employ various strategies to navigate personal and professional challenges. Their approaches emphasise collaboration, coalition-building, and pragmatic responses to opposition.

Participants emphasised the importance of community solidarity as a crucial response to a hostile climate. This is particularly vital for smaller groups like intersex organisations. Unified support when speaking to the media is essential (Urs Vanessa). Another participant stressed the role of group efforts on social media to avoid individual targeting, thus protecting members and maintaining a united front (SWIINT06).

Forging political alliances with supportive politicians is vital for influencing legislative outcomes. Participants cited examples from Geneva, where alliances have successfully opposed proposals aimed at revoking equality laws or restricting healthcare for trans youth. One participant noted that 'anti-gender' rhetoric among some politicians is often strategic rather than genuine, suggesting potential for bridge-building even with conservative parties (SWIINT06).

Raising awareness and demystifying anti-woke and anti-trans issues were deemed effective strategies. Public platforms like festivals were preferred over individual discussions (SWIFG4). A participant working on masculinism highlighted the importance of training cisgender heterosexual men, particularly those in influential positions, to develop empathy and support gender issues (Gilles). Fostering dialogue between generations can bridge understanding. One participant shared a productive exchange with an older feminist who initially held prejudices towards trans people but eventually reconsidered her views (Luna).

Despite the risks involved in its use, social media was discussed as crucial for education and support. One participant regularly posts about trans issues, explaining concepts and addressing concerns from both the trans community and their families. When some cis women felt excluded by terms used in discussions about trans pregnancies (Gebährende), one participant explained the importance of inclusive language, emphasising that these terms are not exclusionary but inclusive of all people who carry children (Tani).

Several participants proposed rethinking or reclaiming terms like 'gender' to counter negative connotations. They suggested framing the discourse around human rights, emphasising the principle of "let people live". The goal is to equip people with the knowledge and language to support human rights decisions (S.N.).

To protect mental health, participants highlighted the importance of maintaining boundaries between public and private life. One participant emphasised the need for professional guidelines to protect personal information and emotional well-being in the face of hostility. She avoids sharing personal contact details and keeps her private life separate from her work, surrounded by supportive people (SWIINT09).

Participants suggested seeking cultural contexts that view gender more fluidly and connect it with other social inequities like racism, ableism, and classism. For instance, the ballroom scene and traditions from Judaism and Native American cultures offer valuable perspectives on gender identity (S.N.; Tani).

Despite the challenges, participants stressed the importance of not letting the 'anti-gender' movement marginalise them. Continuing their work, especially at the political level, and ensuring collegial support were seen as crucial. They emphasised the need to remain factual and counter arguments objectively, viewing information and education as key strategies, even in the face of constant opposition (Urs Vanessa; Tani; SMO). As Urs Vanessa said:

The question is always: how strong do we let this movement become and when do we start to counter it with factual arguments [...] This movement is not well-founded. Most people are simply against it because they are against it. [...] And then they start with some arguments and then you have to refute every argument they bring, using your knowledge, factually and soundly.

Through these discussions, it becomes evident that equality activists in Switzerland employ a variety of strategies to navigate hostilities. By building solidarity, forming political alliances, and maintaining personal boundaries, they continue to advocate for gender equality and human rights amidst growing opposition.

Conclusion

Participants provided detailed accounts of multifaceted and pervasive encounters with 'anti-gender' politics. Generally, 'anti-gender' politics is associated with right-wing populism—the 'recycling' of transnationally circulating discourses—and seen as a general opposition to progressive issues extending beyond the far-right, for example with trans-exclusionary feminists. Generally, participants suggested that 'anti-gender' rhetoric, although mostly prevalent in media and politics, **trickles down into everyday life, leading to unexpected confrontations and aggression.**

Participants reported increased **fears about physical safety at public events**, such as Pride parades, with some queer organisations even discussing emergency protocols in case of violence. On and offline harassment, including hate messages, has been common. Most participants have received hate messages to their professional and personal accounts, and there is a widespread **fear that online hate will turn into offline violence.**

It was pointed out that 'anti-gender' politics in Switzerland often focuses on topics like trans and non-binary issues, sex education, and gender-inclusive language. This puts pressure on equality activists and exposes certain groups to increased risks. **Transgender and gender-diverse individuals especially face a higher risk of physical violence.** In response, some participants feel pressured to adopt cis-passing appearances to reduce the risk of transphobic encounters. There is also a fear of losing access to medical care due to potential policy changes, creating a sense of urgency for some to undergo medical procedures before they become restricted or financially inaccessible.

Hostile discourses have infiltrated professional environments, causing tensions within LGBTIQ+ circles and hindering complex discussions on gender-related topics. Continuous exposure to hostile environments and the need to navigate them have taken a toll on the mental health of equality activists, leading to increased anxiety and stress. Many activists reported feelings of burnout due to the relentless nature of their work and constant opposition, and the need to take breaks from work to keep going. To avoid hostility, many individuals resort to self-censorship, avoiding certain topics or expressions of their identity in public and professional settings.

Effective resistance strategies against 'anti-gender' rhetoric include forming political alliances, fostering friendships and collaborations within communities, education, rethinking key concepts like 'gender' and their impact on the advocacy efforts, seeking supportive cultural contexts, and prioritising self-care and safe spaces.

Respondent Profiles

We asked the 31 participants to fill out a voluntary demographic form with open text boxes for each variable. 26 participants filled their voluntary demographic forms while 5 others were asked the questions directly during the interviews. To ensure varied perspectives, we aimed to recruit participants with diverse backgrounds. Here are some key characteristics of the Swiss sample.

Additionally, it must be mentioned, that many participants are professionally or voluntarily engaged in gender-related issues, including activism, academia, state equality bodies, sexual health and education, politics, sex work activism, counselling, trans activism, queer/LGBTIQ+ counselling, anti-racism, drag, online activism, and journalism/media work. This professional focus often shaped their narratives, with many discussing professional experiences more than personal ones. Despite efforts, some groups are notably missing from the sample, such as queer refugees and Muslim individuals. Consequently, the data does not provide insights into how these groups are specifically affected by 'anti-gender' politics, despite being regularly targeted.

Table 1: Respondent profiles Switzerland

Profile	No. of Responses	Sample Outline
Age groups	31	Most participants who indicated their age are between 25 and 34 (10 participants) or 35 and 49 years old (9), three were in the 50-64 range, two over 65, and one was below 24. The exact age was rarely provided, so that no clear average age can be calculated, but it would lay between 30 and 40.
Gender	31	The participants include 11 non-binary and trans individuals (incl. one identifying as Two-Spirit and one as queer), 13 cis women, six cis men, one intersex person.
Sexual orientation / identity	30	Among the cis men, five identify as gay, and one is a cis hetero man. Among the cis women, four identify as lesbians, three as bi/pan and the others as hetero (5). Non-binary and trans people have indicated a wide range of sexual orientations (pan, gay, hetero, queer, etc.)
Country of origin	29	Most of the participants indicated only Switzerland as a country of origin (18), while four indicated Switzerland and neighbouring countries (two Italy, two Germany). Three participants indicated Switzerland and other places (one Eastern European roots, one India and one Kenya/Somalia). France (1), Germany (1), Portugal (1) and Italy (1) were also mentioned as origins.
Country of residence / legal status	30	All participants indicated Switzerland as their place of residency. Most participants hold Swiss or European passports, and all are legally residing in Switzerland.

Racial / ethnic identity	26	In terms of racial/ethnic identity, most of the participants describe themselves as white or Caucasian (18), while another four indicated being of Swiss/German/central European descent. The sample also reflects racial and ethnic diversity, including four participants who identify as people of colour (PoC).
National identity	26	National identity was not a clear category for most participants and the ones who filled that category put the same answer as for their origins or their racial/ethnic identity.
Educational training	30	An overarching majority of the participants indicated higher education, 27 mentioning having attended university (six PhD, 10 with master, five with bachelor, 6 undefined university experience). One participant went to art school, one indicated having secondary education and one having no formal education diploma.
Religion	18	Religious affiliation was scarce, with most participants 22 identifying as atheist/agnostic/having no religion or not specifying any religious affiliation. One person indicated Jewish roots, while others identified with Catholic (4) or Protestant (3) churches, though around half of those indicated "not practising".
Social class	22	Most participants indicated middle class (13), higher middle class (5) or lower middle class (3), with only one participant stating upper class. The rest of the participants (8) left the field blank.
Dis/ability / chronic diseases	31	Most participants (23) stated having no disability or chronic disease. 7 mentioned chronic diseases, but few details were provided.
Settlement type	25	Most of the participants live in a big city (11) and medium sized city (8); however the exact qualification for Swiss cities remains blurry and many participants were unsure between both categories. There are also participants from small towns (1), villages (5) and rural areas (1). Many of the participants from smaller settlements are still professionally active in the cities.
Anything else	2	Two participants indicated being fat as an important aspect.