

# The ‘Global’ in Anti-Gender Mobilization

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In March 2019, the UK-based feminist organization Women’s Human Rights Campaign (WHRC) published a Declaration on Women’s Sex-Based Rights. Coauthored by scholars Maureen O’Hara, Sheila Jeffreys, and Heather Brunksell-Evans, the declaration uses the UN Women’s Gender Equality Glossary definition of sex as “the physical and biological characteristics that distinguish males from females” to argue against the replacement of “sex” with “gender identity” as the basis of women’s rights. The declaration goes on to assert that “the inclusion of men who claim to have a female ‘gender identity’ in the category of women...erodes women’s rights to safety, dignity and equality.”

At first, circulation of WHRC’s declaration was primarily limited to the United Kingdom, Ireland, the United States, and Australia. But as of the time of this writing, five and a half years later, it has garnered almost 39,000 signatures from 160 countries and has been translated into 21 languages. In January 2022, WHRC renamed itself Women’s Declaration International (WDI), leaning into its image as a leading organization in a global “anti-gender” movement, which opposes what it calls the ideology of gender identity replacing the supposed truth of biological sex in society, law, and medicine.

For groups such as WDI, attracting supporters from the overwhelming majority of the world’s countries bolsters a crisis narrative about the alleged global erosion of “woman” as a universal, sex-based category. Of course, similar arguments, mobilizations, and legislative efforts to diminish the civil rights of transgender people around the world preceded the late 2010s. But a defining feature of anti-gender movements today is the

invocation of the “global” as a rhetorical resource to establish transnational movement infrastructures and prompt international solidarity. For anti-gender actors, only a coordinated global movement for sex-based rights can combat the machinations of gender ideologues around the world.

At least in theory. But how effective is this rhetorical strategy on the ground, especially in places outside of the United States or the UK that organizations such as WDI claim as part of its international struggle? How do invocations of global resistance function in anti-gender movement mobilizations in these peripheral places? The recent rise of Taiwan’s anti-gender movement offers one compelling example of the slippage between the claims and efficacy of these rhetorical strategies.

## TAIWAN’S NEW MOVEMENT

On September 23, 2021, the Taipei High Administrative Court issued a historic ruling in favor of a transgender woman’s administrative appeal to change her legal gender from male to female without providing proof of sexual organ removal surgery, as had been required by a 2008 Interior Ministry directive. In the months following this ruling, more than 5,000 citizens signed two petitions demanding that gender-segregated spaces on the basis of biological sex and the surgery requirement for changing one’s legal gender both be retained. Taiwan’s first anti-gender movement organization, No Self ID Taiwan, was established during this initial wave of mobilization.

“Gender self-identification” refers to a model of gender recognition that allows a person to update their legal gender through a simple administrative procedure without any requirements for supporting documentation. It has been instituted in Argentina, California, and (as of November 2024) Germany. Gender self-identification is the most lenient gender recognition model.

Among the alternatives is the “hard medical model,” which requires proof of sex reassignment

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surgery (SRS), be it sexual organ removal in Taiwan or reconstruction in Singapore. The “soft medical model” does not require SRS, but still necessitates medical evidence of one’s gender identity, such as a gender dysphoria diagnosis in the UK. There is also a “non-medical model,” as in France, which does not insist on surgical intervention or medical evidence, but does require evidence of one’s gender identity, broadly construed to include non-medical forms of evidence, such as a letter from a family member.

No Self ID Taiwan views any departure from the hard medical model as advocating for gender self-identification, which it believes to be the ultimate goal of transgender rights movements globally. This conceptual muddling positions Taiwan within a domino theory of global gender tyranny: even if a given country does not actually implement gender self-identification, it is, along with Taiwan, inevitably headed in that direction—unless a global sex-based movement for women’s rights can stop it. Based on this alarmist understanding of global trends, No Self ID and other anti-gender movement organizations in Taiwan track what is happening in other countries as part of their rhetorical strategy for mobilizing support.

Under the heading of “Incidents that Have Already Happened Abroad” on the home page of its website, No Self ID lists several negative impacts that gender self-identification is purportedly having in countries around the world that offer gender recognition to transgender people who have not undergone SRS. This litany includes decreasing the quality of medical care, destroying fairness in gender-segregated sports, undermining gender equality quotas for public offices, distorting crime statistics by including transgender women in women’s datasets, infringing on freedoms of speech and thought, imperiling the existence of women-only spaces (such as prisons, shelters, dormitories, changing rooms, and restrooms), erasing the word “women” and replacing it with gender-neutral language such as “people who menstruate,” pressuring so-called biological lesbians to have sex with trans women, and pushing “gender-affirming care” on minors.

In addition to domestic news stories, each entry cites multiple Chinese-language summaries of reports from foreign sources such as the

UK-based *Daily Mail* tabloid and independent feminist news and opinion website Reduux. In some cases, No Self ID has engaged in blatant misinformation in its attempts to use foreign media for domestic mobilization. The first incident highlighted under negative impacts to medical care is titled “Female-to-Male Transgender in US Thought Pregnancy Was Abdominal Pain, Belated Realization Causes Fetal Death” (美國女跨男懷孕以為是腹痛，過晚發現造成死胎). The Chinese summary states that even though the patient told the triage nurse that he was transgender, he was triaged as a non-urgent case of male abdominal pain because his medical records listed his gender as “male.” Only after a detailed pregnancy test many hours later did the hospital perform an emergency C-section, delivering a stillborn baby.

An article on this case was originally published in 2019 in *The New England Journal of Medicine* with the title, “The Power and Limits of Classification—A 32-Year-Old Man with Abdominal Pain.” The original authors note that the patient informed the triage nurse that he had a positive at-

home pregnancy test, but she still classified him as a non-urgent case. They argue for establishing more sensitive classifications for transgender patients to prevent such incidents from recurring, and they explicitly state that “the

issues raised in this case cannot be resolved by preventing transgender people from changing their sex on legal documentation or in their medical chart.” Nonetheless, No Self ID has been citing this heartbreaking incident as an omen of the medical mayhem it says is awaiting Taiwanese people should gender registration regulations be loosened.

Anti-gender groups including No Self ID, Taiwan Women’s Association, and the Taiwan Parents Protect Women and Children Association have also mobilized against an initiative by the Taiwanese government’s Department of Human Rights and Transitional Justice to draft comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation that would include protections for gender identity. Their collective statements again make use of cautionary narratives of women’s rights supposedly being suppressed abroad. One such case is a lawsuit filed in Australia against Sall Grover, founder of a women-only social media platform, Giggle for Girls, for discriminating against transgender women by using

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facial recognition software to exclude biological men from the platform. The plaintiff, Roxanne Tickle, won the case in August 2024.

Some of these cautionary narratives distort events abroad to support the anti-gender movement's claims that its speech is being suppressed by the government. For instance, the June 6, 2024, episode of No Self ID's podcast, *What the Woke? 尋常百姓思聊私聊*, invoked a UK tribunal's 2019 ruling against an employment discrimination lawsuit filed by Maya Forstater, who claimed that she was wrongfully dismissed by a think tank because of her social media posts insisting that biological sex could not be changed. The podcast portrayed the case as an example of why Taiwanese people should oppose comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation. Yet Forstater won her case on appeal in 2021; the ruling established that "gender-critical" beliefs are protected under the UK's 2010 Equality Act.

## AN UNCONVINCED PUBLIC

On April 16, 2022, the Taiwan Parents Protect Women and Children Association conducted an online survey of views on gender recognition requirements and transgender issues. This survey, which did not make use of random sampling methods and thus is not representative of the general public, drew over 10,000 responses. The results were selectively translated into English and published in a 2024 article in the academic journal *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, titled, "Gender Self-Identification: Opinions About Transgender Women from a National Online Survey in Taiwan." No Self ID has since cited this article as its source for the claim that "public opinion polling" indicates that "over 90% of Taiwanese people are strongly against legal gender change without surgery," confirming its populist narrative of widespread resistance to a government compromised by gender ideology.

But the Gender Equality Committee of the Executive Yuan has conducted real public opinion polls on gender issues, employing random sampling methods. In 2022, its annual "Opinions on Gender Equality Telephone Public Opinion Poll" (性別平等觀念電話民意調查) began asking whether respondents thought that "transgender people can change their national ID card gender marker without undergoing sex reassignment surgery." Only 29.3 percent of respondents that year agreed with this statement; 67.2 percent disagreed.

In the 2023 poll, however, the number of respondents who agreed increased to 46.5 percent; of the 47.5 percent who dissented, 30.7 percent agreed that "if psychological evaluations (such as a psychiatrist's diagnosis) or other forms of medical evidence (such as use of hormones) are required, transgender people can change their national ID card gender marker without surgically removing their sexual organs." This shift in public opinion suggests that the efforts of transgender rights advocacy groups to educate the public on gender recognition requirements were more effective than the fear-mongering tactics of Taiwan's anti-gender groups.

The most recent public opinion poll data from 2024 indicates similar results for this set of questions: 47.4 percent of respondents agreed that "transgender people can change their national ID card gender marker without undergoing sex reassignment surgery." Of the 50.6 percent who disagreed, 28.2 percent stated their agreement with foregoing the surgery requirement if other forms of medical evidence were required. This means that more than 60 percent of Taiwan's population supports, at a minimum, transitioning from a hard to a soft medical model of gender recognition without a surgery requirement.

Despite the vociferous efforts of anti-gender movement actors in Taiwan to convince the public that it is threatened by a global onslaught of gender ideology, most Taiwanese people appear unconvinced. The recent entry of Taiwanese actors into the international anti-gender counterpublic, represented by organizations such as WDI and publications such as *4W* and *Feminist Current*, may project the image of a global struggle, but it hardly proves that recycling anti-gender movement discourses from the Anglophone world is a potent strategy.

After its 2024 founding, the Taiwan LGB Alliance—a chapter of a UK-based organization—claimed that promoting transgenderism is tantamount to conversion therapy for gays and lesbians. This rhetoric was so far out on the fringe that no major LGBTQIA+ group in Taiwan bothered to dignify it with a public response. If Taiwan can teach us anything about anti-gender movement mobilizations around the world in recent years, it is that a crucial distinction must be made between the internationalist claims and populist rhetoric that these movements employ, and the extent to which these tactics prove effective on the ground. ■