

**United Nations Human Rights Council, 60th Session
8 September to 8 October 2025**

**Item 3: Interactive Dialogue – Special Rapporteur on the right to development
Speaker: Humanists UK representative: Ella Edwards¹**

We would like to thank the Special Rapporteur for his report, particularly his recognition that cultural and religious values should be used to promote, rather than undermine, gender equality.²

We emphasise that the right to freedom of religion and belief must never be misinterpreted to justify restricting women's rights. Individuals must be able to adopt, change, or practice a religion or belief according to their own conscience, including when this challenges societal expectations.³

State-enforced gender-based persecution under repressive theocratic regimes remains deeply concerning. However, a well-connected transnational, religiously conservative network of civil society actors spanning Europe, the United States and Russia, is increasingly driving resistance to gender equality by promoting policy shifts and social norms across continents.⁴ They have mobilised partner organisations to spread misinformation and stigma to discourage abortion in the UK,⁵ to target and harass women's rights activists in Kenya and Ghana,⁶ and to shape education systems in a way that reinforces patriarchal ideas about society and family life in Chile.⁷ Such political and societal influence impedes women's education, health, economic opportunity, and civic participation, directly undermining their right to development. These efforts are often explicitly justified through appeals to religious values.

How can the Special Rapporteur encourage states to protect the right to freedom of religion and belief for all women, to promote gender equality against pressures from religious fundamentalist groups?

¹ Humanists UK is the operating name of the British Humanist Association.

² UN Human Rights Council, *Nexus between Gender Equality and the Right to Development Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Development*. A/HRC/60/25, 25 July 2025 docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/60/25.

³ UN Human Rights Council. "Freedom of Religion or Belief." A/HRC/40/58, 5 Mar. 2019, docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/40/58.

⁴ Sara Kalm and Anna Meeuwisse, 'Transcalar Activism Contesting the Liberal International Order: The Case of the World Congress of Families', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, Volume 30, Issue 2, February 2023, <https://academic.oup.com/sp/article/30/2/556/7030764>

⁵ Amnesty International UK, 'A Powerful and Coordinated Movement against Human Rights is Growing in the UK', <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/anti-rights>

⁶ Saskia Brechenmacher, *The New Global Struggle Over Gender, Rights, and Family Values*, May 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/06/the-new-global-struggle-over-gender-rights-and-family-values?lang=en>

⁷ Sophia D'Angelo, Rachel Marcus, Ayesha Khan and Olha Homonchuk, *Whose hands on our education? Identifying and countering gender-restrictive backlash*, ALIGN report 2024, <https://www.alignplatform.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/education-backlash-full-report.pdf>