



Religious Conservative Actors and the UN Gender Agenda

At the UN, conservative religious lobbyists and states have drawn attention for their efforts to promote traditional family values. To them, the word 'gender' is anathema, associated with liberal laws on abortion, divorce and dissolution of the traditional family. This policy brief offers an overview of key religious conservative actors and their argumentation, organization and influence on the UN gender equality agenda, including on resolutions relating to Women, Peace and Security (WPS).

Brief Points

- States, interstate- and religious/faith-based organizations increasingly seek to weaken internationally agreed language on human rights. Values and systems safeguarding gender equality policies are being challenged.
- Conservatives have proved effective at messaging and building coalitions across religious, cultural and regional divides. An effective common denominator is the 'protection of traditional family values', which allows conservatives to frame a traditionalist agenda in terms that resonate with widespread sentiments across the globe.
- Over time, these collaborations have developed into more formalized pro-family structures, one being the Group of Friends of the Family (GoFF).
- The WPS agenda has avoided attention from the most conservative religiously motivated actors. However, the US's reinstatement of the global gag rule is a cause for concern.

Brief History

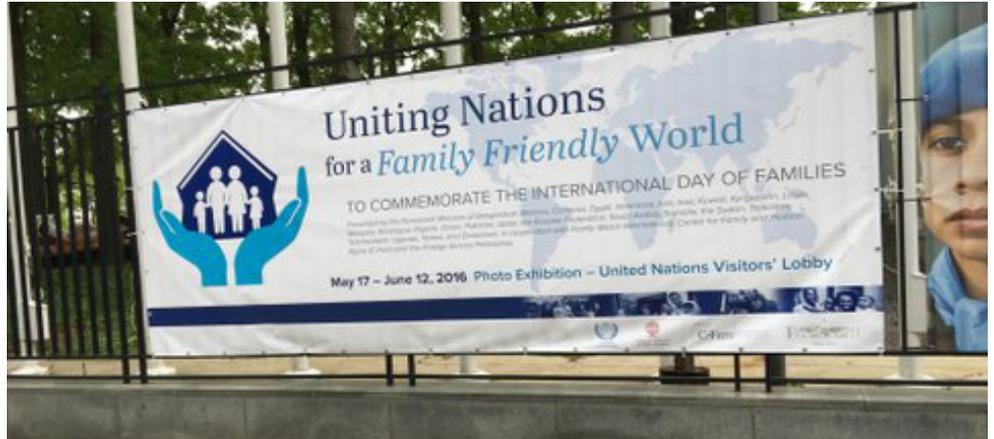
Over the past two decades, groups of conservative religious lobbyists, primarily American Christians, alongside the Vatican and with support from a large number of Muslim states, have continued to fight gender equality and sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR) at the United Nations (UN). The starting points were in 1994 at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, and in 1995 at the World Conference on Women in Beijing, where the Vatican, with support from states in the Arab world, Africa and Latin America, was able to influence discussions on demography and family planning.

Also Christian conservative groups attended the Beijing conference led by the female Christian Right activist, Beverly LaHaye, founder of the lobby organisation Concerned Women for America. LaHaye broadcasted daily radio reports from Beijing to her constituencies back home, smearing her US feminist opponents and making sure that “the voice for pro-family women was heard”.¹ In the following years, Christian conservatives started to appear at UN meetings, and have since taken an active role in debates and gatherings mainly on SRHR and women’s rights.²

The American religious actors are associated with the Christian Right, mirroring the ‘culture wars’ in the polarized American political debates. They constitute networks of Evangelical, Catholic and Mormon organizations and actors that are pragmatically collaborating on common issues of concern.

Organizing the Conservative Voice

By watching their progressive opponents, the Christian conservatives learned how to manoeuvre the UN system through lobbying and negotiation strategies and by developing guidelines that helped like-minded newcomers to adopt effective working modes. A shift was seen in 2001 when President Bush moved into the White House. From being outside activists, they now became influential insiders with resources and connections with which to shape their own political initiatives. Since then, they have apparently taken on a more constructive approach; while continuing to block gender equality policies at conferences and meetings,



High-Level UN Event – Uniting Nations for a Family-Friendly World. Photo: UN Family Rights Caucus

they also promote pro-family policies as a means to reach internationally agreed development goals. Some of the actors have been able to develop partnerships overseas, and have thus extended their networks in the Global South.

Over time, these collaborations have also become more organized and have developed into more formalized pro-family structures. One such achievement was seen in 2014, when a group of states assembled under the label Group of Friends of the Family (GoFF). GoFF was launched at the UN in 2015 during an event organized by Belarus, Egypt and Qatar. It currently has 25 members and operates as a block to promote family-friendly policies at the UN.

Secular Arguments

Ultimately, UN battles are won by gathering the majority of votes through appealing to reasons of state, rather than religious arguments. Accordingly, religious actors avoid framing their issues in faith-specific terms, but do so rather in terms of protecting *the family* and defending *sovereignty*.

‘Family values’ is a potent political slogan with a universal appeal that allows religious conservative actors to bridge otherwise deep religious, doctrinal or ideological differences. A typical claim is that gender equality arguments are dictated from an aggressive secular wing in the West, one that not only promotes militant secularism, but that actively undermines religious and traditional values.

The basic pro-family argument is that the traditional family is under threat, with severe consequences for society as well as families and individuals. The job of the conservative lobbyists, as they see it, is thus to defeat UN proposals that they view as undermining the family. The ‘pro-family’ arguments include a firm protection of traditional gender roles. These are seen as essential to protecting the family as the core social institution in society.

American religious rights activists are motivated by their concern over religious freedom and parental rights against restrictions made by the state, and the sovereignty of national governments against the UN. A recurring argument is that the UN has left its mandate to pursue global peace, and has instead become a multi-national bureaucracy that threatens national sovereignty. The sovereignty argument resonates well with many member states, particularly on regulations of family matters that are typically considered the internal affairs of states and that are bound up with cultural sensitivities.

Two Initiatives

Two specific religio-political initiatives are worth briefly mentioning: The Russian-sponsored resolution on traditional values at the UN Human Rights Council in 2009³; and the resolution on the protection of Family Values in 2015.⁴

In 2009, Russia, supported by the Russian Orthodox Church, introduced a draft resolution to the UN Human Rights Council on traditional

values. The draft was adopted under the title 'Promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms through a better understanding of traditional values of humankind'. The resolution was highly controversial and was interpreted by human rights defenders as an attempt to undermine the universality of human rights. It was argued that the resolution did not account for damaging traditional values such as racism, sexism and xenophobia, and that it undermined the fact that harmful traditional practices – such as female genital mutilation – are often legitimized by traditional values, to mention a few of the critical points. It also undermined the fact that authorities often use traditional values to subordinate women and minorities, including sexual minorities.

The resolution on traditional values has gradually lost momentum. Instead, the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on the protection of the family in 2015 (HRC/RS/29/22).⁵ The group of initiators was composed of countries like Bangladesh, Belarus, Egypt, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. China was also mobilized, as were some of the more moderate states such as Cote D'Ivoire, Tunisia and El Salvador. Conservative American NGOs and lobbyists have played important roles in building state support for this initiative through continuous lobbying and organization of 'pro-family' side events with inter-state and state actors at the Human Rights Council. Progressive states and NGOs



The Group of the Friends of the Family (GoFF) is a coalition of UN Member States that reaffirm that the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State. The GoFF believe that genuine and effective sustainable development may not be achieved without the family.

The Group of the Friends of the Family.

view this resolution as problematic in a number of ways: the resolution challenges established human rights language; it is viewed as an opposition to 'the West' and liberal democratic values; and it represents a serious push back against advances made on women's rights and anti-discrimination.

Implications for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

The WPS agenda seems to have avoided attention from the most conservative religious actors at the UN. Yet, President Trump's first call after taking office was to reinstate the global gag rule, which imposes restrictions on NGOs overseas for receiving international family planning assistance if they provide or make referrals for abortion. The Mexico City Policy was enacted by Ronald Reagan in 1984, revoked by Bill Clinton in 1993, reinstated by George W. Bush in 1999 and rescinded by Barack Obama in 2009. Trump followed suit in the partisan pattern, although he also expanded the policy, as the current version also includes restrictions on governmental organisations that were exempted in previous versions.

While countries such as the Netherlands and Norway have come to the fore and launched funds to cover some of the gap, the new American policy is cause for concern beyond matters of finance. Rather, it threatens to undermine international law and the US's international legal obligations. The WPS agenda comprises of eight resolutions, including the UNSCR 2122 that was adopted unanimously in 2013 and which recognizes the need for access to sexual and reproductive health services, "including regarding pregnancies resulting from rape, without discrimination". The US is a permanent member of the Security Council and a pen-holder on resolutions relating to sexual violence in conflict, and the global gag rule conflicts the provisions and principles of the WPS agenda.

The Holy See

The Holy See is a key opponent to the UN's "gender agenda", and a leading actor on the conservative wing with its unique status as a permanent observer state at the UN's General Assembly, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council with the right to participate in debates and intervene

in discussions of any issue. It has routinely and consistently denounced any language on reproductive rights and gender mainstreaming at the UN, including in relation to the WPS agenda. A key concern is what is seen as the 1325 resolution's de-emphasis on the family and women's role in it. While the Holy See approves women's participation in formal parts of a peace process, it underlines women's role and place in informal processes of peace "in which the family plays a central role". The Pope calls for woman's participation because the "finesse, particular sensitivity and tenderness women possess represent a genuine strength not only for the life of families, for creating an atmosphere of peace and harmony, but for the whole of humanity, too".⁶

This is consistent with the Vatican reasoning and understanding of the family and the role of men and women in society. The Catholic Church's view rests on an essentialist definition of gender with references to holy texts, natural law and biological determinism. Men and women fill different, but complementary, roles (husband-wife, breadwinners-caretakers) and belong in separate spheres (workplace/public-home). Gender is viewed as a political concept tied to a specific agenda, to which the Vatican (as well as other religious conservative groups) stands opposed: the promotion of women's rights, same-sex marriage, diversity of family forms, contraceptives and legal abortion.

Resistance in the Field?

In the specific conflict/post-conflict contexts where the WPS agenda is to be implemented, religious and political conservative groups and actors have continued to argue against women's participation in formal political processes. Generally, one can also say that religious opposition in many post-conflict societies is effectively mobilized against legal reforms to gender discriminatory laws.

In Columbia, gender politics were actively used to mobilize votes against the peace agreement between the government and the Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2016. The most vocal opposition came from evangelical leaders who opposed the agreement's language of combating all forms of discrimination, including those based on gender and sexual orientation, and to legalization of same-sex marriage.



Photo: UN Family Rights Caucus.

Conclusion

Attempts to diminish the principles of the UN charter have always been on the agenda of some states and interest groups – and will probably also be so in the future. The religious conservative opposition to gender equality politics has proved effective and difficult to tackle, although UN member states and human rights defenders have been able to undermine several conservative initiatives.

A question to consider is if the progressive parties have been able to develop the most effective counter-voice. A lot of strategic development is ongoing at the policy level as well as among NGOs, religious as well as secular, to introduce concepts and policies to undermine the religious conservative ownership over concepts such as traditional family values. Here, feminists share a responsibility to contribute to the development and utilization of a more inclusive gender language. Gender equality is not only a ‘women’s concern’, which is how it tends to be contextualized on arenas such as the annual Commission of the Status of Women (CSW) at the UN, but a shared responsibility of all individuals that requires contribution from *both women and men*. For many people across the globe, the words ‘gender

equality’ or ‘feminism’ have become coded synonyms for ‘women’s equality’, with reference to values labelled as secularist and Western.

To safeguard the UN’s gender agenda as a key precondition for peace, security and development, promoters of gender equality must develop a rhetoric that is inclusive and that embraces the notion of family values. However, this must be on their own terms, and in line with sound knowledge and real concerns on the ground. ■

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Notes

1. See www.concernedwomen.org/
2. Around 5,000 NGOs have been granted consultative status, of which religious NGOs constitute less than 10 percent. Only a minor portion of these carry an anti-feminist agenda.
3. Available at: www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Pages/TraditionalValues.aspx
4. Available at: www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/ProtectionFamily.aspx
5. 14 countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, and several other European nations voted against it, while 29 voted in favour and 4 abstained. Available at: www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/ProtectionFamily.aspx
6. Catholic Herald, Pope Francis in an address to a Women’s Group at the Vatican in January 2014. Available at: www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2014/01/27/women-should-play-a-greater-role-in-church-says-pope/

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