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NORAD REPORT 2/2019



# WEAPONIZING FAITH AND FAMILY OPPOSITION TO SRHR POLICIES

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Cover photo: Martin Gutierrez/IPPF WHR  
ISBN: 978-82-8369-274-7  
ISSN: 1502-2528



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CLIENT: NORAD. PERIOD: DECEMBER 2019 - FEBRUARY 2019  
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## INTRODUCTION

In 2013, Norad published a report on religious lobbying against Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) policies at the UN.<sup>1</sup> The study focused on religiously motivated non-governmental organizations (NGO)s. It mapped key actors and organizations, knowledge producers and alliances across religious and geographical divides. The present study takes the 2013 report as its point of departure, and aims to map and analyse the past years' developments.

There is a literature on the rise of the anti-SRHR movement as an export of the US Christian Right and its "culture wars" in conjunction with an apparent Vatican-Muslim axis of state actors.<sup>2</sup> Recent studies also discuss FBOs and religion at the UN more generally.<sup>3</sup> Still, there remain knowledge gaps to fill and analyses to be done on this phenomenon and its influence on international development politics.

An updated revision of the 2013 report is hence timely and in demand by political actors, policy milieus and civil society. A closer study of various anti-SRHR arguments, strategies and knowledge producers could inform better targeted counter-strategies and rebuttals.

While we focused solely on religious groups at UN arenas in 2013, it is also important to understand the environment in which they operate; therefore, we will also discuss relevant political actors/parties and state authorities and examples from regional and national developments.

## TERMS AND USAGES

SRHR is used here as a convenient short abbreviation covering a wide range of policies. Not all of these are promoted, nor is the term SRHR always used, by all the actors that we for simplicity label "pro-SRHR". Conversely, not everything that falls under it is opposed by what we describe as "anti-SRHR" actors, including religious conservatives (who would support improved perinatal care and oppose sexual trafficking, for example). Accordingly, in this report SRHR is often used not in the full sense, but rather as a shorthand for the lengthy list of SRHR policies that conservatives do oppose, including abortion, "sexual rights" including LGBTI rights, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), and to varying extent also contraceptive provision. Moreover, states may find some of these issues (e.g. abortion) more problematic than others (e.g. LGBTI rights), and these patterns to some

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<sup>1</sup> Vik, Stensvold, and Moe, "Lobbying for Faith and Family."

<sup>2</sup> Buss and Herman, *Globalizing Family Values*; Buss, "Robes, Relics and Rights"; Butler, *Born Again*; Bob, *The Global Right Wing and the Clash of World Politics*; Chappell, "Contesting Women's Rights"; Chamberlain, "UNdoing Reproductive Freedom."

<sup>3</sup> Petersen, "International Religious NGOs at The United Nations"; Stensvold, *Religion, State and the United Nations*; Haynes, *Faith-Based Organizations*.

extent vary by region. However, it should be noted from the outset that the religious right tends to oppose any policy that makes reference to broad terms like “SRHR”.

Our previous report focused on an emerging sector of global civil society that we labelled “religious conservatives”, meaning “social conservatives” (as they often label themselves) with a religious motivation. As a highly political movement, they are aptly described as “the religious right”, which also highlights the strong influence of the US Christian right on the globalized and cross-religious movement we describe. Here we use “religious conservatives” and “religious right” interchangeably. We previously described the movement as “anti-feminist”. While this remains valid, particularly with regard to its historical origins, it does not fully capture its opposition to LGBTI rights and fluid notions of gender. The broader term “anti-genderism” is gaining currency in the literature; we think it may still be confusing to readers, and only use it, in scare quotes, when referring to platforms explicitly concerned with “gender ideology”. We avoid referring to these groups as “traditional”, since they are a very modern expression of public religion, but we refer to literature that uses the more appropriate label “neo-traditionalist”.

#### THE REPORT

The report is in three parts. It starts with an overview and discussion of the rhetoric, arguments and methods of the religious right against SRHR. The second part describes the methods and lobbying strategies of civil society groups on the religious right, followed by a discussion of the developing policies of a selection of relevant state and inter-state actors in the third part. We conclude with a brief discussion on ways ahead and reflections on strategies for advancing SRHR policies in a political context of rising populism.

The report has been researched and co-written by Ingrid Vik and Christian Moe. We thank the Norad reviewers for useful comments and Anne Stensvold for all the insights we draw from her work on our 2013 report.

The report is based on:

- A desk review of relevant literature and reports, conference papers, international and national media reports, etc.
- Review of anti-SRHR organizations’ websites, knowledge products and policy statements.
- Conversations with resource people in relevant institutions and contexts.

## KEY POINTS

### Anti-feminist political currents

- Since 2013, conservative religious lobby groups have continued their efforts to obstruct SRHR in various international arenas. Yet, their agenda and messaging, including opposition to “gender ideology” and progressive/liberal interpretation of human rights treaties, are no longer a thematic focus of fringe religious activists, but have entered into mainstream political agendas globally, regionally and nationally.
- Religious conservative activism converges with right wing and nationalist politics across the world, currents that impact national elections and national legal frameworks on SRHR-related matters.
- Efforts have continued to construct a cultural divide between states that advocate ‘liberal values’ and states with ‘conservative’ or ‘traditional’ values such as Russia, the OIC states, and right-wing or traditionalist regimes in Latin America and Africa.
- In world politics conservative “pro-family” or “traditional values” currents reach well beyond the South; they resonate in Russia and Central Asia (Eurasia) and among certain EU-member states. These discourses have led to mobilisation against international and national reforms, such as the refusal to ratify the Istanbul Convention<sup>4</sup> combating violence against women, the blocking of LGBTI hate crime legislation, or referendum campaigns against same-sex marriage.
- Russia has continued to develop its role as a promoter of conservative/traditional and religious values in international politics.

#### Fragmentations of the liberal/progressive ‘block’

- Meanwhile, the rise of the populist right both in the US and part of the EU has put a dent in the coalition of pro-SRHR states and given traction to religious conservative strategies such as pitting sovereignty against ‘new’ international rights. The EU has become increasingly divided with conservative states such as Poland, Malta and Hungary taking a more conservative position than the majority of EU states on SRHR matters. There is hence a risk that the voice of the EU will become less vocal on SRHR-matters at the UN, as the Lisbon Treaty (2009) requires the EU to speak with one unified voice on foreign policy matters.
- A consequence of the conservative turn in US politics is the downscale of US’s global commitment to SRHR. Since 2017, the Trump administration has reinstated and expanded the Mexico City Policy and Kemp-Kasten amendment to impose restrictions on NGOs overseas for receiving international family planning assistance and to withhold funding for the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). At the

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<sup>4</sup> The Council of Europe’s “Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence”.

UN, US diplomats have sought to strike references to specific issues and wordings and to propose modifications in wordings to weaken SRHR language in UN resolutions and documents.

- South Africa stands out as one of the few African states with a strong legislative framework protecting SRHR, including abortion and LGBTI rights. Still South-Africa's role in safeguarding LGBTI-rights in regional and global politics remains ambivalent and uncertain.
- Brazil has long been an eager promoter of LGBTI-rights and gender equality on global arenas. This role is likely to end with the newly inaugurated president Jair Bolsonaro whose political program is explicitly anti-SRHR and anti-feminist.

### Strategic alliances

- These currents are also mirrored in increased engagement among pro-family and anti-SRHR civil organizations that have gained accreditation to relevant international and supranational institutions such as the UN, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (EU FRA).
- At the global stage, recent developments in 'pro-family' activism include formalized coalitions of like-minded states (the Group of Friends of the Family, launched by Belarus, Egypt and Qatar in 2015)<sup>5</sup> and NGOs (the Civil Society for the Family, launched in April 2016 with the "Family Articles" statement).<sup>6</sup> It is not clear, however, whether formalized cooperation has enhanced their influence.

### Issues and framing

- While key actors in the anti-SRHR movement have particular religious identities, motivations, and constituencies, they are able to further their religio-political agenda by framing it in secular arguments – referring to rights, science, and sovereignty – and by claiming to defend traditional values values universally shared – life, faith and family.
- Internationally, anti-SRHR currents tap into a growing political culture of sovereigntism seeking to "take back control" from international institutions and norms. They argue unelected global elites seek to impose their secularist and/or radical sexual agenda on traditional-minded nations in the guise of new-fangled

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<sup>5</sup> [http://mfa.gov.by/en/press/news\\_mfa/f8ff663d7481c615.html](http://mfa.gov.by/en/press/news_mfa/f8ff663d7481c615.html)

<sup>6</sup> <https://civilsocietyforthefamily.org/>



“rights” that go beyond accepted international law in a form of “ideological colonization”.

- “Anti-genderism” – opposition to a perceived “gender ideology”, which can refer to a variety of feminist and LGBTI causes – allows diverse actors to unite on a shared platform and to challenge international conventions and frameworks.

### Ways ahead

- Knowledge production on working modes and impact of anti-SRHR activism is still needed, yet perhaps with a stronger focus on context-specific developments. This will allow better insight into how diverse actors collaborate or interact, and further knowledge of the different types and forms of opposition to SRHR. A more context-focused analytical approach will also advance analysis of the movement’s home-grown roots in various parts of the world.
- Several SRHR advocates argue that a holistic and intersectional approach is needed when advancing SRHR to avoid protection gaps that occurs when certain issues are foregrounded at the expense of others. Yet, one shouldn’t overlook the risk of lumping everything in together into one large target called SRHR. While a holistic perspective is highly in place when e.g. negotiating UN resolutions or national health strategies, bilateral talks require fine tuned pragmatism, with language and topics adapted to the specific contexts’ concerns and needs.
- SRHR fall under economic and social rights. Still the religious right has some success framing them as the politicized rights claims of disadvantaged minorities. Increased attention to economic rights might prove essential in the task of rebuilding global consensus on international human rights and SRHR in the current political climate. Without giving up on the basic principles and the rights-based approach to SRHR, we suggest to further develop the lines of arguments on the links between SRHR and broad social and economic benefits, and bring to fore the empirical data on positive impact, including for families, men and women and children included.
- Conservatives have taken ownership of concepts such as “family”. To “take the family back”, progressives and liberals (whether secular or religious) should develop and convey their own positive, substantive vision of the family, and show that it outperforms the dysfunctional conservative model in meeting the needs of families in all their diversity. A positive family policy approach may open for new dialogues on sensitive matters such as gender equality, the rights of the child and SRHR.

- Finally, we suggest to pay more attention and research to the positive developments of SRHR over the past decade, both with regard to global development policies and to successful political campaigns. Examples include the adoption of extensive transgender rights in Argentina (2012), and the liberalization of abortion Ireland (2018). The referendum on abortion in Ireland was a rebuke to a conservative religious establishment and its influence on Irish society and politics. Still, such developments are rarely included in reports assessing the influence of religious conservatives.

## PART I

### KEY VALUES, FRAMING DISCOURSES AND ENEMIES

#### INTRODUCTION

In the 2013 report, we suggested that the surveyed groups should be understood both as political and as ultimately motivated by their particular religious beliefs and identities, in accordance with their self-understanding. However, they are able to mobilize support and cooperation both across religious divides and from secular actors. They do so by focusing on a set of key values with wide resonance – life, faith and family; by pragmatically framing these religious values in secular discourses – human rights, science and sovereignty; and by portraying them as threatened by evil enemies. Here, we use these dimensions (values, framing discourses and enemies) to give a systematic overview of arguments used in SRHR debates, extending our previous discussion and updating it with recent developments.

#### LIFE

A “pro-life” stance, i.e. opposition to abortion, is a key plank in the conservative religious anti-SRHR platform. This stance is grounded in religious teachings that life is a gift from God, which human beings may not dispose of as they wish, that human life is sacred, created as it is “in the image of God”, that murder is sin, and that the role of women is to bear children and nurture them. Historically, both Christians and Muslims have condemned abortion, but with pragmatic gradations and exceptions, such as the notion that the fetus is “ensouled” or “quickens” only after a period of gestation. It was only in the 20th century, as religious conservatives reacted to modernization and liberal theologies by selecting and absolutizing core tenets, that major religious groups began to vigorously campaign for human life to be protected absolutely from conception. The Catholic Church was joined by Evangelicals in this endeavour from the 1970s. (The Catholic Church also opposes modern methods of contraception, based on the teaching that every act of sexual intercourse must be open to conception.) Religious anti-abortion campaigners draw stark battle lines against what they see as mainstream society’s “culture of death”. Amid growing concern for the natural environment, it is also framed as the neglect of “human ecology”, most recently by Pope Francis writing on climate change: “concern for the protection of nature is ... incompatible with the justification of abortion”.<sup>7</sup>

In secular terms, anti-SRHR groups invoke the *human right to life* as set out in UN documents, claiming that this right protects human life from conception and precludes

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<sup>7</sup> *Laudato si'*, para. 120. The notion of a ‘human ecology’ based on the family was used by John Paul II, in *Centesimus Annus* (1991), and elaborated by Benedict XVI in *Caritas in veritate* (2009).

abortion except when the mother's life is at risk.<sup>8</sup> Contrary to this interpretation, the competent UN committees have in recent years laid down authoritative interpretations that support a variety of abortion-related rights.<sup>9</sup> However, conservatives reject all this as an illegitimate agenda imposed against the wishes of a majority of states by unelected international liberal elites. They argue that no human rights treaty enumerates any right to abortion and that no such right was contemplated when the treaties were drawn up, and reject arguments that derive a woman's right to choose from existing rights such as the right to privacy, the right to decide on the number and spacing of one's children, and general considerations of bodily autonomy.<sup>10</sup>

These groups use a battery of arguments drawn from medical *science* to lobby against abortion. They reject earlier religious notions of "ensoulment" as incompatible with modern embryology, and claim that the only scientific view of human life is that it begins at conception (e.g. on the grounds that the zygote contains the unique genetic blueprint for a new individual).<sup>11</sup> They also make a variety of claims about fetal pain, the medical risks of abortion, including the allegedly covered-up side effects of abortion drug misoprostol, etc. They develop counter-studies to contest public-health arguments that legal restrictions only drive up unsafe abortions, and to dismiss findings about the world's unmet need for contraceptives.

The anti-SRHR groups of course insist on states' *sovereign* right to restrict abortion in accordance with their national values, and warn against the creeping "creation of new rights" to abortion. They also regularly denounce aid-donor countries' attempts to influence developing countries' policies as neo-colonialist – but make a telling exception for the U.S. "Global Gag Rule", which they endorse despite its interference with the preferences of recipient countries and third-country donors alike. They also make other arguments that play on national interests, fears and grievances, both targeted at the developing world (e.g., claims that population control and abortion are racist strategies to keep non-white populations down) and at countries undergoing demographic transition (promoting pro-natalist policies in general to save "greying" national economies).

The *enemy* is identified not only as a vague "culture of death", but also in very specific terms as an "abortion industry", portraying providers such as Planned Parenthood as giant corporations profiting from death.

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<sup>8</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), art. 3; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR), art. 6; cf.

*General Comment no. 36 (2018) on article 6* (UN doc. CCPR/C/GC/36, 30 October 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), *General Comment no. (2016) on the right to sexual and reproductive health* (UN doc. E/C.12/GC/22, 2 May 2016); Human Rights Committee (HRC), *General Comment no. 36 (2018) on article 6* (UN doc. CCPR/C/GC/36, 30 October 2018), para. 8; for Europe, see the issue paper published by the CoE Commissioner for Human Rights: Hoctor, Lamačková, and Thomassen, "Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Europe," 33–38, 51–52.

<sup>10</sup> For a representative statement of their claims about international law, human rights, and sovereignty, see the anti-abortion manifesto "The San Jose Articles", [https://sanjosearticles.com/?page\\_id=2](https://sanjosearticles.com/?page_id=2).

<sup>11</sup> For example, see footnote 1 to "The San Jose Articles", [https://sanjosearticles.com/?page\\_id=88](https://sanjosearticles.com/?page_id=88).

## FAITH, RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND “TRADITIONAL VALUES”

Many of the groups we look at here are both explicitly “faith-based” and identified with a particular religious tradition: for example, the C in C-FAM stands for “Catholic”, and the Evangelical lawyers of ADF International conclude their self-presentation with “Apart from Jesus, we can do nothing”.<sup>12</sup> While affirming a specific religion can provide motivation and identity, and make it easier to network and solicit support and donations from fellow believers, it can be a liability when interacting with a diverse array of policy-makers and diplomats from representing states in a secular arena like the UN. For broader impact, they reframe their specific beliefs as universal in two ways: in the language of human rights, by representing opposition to their agenda as attacks on religious freedom, particularly the right to conscientious objection and parental rights in education; and in the language of anti-globalization, by presenting themselves and their supporters as a global alliance of people and nations for “traditional values”.

Conservative religious anti-SRHR activists present religious freedom as threatened by a number of enemies, most generally by a climate of “political correctness” in which they will be penalized for expressing and acting on their views. In the 1990s and early 2000s, when the U.S. religious right focused on same-sex marriage as the major election issue, they came to portray the movement for LGBTI rights – framed in conspiracist terms as a devious “homosexual agenda” – as literally *the* principal threat to religious freedom.<sup>13</sup> In recent years, this narrative of conservative Christians as victims of persecution by a “homosexual lobby” has been fed on both sides of the Atlantic by conflicts where marriage registrars or wedding-services providers have faced legal proceedings for discriminating against same-sex couples, which they frame as a matter of freedom of religion and conscience.<sup>14</sup> However, what is designated the main threat can shift with current political debates. During the mobilization of the U.S. right against the Affordable Care Act (“Obamacare”) in the 2010s, religious conservatives’ fears for religious freedom often focused on how the Act’s “contraceptive mandate” would force employers to include contraceptives in health insurance for their employees, against their religious conscience.

Conscientious objection is also invoked by pharmacists refusing to dispense contraception (especially emergency contraception), and of course in the abortion debate. Professional ethics standards and human rights authorities suggest that health-care workers’ right to conscientious objection should be recognized, but can be regulated and restricted to protect public health and the rights and freedoms of patients: objecting

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<sup>12</sup> <https://adfinternational.org/who-we-are/>, accessed February 1, 2019; the reference is to John 15:5.

<sup>13</sup> Sears and Osten, *The Homosexual Agenda*. Sears was president of the ADF, Osten a former Focus on the Family staffer.

<sup>14</sup> For marriage registrars, for Europe, see the case of Lilian Ladele in *Eweida and Others v. the UK*, judgment of the European Court of Human Rights, January 15, 2013; for the U.S., see the case of Kim Davis, the Kentucky county clerk who met Pope Francis after she was briefly jailed for contempt of court for refusing to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples in 2015. For other professions, see e.g. *Elane Photography v. Willock*, opinion of the New Mexico Supreme Court, August 22, 2013; in Europe, the Vienna-based religious conservative NGO Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination Against Christians collects reports on such cases.

providers should provide timely referral to a non-objecting provider, and should provide emergency treatment where referral is not possible.<sup>15</sup> Widespread resort to unregulated conscientious objection can create barriers to safe and legal abortion, and there is concern that it is becoming more prevalent in several regions.<sup>16</sup> The Catholic Church teaches that there is a “grave and clear responsibility to resist laws permitting abortion and euthanasia by conscientious objection”, and that health-care personnel including doctors, nurses and pharmacists have a “unique responsibility” in this respect.<sup>17</sup> The Vatican actively encourages doctors to object,<sup>18</sup> and works to prevent states from regulating objection, as do other religious conservative actors. Religious conservatives have achieved lobbying successes e.g. at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), which in 2010 adopted a resolution opposing restrictions in a complete reversal of the proposal from its own rapporteur.<sup>19</sup>

Religious conservatives also oppose comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) programs and promote abstinence-based teaching by appealing to the human right of parents to an education for their children in accordance with their convictions. Though this argument has not convinced human rights bodies,<sup>20</sup> it may be effective in politics.

“Traditional values” is the other discursive framing of particular religious beliefs as universal. The term may be used in a general sense (interchangeably with “traditional beliefs”, “morals”, “family values” etc.). Specifically, it refers to a diplomatic initiative of Russia at the UN Human Rights Council between 2009 and 2012, supported by the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>21</sup> Here, Russia and like-minded countries sought to (re)define international human rights as based on – and thus subject to interpretation in the light of – “traditional values”, an open-ended term that was specifically said to include the values of dignity, freedom, and responsibility. They achieved three HRC resolutions asserting the

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<sup>15</sup> WHO, *Safe Abortion*, secs. 3.3.6, 4.2.2.5; FIGO, “FIGO Recommendations.”

<sup>16</sup> Chavkin, “Conscientious Objection to the Provision of Reproductive Healthcare”; Casas, “Invoking Conscientious Objection in Reproductive Health Care.” On Italy, see e.g. Claudia Torrisi, “Abortion in Italy: how widespread ‘conscientious objection’ threatens women’s health and rights”, OpenDemocracy.net, June 15, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), paras 73–74, 89.

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Carol Glatz, “Pope Francis tells doctors to defend right to life, conscientious objection”, Catholic News Service, May 29, 2018, <https://www.chicagocatholic.com/vatican/-/article/2018/05/29/pope-francis-tells-doctors-to-defend-right-to-life-conscientious-objection>.

<sup>19</sup> Christine McCafferty, *Women’s access to lawful medical care: the problem of unregulated use of conscientious abortion* (2010); PACE resolution 1763, “The right to conscientious objection in lawful medical care” (October 7, 2010); for a sample of the conservative religious argument, see Grégor Puppink and Kris J. Wenberg, “Memorandum on the PACE report” (European Centre for Law and Justice, September 17, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> CCPR art. 18 (4), cf. ECHR, Protocol 1 art. 2. The ECtHR has ruled that compulsory sex education does not violate human rights as long as it is taught in an objective, critical and pluralistic way, cf. *Kjeldsen, Busk Madsen and Pedersen v. Denmark* (1976).

<sup>21</sup> The traditional-values concept can be traced to several converging lines of thought that gained prominence under Putin. Critiques of human rights were developed both by secular policy figures appalled at Russia’s political chaos and loss of empire in the Yeltsin years and, later, by religious ‘traditionalists’ in an internal process in the Russian Orthodox Church. Horvath, “The Reinvention of “Traditional Values””; Stoeckl, “Postsecular Conflicts”; Stoeckl, “The Russian Orthodox Church as Moral Norm Entrepreneur.”

helpfulness of the concept and calling for workshops and studies, which led to a workshop, a controversial interim report by a Russian expert, a more balanced study by the Advisory Committee which blunted the initiative considerably, and a collection of “best practices”.

After Russia’s term on the HRC ended in 2012, the initiative has been dormant. Some assess it as a failure in its own terms, as the UN did not end up issuing the kind of document Russia sought.<sup>22</sup> The positive mention of traditional values in the HRC resolutions may, however, be seen as a contribution to building up a body of conservative “soft law” at the UN as a counterweight to emerging liberal norms. It provided a new twist on the cultural-relativist and communalist reservations against human rights that featured at the Vienna Conference (1993). As an exercise in Russian “soft power”, it brought together under Russian leadership a voting bloc of like-minded countries including OIC and African Union members, and thus furthered efforts to build conservative alliances at the UN. This cooperation would continue at the HRC, though the thematic focus shifted to the “Protection of the family” debates in 2014–15.

While the vague and sweeping claims for traditional values were clearly directed against “gay rights” and other “gender” issues, particularly against criticism of Russia’s harsh laws against “homosexual propaganda”,<sup>23</sup> they have broader implications. As presented in the interim report, they implied rediscovering and stressing the individual’s duties to society as a basic – and limiting – principle of human rights.<sup>24</sup> A doctrinally “thicker” and highly relevant example of where they might lead is the Russian Orthodox Church’s *Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights* (2008). While this qualified support for human rights is a remarkable development in the teaching of the Church, seen from the outside it includes a dangerously sweeping list of grounds for restricting international human rights, all the way down to their foundation in inherent human dignity, based on “God-established” moral norms.<sup>25</sup> SRHR-relevant norms include protection of life from conception, the special role of parents in education, and the family as union of a man and a woman and their children, which should be protected by law “against the destruction provoked by moral decay”.

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<sup>22</sup> Stoeckl, “The Russian Orthodox Church as Moral Norm Entrepreneur,” 138.

<sup>23</sup> Wilkinson, “Putting ‘Traditional Values’ Into Practice.”

<sup>24</sup> Kartashkin, “Preliminary Study”. The reference is to UDHR art. 29, which affirms the individual’s duties to society and lists the legitimate grounds for limiting rights; this was also stressed by the then Metropolitan Kirill in his speech at the UN, cf. discussion in Stoeckl, “The Russian Orthodox Church as Moral Norm Entrepreneur,” 136, 140.

<sup>25</sup> Russian Orthodox Church, *Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights* (2008), <https://mospat.ru/en/documents/dignity-freedom-rights/>. The document affirms that freedom of choice “will inevitably disappear if the choice is made in favor of evil” and that “a human being preserves his God-given dignity and grows in it only if he lives in accordance with moral norms”, a view at odds with the Universal Declaration’s unqualified recognition “of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family”. While the Church believes human rights can contribute to protecting human dignity, “the implementation of human rights should not come into conflict with God-established moral norms and traditional morality based on them”, and human rights cannot be set against the interests and values of homeland, community, family, religious symbols, cultural values, national identity, or the natural environment.

The freedom of religion or belief is a human right under threat in many parts of the world, and needs to be carefully balanced against other rights – of women, children, and LGBT persons in particular – with a view to finding synergies where possible. As a former UN Special Rapporteur has warned, however, some representations of religious freedom risk compromising the right by blurring its contours and undermining the principles of universalism, freedom, and equality.<sup>26</sup> In religious conservative advocacy, the right often seems to be used more as a “sword” to attack hard-won sexual and reproductive rights than as a “shield” to protect believers. The credibility of this argument also suffers from the fact that the states most supportive of “traditional” or “family” values tend to have very poor records on religious freedom.<sup>27</sup> This points to a potential tension between the two discursive frames discussed in this section, and between different actors on the new global religious right. For example, Evangelical legal-advocacy groups like the ADF and ECLJ, which support the right of religious groups to establish themselves and spread the gospel in different countries, and that have come to champion freedom of expression against blasphemy laws, have good reason to be wary of “traditional values” as understood by the Putin administration.

#### FAMILY

By “family”, religious conservative actors strictly mean the monogamous, heterosexual union of one man and one woman in formal marriage and their children. They refer to this as the “natural” or “traditional” family. This tends to disregard the many and changing forms kinship ties have taken in history: the notions of love-based marriage and the family as a private sphere of refuge is only a few centuries old, and the male-breadwinner, female-caregiver, nuclear-family household ideal associated with 1950s America is historically unusual.<sup>28</sup> It also tends to gloss over the considerable disagreements over family arrangements between the different traditions that make up the global religious right. Moreover, the ideal promoted by these actors today may be better described as “neo-traditional”, meaning that it does not assert male authority over women outright, but describes marriage as a partnership structured by gender difference and complementarity in roles, rights and duties.<sup>29</sup>

By defining the family this way, the religious right excludes LGBTI persons from the normal family life and licit sexual relations that should be protected by law. By asserting the family as the primary social cell, they seek to limit government power, particularly its power to educate children and offer them sexual and reproductive health care against

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<sup>26</sup> Bielefeldt, “Misperceptions of Freedom of Religion or Belief.”

<sup>27</sup> For example, the “Group of Friends of the Family” was founded by Belarus, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, the Holy See, Libya, Pakistan, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Yemen, and Tajikistan ([http://mfa.gov.by/en/press/news\\_mfa/f8ff663d7481c615.html](http://mfa.gov.by/en/press/news_mfa/f8ff663d7481c615.html)). The most recent Pew research finds “high” or “very high” government restrictions on religion in 11 of these 13 states (it classes Libya as “moderate” and does not cover the Holy See). Pew Research Center, “Global uptick in government restrictions on religion in 2016”, Appendix A.

<sup>28</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, a History*.

<sup>29</sup> Josephson and Burack, “The Political Ideology of the Neo-Traditional Family,” 214.



parental wishes. And by continually referencing the family, they tap into widely shared and psychologically deep-rooted feelings, perceptions, dispositions and metaphors, to powerful rhetorical effect – whether they lend a warm and fuzzy image to their own causes, or inspire fear and loathing against those who, they claim, seek to destroy the family. These enemies include those who promote the “homosexual agenda” and, more broadly, “gender ideology”, which has emerged as the main imagined threat to “family values” in Catholic environments.

In this rhetoric, gender ideology (used interchangeably with “gender theory”) refers to a view that that being either male or female is not a natural, immutable given, but rather a historically contingent social/cultural construction and/or a matter of personal choice. It contrasts with the central importance the Catholic Church places on sexual identity in its anthropology (understanding of the human being); while affirming their equal dignity, the Church stresses the different and complementary natures and roles of men and women. “Gender theory” is a catch-all label applied to a range of viewpoints and actors – feminists, the academic discipline of gender studies, LGBTI advocates – who may in fact take widely differing theoretical approaches to sex and gender. Conversely, it is a slogan behind which a range of conservative actors, religious and secular, have been able to unite. This rhetoric has been developed in Catholic circles since the Cairo and Beijing conferences (1994–5), when religious conservative activists became worried about the platforms’ language about “gender equality” and “gender mainstreaming”; the terminology became fixed in 2003, when a Church body published a “Lexicon of Ambiguous and Debatable Terms”.<sup>30</sup> “Gender theory” became a central political slogan in France during the *Manif pour Tous* mass protests against marriage equality. Since then, “anti-gender” campaigns have spread to many other countries, not least in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>31</sup>

The family discourse is rooted in religious teachings that see marriage as a sacred bond, instituted by God for the purpose of procreation, and properly run along patriarchal or neo-traditional lines, though the faiths differ e.g. over the permissibility of divorce and possibly polygamy.<sup>32</sup> They reference scriptural models such as the creation of Eve as a helpmate for Adam and, in the Christian tradition, the Pauline account of the husband-wife relationship as a mystery that signifies the relationship between Christ and the Church.<sup>33</sup> For advocacy purposes, however, secular arguments must be used.

The *rights* argument starts with Natural Law – the family as a natural institution that existed before the social contract of the state and retains imprescriptible rights. Religious conservative advocates go on to reference the UDHR Art. 16 (3), “The family is the natural

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<sup>30</sup> Favier, “Catholics and Gender”; Garbagnoli, “Against the Heresy of Immanence.”

<sup>31</sup> Korolczuk and Graff, “Gender as ‘Ebola from Brussels’”; Kuhar and Paternotte, *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe*.

<sup>32</sup> Traditional Islamic law allows a man up to four wives, though monogamous marriages are common in Muslim societies. Members of the mainstream modern Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (“Mormons”) do not practice plural marriage, as the early community did.

<sup>33</sup> See, among a number of other relevant verses, Eph. 5:22–24, 31–32.

and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State”, and the preambular statement of the CRC that describes the family as the “natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children”. They also interpret Art. 16 (1), “Men and women of full age [...] have the right to marry and to found a family”, to mean that marriage can *only* be between a man and a woman. Other arrangements – that is, same-sex relationships – are “neither equivalent nor analogous to the family”,<sup>34</sup> they say, and have no claim to the same respect and protection. Again, they strongly insist on the right of parents to make decisions on the education and health of children.

The *scientific* arguments are drawn from the social and medical scientific literature, mainly in the U.S., to argue that traditional marriage, active fatherhood, and policies supporting it, provide the best outcomes for all family members, particularly children, as well as for society, while the alternatives lead to broken lives and social decay.<sup>35</sup> Marriage is thus a “public good” providing health and wealth benefits and preventing teenage delinquency and pregnancy. Such evidence, in as far as it is valid, may support policies to promote marriage, but it does not logically provide ammunition against LGBTI rights – to the contrary, it might be argued that it supports bringing the benefits of marriage to same-sex couples too.<sup>36</sup>

However, conservative advocates argue that “tampering” with this fundamental social institution in any way, e.g. by redefining marriage to include same-sex couples, is a reckless social experiment, and they portray the “homosexual agenda” as a threat to marriage and to intact families. Conservatives also cite selected research, particularly the controversial 2012 study by Regnerus,<sup>37</sup> to suggest that children suffer negative outcomes from same-sex parenting (contrary to the American Psychological Association’s position, since 2004, that the best available science shows lesbian and gay parents to be as likely as heterosexual parents to provide a supportive environment).

When religious conservatives decry “gender theory/ideology”, insist on sex/gender as binary and immutable, and seek to naturalize gender roles, they can draw inspiration from religious texts (“male and female created He them” – Gen 1:27), but they also make reference to biology in order to present their view as scientific and the opposition as unscientific, ideological or “just a theory”.<sup>38</sup>

The *sovereignty* argument, first, is that every state has a right to determine for itself what family arrangements to allow and promote, and how to deal with LGBT issues, in accordance with its cultural traditions, without being pressured by UN committees and

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<sup>34</sup> “The Family Articles”, paragraph 5, <https://civilsocietyforthefamily.org/>.

<sup>35</sup> For two influential surveys along these lines, see Wilcox, *Why Marriage Matters*; Witherspoon Institute, *Marriage and the Public Good*.

<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the president of the think-tank Institute for American Values, which publishes one of the pro-marriage surveys frequently cited by religious conservatives to support anti-LGBT agendas, has supported marriage equality since 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Regnerus, “How Different Are the Adult Children of Parents Who Have Same-Sex Relationships?”

<sup>38</sup> Fillod, “L’invention de la ‘théorie du genre.’”

donor countries to change. Borrowing a leftist discourse, second, the religious right frequently frame such pressures as a form of “colonialism”, a concern that resonates with formerly colonized states. (However, this charge can also be made against e.g. the US religious right when they lobby for harsh laws against homosexuality in Africa.<sup>39</sup>) In recent years, Pope Francis – who, as the first pope from the global South, often returns to the theme of colonialism – has repeatedly warned against “ideological colonialism”, and anti-SRHR advocates explain that this is “a term of art for the aggressive promotion of homosexuality and transgenderism”.<sup>40</sup>

#### DUBIOUS ARGUMENTS, EFFECTIVE RHETORIC

Religious anti-SRHR advocates fit their rhetoric to their audience, pressing for public policy to be based on particular interpretations of scripture and Natural Law, but using the secular language of science, human rights and sovereignty/tradition. The religious right has appropriated not only the tactics of progressive NGOs, but also many of their arguments, framing LGBTI advocates as “ideological colonizers” and abortion providers as a profit-seeking “abortion industry” tainted with racist, ableist “eugenics”, and themselves as traditional-minded common people who are victimized by powerful elites. This rhetoric has proven effective in uniting coalitions to counter SRHR policies.

On the other hand, and though we do not attempt to assess the strength of their arguments,<sup>41</sup> even the cursory overview above suggests that these arguments are often weakly founded on highly selective readings of the scientific literature or international law, and that they contain multiple contradictions and tensions. One scholar, for example, looked at a seminal Catholic text on “gender theory” and found its use of science “awkward at the least”, consisting of non-scientific “common-sense” assertions and a handful of citations to neuroscience papers that neither reflected the state of research nor supported the specific claims.<sup>42</sup> This is to be expected: The opposition to SRHR advances contrarian research that confirms their religiously motivated views but is unlikely to disprove the expert reviews relied on e.g. by the WHO. Still, common-sense assertions resonate, and to obstruct policy one only needs to create doubt, not to be right.

One scholarly attempt to refute the religious conservatives’ human-rights arguments, by Alice Miller et al.,<sup>43</sup> analyses these arguments against sexual rights under three headings: *textuality* – the argument that there are no explicit sexual rights in the sources of human rights law; *countervailing rights claims* – protection of children and the family against the alleged threat of gay rights; and *universality* – both the argument that sexual rights are not supported by all states, and that they are ‘special rights’ for sexual minorities, not for all

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<sup>39</sup> Kaoma, *Colonizing African Values*.

<sup>40</sup> [https://c-fam.org/friday\\_fax/pope-francis-decries-ideological-colonialism-worlds-diplomats/](https://c-fam.org/friday_fax/pope-francis-decries-ideological-colonialism-worlds-diplomats/)

<sup>41</sup> For a scathing critique of their arguments before European institutions, see Zacharenko, “Perspectives on Anti-Choice Lobbying.”

<sup>42</sup> Fillod, “L’invention de la ‘théorie du genre.’”

<sup>43</sup> Miller et al., “Sound and Fury – Engaging with the Politics and the Law of Sexual Rights.”

people. The paper seeks to use the principles of interpretation of treaties and the strict standards about limitations on human rights to refute each of these arguments separately.

Useful as this is, it may be a limited strategy, since what makes these three kinds of argument politically effective is how they flow together into a narrative that connects with the *sovereignty* argument: that unelected, powerful international elites seek to destroy traditional cultures by imposing on nations their radical sexual agenda in the guise of made-up international rights that these nations never agreed to. This narrative has long resonated both in former colonies concerned with self-determination and in U.S.

It has become even more effective in the current political climate, marked by the recent rise of right wing populist parties in many countries and by states clamoring to “take back control” from international bodies. There are other convergences between the religious right and the populist right as well: Historically secular populist right-wing parties in Europe are embracing Christianity as a foil against immigrant Islam.<sup>44</sup> By the same token, some of these parties have cast themselves as defenders of secular, liberal values such as gender equality;<sup>45</sup> however, they remain conservative on family issues,<sup>46</sup> and “anti-gender” and anti-feminist views thrive on the secular far right as well.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the religious right entertains similarly dark, conspiracist, apocalyptic notions – about elites infiltrating their “cultural Marxism” and radical sexual ideas into education and government, corrupting and destroying Western society from within – to an extent that may not be clear from the arguments they present in secular, international forums.<sup>48</sup> The extent to which the views of a conservative religious fringe will enter the mainstream thus depends on broader social and political developments.

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<sup>44</sup> Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy, *Saving the People*.

<sup>45</sup> Betz and Meret, “Revisiting Lepanto”.

<sup>46</sup> Akkerman, “Gender and the Radical Right in Western Europe”.

<sup>47</sup> For a variety of recent perspectives, see Köttig, Bitzan, and Petö, *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe*.

<sup>48</sup> For an illustrative example, see Tozzi, “From ’48 to ’68: The Decline of Universal Rights, and the Cultural Ascent of the Latex Left.”

## PART II

### CONSERVATIVE ANTI-SRHR ADVOCACY - NGOS AND PRIVATE FOUNDATIONS

#### INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, civil-society advocacy has been associated with liberal agendas and actors defending progressive policies and human rights against unjust states and oppressive majorities. The international women's movement is a case in point whose values have laid the foundation for the global discourse on SRHR.

Since the mid-1990s however, conservative actors have come to the fore. Global conferences such as Cairo and Beijing exposed not only the huge impact of the UN on important social and political issues, but revealed also the influence of civil society in shaping those policies through effective advocacy. Conservative NGOs and actors realized that they needed to get involved and seek influence from the inside. This strategic shift led to a rise in the number and prominence of religious conservative NGOs at the UN.

The main pioneer in the conservative opposition to SRHR at the UN was the Vatican. At the ICPD conference in Cairo in 1994 and the World Conference on Women in Beijing the year after, it forged alliances with member states in Arab world, Africa and Latin America, and was thus able to influence negotiations on demography and family planning. When conservative NGOs started to appear at UN meetings in the following years, they pursued a similar strategy and rhetoric with the aim of building and maintaining long lasting strategic alliances to oppose SRHR.

Today, NGOs play a crucial role in the religious right's advocacy efforts globally, regionally and nationally. In the following, we present an overview of the role and function of civil society in anti-SRHR by focusing on some of the key features of their organization and work.

#### LOBBYISM

The religious-right civil lobbyist networks are at work in various contexts and through a range of platforms and strategic approaches. Their modus operandi has been to block progressive and liberal agendas and establish networks of pro-family member states, primarily from Christian and Muslim developing countries. This was identified as a

feasible strategy right from the beginning, as the UN consensus system allows ‘a dozen states’ to stop anything, to paraphrase C-FAM’s director Austin Ruse.<sup>49</sup>

When they entered the UN during the late 1990s/ early 2000s, the newcomers, mostly Christian and Americans, were few in number (compared with the traditionally progressive/liberal NGO caucus) and with little experience in working the UN – an institution that some on the religious right considered best avoided and the instrument of a satanic conspiracy. By watching their progressive opponents, however, they quickly adopted effective lobbying strategies and negotiation skills.

They also developed guidelines that helped like-minded newcomers to navigate the complex UN system. For example, the European branch of the US legal advocacy organization Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) holds workshops and has also published a book on how to influence international and global organizations.<sup>50</sup> Key to the strategy is their analysis that “abortion advocates and their ilk”, aware that getting new treaties passed will be difficult, are insinuating their “radical agenda” into non-binding documents from international bodies and then arguing that such soft law can become “crystallized” into hard law as customary international law: Conservatives, therefore, must work “to remove detrimental language and insert positive language” or get the document voted down.<sup>51</sup> This style of advocacy produces what Clifford Bob has called “nonpolicy”,<sup>52</sup> the endless tug-of-war over phrases such as “various forms of the family” and “reproductive health and rights” that has characterized SRHR-related UN negotiations.

An important tactic from the beginning has been to build ties with conservative member-state delegations across religious and political differences, as well as to connect with religious or right wing NGOs and actors world wide. Through these networks, the NGOs get access to trainings, coordinated approaches and fundraising opportunities.

At the UN, the religious right have continued their efforts to influence the work of the most relevant UN committees as well as the UN General assembly. A recent development was the launch of the Group of Friends of the Family (GoFF) by Belarus, Egypt and Qatar in 2015. It comprises 25 member states that according to the mission statement “reaffirm that the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State”, and which believe that “genuine and effective sustainable development may not be achieved without the family”.<sup>53</sup> In 2016 a similar initiative brought together NGOs in the ‘Civil Society for the Family’, which claimed 201 member organizations as of February 2019.<sup>54</sup> Both initiatives have materialised as a

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<sup>49</sup> Kissling and O’Brien, “Bad Faith at the UN”.

<sup>50</sup> Coleman, Koren, and Miranda-Flefil, *Global Human Rights Landscape*.

<sup>51</sup> Coleman, Koren, and Miranda-Flefil, 5, 17, 27–30.

<sup>52</sup> Bob, *The Global Right Wing and the Clash of World Politics*, 32.

<sup>53</sup> <https://unitingnationsforthefamily.org/background-2/organisers/>

<sup>54</sup> <https://civilsocietyforthefamily.org/>

result of persistent NGO lobby work conducted by (among others) two well-known pro-family actors at the UN, the Family Watch International and the Catholic C-FAM.

The impact of these initiatives on global politics remains uncertain. Judging by the websites of GoFF and the Civil Society for the Family, few if any new initiatives seem to have occurred since 2015 and 2016. The list of GoFF states corresponds to the traditional anti-SRHR-block at the UN, so it does not represent a new or additional pro-family stronghold. The resolution on the protection of the family in 2015 (HRC/RS/29/22) was initiated by countries like Bangladesh, Belarus, Egypt, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and in a sense served as a replacement for the earlier Russian-sponsored resolutions on “traditional values”, which had lost momentum.

Anti-SRHR lobbyism has made its way outside the UN and into regional and national politics, including in Europe. One recent report suggests there are at least 50 conservative organizations spanning 30 countries quietly networking with a shared agenda to roll back SRHR in Europe.<sup>55</sup> Following the same patterns as at the UN, anti-feminist activists and organizations lobby European institutions to exclude language supportive to SRHR and women’s rights from important documents and resolutions,<sup>56</sup> and to restrict or stop EU development programs’ funding of SRHR-related activities.

In 2013, we noted how US networks worked together with the Qatar-based Doha International Family Institute, situated in and financed by the state of Qatar. The centre was initially headed by a senior pro-family advocate from the US, the late prof. Richard Wilkins from the Brigham Young University (2008–2012). Since 2013, the centre has been focusing its attention on the Middle East and North Africa region. It engages in research as well as policy development relating to family matters, but seems also to have been engaged on a broader platform of family related topics in cooperation with a range of organizations and member states that reach beyond the traditional pro-family block.<sup>57</sup>

## LEGAL ADVOCACY

A significant development is the tendency among pro-life and pro-family advocates to focus on legal strategies. Over the past years, conservative religious NGOs have been expanding their activities and influence to national and regional courts around the world.

It is not necessarily a new thing that NGO networks engage in regional or national litigation to influence interpretations of human rights treaties. Transnationally, religious actors are still a relative newcomer in the game of identifying litigation opportunities “wherever they occur”.<sup>58</sup> American legal organizations play a significant role in this

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<sup>55</sup> Datta, *Restoring the Natural Order*, 19.

<sup>56</sup> E.g. the campaign against the McCafferty report at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in 2010, and the Estrela report in the European Parliament in 2012.

<sup>57</sup> See e.g. [https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2019/02/Qatar\\_The-Doha-Briefing.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2019/02/Qatar_The-Doha-Briefing.pdf)

<sup>58</sup> McCrudden, “Transnational Culture Wars,” 436.

development, with a several decade long history of engaging legally to influence domestic court decisions. Strategic litigation is their means to “defend religious freedom, the sanctity of life, and marriage and family”, as stated in the influential legal advocacy organization Alliance Defending Freedom’s mission statement.<sup>59</sup>

ADF was founded by evangelical leaders in 1994 and remains one of the largest and most influential Christian right legal advocacy organization in the world. It provides finances and resources for litigation around the world. In the US, it has argued cases before the Supreme Court nine times over the last seven years. ADF opened its first office in Europe in 2012 and now has representation in Vienna, Strasbourg, Geneva and Brussels and London. ADF is accredited to the UN, the European Parliament and Commission, and the Organization of American States (OAS). They also enjoy participatory status at the EU’s Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), and engage with the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE). ADF also engages in cases before national courts; one of their first cases outside the US was in 2003, when they provided support for the defence of the Swedish pastor Åke Green who was prosecuted for hate speech after giving a homophobic speech during a sermon. ADF as well as a number of other foreign organizations like the Becket Fund, the Family Research Council, Focus on the Family, and several others, came to Green’s defence.<sup>60</sup>

In addition to lobbying and litigation, ADF provides trainings and launches and coordinates political campaigns such as in 2016 with the “Declaration on the Importance of Strengthening the Fundamental Right to Freedom of Conscience”, signed by 21 members of the European Parliament.<sup>61</sup> In Latin America, the ADF together with Evangelical and Catholic organizations coordinated the campaign “Yes, we want sustainability” during the OAS General Assembly to alert member states to the danger of “gender ideology”.<sup>62</sup>

ADF is by no means the only actor in this field. Other influential actors are e.g. the American Center for Law and Justice (ACJL), the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty and the Christian Legal Society.<sup>63</sup> The ACJL has opened offices in France, Russia, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Pakistan and Israel from where it advocates for strict laws on SRHR and intervenes in domestic and regional courts. It has courted controversy for its anti-gay advocacy work in Russia, Kenya and Zimbabwe.<sup>64</sup> The ACLJ’s European arm, The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) is well known as a persistent opponent of SRHR and SOGI rights. From its European headquarter in Strasbourg it organizes political

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<sup>59</sup> <https://adfinternational.org/>

<sup>60</sup> Bob, “The Global Battle over Religious Expression.”

<sup>61</sup> <https://adflegal.blob.core.windows.net/international-content/docs/default-source/default-document-library/resources/campaign-resources/europe/respect-freedom/declaration-on-the-importance-of-strengthening-the-fundamental-right-to-freedom-of-conscience.pdf>

<sup>62</sup> Peñas Defago, Morán Faúndes, and Vaggione, “Religious Conservatism on the Global Stage,” 24.

<sup>63</sup> McCrudden, “Transnational Culture Wars,” 447.

<sup>64</sup> Kaoma, *Colonizing African Values*; Blue, “Religious Right.”



campaigns and litigation on concerns of the religious right such as abortion and freedom of religion, euthanasia, marriage/family, antidiscrimination and surrogacy.

#### POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING

The religious right have proved their ability to mobilize thousands of people to protest against liberal laws on family matters. Campaigns are usually presented as responses from concerned citizens. The online petition platform CitizenGo, which was founded in Spain in 2013, currently has over 10 million registered users across the world. CitizenGo, according to the website, offers campaigns in 12 different languages and is currently promoting petitions in around 50 countries to defend Christian conservative values on marriage, abortion and other SRHR matters.<sup>65</sup> In 2017, it made it to the headlines with its “Free Speech Buses” which toured in the US with anti-transgender slogans.<sup>66</sup>

From 2010 onward, such campaigns have also entered into mainstream European politics, both on the EU and national level on topics such as abortion, same-sex marriage and sexual education. 2012 has been described as the “tipping point”, with mobilizations such as the “Manif pour Tous” in France, initiated as a protest against a bill pledged by president François Hollande on same-sex marriage. “Manif pour Tous” was celebrated as a breakthrough by conservatives all over Europe since it appeared in France, a country broadly associated with liberal sexuality and French-style *laïcité*.

Since then, similar mobilizations became visible in many countries, often as responses to anticipated progressive policy proposals. This happened for instance in Croatia and Slovakia where conservative groups called for referendums on same-sex marriage.<sup>67</sup> Another notable mobilization was the the European Citizens Initiative (ECI) “One of Us”, which collected 1.7 million signatures across Europe to protect human embryos, prohibiting and ending the funding of human embryonic stem cell research and of organisations promoting women’s right to safe and legal abortion.<sup>68</sup>

Campaigns are also instigated to slam political opponents. This was the case when the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) was attacked by ADF and likeminded organizations based on an attempt to compromise the IPPF’s US affiliate, the Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA). Anti-choice advocates had circulated

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<sup>65</sup> <https://www.citizengo.org/>

<sup>66</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/03/31/an-anti-transgender-free-speech-bus-is-rolling-through-the-east-coast-sparking-protests-and-a-video-game/?utm\\_term=.d358df2bd530](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/03/31/an-anti-transgender-free-speech-bus-is-rolling-through-the-east-coast-sparking-protests-and-a-video-game/?utm_term=.d358df2bd530)

<sup>67</sup> Paternotte and Kuhar, “Disentangling and Locating the ‘Global Right’”.

<sup>68</sup> Website: <https://oneofus.eu/> Signed by less than half a percent of the EU’s half-billion population, this was nevertheless the most signatures gathered by such an initiative to date, and one of only four (out of about 40 proposed since 2012) that have crossed the million-signatures threshold, requiring the European Commission to consider taking action (<http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/initiatives/successful>). In the end, however, the Commission did not see any need to propose changes to the legislation in place. European Commission communication, COM(2014) 355 final, 28 May 2014.

false allegations in the US and later in Europe, claiming that the PPFA was selling aborted fetal tissue illegally for profit<sup>69</sup> (a number of investigations launched in the U.S., however, found no wrongdoing by the PPFA, and the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine* came out in defence of the organization's work).<sup>70</sup> The campaigns were launched through social media and by mobilizing political support among members of the European Parliament. ADF organized an event titled 'You Can't Put a Price on a Baby's Heart: The Sale of Baby', and instigated a Twitter campaign to defund IPPF.

## MOVEMENT BUILDING

As seen above, religious right advocacy works on many levels and in different areas of society and politics. A striking feature is also their ability to mobilise and build coalitions and cooperation across religious, cultural and national divides. American Christian Rights advocates seem to take a particular central role in the international movement building. A prominent example is the World Congress of Families, a project of the former US-based Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society, and now an interconnected network of organizations from countries mainly in the US, Europe and Russia pushing for pro-family and pro-life policies in several parts of the world.

WCF, now under the auspices of the International Organization for the Family, currently has more than forty official partner organizations and is active in more than 60 countries.<sup>71</sup> It holds consultative status at the UN (since 2003) and aims to build an international movement of "religiously grounded family moral systems" that can influence and shape social policy in global politics. They hold large annual conferences attracting pro-family activists from across the world.<sup>72</sup>

The WCF operates in a variety of arenas, globally as well as nationally and through partnerships with local NGOs and governments. In recent years, WCF has stepped up its efforts in Eastern Europe. The Howard Center's Allan Carlson originally conceived the WCF on a 1995 trip to Moscow, and Russians have always participated, but it is only in the last decade that the WCF has been particularly active in Russia and other former Soviet Republics, and that the Russian Orthodox Church has participated in its activities.<sup>73</sup> The group has been criticized for its connections with oligarchs and for giving explicit support to Russia's anti-gay legislation.

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<sup>69</sup> Fischer and Čahojová, "International Planned Parenthood Federation". The allegations were based on videos surreptitiously recorded by activists of the anti-choice NGO Center for Medical Progress; for a sample, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjxwVuozMnU>.

<sup>70</sup> Topulos, Greene, and Drazen, "Planned Parenthood at Risk".

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.profam.org/world-congress-of-families-partners-2017/>

<sup>72</sup> In Prague (1997), Geneva (1999), Mexico (2004), Warsaw (2007), Amsterdam (2009), Madrid (2012), Sidney (2013), Moscow (2014 – not under the auspices of WCF, which officially canceled it, due to Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in the Ukraine), Salt Lake City (2015), Tbilisi (2016), Budapest (2017) and Chisinau (2018); the 2019 congress will take place in Verona.

<sup>73</sup> Stoeckl, "Aktivisty vne konfessional'nyh granic [Activists beyond confessional borders]"; Stoeckl, "Transnational Norm Mobilization: The World Congress of Families in Georgia and Moldova."

## PART III

### STATE AND INTER-STATE ACTORS

Why is SRHR so complex and difficult to discuss in today's world reality? In the following, we focus at some relevant states/regions, their role in global politics with regard to SRHR, and how changes in regional and national politics influence SRHR discussions and policy developments at the UN. We focus on states and alliances that usually oppose SRHR in discussions at the UN, and assess also fragmentations of the so called 'progressive block'.

#### THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Since 2010, Russia has in tandem with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) taken a more prominent role in promoting so-called 'traditional values' as a legitimate consideration in the protection and promotion of international human rights. Russia's emphasis on traditional values as the foundation for its conservative positions on SRHR has strong implications for Russian domestic politics, but has also become a strategic factor in Russian foreign policy that reaches beyond the discussions on SRHR at the UN.

#### RELIGIO-POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Church-state relations in Russia have undergone significant changes over the past decades. With the fall of the Soviet Union, a new law granting almost full religious freedom was adopted. In 1997, however, the Religious Freedom Act amended to grant a special role to the ROC and a special status to four traditional religions, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism. One of the aims was to draw a clear distinction between traditional religions and those coming from outside through proselytization (mainly from the West), but it also marked also starting point for a process of integrating Orthodox religion into state affairs.<sup>74</sup>

The Russian constitution, however, firmly defines the secular nature of the state,<sup>75</sup> and while the ROC constitutes the dominant religion (around 71 percent of the population), only a small portion of these (up to 10 percent) attend church services on a regular basis or consider religion central to their lives.<sup>76</sup> For many Russians as well as their political leaders however, religion constitutes a crucial source of values for the development of Russian society, as well as an identity factor with relevance for the state's role in world

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<sup>74</sup> E.g. from 2008, military chaplains were introduced in the Russian army. In 2009, a new law on the "Return of Property of a Religious Character Held by the State or the Municipalities to Religious Organizations" came into force. In 2012, religion was also introduced into primary education through school curricula. See e.g. Horsfjord, "Negotiating Traditional Values."

<sup>75</sup> Article 14, <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-02.htm>.

<sup>76</sup> Pew Research Center, May 2017. Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe. <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>

politics. This explains also how the Church became instrumental in the making and shaping of Russia's role as the champion of traditional values at the UN as well as its support for several controversial laws and regulations, including on SRHR-related matters.<sup>77</sup>

#### RUSSIAN SOFT DIPLOMACY

In Putin's third presidential term (2012–2018), the official discourse on traditional values and "spiritual bonds" intensified. This discourse promotes the idea of a genuine Russian culture and spirit untouched by Western modern and secular norms. Here Orthodoxy is considered to be the guardian of traditional values and norms and an effective defence against the 'secularized and emasculated' Western Europe.

On the other other hand, the multi-religious nature of Russia is very much present in the state's religio-political discourse and strategy. The Kremlin therefore cautiously emphasises the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of the Russian society, and at the same time argues for the strengthening of the Orthodox foundation of the state and the nation.<sup>78</sup> Russian leaders have e.g. underscored the role of Islam as an integral part of the Russian social, political and historical context with its large Muslim population (up to 20 million). The multi-religious political discourse is also seen in the language of traditional values, which does not have a specific Christian reference, but is formulated in a manner that resonates with a wider religious constituency<sup>79</sup> as opposed to the 'secularized' and 'anti-Islamic' Western Europe.

The multi-religious discourse of Russia as a country where Christians and Muslims live in harmony is also an asset in Russia's foreign diplomacy with the Muslim world, including at the UN, where Russia for several years has cooperated with OIC members to build a platform as a counterweight to Western power. In this alliance-building, SRHR matters represent an obvious opportunity as a cause over which Russia can find common ground with e.g. Middle East states that are disturbed by the advancement of Western social values. At the same time, Russia seeks to use traditional values as a shield against international human-rights criticism<sup>80</sup> of its restrictive policies at home, including the 2013 law against homosexual "propaganda".<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> E.g. the 2013 LGBT propaganda law, the 2012 Foreign Agent law, the 2013 Law Protecting Religious Feelings, and the 2015 Undesirable Organizations Law.

<sup>78</sup> Curanović highlights the challenge of balancing these two narratives, especially in light of existing interethnic/religious tensions "fuelled inter alia by immigration, terrorist attacks and economic crises" (Curanović, "The Religious Diplomacy of the Russian Federation," 12.) Islam in Russia is a complex and increasingly important issue with strategic significance. Russia's approach to Islam is hence full of contradictions with "its mix of cultivating religious allies, repressing others, and perpetuating an image of vast Islamic unrest emanating from the Caucasus" (Antunez, "Islam in Russia.").

<sup>79</sup> Horsfjord, "Negotiating Traditional Values," 68.

<sup>80</sup> See e.g. ECtHR, *Alekseyev and others v. Russia*, judgment, 28 November 2018, app. no. 14988/09, <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-187903>, which reiterates that Russia needs "to make a sustained and long-term effort to adopt general measures, particularly in relation to issues of freedom of assembly and discrimination measures".

<sup>81</sup> Wilkinson, "Putting 'Traditional Values' Into Practice."

The Russian state's emphasis on 'traditional values' may thus be seen as both an idealist and pragmatic foreign policy approach. It is a soft power initiative that signals Russia's ambition and standing in international politics as the 'leader and guardian of values' in a multi-national conservative alliance. This approach is founded on a language defining Russia as a nation profoundly different from the West with its own definition of values and its own model of modernization.

A main purpose of Russian foreign policy (as for most states), including its soft power diplomacy, is to mobilize national consensus and stability. The traditional value concept could serve as a distraction from the country's weak economic development and urgent need for reforms. In spite of its many promises, the Russian leadership has remained passive in promoting and implementing reform policies on the domestic level in stark contrast to its extremely active role in regional and international politics.<sup>82</sup> The fact that Russia's declared values do not correspond with realities on the ground, is largely overlooked in the internal political discourse.<sup>83</sup> For instance, Russia has the second highest divorce rate in Europe (after the Ukraine),<sup>84</sup> and vastly higher abortion rates, per capita, than the US or Europe.<sup>85</sup>

Here the ROC plays a significant role as the institution providing content and legitimacy to the political and strategic value discourse, domestically and internationally.<sup>86</sup> With regard to the latter, it has taken an active role in international forums, working hand in hand with Russian diplomats, as seen e.g. when the Russian federation sponsored the resolutions on traditional values at the UNs human rights council in 2009, 2011 and 2012.

At the UN, Russia has taken a leading role among member states that persistently opposes consensus on SRHR-matters and minority rights. Supported by states in Central Asia (such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Belarus), African and Muslim states, all of which voted in favour of the resolution on traditional values in 2012, it seeks to remove and replace language on human rights matters relating to e.g. LGBTI-rights. For example, Russia led an effort which led to the removal of language to decriminalize homosexuality in the 2016 UN General Assembly Resolution on AIDS.<sup>87</sup>

## **ORGANIZATION FOR ISLAMIC COOPERATION**

With 57 member states, the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) describes itself as the second largest intergovernmental organization after the UN.<sup>88</sup> OIC is the only intergovernmental organization based on a shared religious affiliation, and is committed also

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<sup>82</sup> Busygina, "Russian foreign policy as an instrument for domestic mobilization".

<sup>83</sup> Curanović, "Guardians of Traditional Values."

<sup>84</sup> [https://www.oecd.org/els/family/SF\\_3\\_1\\_Marriage\\_and\\_divorce\\_rates.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/els/family/SF_3_1_Marriage_and_divorce_rates.pdf)

<sup>85</sup> <https://www.gutmacher.org/report/abortion-worldwide-2017>

<sup>86</sup> Curanović, "Guardians of Traditional Values."

<sup>87</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-leads-effort-un-strip-gay-decriminalization-drug-users-from-aids-resolution-iran-/27787638.html>

<sup>88</sup> OIC Permanent Observer mission to the UN, "About OIC", <http://www.oicun.org/2/23/>.

to disseminating, promoting and preserving Islamic teachings and values.<sup>89</sup> Despite the fact that the OIC potentially commands approximately one third of the UN's membership and has significant influence on diplomacy and voting there, studies on the impact of the OIC are scarce.<sup>90</sup> The OIC has Permanent Observer status at the UN. Due to the number of votes it can mobilise, the OIC can be a force to be reckoned with when members act in concert, as for instance demonstrated in its initiative on defamation of religions in 2010,<sup>91</sup> though it ended in a compromise.

The OIC's various member countries also unite with like-minded or neighbouring countries to act through a variety of other intergovernmental organizations or informal groupings: as Arab countries through the Gulf Cooperation Council or the wider Arab League, as African countries through the African Union, as developing countries through the G77, etc; or through the informal regional groupings of the UN (African Group, Asia-Pacific Group).

All of these may sometimes take an active role in SRHR debates. Whether OIC members make use of the OIC or these other platforms in a particular UN debate will depend on the type of interest at stake, the UN arena in question, etc. The OIC remains the only such forum that unites all Muslim countries on an explicitly Islamic platform, and seems to be a salient platform particularly in the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council.

#### OIC POSITIONS ON SRHR/FAMILY VALUES

The OIC has not developed a comprehensive policy specifically on SRHR, and apart from a focus on maternal health and vague references to family values in internal health policies,<sup>92</sup> the issue is barely mentioned in OIC documents. Yet OIC member states have frequently objected to the SRHR agenda of the UN, often on behalf of the OIC as a group. Progressive and liberal activists have deplored the alliances between the Vatican and Muslim countries in SRHR matters ever since the the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994.<sup>93</sup> OIC members tend to vote conservatively, and individual OIC countries such as Pakistan and Egypt especially have taken the lead against various SRHR proposals. These countries have acted relatively cohesively with clear and strong positions against LGBTI rights and against the introduction of language about sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) at the UN.

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<sup>89</sup> OIC, *Charter*, article 1.11.

<sup>90</sup> Though see Samuel, *The OIC, the UN, and Counter-Terrorism Law-Making*; Khan, "The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and Muslim Minorities"; Kayaoglu, "The OIC's Permanent Independent Human Rights Commission: An Early Assessment"; Petersen, "International Religious NGOs at The United Nations: A Study of a Group of Religious Organizations."

<sup>91</sup> Since 1999 the OIC has sponsored a series of UN resolutions against the defamation of religions, opposed by Western governments on the grounds of freedom of expression. In 2011, a compromise was reached in the form of a resolution to protect individuals against intolerance, discrimination, and violence based on religion or belief, rather than protect religions against defamation. The U. and OIC went on to hold a dialogue on the issue in Istanbul (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/07/168653.htm>).

<sup>92</sup> OIC Strategic Health Programme of Action 2014–2023.

<sup>93</sup> E.g. Buss, "Robes, Relics and Rights."

However, the OIC as an organization has only occasionally figured prominently in the debate, and more prominently on some issues, such as LGBTI rights, than on others, such as abortion. Although most OIC countries have restrictive abortion laws, some permit abortion on broad grounds in principle.<sup>94</sup> Although abortion is generally seen as wrong both in Islamic law and in widespread Muslim opinion, Islamic legal tradition allows for nuance with regard to stages of development in the womb, exceptions in case of necessity, and scope for considerations of social welfare.<sup>95</sup> Abortion on medical grounds in early pregnancy is thus widely permitted. Perhaps the clearest official statement of the OIC on abortion is that “...abortion should be prohibited except under necessity warranted by the interests of the mother, the fetus, or both of them”.<sup>96</sup>

Over family planning, contraceptives, and sexuality education, there is considerable variety in the policies of Muslim countries, as well as a variety of interpretations drawn from Islamic legal tradition. OIC health policy seems to favour family-planning services. However, there are deep-rooted concerns in many countries about sexual license among unmarried youth and any measures that might be seen to promote it, including comprehensive sexuality education and giving young women access to reproductive health services without parental supervision.

OIC members can usually be relied on to support the body of “traditional values” and “family” statements promoted by conservatives at the UN. For example, the Human Rights Council resolution on the “Protection of the family” in 2014<sup>97</sup> was co-sponsored by a number of OIC countries, and Saudi Arabia manoeuvred to block an amendment recognizing “various forms of the family”. Qatar has been a mainstay of the international conservative “pro-family” movement, and its Doha International Family Institute has worked with American religious conservatives to put the family front and centre of UN development goals.

## **THE AFRICAN GROUP**

African states have a mixed record at the UN with regard to SRHR, mirroring restrictive laws and popular attitudes on SRHR across the African continent. With regard to abortion, the Guttmacher Institute reports that around 90 percent of African women in reproductive age live in countries with restrictive abortion laws. Only a limited number of African countries are reported to have relatively liberal abortion legislation (Zambia, Cap Verde, South Africa, Mozambique and Tunisia), whereas ten countries had laws restricting abortion for any reasons.<sup>98</sup> With the exception of Cap Verde and South Africa,

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<sup>94</sup> Turkey, Tunisia, Bahrain, and several former Soviet republics. See UN Population Division, “Abortion Policies: A Global Review.”

<sup>95</sup> On this complex question, see e.g. Bowen, “Abortion, Islam, and the 1994 Cairo Population Conference”; Bowen, “Contemporary Muslim Ethics of Abortion”; Katz, “The Problem of Abortion in Classical Sunni *Fiqh*”; Hessini, “Abortion and Islam”; Hedayat, Shooshtarizadeh, and Raza, “Therapeutic Abortion in Islam”; Brockopp, *Islamic Ethics of Life*; Atighetchi, *Islamic Bioethics*, chap. 5.

<sup>96</sup> Covenant on the Rights of the Child in Islam, Article 6.

<sup>97</sup> UN Doc. A/HRC/26/L.20/Rev.1. Passed on 26 June with 26 votes to 14 against, 6 abstentions.

<sup>98</sup> Guttmacher 2018 [https://www.guttmacher.org/sites/default/files/factsheet/ib\\_awn-africa.pdf](https://www.guttmacher.org/sites/default/files/factsheet/ib_awn-africa.pdf), WHO’s [Global Abortion Policies Database](#)

SOGI rights remain very limited and highly controversial to promote in most African countries. South Africa is currently the only African state that has legalized same-sex marriage.

When the HRC was founded in 2006, the African Group became notorious for blocking resolutions to enhance country-specific human rights. Over the years, however, the group has become more willing to address human rights violations. On SRHR-specific matters, however, the African group usually votes with the conservative block. That is particularly true with regard to SOGI rights; in 2016, for example, headed by the Botswana delegate, the African Group presented a resolution at the UN's General Assembly, targeting the Independent Expert's mandate, rejecting its legality and arguing that it infringed state sovereignty.<sup>99</sup> African countries have been more willing to make advances on reproductive health issues (as highlighted by the e.g. the Maputo Protocol).<sup>100</sup>

### THE HOLY SEE

The Holy See (colloquially 'the Vatican') is the one religious institution that stands out on the global stage due to its unique role as both the government of a global religious organization made up of local churches (the Roman Catholic Church), a sovereign entity under international law (the Holy See) that can enter into treaties and diplomatic relations with states and participate in international organizations, and the religious authority that is looked to by a network of autonomous lay organizations (NGOs) without formal links to the Vatican or the Church.

The Church's presence in countries across the world is a crucial source of influence, but it also plays an important role on the international level. As a permanent observer at the UN, the Holy See has the right to speak on a par with other states, but is barred from voting. Yet it is extensively involved in UN deliberations, and participates fully in several UN agencies (IAEA, FAO, UNESCO, UNID).<sup>101</sup> This *sui generis* international legal status of a religious institution has been contested,<sup>102</sup> but continues to be recognized by states.

It can also draw on vast intellectual resources. Catholic universities are found all over the world, many of them prestigious. Though some of the research produced in these universities is cited by the conservative lobby, they are not political think tanks but academic institutions sustaining diverse lines of inquiry.<sup>103</sup> However, the Catholic Church

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<sup>99</sup> <https://papersmart.unmeetings.org/media2/7663738/botswana.pdf>

<sup>100</sup> The Maputo Protocol (Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa) is a legal framework addressing the political, social and economic rights of women and girls. It is the first treaty that specially addresses violence against women (article 3), female genital mutilation (article 5), the rights of women living with HIV/Aids (article 14(1)(d) and (e)) and health and reproductive rights matters (article 14). [http://www.achpr.org/files/instruments/women-protocol/achpr\\_instr\\_proto\\_women\\_eng.pdf](http://www.achpr.org/files/instruments/women-protocol/achpr_instr_proto_women_eng.pdf)

<sup>101</sup> Chao, "The Evolution of Vatican Diplomacy," 42.

<sup>102</sup> See e.g. Morss, "The International Legal Status of the Vatican/Holy See Complex". The NGO Catholics for Choice has campaigned for decades for the Holy See's status at the UN to be revoked. See Catholics for Choice, *The Catholic Church at the United Nations*.

<sup>103</sup> For example, an expert witness at 2018 Brazilian Supreme Court hearings on abortion was the founder of the reproductive-rights organization Católicas pelo Direito de Decidir (Catholic women for the right to



also has several international “think tanks” in the form of its official councils and academies such as the Pontifical Academy for the Family and the Pontifical Academy for Life. The latter was established in 1994 to furnish arguments for and help develop the Church’s teaching on abortion, euthanasia, and contraceptive/reproductive technologies, though since 1997 it has aimed to widen its scope beyond bioethics to issues such as migration, the environment/climate, and arms. There are also lay Catholic NGOs and think tanks around the world that play an active role in the politics of SRHR.

#### CONCERNS AND STRATEGIES

Since the Cairo and Beijing conferences in 1994–5, the Catholic Church has played a leading role in the religious conservative reaction to SRHR, and conservative religious lobbies at the UN have continued to pursue a strategy and rhetoric forged by the Vatican. The Holy See has consistently resisted SRHR language at the UN and other important international arenas, and continues to influence national politics on SRHR in Catholic countries, across a range of issues including contraception, birth control, abortion, same-sex marriage and other LGBTI issues, all of which are of intense concern to the Church. Research also shows also that its diplomatic engagement on SRHR-matters on international arenas has intensified over time.<sup>104</sup>

In Beijing, the Vatican deployed a subtle strategy, “challenging not only specific human rights provisions but also broader human rights concepts and language which the Vatican perceived as offering a vision of human rights inimical to its own”.<sup>105</sup> Assessing the impact of the Vatican strategy and rhetoric in this particular meeting, Buss notes that the Vatican opposed key human rights concepts, like gender and equality. It presented its views as representative of the women across the world, unlike the excessive feminism allegedly characterizing women’s human rights organizations.

In particular, the Vatican opposed the use of ‘gender’ and insisted that it could only be interpreted in terms of the male and female sexes. Struggles still continue over these issues in the UN today (see below for elaborations on such discourse).

Pope John Paul II’s influence on the Church’s vision on the view of sexuality, built on the vision of complementary gender roles rooted in natural law and biology, is profound. His successor Joseph Ratzinger (pope Benedict XVI 2005–13) also made important contributions in the shaping of the Church’s response to the “gender agenda”, and he was also particularly engaged in discussions on how to impose such vision on secular law.<sup>106</sup> Under Jorge Mario Bergoglio (pope Francis 2013–), the rhetoric against “gender theory” has intensified, especially in connection with transgender persons.<sup>107</sup>

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decide), Maria-Jose Rosado Nunes, who is a professor of sociology of religion at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo.

<sup>104</sup> Coates et al., “The Holy See on Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights.”

<sup>105</sup> Buss, “Robes, Relics and Rights,” 344.

<sup>106</sup> Case, “After Gender the Destruction of Man?”

<sup>107</sup> Case, “Trans Formations in the Vatican’s War on ‘Gender Ideology.’”

The notion of the family subsumes all these issues. Progressive Catholics' hopes for change were raised when Catholic bishops met for two contentious and highly publicized Synods on the Family (2014–2015). This was early in the papacy of Francis, who seemed a breath of fresh air after his sternly doctrinaire predecessor, and who seemed to want a Church more open to people's lived realities. However, it soon became clear that the Synod were not going to make changes in doctrine on SRHR issues, but would at most promote a more relatable pastoral approach and language. (Homosexual acts, for example, would still be "intrinsically disordered",<sup>108</sup> but the Church might want to shelve that phrase for a while.<sup>109</sup>) The concluding document showed some understanding for remarried and even unmarried couples, but gave no ground on contraception, "gender ideology", or homosexual unions, let alone abortion.<sup>110</sup>

The debate on clerical sexual abuse of minors and the complicity of the hierarchy in covering it up, a major challenge for the Roman Catholic Church in recent decades, has intensified over the past year<sup>111</sup> and was the subject of a February 2019 summit at the Vatican. In the present context, this raises the questions whether and how the debate will affect, first, the Church's stance on sexuality and, second, its credibility in public debates on SRHR. The answer to the first question depends on the outcome of ongoing internal political struggles, where some liberals connect the problem with celibate male-only priesthood, but some Catholic conservatives, conflating child abuse with homosexuality, blame the problem on an alleged "gay lobby" within the Church<sup>112</sup> and use it against a pope considered too left-wing. As for the second question, the abuse revelations are obviously a liability for a Church that seeks to intervene in public affairs as a moral authority on sexuality and children's rights. Belated attempts to address the problem may do more to call attention to it than to restore trust in the short run. After decades of public attention to the scandal, however, it is not clear that new developments will further affect the influence of the Church.

## UNITED STATES

While being the most influential superpower in the modern world and a great champion of multilateral institutions, the United States (US) has also been "reluctant to tie itself too closely to these multilateral institutions and rules".<sup>113</sup> That is not to say that the US has

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<sup>108</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, para. 2357.

<sup>109</sup> Allen, "Why the Synod of Bishops Is More than Rock'em Sock'em Robots."

<sup>110</sup> Synod of Bishops, *Vocation and Mission of the Family*; Crux staff, "Bishops: Integrate Remarried Catholics into Church Life."

<sup>111</sup> For an overview of recent events, see Daniel Burke, "How 2018 became the Catholic Church's year from hell", CNN, December 29, 2018,

<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/12/28/world/catholic-church-2018/index.html>.

<sup>112</sup> In an open letter on the eve of the February 2019 summit, cardinals Burke and Brandmüller claimed the abuse of minors was part of a larger crisis: "The plague of the homosexual agenda has been spread within the Church, promoted by organized networks and protected by a climate of complicity and a conspiracy of silence." For the full text, see e.g.

<https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/dubia-cardinals-to-bishops-at-vatican-abuse-summit-will-you-also-be-silent>.

<sup>113</sup> G. John Ikenberry quoted in Brooks and Wohlforth, "International Relations Theory and the Case against Unilateralism."

not stood by the UN over the past 70 years: It is a permanent member of the Security Council, many UN agencies are headquartered on American soil, the US played key roles in the development of the organization and agencies of the UN, and it is ranked as the largest donor to multilateral institutions generally and the UN specifically.<sup>114</sup> Still, UN–US relations have always been ambivalent. The US has been selective in assuming international commitments, and has in some cases withdrawn from UN institutions, most recently from the Human Rights Council in June 2018. The US has also failed to ratify central UN human rights conventions relevant to SRHR, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), or the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CPRD).

#### RELIGION AND POLITICS

Religion has always mixed with politics in the USA where political leaders regularly refer to their religious beliefs and values. Since the late 1970s, Christian social conservatives have influenced government through the Republican Party and through movements such as the Moral Majority and Tea Party. However, the degree to which the Trump administration accommodates the religious right has raised concerns that the constitutional “wall of separation” between religion and state is coming down. Under Trump, ultra-conservative Christians have gained political power and direct influence through political and institutional appointments, and in SRHR matters, the administration is engaging with some of the most anti-SRHR groups: for example, the Centre for Family and Human Rights (C-FAM) and the Heritage Foundation were appointed to the official US delegation to the March 2018 session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) As members of the official state delegation, they were able to engage directly with other UN member states and thereby promote their views and concerns to the most influential actors at the meeting. One should note that it is not the first time Christian Evangelicals enjoy special attention from the White House. The Bush's administration (2000-2008) was e.g. contributing politically and financially to US conservative lobbyists at the UN, and during this presidency new groups formed and applied for accreditation every year. The clout of the far right Christian wing seems nevertheless to have been bolstered under the current administration.

#### US SRHR AND ANTI-ABORTION POLICIES ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

An obvious change in the current landscape of SRHR-policies at the UN and in international politics is caused by the change of the US government in 2017 with the Trump administration taking a stronger anti-SRHR position nationally and internationally compared to former conservative US governments. Still, while the current administration policy has an explicit social conservative profile, the far more progressive Obama administration was also hesitant on certain SRHR matters such as abortion. Although Obama rescinded the Mexico City Policy, upon taking office in 2009, he refused

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<sup>114</sup>[https://www.brookings.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2017/12/globalviews\\_who\\_funds\\_which\\_multilaterals.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2017/12/globalviews_who_funds_which_multilaterals.pdf)

to override the Helms amendment by executive order, despite international criticism that it was an obstacle to safe abortion for women and girls raped in conflict areas.<sup>115</sup> In the SOGI field, however, the Obama administration supported international agreements that specifically condemned discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.<sup>116</sup> It also launched a broad initiative to empower adolescent girls, which brought together several key US governmental agencies to coordinate efforts on matters such as preventing sexual abuse, female genital mutilation (FGM) and early forced marriage, and to provide comprehensive SRHR information, education, etc.<sup>117</sup>

#### MEXICO CITY POLICY AND THE KEMP-KASTEN AMENDMENT

President Trump's first call after taking office was to reinstate the Mexico City Policy, the so-called Global Gag Rule, which restricts NGOs overseas from receiving international family planning assistance if they provide or make referrals for abortion.<sup>118</sup> The Trump administration announced its interpretation of the Mexico City Policy under the label "Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance policy",<sup>119</sup> taking the Global Gag Rule a step further by applying it to the vast majority of US bilateral health assistance. Beside reproductive health programs, the restrictions also apply to HIV and AIDS funding, health strengthening systems, maternal and child health, nutrition, malaria and neglected tropical diseases, global health security and even to certain kinds of research.<sup>120</sup>

During 2017 and 2018, the US administration also invoked the Kemp-Kasten amendment to withhold funding for UN Population Fund (UNFPA) as the responsible UN agency for programs relating to global populations and reproductive health.<sup>121</sup> The Amendment denies federal funding to any organizations or programs that "support or participate in a program of coercive abortion or involuntary sterilization"; it has so far only been applied to the UNFPA, even though the UNFPA does not support such programs.<sup>122</sup> Decisions to

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<sup>115</sup> <https://www.thenation.com/article/women-and-girls-raped-in-conflict-need-abortion-care-but-the-us-is-standing-in-their-way/>

<sup>116</sup> In December 2011, Barack Obama issued a Presidential Memorandum on LGBT rights which was presented by US secretary of state Hillary Clinton at the UNHRC in Geneva.

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/12/06/presidential-memorandum-international-initiatives-advance-human-rights-l>

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/09/fact-sheet-obama-administrations-record-and-lgbt-community>

<sup>117</sup> <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/254904.pdf>

<sup>118</sup> In 1984, the US President Ronald Reagan passed the Mexico City Policy as a reaction to the second International Conference on Population, held in Mexico City in August 1984. It extended previous legislative restrictions on US international funding for abortion by also restricting funds to foreign NGOs with abortion-related programs supported by donors other than the US.

<sup>119</sup> <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/05/270866.htm>

<sup>120</sup> Henry J.Kaiser Family Foundation. The Mexico City Policy: An Explainer (May 2018), <https://www.kff.org/global-health-policy/fact-sheet/mexico-city-policy-explainer/>

<sup>121</sup> Historically, the US was instrumental in the founding of the UNFPA in the late 1960s and remained the agency's largest donor until 1985.

<sup>122</sup> The Kemp-Kasten Amendment was initially endorsed as a response from the US Congress to President Reagan's administration on the suspicion that the United Nations Population Fund Agency (UNFPA) was providing China with support in the implementation of its strict one-child policy. This allegation was never substantiated, but future funding to the UN agency was conditioned on the assurances that it did not engage

apply the Kemp-Kasten Amendment or not have, as with the Global Gag Rule, followed party lines.

In a recent publication on the Mexico City Policy and its impact on women's reproductive health, the main finding is that the policy has tripled abortion rates in the most exposed countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. A similar trend was seen in the most exposed African countries, with a doubling of abortion rates compared to less exposed countries and before the reinstatement of the policy. The analysis also revealed strong similarities across the regions, and correlations between access to modern contraceptives and lower abortion rates. Thus, the intent of the global gag rule to discourage women from having abortions has failed.<sup>123</sup>

The social conservative turn under the Trump administration is also evident from the efforts by US diplomats to amend and rewrite UN texts and policy statements on women's issues. This includes discussions on a number of UN resolutions on health, education and social issues, where US diplomats have sought to strike references to specific issues and wordings such as gender or "sexual and reproductive health". Here the US either proposes changes in wording (e.g. replacing the word "gender" with "women" or "girls"), or to rephrase notions such as "gender-based violence" as "violence against women".<sup>124</sup> Yet reports suggest that the US policy on these matters has not been entirely consistent, whether as an intentional strategy or due to disagreement between different members of the US missions to the UN.<sup>125</sup>

US-led discussions on SRHR-policies and language are likely to continue in the coming years. Yet, if the US is to succeed in its conservative campaign on SRHR topics, it will have to continue to ally itself with Russia and conservative Muslim states against its partners in Western Europe and elsewhere.<sup>126</sup>

## DEVELOPMENTS IN EUROPE AND THE EU

Anti-SRHR and anti-feminist opposition in Europe is not a new thing. Campaigns opposing feminist policies were mobilised from the mid-1990s, mainly as a Catholic response to the UN meetings in Cairo (1994) and Beijing (1995). From the mid-2000s, "anti-gender"

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in abortion or coercive family planning, neither on its own nor through sub-contractors. It has been in effect for almost 35 years. <https://www.congress.gov/112/crpt/hrpt361/CRPT-112hrpt361.pdf>. It must be renewed annually as opposed to the Global Gag Rule which remains in effect until rescinded. The Global Gag Rule and Kemp-Kasten amendment, while often conflated, thus relate to different types of organizations and activities.

<sup>123</sup> Rodgers, *The Global Gag Rule*, 124, 144-5.

<sup>124</sup> See e.g. session of the Third Committee, 52nd Meeting - General Assembly, 73rd session, or the US State Department's statement : <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/12/287947.htm>

<sup>125</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/24/trump-administration-gender-transgender-united-nations>

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

mobilization also became visible in countries such as Spain, Croatia, Italy, France, Slovakia, Italy, Poland and Slovenia.<sup>127</sup>

The Council of Europe has for several years expressed concern about regressions among member states with adoption of more restrictive laws and policies on e.g. abortion services in countries such as Georgia, Macedonia and Slovakia.<sup>128</sup> Proposals for near total bans on abortion have been proposed in Lithuania, Slovakia, Spain, Poland and Russia, but have failed due to massive opposition and large-scale demonstrations.

It's worth noting that otherwise conservative countries conclude differently on the issue of abortion. For instance, ROC-led campaigns to ban abortion in Russia have received little support from the Kremlin. Well aware of popular opinion on this matter, Putin speaks openly against drastic changes to the current abortion legislation. However, to mitigate the value gap between the state and the Church on this matter, the government co-operates with the Church on pre-abortion counselling.

In Poland, on the other hand, abortion is already illegal except in cases of rape, when the woman's health or life is in danger or if the foetus is irreparably damaged. Even in these cases, access to legal abortion may be limited by doctors resorting to conscientious objection or delaying tactics.<sup>129</sup> Still, the Polish government has imposed additional restrictions (such as making emergency contraception prescription-only), and is continuing to propose restrictions to further limit the country's already restrictive abortion laws, as seen e.g. with a new proposed abortion bill in 2018.

#### THE EU VOICE AT THE UN

Traditionally a progressive voice at the UN, the EU strives to speak with a united voice on SRHR in international fora and settings like the UN Commission on Population and Development (CPD) and Commission on the Rights of Women (CSW). However, coordination on SRHR among all 28 EU member states is challenging due to opposition from conservative members like Malta, Hungary and Poland,<sup>130</sup> particularly after the illiberal turn of the latter two in the 2010s.

Among the progressive states are the United Kingdom (UK), a state that not only aims for a strong SRHR consensus internationally, but one that has traditionally also played an important role in the EU's coordinating processes. The UK is not likely to change its

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<sup>127</sup> Paternotte and Kuhar, "Disentangling and Locating the 'Global Right,'" 7–8; Kuhar and Paternotte, *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe*.

<sup>128</sup> E.g. mandatory waiting periods and counselling requirements prior to abortion. See Høctor, Lamačková, and Thomasen, "Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Europe."

<sup>129</sup> See e.g. Hillary Margolis, "Dispatches: Abortion and the 'Conscience Clause' in Poland", Human Rights Watch, October 22, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/10/22/dispatches-abortion-and-conscience-clause-poland>.

Abusive delaying tactics were seen e.g. in the case of *R.R. v. Poland*, ECtHR judgment, May 26, 2011, or the case of Bogdan Chazan, a hospital director in Warsaw who became a pro-life cause celebre when he was dismissed for delaying the abortion of an anencephalic fetus past the 24-week limit.

<sup>130</sup> EPF, "The impact of 'Brexit' on EU support for SRHR".

position at the UN after leaving the EU, but without the UK's role in negotiation processes within the EU, it might prove harder to reach a progressive consensus going forward.<sup>131</sup>

## LATIN AMERICA

The historical development of SRHR policies in Latin America has mirrored developments in global politics. Until the 1980s, countries in Latin America were heavily influenced by internationally initiated population reduction programs. The US subsidized contraceptive methods due to fear that population growth could lead to political instability and left-wing social uprisings.<sup>132</sup> In some cases these policies were even supported by the Catholic Church, e.g. in Peru, where the Church supported family planning programs in poor areas of Lima between 1967 and 1976, even after the encyclical *Humane Vitae* (1968) had rejected artificial contraception.<sup>133</sup>

Today Latin-America remains among the most restrictive continents when it comes to abortion legislation. According to Guttmacher, more than 97 percent of women in reproductive age live in countries with restrictive laws on abortion. Six countries have a total ban on abortion, and only four countries allow abortion without a specific reason (Cuba, Guyana, Puerto Rico and Uruguay).<sup>134</sup>

The Catholic Church is a key conservative actor that opposes liberal policies on SRHR, particularly abortion, throughout the continent, though Catholicism in Latin America also includes noted progressive counter-currents. The Church exercises influence in several ways and through different channels. For example, members of the Catholic lay organization Opus Dei have held important strategic political positions from which they have advocated against or blocked decisions on SRHR.<sup>135</sup>

## CATHOLIC DECLINE, INTER-RELIGIOUS RESPONSE

Almost 500 million Catholics live in Latin America, i.e. nearly 40 percent of the world's total Catholic population. In 2013, the Catholic Church also elected a Latin American pope for the first time in its history. However, the Catholic Church has seen a dramatic decline in devotees over the past decades with a loss from 90 percent in the 1960s to 60 percent in 2014.<sup>136</sup> In the largest Catholic country in the world, Brazil, the Church loses more than 100 000 members every year, often at the expense of new Protestant churches, primarily evangelical.<sup>137</sup> The Church's spiritual dominance has hence been challenged by Evangelical and Pentecostal Christian Churches, attracting millions of followers. The Catholic Church is thus not the only religious community engaged on issues of reproductive health and family policies in Latin America.

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<sup>131</sup> EPF, "The impact of 'Brexit'".

<sup>132</sup> Richardson and Birn, "Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Latin America."

<sup>133</sup> López, "Priests and Pills."

<sup>134</sup> Guttmacher Institute, "Abortion in Latin America and the Caribbean: Factsheet 2018."

<sup>135</sup> Richardson and Birn, "Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Latin America."

<sup>136</sup> Pew Research Center, "Religion in Latin America."

<sup>137</sup> Lende, "Latin-Amerika – katolisismen under press."

Tensions between new protestant Christian denominations and the Catholic Church notwithstanding, religious conservatives have been able to develop a shared agenda against SRHR and “gender ideology”. Together with conservative governments in several Latin American countries, religious leaders and institutions across confessions have thus managed to hold sway on issues of SRHR through a powerful, diverse and well organized conservative opposition.<sup>138</sup>

#### DEVELOPMENTS ON SRHR?

Despite these powerful conservative influences on Latin American political and social life, liberal views on gender equality and sexuality have gradually gained a stronger presence and in some cases also influenced policies and legislation favouring SRHR. In the 2013 Montevideo Consensus, regional governments among other things endorsed sexual rights and urged states to amend abortion laws.<sup>139</sup> For instance, in Argentina, Uruguay, several Mexican states, Colombia and Brazil laws have been adopted or courts have executed rulings allowing same-sex marriage. In countries such as Costa Rica and Chile, legal civil unions are allowed. There has not been comparable liberalization on abortion, but several countries have lifted the strictest regulations by e.g. expanding the legal grounds for terminating a pregnancy.<sup>140</sup>

These developments notwithstanding, violence against LGBTI persons persists. Indeed, human rights reports underscore that LGBTI people in Latin-America live under extremely vulnerable conditions.<sup>141</sup> According to a 2015 study by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, nearly 600 LGBTI persons were murdered throughout the region in one year (2013–2014). The true numbers are thought to be considerably higher, as most Latin American legal systems do not require local authorities to register murders of LGBTI persons as hate crimes.<sup>142</sup>

Globally, however, Latin American states have taken a leading role in campaigning for sexual rights, including pushing through UN resolutions on SOGI. In 2016, seven Latin-American states (Mexico, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Costa Rica – LAC 7) championed a resolution at the Human Rights Council securing a mechanism for examining discrimination and violence on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity over the following three years (2016–2019) through the appointment of an

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<sup>138</sup> Peñas Defago, Morán Faúndes, and Vaggione, “Religious Conservatism on the Global Stage.”

<sup>139</sup> Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development, August 14, 2013, PLE-1/EN, <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/montevideo-consensus-population-and-development>. “Promote policies that enable persons to exercise their sexual rights, which embrace the right to a safe and full sex life, as well as the right to take free, informed, voluntary and responsible decisions on their sexuality, sexual orientation and gender identity ... ” (para. 33). “Ensure, in those cases where abortion is legal or decriminalized under the relevant national legislation, the availability of safe, good-quality abortion services for women with unwanted and unaccepted pregnancies, and urge States to consider amending their laws, regulations, strategies and public policies relating to the voluntary termination of pregnancy ... ” (para. 42).

<sup>140</sup> Encarnación, “Latin America’s Rights Riddle.”

<sup>141</sup> Peñas Defago, Morán Faúndes, and Vaggione, “Religious Conservatism on the Global Stage”, 26

<sup>142</sup> IACHR, *Violence against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Persons in the Americas*.



independent expert. The mandate of the UN Independent Expert on SOGI, Victor Madrigal-Borloz, ends in June 2019.

Brazil in particular has been an eager promoter of SOGI rights on global arenas. This role is likely to end, however, under president Jair Bolsonaro, a right-wing hardliner notorious for his homophobic and anti-feminist attitudes and for his negative view on global human rights instruments.

## **SOUTH AFRICA**

Against the background of the long struggle against Apartheid, it is not surprising that South Africa chose to emphasize human rights in its foreign policy,<sup>143</sup> both in the region and globally. South Africa under Mandela took firm positions against oppressive regimes and dictatorship in Africa, and it expressed progressive viewpoints internationally, like in 1995 at the Beijing Conference on Women.<sup>144</sup>

This gained South Africa little support from other African states, which accused it of acting unilaterally. Mandela's successor, Thabo Mbeki, sought instead to increase diplomacy with other African heads of state, with the clear aim of developing relations and a stronger inter-African involvement. This signalled a shift from unilateral to multilateral decision-making where South Africa's foreign policy would be defined within African multilateral mechanisms such as the African Union.<sup>145</sup>

A consequence of this development has been a downplaying of South Africa's role as a global advocate for human rights, including SRHR and SOGI rights in particular. For example, South Africa's decision to vote against a UN resolution to protect gay people against violence in 2008 was explained as a wish to avoid offending other African governments.<sup>146</sup>

While South Africa took a leading role at the HRC to adopt the UN resolution 17/19 on "Human rights, sexual orientation and gender identity" in 2011, which marks the first UN resolution on sexual orientation, it's voting pattern subsequent to 17/19 has been rather mixed. South Africa supported the UN resolution on 'Protection of the family' at the HRC in 2014, which disregarded multiple types of families (in stark contrast to the inclusive definition of the family as defined in the South Africa's "White Paper on Families in South Africa" from 2012, issued by the Department of Social Development<sup>147</sup>). Later that year, however, South Africa took the lead in the adoption of the the UN Resolution 27/32 on Human rights, sexual orientation and gender identity later that year (2014).<sup>148</sup> South Africa also spoke against a new resolution on the protection of the family in July 2015 on the grounds that it failed to acknowledge the diversity of families. Yet in 2016, South

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<sup>143</sup> Graham, *Democratic South Africa's Foreign Policy*.

<sup>144</sup> Jordaan, "South Africa and Sexual Orientation Rights at the United Nations."

<sup>145</sup> Barber, "The New South Africa's Foreign Policy."

<sup>146</sup> Williams, "Assessing South Africa's Ambivalent SOGI Diplomacy in Africa."

<sup>147</sup> [http://www.dsd.gov.za/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=cat\\_view&gid=33&Itemid=39](http://www.dsd.gov.za/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=33&Itemid=39)

<sup>148</sup> <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G14/177/32/PDF/G1417732.pdf?OpenElement>

Africa abstained when the HRC adopted the UN resolution 32/2 “Protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity”. The African block (South Africa included) also submitted a letter to the UN questioning the legality of the SOGI resolution and the mandate of the independent expert.<sup>149</sup>

The examples above illustrate South Africa’s reluctance to take lead on SOGI rights issues at the UN and the harsh criticism it faces from its regional partners when it does do so. South Africa’s ambivalent diplomacy on human rights can therefore be seen as a maneuver to balance Africanism and anti-imperialism with human rights and democracy.

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<sup>149</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/nov/07/african-nations-attempt-suspend-un-united-nations-lgbt-rights-monitor-vitit-muntarbhorn>

## WAYS AHEAD

In this report, we have mapped recent developments and currents in the religious right's opposition to SRHR. Such opposition is not a new thing. Indeed, SRHR specifically, and women's rights generally, have never been a consensus project, but rather a product of constant struggle and controversy. In a Report by the UN Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice, opposition to women rights is highlighted as alarming. The report urges the international community to "increase its effort to counter negative trends towards undermining human rights principles and jeopardizing the gains made in women's rights."<sup>150</sup>

Before the 1990s, discussions on reproductive health were mainly motivated by the wish to curb population growth. The Cairo conference (ICDP) in 1994 was a game changer, establishing a framework for a human rights-based approach to development programs relating to reproductive health. The mid-1990s have thus been described as the golden age of SRHR, with the adoption of the basic definitions of the SRHR paradigm followed up by the will and commitment of member states.<sup>151</sup>

Yet the ICPD in Cairo also represents, as seen above, the beginning of the conservative religious opposition to SRHR policies at the UN. This has contributed to a certain stagnation over the past decades. Nevertheless, discussions on SRHR have also included several breakthroughs, e.g. the adoption of resolutions granting LGBTI-rights<sup>152</sup> or General Comment 22 by the treaty-monitoring body of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.<sup>153</sup> The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also include clearly defined goals on SRHR with reference to internationally agreed human rights instruments.<sup>154</sup>

At the same time, the anti-SRHR movement can mobilize considerable public support, and not always just from a vocal minority. Polls from Eastern Europe, for example, show widespread conservative views on homosexuality, with 85 percent of the Russians responding that homosexuality is morally wrong.<sup>155</sup>

No doubt, SRHR is also a field that has been relatively easy to exploit by governments, such as when Russia uses anti-SRHR sentiments as a platform to build alliances and seek support for a range of issues that reach far beyond the health and sexual rights agenda. But the conservatives' relative success also tells us that SRHR is a field that must be

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<sup>150</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21809&LangID=E>

<sup>151</sup> Berro Pizzarossa, "Here to Stay." See also:

<http://www.policyproject.com/matrix/Documents/Cairo.htm>

<sup>152</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/discrimination/pages/lgbtunresolutions.aspx>

<sup>153</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=17168&LangID=E>

<sup>154</sup> Berro Pizzarossa, "Here to Stay". See also her discussions of SRHR in the context of the SDG agenda (p. 10–12)

<sup>155</sup> Sahgal and Cooperman, "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe," 27.

vigilantly defended in the years to come. This is indeed already an ongoing effort, but there is a continuing need for strategic discussions on how to further it.

The natural starting point has been to build knowledge of religious conservative actors and alliances, their motivations and working modes. Scholars remind us to avoid a too alarmist reading of such movements, but instead engage with the complexity of these oppositions and avoid overemphasizing developments that may be context-specific.<sup>156</sup> Locating the religious right in its various settings will not only allow us better insight into how diverse actors collaborate or interact, but also further knowledge of the different types and forms of opposition to SRHR. Equally important, a more context-focused analytical approach will also advance analysis of the movement's home-grown roots whether in Europe, Africa or Russia.<sup>157</sup>

Mapping and tracing funding policies may also yield a clearer idea of the power and potential of these movements. Wealthy liberal governments and private foundations (such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) provide considerable funds to develop and distribute public health and reproductive services in poor and undeveloped countries, as well as for advocacy and awareness campaigns. Religious conservative actors therefore often point to their opponents' solid funding base compared to their own, and perhaps rightly so, but this would need to be researched.

Certainly, anti-SRHR groups cannot mount large-scale health programs provided by states bilaterally or through multilateral agencies in aid development. Their aims are mostly limited to obstructing progressive policies and their means are mostly limited to discourse. Still, the power of discourse is not to be underestimated, as illustrated by the current US administration's expanded Global Gag Rule, which shows the impact the religious right can have.

Understanding the opposition is useful, but does not overcome opposition. To do so, it may be necessary to learn from the religious conservative opposition in order to beat them at their own game, or to change the game to one they don't play well.

One might start with the anti-SRHR groups' strategic analysis of the game: that pro-SRHR campaigners want new rights that nations would not agree to if put to a vote, so they try to sneak them in by the back door of accumulating soft law in the form of carefully worded declarations and reinterpretations of existing rights by expert committees. To the extent that this analysis is accurate, it points to a growing problem of legitimacy that engenders populist and sovereigntist resistance and ultimately limits what such a strategy can achieve. Without abandoning a rights-based agenda, it is important to consider how it can gain political support.

Several SRHR advocates argue that a holistic and intersectional approach is needed when advancing human rights related to sensitive matters such as reproduction, gender

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<sup>156</sup> Paternotte and Kuhar, "Disentangling and Locating the 'Global Right,'" 7.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

and sexuality. Stuart Halford argues e.g. that the disadvantage of a silo approach is seen in many instances and may also result in protection gaps that occurs when certain issues are foregrounded at the expense of others. For instance, he notes that issues such as Child Early Forced Marriage and SOGI receive much attention while other core SRHR receive little or no attention.<sup>158</sup>

While this is certainly true, one shouldn't overlook the risk of lumping everything in together with abortion and LGBTI rights into one large target called SRHR. Perhaps a starting point in resolving highly contested and deeply politicised matters such as SRHR is to recognize that there is no 'one-size-fits-all'. While the holistic perspective is highly in place when e.g. negotiating resolutions at the UN or national health strategies, bilateral advocacy and awareness campaigns on the ground, whether with civil actors, informal leaders or local authorities, require fine tuned pragmatism, with language and topics adapted to the specific contexts' concerns and needs.

The UN special rapporteur on poverty Phillip Anston argues that increased attention to economic rights might prove essential in the task of rebuilding global consensus on international human rights in the current political climate: Illiberal populism thrives in part because "the majority in society feel they have no stake in the human rights enterprise", which is perceived to be mainly about political rights of disadvantaged minorities. Noting that a "surprisingly small proportion of self-described human rights NGOs do anything much on economic and social rights", he does suggested that "all groups should reflect on ways in which they can constructively contribute."<sup>159</sup>

Sexual and reproductive health right fall under economic and social rights. However, the religious right has some success framing them as the politicized rights claims of disadvantaged (sexual) minorities. This raises an analogous problem to that described by Alston for human rights in general, and suggests a need to show broad social benefits of SRHR.

Key UN agencies such as the UNFPA and the World Bank have argued along economic lines for several years, linking SRHR and women's rights to healthy economies. Causal links have also been made between modern contraceptives and economic development for families and at the social level, e.g. from a "demographic dividend".<sup>160</sup> This is not to suggest turning away from the rights-based approach to reproductive health established at the ICPD. Nor is it necessarily an effective approach everywhere; there are concerns e.g. that linking SRHR to economic outcomes would legitimate anti-SRHR arguments in countries that do not face a demographic dividend but demographic decline.

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<sup>158</sup> Halford, "Addressing the Protection Gaps".

<sup>159</sup> Alston, "The Populist Challenge to Human Rights".

<sup>160</sup> This refers to growth resulting from a shift in the population's age structure that increases the share of the working-age population relative to the non-working age.

Progressives and liberals (secular and religious alike) may also study their opponents' methods to learn from their successes. Conservatives have e.g. taken ownership of concepts such as "values" and the "family", both effective and uniting slogans that resonate widely across religions and world regions. George Lakoff describes the family as a master metaphor structuring both conservative and progressive social thought – a "Strict Father Model" versus a "Nurturing Parent Model" – but argues that only conservatives are aware that their politics center on a morality of the family and thus are able to use the metaphor to their advantage.<sup>161</sup> On this argument, progressives should develop and convey their own positive, substantive vision of the family, and show that it outperforms the dysfunctional conservative model in meeting the needs of real families in all their diversity.

One such approach could be to engage in discussions on SRHR in the context of broader social and welfare policies, and bring to the fore empirical data on their positive impact, not only in relation to broader economic development, but also for families, men and women and children included. A positive family policy approach is, as noted above, important as a counterweight to the religious right's co-optation of the 'family', and it may open for new dialogues on sensitive matters such as gender equality, the rights of the child and SRHR.

Finally, a constructive way forward would perhaps also be to invest in research and attention to the positive developments of SRHR over the past decade, both with regard to global development policies and developments on the ground, but also to national progressive political campaigns such the referendum on abortion in Ireland in 2018, which showed that religious conservatives did not speak for the people, but could be beat through democratic politics. Such developments are hardly ever included in reports assessing the role and influence of religious conservatives in global and national SRHR policy.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Lakoff, "Metaphor, Morality, and Politics".

<sup>162</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/26/world/europe/ireland-abortion-yes.html>

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