
Anti-Feminist Backlash in the UN

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The WZB Talks - 18.08.2020





Conservatives cannot afford to abandon the institutions of power that seek to redefine human rights for the entire world. The temptation may be to forsake the international institutions and resist any appearance of assimilation with progressive agendas. The best solution, however, is to stay in the fight and proceed with the best and most truly universal resource at our disposal—the Declaration.

(Director of ADF International)



Research Question: What happens in international organizations, specifically in the UN, when conservatives decide to engage in them, and start interacting with groups with opposing agendas?



Background: Actors & Frames

Alliance of NGOs, states, religious organizations

- NGOs: Predominantly US based conservative NGOs
- States: Group of Friends of the Family* (Coalition of 25 UN Member states)

Unifying frames

- Natural family
- Gender ideology

* Bangladesh, Belarus, Comoros, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Libya, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Yemen, Uganda and Zimbabwe



Socialization & Politicization

Anti-feminist backlash is facilitated by **the socialization** of conservative NGOs in the UN.

Mechanism of socialization: **competitive mimicry**

Emulating the behavior dominant in a given social environment with the expectation of maximizing utility and/or preventing erosion of one's social status relative to the peers who are being imitated.

Competitive mimicry is visible in two areas:

1. The way conservative NGOs organize transnationally
2. Their skillful use of UN Human Rights framework



1. Transnational organizing of conservative NGOs

Forming of various groups: The Group of the Friends of the Family, The Civil Society for the Family, The World Congress of Families

Events: WCF World Conferences (between 1997 and 2012, the Congress organized only five of these conferences, since 2012 it organizes them yearly), the International Year of the Family anniversaries

Other strategies: provide training to UN delegates, move their headquarters to cities such as New York and Geneva, train and mobilize youth



2. The skillful use of the UN's Human Rights Framework

Secularizing and scientific justifications of “the natural family” and embedding it into the UN human rights language of human rights.

Think tanks: The Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society has a scientific journal The Family in America: A Journal of Public Policy dealing with ill-effects of divorce, abortion, same-sex partnership, and positive effects of traditional family; **C-Fam** publishes scholarship and policy literature; **Family Watch International** provides talking points, negotiating techniques, translating conservative language into UN-appropriate language.

Influences UN fora and documents: Human Rights Council “protection of the family” resolutions (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017); UN General Assembly resolution on “parental rights” in 2017.

Influencing soft law: e.g. 2004 International Year of the Family and the Doha Declaration

Blocking language: “sexual and reproductive rights” from WPS Security Council Resolution in 2019. In other fora, they put up a strong oppose references to references to “safe abortion”, “sexual orientation and gender identity,” “women in all their diversity”



Pernicious Polarization

Concept & Methods

- “a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of ‘us’ versus ‘them” (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018)
- No middle ground, no compromise, no dialogue
- Life of its own
- From domestic context to international:
 - What does polarization look like in the UN concerning gender politics?
- Document analysis (113 documents consisting of reports, declarations, factsheets, blog entries, meeting reflections, videos, and policy recommendations)



Characteristics of pernicious polarization

1. Competition for institutional spaces
“Fully occupy the space” otherwise “it will be hijacked”
Exclude the opponents
1. Competition for institutional language
Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
1. Mutual perceptions of sneakiness
“Stacking”
1. Moral legitimacy claims
Common sources of legitimacy claims: social science, protecting the disadvantaged
1. Perceptions of existential threat
“If they win, we will wither”
1. Mobilization of followers
Praise, support or shame



Concluding Remarks

The anti-feminist backlash will not wither away any time soon given that relatively strong transnational network stands behind it .

It remains to be examined how Covid-19 will influence the developments.