

Family Matters:

Family Values in International
Politics

Final Report



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1 How Conservative Christian Actors took Ownership of the Concept of “Family”

For more than two decades conservative¹ American Christian lobbyists, alongside the Vatican, have systematically promoted conservative family values at the UN – policies which have resonated with Muslim states as well.² This memo discusses religious conservatives’ family engagement, their aims, methods and arguments.

It started in 1994 with the UN's Year of the Family. The Catholic Church eagerly latched on to it and inaugurated the year in Nazareth on the Feast of the Holy Family (December 26, 1993).³ At the Cairo conference on population and development later that year, the conservative family policies of the Catholic Church gained enough support from states in the Arab world, South America and Africa to shift the terms of the debate on demography and family planning. Since then, conservative religious actors have not only been able to set the agenda and define the terms for how certain discussions on the family are framed, but to a large extent taken ownership of the very definition and concept of family.

When the UN announced the 10th anniversary for the International Year of the Family (IYF+10) in 2004 the UN was in the process of downsizing the office that addressed the family. Only a few NGOs – most of them progressives – participated in the UN committee “NGO committee on the Family”. The Christian conservative NGOs chose instead to form their own “IYF+10 Committee” with support from a handful of country missions from the USA,⁴ Qatar and some African states. When Qatar hosted an inter-religious conference to mark the anniversary in 2004 (Doha International Conference on the Family), it was done in alliance with members of the conservative IYF+10 committee as well as a number of

¹ In this memo, we call the groups discussed “conservative,” because they often describe themselves that way (in the American context). Others might describe at least some of them as fundamentalists, reactionaries, or radical right-wingers, and the views discussed here should not be imputed to conservatives in general. They tend to brand their opponents as “radical”; we use “progressive”.

² Family values became a contested issue in the 1970s in the wake of the rapid growth of the feminist movement. US conservatives mobilized resistance to the legalization of abortion in 1973 (the Supreme Court ruling in *Roe vs. Wade*); a proposed constitutional amendment guaranteeing equal rights for women (ERA); and early gay-rights legislation. A few years earlier family policies in the Catholic Church had taken a conservative turn when pope Paul VI banned contraception, and praised celibacy (the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (On the development of peoples), 1967). The 1970s also saw an “Islamic awakening” in the Muslim world.

³ Letter to families from Pope John Paul II, *Gratissimam sane*, issued on February 2, 1994, section 3. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_02021994_families_en.html

⁴ During the Bush-era Christian conservative NGOs had direct backing from the White House.

traditionally conservative UN member states.⁵ The conference's outcome was the Doha Declaration on the Family,⁶ which inter alia stresses the importance of religious faith, calls on governments to "preserve and defend the institution of marriage," and underlines parents' right to choose their children's education. The document, which conservatives tend to refer to in the same manner as official UN conference outcomes, was never discussed or adopted by the UN, but "noted by the General Assembly."⁷ This illustrates the existence of a growing international pro-family platform with a significant potential. It also showed that progressives had underestimated the symbolic and political value of the family and how well pro-family arguments resonated with the global south.⁸

5 The idea of co-hosting a family conference came from Qatar's UN Ambassador. The conference was organised in collaboration with the conservative Mormon World Family Policy Centre (led by the late Richard Wilkins at Brigham Young University) and the Year of the Family+10 Committee.

6 The declaration is available at the home page of Doha International Family Institute, <http://www.difi.org.qa/about/doha-declaration>.

7 Doha webpage, citing UN GA resolution A/RES/59/111 (December 6, 2004).

8 Jennifer S. Butler, *Born Again: The Christian Right Globalized* (London: Pluto Press, 2006), 69–74.

2 Defining the “Real” Family

The minimal ideal model of the family promoted by these conservative religious NGOs is one man and one woman, united in an enduring marriage, and their biological children; it may be extended to include other generations and adopted children. They also promote a clear differentiation of gender roles, with the male as the sole or primary breadwinner and head of the household, and the female as the primary home-maker and care-giver. The subordination of women to men in the family, justified as part of the sacred order, is found in all religions traditions. However, the “traditional” family promoted here is better described as “neo-traditional,” as male authority over women is not explicitly asserted; instead, marriage is described as a partnership structured by gender difference and complementarity.⁹ Although men and women share equal “dignity”, “worth”, or “partnership”, they have different, sex-specific roles, and hence rights and duties, that complement each other.¹⁰

The family is the basic unit of all social life and should be supported and defended as such by the legal system. The responsibility of the state is to make conditions right so that families can thrive, yet its boundaries should be respected and protected from undue state interference. Christian conservatives insist on the parents’ prior right to decide on their children’s education, including home-schooling, and to object to lessons in sex education.

In the international context, conservatives unite to protect the “traditional family,” although their definition of family may vary substantially across religions and cultures, for instance on issues like polygamy, divorce, and adoption (Islamic tradition), or on the emphasis on the nuclear versus the extended family. Yet the conservative consensus is broad when it comes to the social function of the family; the difference between husband and wife; the importance of male and parental authority; and the prohibition of pre- and extra-marital sex and same-sex relations. The conservative movement for the family arose largely as a reaction

9 J. Josephson and Cynthia Burack, “The Political Ideology of the Neo-Traditional Family,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 3, no. 2 (1998): 213–231 at 214, doi:10.1080/13569319808420777. On neo-traditionalism in an Islamic context, see e.g. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 83–85.

¹⁰ See for instance the The Holy See’s “Charter of the Rights of the Family” (October 22, 1983, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_19831022_family-rights_en.html), which does accord the spouses “equal rights as to the marriage,” but qualifies this equality with “the natural complementarity which exists between man and woman” (art. 2c). – The Mormon church says fathers are to “preside over”, provide for, and protect their families; mothers are “primarily responsible for the nurture of their children”; but they should help each other “as equal partners” (LDS Church, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” September 23, 1995, <https://www.lds.org/topics/family-proclamation>). – The “equal partners” formulation is also found in the Doha Declaration.

to the perceived threat of a radical feminist and gay-rights “gender agenda”, which they view as an attempt to deny natural biological differences between men and women.¹¹

What constitutes a family is intrinsically an emotionally charged subject, since people have the formative and affective experience of growing up in one. Conservative religious groups refer to a “traditional” or “natural” family as a self-evident fact. However, the love-based marriage, and the family as a private sphere of refuge, is only a few centuries old. The male-breadwinner, female-caregiver, nuclear-family household ideal, associated with the postwar economic surplus and baby boom of the 1950s USA, is something of a historical aberration.¹² There are no biological or historical grounds constraining the possible forms of the family to those accepted by social conservatives.

The “traditional family” ideal does not refer to any **historically** prevalent phenomenon even in the West, especially not one found over “millennia” of “recorded history”.¹³ Historically, marriage was not a relationship just between “a man and a woman”, but between a family and another family, as well as other stakeholders involved in arranging the match, for economic or political advantage rather than for love. Serving sometimes as a business merger, and sometimes as a diplomatic treaty, it allowed families to form alliances, pool economic resources, increase their workforce by having children, and regulate succession by producing legitimate heirs.¹⁴ **Cross-culturally**, most human societies have practised at least occasional polygyny, some have practiced monogamy, and a few polyandry¹⁵. In some, the maternal uncle acts as social father. In one (the Na people of China), there is no marriage; brothers and sisters form households and raise the children that result from casual sex with houseguests.¹⁶ Many societies have allowed easy divorce.

Homosexual behaviour, for example, is often denounced as obviously “unnatural” because it is not reproductive, but parallels have been described in at least 450 species, including long-lasting pair bonds and parenting.¹⁷ Of course, animal behavior is a poor guide to human morality either way, and it is not what many conservative religious actors in fact

11 See for instance <http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en/the-vatican/detail/articolo/vaticano-onu-identita-di-genere-vatican-gender-identity-identidad-de-genero-4864/>

12 Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy; Or, How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005).

For examples of such sweeping statements, see the Family Watch International (FWI) policy brief “Traditional Marriage is Essential for a Healthy Society”. This and other FWI statements may be found at <http://www.familywatchinternational.org/fwi/resources.cfm>.

¹⁴ Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage*.

¹⁵ J. Patrick Gray, “Ethnographic Atlas Codebook,” *World Cultures* 10, no. 1 (1998): 86–136, table 9.

¹⁶ Coontz, *Marriage*, 32–33.

¹⁷ See Bruce Bagemihl, *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), for documentation of cases (but not for scientific explanation).

have in mind when they speak of “nature”. Rather, they refer to natural law: the theory that there exist moral laws that are objectively given, laid down in human nature, accessible to human reason, and prior to positive law. Today, natural law plays a particular role in Catholic thought, and the Catholic Church claims to be its authoritative exponent.¹⁸ Historically, natural law theory has been an important influence on international humanitarian law and human rights. In the SRHR context, it is often used to give religious arguments a secular form with broader appeal.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 16 (3) does state that: “The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State”. It is worth noting, however, that the drafters of the Declaration twice explicitly voted to reject additional language that would have made the family “endowed by the Creator with inalienable rights antecedent to all positive law.”¹⁹ Moreover, this right has long been interpreted in light of the existence of “various forms of the family”, a formulation vigorously opposed by religious conservatives, who claim it is a code word for same-sex marriage.²⁰

Debates at the UN illustrate that *what* this protection means and *what* or *whom* should be protected are subject to profound disagreements. Countries in the Western world have experienced tremendous changes in family patterns as women have gained legal and political equality and economic independence over the past decades.

Most importantly, these changes came as a result of revolutionary biotechnological inventions, namely contraception. Rubber condoms became available to the masses in the inter-war period, and from the 1960s industrial production of the Pill gave women the possibility to control how many children they would have. Assisted reproductive technology further decoupled procreation, sex, and marriage. With procreation under control, marriage could become a matter of individual choice. The conservative religious actors who champion the cause of “traditional family values” at the UN and elsewhere fervently oppose the spread of contraception and the “fertility industry,” but they don’t seem to realize just how far-ranging and irreversible is this change, which in practical consequence could be compared to a real change in female biology. This change has had a

¹⁸ *Humanae Vitae* (1968), section I (4).

¹⁹Johannes Morsink, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Origins, Drafting, and Intent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 254–256.

²⁰ While the formulation is open to that interpretation, it obviously also covers many other important realities, and pre-dates the push for gay rights at the UN. CCPR General Comment No. 19 on Article 23, adopted by the Human Rights Committee on July 27, 1990, refers to “the existence of various forms of the family, such as unmarried couples and their children or single parents and their children.”

dramatic impact on family policies and attitudes to sexuality in Western societies²¹ and continues to challenge the traditional subordination of women to men around the world.²²

21 Robert Jütte. *Contraception: A history* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2003).

22 A report on the status of marriage and family life in the USA demonstrates that the American public's definition of a family has changed accordingly. 86 percent hold that a single parent and child constitute a family; nearly 80 percent say an unmarried couple living together with a child is a family, and more than 60 percent say a gay or lesbian couple raising a child is a family. *The Decline of Marriage and Rise of New Marriages*. (Pew Research Centre, 2010).

3 Motivation and purpose

The neo-traditional family caucus at the UN is dominated by American Christian conservative NGOs. For these actors “traditional family values” has a political meaning associated with a package of specific conservative social values. These values are often what motivates them to engage in international politics in the first place.

American Christian conservatives’ deep distrust of the UN (not shared by the Vatican or Muslim delegations) makes it imperative to take action to limit international influence on national legislation and policies. They entered the UN scene in reaction to the agendas of the large UN conferences on population (Cairo, 1994) and women (Beijing, 1995). In the late 1990s, powerful conservative think tanks like the Heritage Foundation encouraged Christian Conservatives to take part on the UN scene as a counterweight to socialists and liberals who had supposedly dominated UN politics for many years.²³ The fact that Christian conservatives have lost some influence on American politics (the Obama administration) may further motivate conservative American Christians to seek international partnerships.²⁴ American activists have not only vocally supported anti-gay laws in countries like Russia or Uganda, but have systematically sought international collaboration to advance their conservative family policies outside the USA.²⁵

The Vatican is a key institution that takes a leading role in promoting traditional family models on the international arena. While Catholicism has lost much of its influence in Europe, especially regarding its teaching on sexual ethics and family policies (ban on contraceptives, divorce and infertility techniques), the Vatican has stepped up its international engagement.²⁶ The Vatican has had the political and religious clout to influence family legislation in Catholic countries (Latin America) as well as to take a leading role in the “natural family” lobby at the UN, working with like-minded parties – including Muslim and Orthodox countries. A process to watch is the Synod of Bishops on pastoral challenges to the family in the context of evangelization, which will take place in two stages in 2014 and 2015. Judging by the framing of the topic and early statements by Vatican spokesmen, one

23 Butler, *Born Again* (2006); Doris Buss & Didi Herman, *Globalizing Family Values; the Christian Right in International Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

24 http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/21/us/21evangelical.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0
<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/10/us/politics/christian-conservatives-failed-to-sway-voters.html>

On Russia, see for instance: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/04/american-conservative-support-russia-anti-gay_n_3866442.html. On Uganda, see for instance: <http://www.politicalresearch.org/resources/reports/full-reports/colonizing-african-values/>.

26 A questionnaire survey has been carried out in preparation. See the preparatory document at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20131105_iii-assembly-sinodo-vescovi_en.html.

should not expect doctrinal changes on SRHR issues; but neither can one rule out a shift in the Holy See's international policy priorities.

4 Methods and strategies

From the beginning, Christian conservatives' mode of action was to block progressive agendas. They learned lobbying and negotiation strategies by watching their progressive opponents, and developed guidelines that helped likeminded newcomers to navigate the complex UN system.²⁷ With help from the Bush administration (2000-2008), Christian conservatives moved from being dissident outsiders to influential political insiders, not just protesting, but developing their own political initiatives.

At the UN, conservative Christian lobby groups now employ at least two different strategies: They continue to vigorously oppose SRHR policies by blocking progress at international conferences and UN meetings. But they also take a seemingly more constructive approach when they promote neo-traditional family policies as a means to reach internationally agreed development goals.

In this regard it is worth mentioning the network around the Qatar-based Doha International Family Institute. The institute, situated in and financed by a modern, though autocratic, Muslim state, is mandated to follow up the Doha Declaration. The institute continues to work to promote the Doha policies at the UN, in a diplomatic mode, though it now focuses more on the Arab world and on research. The centre works tightly with conservative American Christians as well with like-minded advocates in Asia, Latin America and Africa. A recent publication, arguing that the (traditional) family is the key to achieving development goals, is an illustrative example of their international partnerships as well as their operational approach.²⁸ The book, edited by a well-known conservative "pro-family" leader and veteran of UN lobbying, features contributions by scholars, activists and political actors from countries like India, Kenya, Qatar and the USA.

To achieve results at the UN, Christian conservative NGOs count on support from like-minded delegations, sometimes from Latin America, the Caribbean, or Africa, but often from Muslim countries. Their causes have often been sponsored by delegations of countries like Pakistan, Egypt, and Qatar, sometimes speaking for the OIC.

For example, the "family" was a hot topic at the UN Human Rights Council in March 2013. Progressive NGOs and Western delegations mobilized against a proposed resolution on "Protection of the Family", which was postponed. A seemingly innocuous call for a panel

27 Conservative UN veteran and founder of United Families International Susan Roylance issued "The UN Negotiation Guide". Family Watch International recently issued a "Resource Guide to UN Consensus Language on Family Issues" to prepare pro-family lobbyists for the opportunities and events in relation to the 20th anniversary of the International Year of the Family in 2014

28 Susan Roylance, ed., *The Family and the MDGs: Using Family Capital to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals* (Doha: Family First Foundation; United Families International; Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society; Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development, 2012), <http://www.difi.org.qa/about/the-family-and-the-mdgs>.

discussion, the proposal, sponsored by Egypt, should be seen in light of the then ruling Muslim Brotherhood's simultaneous statement decrying very basic women's rights as "destructive tools meant to undermine the family as an important institution".²⁹

29 "Protection of the family", draft resolution, March 19, 2013, A/HRC/22/L.25; "Muslim Brotherhood Statement Denouncing UN Women Declaration for Violating Sharia Principles", March 14, 2013, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=30731>.

5 Main arguments

5.1 Social Order

Conservative religious actors see the social order and the future of civilization itself as being at stake: Marriage is a “social good” and a “public good”, providing all sorts of benefits, such as greater wealth and better health for individuals, and protecting society from a long list of pressing social problems, such as crime and teenage pregnancies. Conservative religious activists here draw on a research literature produced by more moderate, academic “pro-family” initiatives, which critics accuse of selectivity, disregarding negative outcomes for women, and using circular reasoning to promote a social order based on male authority.³⁰

Moreover, it is argued that marriage/the family is a fundamental social institution, and society is made up of its institutions. Therefore, any tampering with the definition of marriage – for example, to include same-sex couples – is a reckless social experiment.³¹

This argument does not hold up to inspection, of course, since all social institutions have undergone change in modern times. For example, government now includes the people, and slavery has been abolished. The legal institution of marriage itself has undergone enormous change, e.g. when common-law countries abandoned the notion (known as “coverture”) that a woman ceased to exist as a separate person in law when she married.

Though the arguments are couched in secular terms, they mesh with religious fears that God may visit collective punishment on a sinful society, as in Sodom and Gomorrah. The Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) is particularly clear on this point: “We warn that the disintegration of the family will bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets.”³² Tampering with God’s plan by allowing same-sex marriage is “to court disaster”, with civilization itself at risk, according to Focus on the Family leader James Dobson.³³

30 For surveys of this research, see **Marriage and the Public Good: Ten Principles** (Princeton, New Jersey: Witherspoon Institute, 2008) and **Why Marriage Matters, Second Edition: Twenty-Six Conclusions from the Social Sciences** (New York: Institute for American Values, 2005). For their use by religious conservative lobbies at the UN, see the FWI brief “Outcomes According to Policy Structure”. For the criticism, see Josephson and Burack, “Political Ideology of the Neo-Traditional Family.”

31 FWI, “Traditional Marriage”.

32 LDS Church, “The Family”.

33 James Dobson, “Marriage Under Fire”, n.d. (2004?), http://drjamesdobson.org/about/commentaries/marriage_under_fire.

A line of argument on which conservative and liberal religious groups agree, however, is a critique of materialism and its associated vices (egotism and greed) that also plays into anti-Western sentiments. With the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (On the development of peoples), Pope Paul VI in 1967 launched a neo-traditional family policy as the remedy for the world's ills. Although communism was the worse for its atheism, the pope was also critical of capitalism for its hedonistic tendencies, egotism and blind pursuit of immediate pleasure, as opposed to Catholic moral teaching, which values asceticism, celibacy and temperance. The lack of moral restraint in modern (Western) societies was a sign of moral corruption in the wake of irreligion (secularization). In the absence of moral guidance (e.g. religious authority), people become slaves to their own base drives. Here the pope and traditionalist Muslim leaders could find common ground in their shared ideas of the good society: a society where people are guided by religious moral rules and norms, which are expressed in traditional gender models and family life.

Neo-traditional actors regard the family as the most vital instrument in the fight against the irreligious contemporary world, which pope John Paul II repeatedly referred to as “a culture of death”.³⁴ This phrase, which in this context has an immediate association with abortion, also involves a criticism of egoism and materialism, here construed as the opposite of a religious world view which is concerned with the soul and the absolute value of religious norms.

5.2 Fertility and demographics

Neo-traditional family values are often expressed as concerns for demographic decline and a “graying” population. Conservative religious actors see these threats, not over-population, as real. The underlying arguments, however, are religious.

In a discussion on sustainable development at the UN in June 2013, for example, the Holy See representative derided the progressive side for relying on “outdated and discredited Malthusian mechanics of development”, the “harsh consequences” of which were “glaringly evident in ageing communities in many societies”.³⁵ To these appeals to scientific fact and theory, the Holy See added its concern for “the loss of millions of creative individuals who never had the opportunity to be born and contribute their human potential”. In this last section it becomes clear that the Catholic view on family planning and population policy is

34 Reference to the contemporary irreligious world as a 'culture of death' is found for example in the catalogue of central texts referred to and made available at the website of the Holy See at the UN (*The Social Agenda. A collection of Magisterial Texts*, Rev. Robert Sirico (ed.), Città del Vaticano: Liberia Vaticana, 2000, § 105).

35 "Health, population, dynamics": intervention by the Holy See at the IV session of the General Assembly open working group on sustainable development goals. June 17-19, 2013 available at <http://www.holyseemission.org/statements/statement.aspx?id=434>

dictated by the religious conviction that the foetus is a human life and person from the moment of conception, and therefore has the same human rights as those who are born. It should be noted that this teaching is relatively recent. Until the new code of canon law from 1917, the Catholic position was similar to the Muslim in assuming that the foetus got its soul at a later stage, and recognizing ensoulment and birth as morally and legally relevant distinctions.

The Catholic ban on contraception is related to a different line of argument, which sets it apart from Muslims and Evangelicals who do not have principled objections to contraceptive use within marriage. The official Catholic position, that every act of sexual intercourse must be open to the transmission of life as designed and willed by God, has received much internal criticism, not least from health workers involved in AIDS programs, and has led to widespread disobedience. In traditional Catholic countries low birth rates are a telling sign of an increasing loss of authority in matters regarding sexuality.

Conservative family policies thus appear to fail to deliver the fertility they promise. By the turn of the millennium, fertility in the OECD continued a steep decline among South European countries with Catholic adherence, while Scandinavian countries seemed to have arrested the decline at a higher fertility level – a striking reversal of the situation just two decades earlier.³⁶ An obvious explanation is that progressive Scandinavian family policies such as extensive child-care provision, flexible work arrangements, and generous parental leave, encourage working women to have babies. On the other hand, fertility falls where traditional family values continue to inform policies that force a choice between motherhood and paid work outside the home. Given the bio-technological revolution women have autonomy and are no longer obliged to choose the former.

5.3 State Sovereignty

Conservative religious groups defend individual freedoms and parental rights against interventions by the state, States' rights against the Federal government (in the U.S.), and the sovereignty of national governments against the United Nations. They share the general conservative distrust of (selected) elites, government bureaucracies and international bodies, but oppose them in particular for their secular bias and disregard for religious concerns.

Conservative religious lobbies charge UN treaty bodies (human rights committees) with infringing national sovereignty and overstepping their mandate to oversee their respective treaties: by “inventing new rights” to abortion, sexual orientation and gender identity, rights not set out in the treaties or agreed to by national governments; and by grilling the

36 Francis G. Castles, “The World Turned Upside Down: Below Replacement Fertility, Changing Preferences and Family-Friendly Public Policy in 21 OECD Countries,” *Journal of European Social Policy* 13, no. 3 (August 1, 2003): 209–227, doi:10.1177/09589287030133001.

governments that report to them over their failure to protect such rights. The women's and children's committees (CEDAW, CRC) come in for particular criticism.³⁷ They also denounce UN agencies for referring to non-binding guidelines, expert reports and committee views as if they created binding SRHR obligations.

The sovereignty card is easy to play in UN negotiations, particularly over the regulation of family, marriage, and public morals, which are typically considered the internal affairs of states, and are bound up with cultural sensitivities. In particular, in most Muslim countries family law is symbolically charged, as the only legal area where Islamic provisions have not been replaced with codes of Western inspiration. And although the conservative argument seems exaggerated, and based on a narrow and outmoded view of national sovereignty and international law, parts of it ring true. The relevant UN treaties do not contain explicit LGBT or abortion rights. Instead of seeking a near-impossible consensus among states on new legally binding rights, advocates do seem to follow a strategy of building up "soft" law³⁸ (a strategy imitated by conservative religious groups³⁹). The scope, legitimacy and authority of UN treaty bodies' interpretations and demands for compliance are matters of legitimate debate.⁴⁰ And their functioning is under review in the UN system – a process targeted by leading American conservative groups.

However, similar criticisms might be made of the conservative religious camp. Religious conservatives also assert human rights (against abortion) that governments have not agreed to put in UN treaties. American groups promoting homophobia or total abortion bans in developing countries could be accused of cultural imperialism. The clearest example of rich countries using aid conditionality to impose a certain SRHR policy on poor countries is probably the "Mexico City Policy" of conservative American administrations to withhold family-planning funding from groups connected with abortion services.

5.4 Gender and Fatherhood

The word *gender* has become anathema to neo-traditionalist family activists and stirs debate wherever it occurs in international conferences and meetings on family matters. The resistance to the "UN gender agenda" rests on an essentialist definition of gender with

37 See e.g. Family Watch International policy briefs on "CEDAW" and "The Committee on the Rights of the Child"; FamilyPolicy.ru, **Ultra Vires Acts by the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the New Optional Protocol to UNCRC** (<http://familypolicy.ru/rep/int-12-034en>). The CRC's controversial Concluding Observations on the report of the Holy See in February 2014 will stoke this debate further (http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared_Documents/VAT/CRC_C_VAT_CO_2_16302_E.pdf).

38 Clifford Bob, *The Global Right Wing and the Clash of World Politics*, Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

39 See the "San Jose Articles" (2011, <http://www.sanjosearticles.com/>), an anti-abortion manifesto that would seem to mimic the strategy of the pro-LGBT rights "Yogyakarta Principles".

40 Helen Keller and Geir Ulfstein, eds., *UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies: Law and Legitimacy*, Studies on Human Rights Conventions 1 (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

references to biblical texts, natural law and biological determinism. Men and women fill different, yet complementary roles (husband–wife, breadwinning–childrearing) and separate spheres (workplace/public–domestic). Gender is seen as a political notion tied to a specific progressive agenda to which Christian conservatives are deeply opposed: promotion of women’s rights, recognition of a diversity of family forms, gay rights, contraceptives, legal abortion, and biotechnological fertility techniques.

Fatherhood is a loaded concept within this discourse. Conservative Christians claim that feminists and liberals promote policies that undermine men’s traditional roles in the family, and claim that feminism and progressive policies have turned women against men and systematically undermined the importance of fatherhood. The costs of these policies for children and society at large are severe: antisocial behaviour, soaring crime rates and violence, teenage pregnancies, etc. – all because of absent fathers. In short, it is argued that fatherhood within heterosexual marriage provides stability and order. Children who are raised by their single or divorced mothers who are forced to work outside the home, leaving their children alone to fend for themselves, pay the price for the dissolution of the traditional father role.

It is worth noting that the neo-traditional discourse on fatherhood is quite complex. While male authority continues to be affirmed in evangelical literature, the definition of male leadership is not a promotion of traditional male authority, but is softened and presented as “servant leadership,” exemplified by the image of the ideal father who invests time and emotions in family relations. Surveys also illustrate that ordinary evangelical families tend to be more traditional in their rhetoric than in their actual behaviour when it comes to gender roles. Despite their stated beliefs, more than half of married evangelical women with children are employed outside the home. Thus flexible gender roles and active father involvement have become a mainstream feature also within conservative Christian families in the USA.⁴¹ Neo-traditional family literature also emphasises that family life has the positive effect of domesticating and socialising men by channeling masculine sexual aggression into functional and responsible behaviour.⁴² This literature explains crime and other social ills by broken families, and broken families by cultural attitudes (feminism) and private morality, disregarding socio-economic and other structural causes behind both the “decline of marriage” and crime rates.

41 Gallagher describes this fusion of beliefs and behaviours as “*symbolic headship*” and “*pragmatic egalitarianism*.” Sally K. Gallagher, *Evangelical identity and gendered family life* (Rutgers University Press, 2003).

42 J. Josephson and Cynthia Burack, “The Political Ideology of the Neo-Traditional Family”.

6 Taking the family back?

We began by noting that religious conservatives have taken ownership to the concept of the family, and have deployed it effectively to obstruct a range of important SRHR policies.

One obvious secular, academic response is to invoke feminist and queer criticism of the “traditional” family as based on exclusion, domination, and exploitation. Religious conservatives take this as yet more evidence for their claim that the family is under attack. Another is to deconstruct and debunk the myth of the “traditional natural family”, as we have briefly noted above. It’s worth doing, but does not win hearts and minds.

One could also dismiss or sideline “traditional family” talk as irrelevant for SRHR talks, and approach SRHR narrowly as a public health matter requiring targeted, evidence-based measures. Many faith-based approaches may meet these criteria, but “promoting the traditional family” is too broad and contentious, and some specific “family-values” approaches, such as abstinence-only programs against teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, have proven ineffective at best.

Sensible or appealing as these responses may be, they allow religious conservatives to keep their symbolic ownership of the family, which they have largely won by walk-over, because progressive forces have been indifferent or apprehensive about family talk.

The religious conservatives have got at least one thing right: Family matters. All societies rely on families in some form for their biological and cultural reproduction, the nurture and primary socialization of children, and often many other important functions. Democracies rely on families to bring up citizens; economies rely on families to bring up workers.

The family is also a potent political tool. As a slogan, “family values” is vague enough to bridge the very real political, cultural, and religious divides between different religious conservatives. It is broad enough to serve as shorthand for the range of sexual and reproductive health rights they are against, but its positive, affective connotations makes them seem to be **for** something, and allows them to cast their opponents as “anti-family” to devastating effect.

Clearly, family matters too much to be left to far-right religious fringe American “culture warriors”. Some groups have entered the fray, contending with the religious right over who represents “real family values”. The activists of the American group PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), for example, support their gay relatives while flaunting their religious and family-minded credentials. The dilemma, as ever, is that by entering the contest over the family on the terms of the neo-traditional family ideology, one risks reinforcing it.⁴³

The symbolic importance of family goes deeper than slogans. George Lakoff, a cognitive scientist who advises American progressive groups, has claimed that the family is the

43 K. L. Broad, Sara L. Crawley, and Lara Foley, “Doing ‘real Family Values’: The Interpretive Practice of Families in the GLBT Movement,” *Sociological Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2004): 509–527, doi:10.1111/j.1533-8525.2004.tb02301.x.

master metaphor that structures the ways both conservatives and progressives think about moral values and politics: Conservatives share an ideal “strict father model” of the family, progressives a “nurturing parent model” with a different order of moral priorities. These models account for their stances on all kinds of issues, such as why conservatives are “pro-life” on abortion yet support the death penalty. Lakoff believes that strict father morality is “inherently pathological”: it allows hurting people in the name of morality, and is empirically harmful to children’s development. The advantage of conservatives, however, is that they are aware that their politics center on a morality of the family, a self-insight progressives have lacked.⁴⁴

This analysis suggests that if progressives are to take the family back, they cannot do it issue-by-issue. They need to develop a clear, positive vision of what family means to them and how it fits within their value system, and to offer it as a superior alternative. They need to show how “traditional family” policies harm children, families, and the very notion of the family itself. They need to show how progressive policies better meet the needs and aspirations of real families, in all their diversity, given real social and economic challenges of the developing world.

This should not be difficult. “Traditional family” activists are morality-based, not reality-based. They do not have solutions for the various forms of family that exist, but would make all society conform to a single model, which would require rolling back decades of political, economic, and technological change. The attitudes and policies they promote are likely to prove increasingly dysfunctional and counter-productive, even on their own terms, as women become increasingly educated and active in the market economy, as illustrated above by the example of the changing connection between traditional values and fertility.⁴⁵ And the harms of conservative policies can be staggering in a world of HIV/AIDS and unsafe abortion.

Still, taking the family back would require a serious effort, and the message and strategy would have to be developed by the NGOs or agencies that would realize them, based on their convictions. This vision need not be faith-based, but it should be open to progressive religious views and able to connect with shared concerns, e.g. through an ethic of care, empathy, and compassion.

44 George Lakoff, “Metaphor, Morality, and Politics, Or, Why Conservatives Have Left Liberals In the Dust,” *Social Research* 62, no. 2 (July 1, 1995): 177–213.

45 An example Norwegian actors could also use as a success story.