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## Working Paper

The international anti-gender movement: Understanding the rise of anti-gender discourses in the context of development, human rights and social protection

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WORKING PAPER 2023-06

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# **The International Anti-Gender Movement**

## **Understanding the Rise of Anti-Gender Discourses in the Context of Development, Human Rights and Social Protection**

Haley McEwen and Lata Narayanaswamy

May 2023

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## **Abstract**

In this working paper, we interrogate the ways anti-gender, or “pro-family”, actors and organizations are using the frameworks and language of “development” to advance arguments and policies that restrict the rights of LGBTIQ+ people and seek to limit how we understand sexual and reproductive health and rights. Support and funding for extensive and growing anti-gender movements is a transnational endeavour, with movements of both people and finance within and between the global North and global South. While organizations and activists who oppose abortion, LGBTIQ+ rights, and comprehensive sexuality education have long cited moral and religious justifications for their intolerance, these so-called “pro-family” actors are increasingly deploying economic and social arguments that enable them to frame their views as essential to the realization of broader development goals. These movements convene at the global level, including through UN institutions, and in so doing, anti-gender groups have devised strategies for centring the “family” as a key site of contestation in ways that invoke notions of rights and sustainability at national, regional and international policy levels. We also explore the increasing professionalization that underpins anti-gender advocacy. There is a growing network of self-styled think tanks funded by anti-gender movements that use mainstream knowledge validation tools, including peer-review articles, policy briefs and webinars, to disseminate anti-gender messages in a range of global development spaces, including the UN system. These efforts are shrouded in the twin cloaks of “neutrality” and “rigour”, rendering anti-gender messaging harder to refute.

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## Acronyms

ACLJ	American Centre for Law and Justice
C-Fam	Centre for Family and Human Rights
CSE	Comprehensive Sexuality Education
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOF	International Organization for the Family
GCD	Geneva Consensus Declaration
LGBTIQ+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SOGIE	Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Expression
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
TFP	Tradition Family and Property
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UNAIDS	The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WCF	World Congress of Families
WHO	World Health Organization

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## Introduction

A new urgency has taken hold for us to better understand what, how and why anti-gender movements are gaining political, social and economic legitimacy. Anti-gender/pro-family actors are generating professionalised discourses justifying their stances against gender equality, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) by expanding their arguments beyond largely religious and moral foundations. In this report we are keen to elucidate the ideational terrain that underpins these movements by addressing two key questions:

1. How is the phenomenon of anti-genderism seeking to align itself with development frameworks and discourses?
2. What are the implications of this alignment for our understanding of the increasing proliferation and uptake of anti-gender/pro-family discourses in diverse political contexts the world over?

Globally, anti-gender actors and discourses have emerged in response to national and global policy developments relating to access to abortion, gender affirming care for transgender and intersex individuals, provision of CSE and the emergence of “gender studies” in secondary and tertiary education. Gender and sexuality as areas for scholarly enquiry and intervention in a range of diverse Global North and South contexts is construed by anti-gender actors as morally depraved excesses of the “liberal west” and global elites that endanger “ordinary” people, entire societies, economies, and nations (see van Klinken et al. 2023).

We can observe how such ideas have been come to drive policy in a range of national and global contexts. “Gender studies” has come under direct attack in Brazil, Poland, and Hungary with efforts to close down and discredit gender and sexuality studies scholars, programmes and publications (McEwen 2020). Parallel efforts have been undertaken to close down and discredit CSE programming for young people in schools in several countries across Africa, eastern and western Europe, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. In 2022 the UK government was accused of altering a statement on gender equality – issued at the International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief hosted in London – by removing “commitments to women’s reproductive and sexual health and rights” ostensibly in favour of religious freedom (Davies 2022). In the state of Florida in the US in March 2022, the news network CNN reports that a bill was passed ‘that would ban certain instruction about sexual orientation and gender identity in the classroom’ (Cole 2022) in primary schools. The news agency Reuters reports that a similar bill is currently under consideration that would effectively ‘ban’ gender studies courses in Florida’s publicly-funded universities (Bernstein 2023).

With the overturning of *Roe v Wade* in the US in 2022 – a supreme court decision that upheld the constitutional right of women to seek abortion on the basis of the right to privacy – we can also observe how national policy may also have global implications. Overturning constitutional



protections to seek legal abortions in the US has had dangerous consequences not only for the maternal health of American women, but potentially in international contexts as well. Firstly, the overturning of *Roe v Wade* risks the withdrawal of USAID funding to SRHR services in the global South. Secondly, the striking down of the ruling itself provides both inspiration and leverage to other states seeking to adopt more conservative interpretations of women's rights, particularly around sexuality and bodily autonomy (see Matsilele 2022).

There is an extensive and rapidly expanding literature documenting the multiplicity of networks that are driving anti-gender/pro-family efforts that are in turn emboldening powerful conservative political voices and movements in ways that cut across Global South-North divides (see for example van Klinken 2023; Pazello 2022; Wilson 2023). In this report we will draw on this wide-ranging literature to broaden our understanding of how anti-gender opponents of sexual and reproductive rights, gender and sexuality diversity, and gender equality, who are mainly affiliated with conservative religious institutions and organizations, are increasingly aligning their arguments with mainstream international frameworks of sustainable development and human rights. Starting in the mid-1990s, pro-family groups have become skillful in co-opting UN frameworks and language to assert anti-rights agendas (Cupać and Ebetürk 2020), including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is observable, for instance, in how the relationship between population growth and economic development has been central to pro-family efforts to present their arguments as mainstream and not driven by fundamentalist religious viewpoints (see McEwen 2017, 2018). It is this appropriation of “sustainable development” discourses, in turn creating a veneer of alignment with more progressive, mainstream notions of “development”, that we are keen to explore further.

Identifying and problematizing entry points for anti-gender advocacy in mainstream gender and development narratives is thus crucial to refuting their underlying logics. In this paper we discuss two key ways in which anti-gender political agendas are gaining traction within dominant development frameworks: Firstly, we argue that the ways in which women's rights and gender equality aspirations are discussed in global and/or development declarations and instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) or the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) lend themselves to being adapted to suit heteronormative pro-family discourses. We identify similar tendencies in how gender inequality is articulated in social protections programmes and policies. Secondly, we argue that anti-gender advocacy has professionalized, circulating money and ideas through ecosystems of pro-family think-tanks staffed by researchers with postgraduate degrees who are able to package and disseminate their messages using tools including peer-reviewed articles, webinars and reports. The resultant messaging, supported in many contexts by high-level political patronage, is thus more challenging to refute.

This report takes the form of a review and analysis of anti-gender stakeholders and associated discourses on gender and development. For this we sourced and analysed reports, speeches, presentations, articles, website content, and other available texts produced by “pro-family” civil society organizations, think tanks, and academic researchers that provide insight into anti-gender discourses on gender and development.

This working paper is structured as follows. We start by providing a brief overview of anti-gender movements, proceeding to place these movements into a wider historical context that recognizes the colonial continuities that underpin modern conservative interpretations of the importance of heteronormative patriarchy to social, economic and political development processes. We then move on to consider how anti-gender advocates use professionalized forms of communication and engagement to lend legitimacy to pro-family agendas. Through extensive networks of think-tanks as well as academic and broader civil society partnerships, anti-gender/pro-family actors are able to advance their agendas both within and outside international spaces, notably the UN. We then undertake a more in-depth analysis of the key anti-gender arguments pro-family advocates seek to proliferate: the co-optation of “UN language” and associated high-level tools, including political organization, to engage with human rights and sustainable development; the articulation of the notion of the “natural family”; and the concept of “demographic winter”. Within each section, we also consider how pro-family actors are able to exploit the existing pro-family tendencies of mainstream development discourse, underpinned by instrumental approaches to gender, within the spaces of the UN and elsewhere. The paper concludes with a discussion on the gaps this analysis has highlighted that need further attention.

## **1. Who or what is the anti-gender movement?**

Before situating anti-genderism in wider historical context, we need to understand who and what constitutes this phenomenon, which has been variously described within academic research as a “backlash”, a counter-movement, or emerging forms of illiberalism . Here, we focus on the activities of anti-gender actors and organizations within the institutional reach of the UN, and we are interested in how anti-genderism operates as a transnational social movement working to block inclusive development frameworks within multilateral governance arenas. Operating within and beyond the UN, the anti-gender movement acts as a transnational coalition of conservative activists and organizations working to counter and undermine political and social gains made by local and international feminist and SOGIE (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Expression) rights advocacy. As already noted above, anti-gender activists and organizations are operating at local, regional and global levels, mobilizing opposition against equal rights for LGBTIQ+ people, women’s reproductive rights, CSE in schools and Gender Studies programmes at a tertiary level. The impact of this movement, and its ability to galvanize and coordinate strategic opposition against LGBTIQ+ inclusive policy language and frameworks has been noted with concern by UN agencies whose work addresses issues of sexual and reproductive health, rights, gender equality and education. This includes the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), The Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), World Health Organization (WHO) and UN Women, as well as UN arenas such as the UN General Assembly and World Health Assembly.

The term “anti-gender” captures the forms of resistance and preemptive opposition that have emerged against women’s sexual agency, gender and sexuality diversity over the course of the past decade. Referring to the use of the terms “gender” and “gender ideology” by conservative actors who have overlapping motivations and interests driving their efforts to protect a heteropatriarchal

social order, the term “anti-gender movement” is now frequently used to describe the transnational constellation of actors working to preserve the heteropatriarchal sex and gender power hierarchy in all areas of social, political, economic, and cultural life. This is captured in Kováts and Pöim’s (2015) metaphorical description of gender as forming the “symbolic glue” to understand how “gender” is used as a catchall for “everything” anti-gender actors consider to be wrong with globalization and liberalism (see also Grzebalska and Peto 2017). Anti-gender mobilizations are not therefore “mere reiterations of the past” but “new forms of mobilization against gender and sexual equality” that employ a common pattern of mobilization, a shared discourse, repertoires of action, and strategies that can be observed in several national contexts (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017:253).

While queer and feminist scholars and activists have referred to those working to erode sexual and reproductive rights as anti-gender, these activists and organizations typically refer to themselves in positive terms; as pro-family or pro-life, or as protectors of family values (McEwen 2020). Their so-called defense of the family involves opposition to notions of gender, marriage and family in ways that acknowledge gender and sexuality diversity as well as sexual and reproductive rights. Pro-family activists interpret the redefinition of these concepts as dangerous to the so-called natural family, which they argue is the universal basis of all civilizations and in turn the cornerstone of sustainable development (McEwen 2017). Some analysts have suggested using the phrases “anti-rights” (Shameem 2017; Losiggio 2021), or “gender restrictive” (Martínez 2021) to refer to groups mobilizing against sexual and reproductive health, rights and education. There is also extensive debate about which terminology is most appropriate for referring to anti-SRHR and anti-LGBTIQ+ advocacy. Sonia Correa (Correa in Murray 2022:3250), for instance, argues that the term “anti-rights” falls short:

... it is not appropriate to portray them as anti-rights. They have a different conception of rights, and while it is a catchy term and useful for mobilising, calling them as such is missing the point because it does not provide a good descriptor – or a sharp tool for analysing what these forces are and what they do. In my view, what we are witnessing is the continuation of a longstanding war against the legitimacy of human rights, now waged in entirely novel terms. While in the past conservatives abhorred human rights, now they are disputing their meanings.

We also note the ways in which both money and ideas flow in service of anti-gender advocacy within and between countries and stakeholders that defy more conventional North-South binaries and associated logics. For instance, many of the organizations that are leading anti-gender coalition and movement building are based in the Global North but are active in Global South contexts and within international governance arenas (for example, International Organization for the Family (IOF), the American Centre for Law and Justice (ACLJ), Ordo Iuris, Family Watch International, and CitizenGo. For instance, the IOF’s project, World Congress of Families, has convened several regional and international gatherings in a range of cities including Mexico City, Tbilisi, Accra, Amsterdam, Madrid, and Geneva since 1997. The ACLJ, which has its headquarters in Washington D.C. has established sister organizations in Europe (the European Center for Law and Justice in France) and Africa (the East African Center for Law and Justice in Kenya). Family Watch International, based in Arizona, has mobilized campaigns against CSE across East and Southern

Africa as well as at the United Nations, while the ultra-conservative Catholic organization HazteOir/CitizenGo has established a CitizenGo Africa office in Nairobi. As Joy Asasira (2022: para 4), a Ugandan human rights lawyer who advocates for gender justice across Africa notes in an article for *OpenDemocracy*, “the loudest and most active conservative voices and efforts in Africa are often closely linked to the far right in the US and Europe”. A similar trend is emerging in the Latin American region, with Pazello (2022:16-17) noting continuities between older “anti-gender and anti-abortion politics” espoused by the “Catholic Church and ultra-Catholicism”, alongside more recent “libertarian and neoliberal currents” that have together emboldened anti-gender movements with international links cutting across Brazil, Chile, USA, Spain, Germany, Russia and Hungary.

## 2. Putting anti-gender movements into historical context

Anti-gender efforts to police the definitions of “gender” (as binary) and “family” (as heteronormative) become entangled with decolonial feminist critiques of “gender”, particularly within international development/governance arenas. While pro-family activists argue that the term “gender” must be restricted to cisgender “men” and “women” – or where a person’s gender identity corresponds to their sex as assigned at birth – decolonial and intersectional feminist and queer scholars and activists have also critiqued the use of “gender” on account of its Eurocentrism (see Mohanty 1991). Unpacking anti-gender efforts thus entails a wider and more nuanced reflection on these Eurocentric tendencies that do not descend into the regressive co-option of “gender” undertaken by pro-family fundamentalists. We can begin exploring these tendencies by reflecting on the relationship between coloniality and articulations of the “family”.

### 2.1 Coloniality, the family, gender and LGBTIQ+ rights: historical reflections and continuities

The notions of “natural family” or “traditional family” employed by anti-gender actors are inextricably intertwined with ideologies that accompanied colonization and “modernity”. As Weber (2016:63) writes, modern western development theory positioned the “presumptively Christian...procreative, white, cisgendered, able-bodied bourgeois, heterosexual nuclear family” as foundational to social and political development. The nuclear family was therefore set out as a necessary institution within linear conceptualisations of development-as-civilising processes, ensuring the survival of the social system as a whole by not only reproducing the population, but socialising children into prevailing social norms and values. Colonial Victorian (heteronormative, patriarchal) ideals around the nuclear family in turn underpinned the division of the “public” (masculine) and the “private” (feminine) (see Weiss 2012) and was central to colonial domination (Smith 2010). As the history of European colonial conquest reveals, the dominance of the nuclear family model is entangled with other modern classificatory schemes such as “gender”, “race” and “nation” that became the epistemic building blocks of Western modernity as part of strategies of empire building (Stoler 1995). The variously termed nuclear/modern/bourgeois family, consisting of a married, monogamous and reproductive man and woman, was positioned as a mark of civilisation, a notion used to classify people and societies that did not practice this particular order of kinship, as “uncivilized” (Kitch 2009).

The corollary to the centering of the “family” is the rejection of LGBTIQ+ identities, as these fall outside of heterosexual male-female binaries, with the legal codes of the British Empire casting the longest shadow:

From 1860 onwards, the empire spread a specific set of legal codes and common law throughout its colonies, among them laws proscribing male-to-male sexual relations. The British Empire drafted these penal codes with a moral, religious mission in mind. The intention was to protect local Christians from “corruption” and correct and Christianise “native” custom ... In contrast with the British experience, the other major colonial powers did not leave such an institutional legacy on criminalisation of homosexual conduct. This is why former British colonies are far more likely to still have these laws in place than the former colonies of other European states or other states in general. Of the 72 countries with such a law still on the books in 2018, at least 38 of them were once subject to some sort of British colonial rule. (Han & O’Mohaney 2018).

Promotion of, and advocacy around, gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights has become a mainstream element of development aid but is still too often tied up with assumptions of a “backward” Global South that does not embody the values of a more “progressive” West/North (Asante & Hanchey 2021). Suggesting that the pursuit of gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights is a uniquely Western/Global North preoccupation is to deny the colonial legacies that may underpin the continued denial of these rights.

This association of gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights with the West/North also creates opportunities for more conservative stakeholders to pushback against the adoptions of such norms. Calls to reject “Western” or “neo-colonial” gender norms and preserve, for instance, “African cultural identity”, are made in order to re-assert a heteronormative patriarchy (Asante & Hanchey 2021: 216). Although several anti-gender actors are using anti-colonial frames to construct their anti-LGBTIQ+ and anti-SRHR narratives in relation to the protection of “tradition”, their arguments about the universality of the gender binary and nuclear family model reproduce colonial ideologies about fixed gender/sex binaries. While it is not contested that forms of patriarchal domination and control existed prior to modern European colonial encounters, European colonial ideology and conquest introduced a particular model of heteropatriarchy that was compatible with the system of capitalism:

To think the scope of the gender system of Eurocentered global capitalism it is necessary to understand the extent to which the *very process of narrowing* of the concept of gender to the control of sex, its resources, and products constitutes gender domination (Lugones 2008:12; emphasis in original).

Charges of “non-Africanness” associated with the promotion of LGBTIQ+ rights are also “tenuous”, as van Klinken et al (2023:10) remind us, “in light of evidence that anti-LGBTIQ campaigns [in East Africa] themselves receive considerable Western (mostly American Christian

right) support”. If the system of “Eurocentered global capitalism” necessitates the “control of sex” as Lugones suggests, then we might consider the structural knock-on effects in the present day for those whose sexuality is deemed deviant and thus must be “controlled” within this system according to anti-gender advocates.

## **2.2 Building and consolidating anti-gender movements in the neoliberal era**

It is against this historical backdrop that we must situate the provenance of anti-gender movements. The “pro-family” or “anti-gender” movement has been taking shape since the mid-1990s and has primarily focused on rolling back policy and norms, eroding global and national feminist and queer social movements, and preventing further advocacy for gender equality, reproductive rights and LGBTIQ+ rights.

To what extent is the anti-gender movement new? Some have argued that it has emerged from “dormant” heteropatriarchal forces coming back to the surface within national and international political arenas. Yet, as several scholars have shown, the anti-gender movement is part of new right-wing movements and associated forms of conservative populism. Whilst there are many older and more established stakeholders including, for instance, the Vatican/Holy See, there are also several new actors – The Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam), International Organization of the Family (IOF) and World Congress of Families (WCF), Family Policy Institute, UN Family Rights Caucus – that have been established with the specific purpose of global anti-gender movement building and advocacy at the United Nations (UN). For example, C-Fam describes its mission as “defend[ing] life and family at international institutions” and its vision as “the preservation of international law by discrediting socially radical policies at the United Nations and other international institutions”. The UN Family Rights Caucus similarly describes its mission as being to “to protect and promote the natural family as the fundamental unit of society as called for in Article 16 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights”, and states that it was “founded in 2008 in response to the growing attacks on the family at the UN”. These organizations have partnered with traditionally conservative member states, forming what Bob (2013:75) describes as a

... ‘Baptist-Burqa’ coalition [of] Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and Muslim NGOs and states ... [who] have worked together to for years in international institutions, promoting long-established values, customs and prohibitions... these efforts have stymied even the UN’s official recognition of the basic concept of ‘sexual orientation’, let alone its promulgation of international standards on gay rights.

It is also worth noting here as well that anti-gender movements feature prominent views and voices of cisgender men and women. Indeed, while there is a tendency to presume that women are likely to advocate for progressive change, and in particular on behalf of other women (Goetz, 1996; Narayanaswamy, 2016), we must not presume that there is some “natural solidarity or sisterhood” (Goetz, 1996: 127; see also Narayanaswamy 2017) amongst women. We have no reason to presume this is different in the context of pursuing patriarchal notions of “femininity” and prioritising women’s roles within an idealised “family” unit.

The UN has become a key site where anti-gender advocacy and associated movements have formed transnational coalitions to prevent feminist and LGBTIQ+ inclusive policy language and frameworks. As the story is often told by critical scholars and pro-family activists alike (Buss and Herman 2003, Corredor 2019), the pro-family movement was born at the UN in the mid-1990s, when the Holy See and U.S. Christian Right actors became aware of proposed language promoting more expansive definitions of “gender”, “family” and the inclusion of SRHR at the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development in 1994, and the Beijing World Conference on Women in 1995. As researchers on the anti-gender movement have discussed (Buss 1998; Cupać and Ebetürk 2020), prior to the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, various opponents to LGBTIQ+ and reproductive rights were present within UN conferences, but they were not yet working together as a collective or directly targeting feminist and LGBTIQ+ activists. However, it was in Cairo that the anti-gender movement “began to show its muscle”, blocking the inclusion of women’s reproductive rights and policy language that would recognize that multiple forms of family exist across diverse cultural, political and social systems (Corredor, 2019, pp. 622-623). By the end of the twentieth century, a “curious global alliance” (Buss and Herman 2003: xiv) around the agenda of the “natural family” was taking shape as previously diffuse conservative religious organizations were amalgamating themselves into an “anti-gender” assemblage and instrumentalising UN policy frameworks and processes to assert pro-family agendas against LGBTIQ+ and reproductive rights.

More recently, anti-genderism has been attributed to the rise of new illiberal populist right-wing movements that have emerged after the 2008 global economic recession. Feeding upon “anxieties produced by neoliberal reforms” (Graff et al. 2019:541), anti-gender ideology demonizes gender equality, gender and sexuality diversity, and sexual rights movements as the cause of unwanted economic and social change, positioning a return to heteropatriarchy as a “common sense” solution that will restore order and certainty. The notion that economic and national crises can be “solved” through a closing down of gender mainstreaming and LGBTIQ+ rights has become a platform for organizing and for recruiting massive support amongst right-wing activists from otherwise distant walks of life, including “believers and nonbelievers, nationalists and universalists, populists who demonize global capital and traditional Reagan/Thatcher-style conservatives with a neocon love for the market” (Graff et al. 2019:541).

### **3. Who funds anti-gender movements?**

As noted briefly above, an important and widely acknowledged characteristic of the anti-gender movement is its transnational structure. Noting the similarities across movements opposed to the inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity and sexual and reproductive rights in policy language, research shows that “anti-gender campaigns are neither mere national trends nor isolated occurrences but take part into an organized transnational – and increasingly global – phenomenon” (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017:1). Religion continues to be a central organizing principle; powerful and well-resourced global actors such as the Catholic Church, U.S. Christian Right organizations, and the Russian Orthodox Church have been identified as key instigators of anti-gender politics within various country contexts and international policy arenas. These actors are forming transnational

coalitions with traditionally conservative states and stakeholders in Muslim-majority countries, such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, who in turn are investing in research institutes and think-tanks, including, for example, the Doha Family Institute, funded by the Government of Qatar. In addition to conservative financial sources, recent research produced by the Institute for Journalism and Social Change has shown that donors in the Global North have also unwittingly contributed to the capacity building of anti-gender organizations in the Global South through multilateral and bilateral aid, undermining their commitments to progressive social change (Provost 2023). Provost's (2023) report focuses on tracing funding to Uganda, which at the time they published the report Uganda's parliament was debating, but has now passed, a law that outlaws LGBTIQ+ expression, punishable by death. While official development assistance was not intended to instigate anti-LGBTIQ+ and anti-SRHR agendas, Provost (2023) found that a range of donors have funded projects in Uganda involving anti-LGBTIQ+ groups worth an estimated \$75 million over the past decade.

As noted earlier, many of these stakeholders are in turn emboldening conservative political forces and alliances within and across both Global North and South contexts, amplifying anti-gender/pro-family ideas and their uptake into mainstream policy and decision-making spaces, with Uganda's anti-LGBTIQ+ law the most recent example. We recognize the dynamism of this "anti-gender" ecosystem; colleagues are documenting the diverse and context-specific manifestations of the alignment between anti-gender movements and politically conservative, neoliberal forces across the world, including for example in Latin America (e.g., Correa 2022), Africa (e.g., van Klinken et al. 2023), Central and Eastern Europe (e.g., Korolczuk and Graff 2018) and South Asia (e.g., Wilson 2023). In this analysis we are keen to draw attention to the dominance of the US Christian Right, conservative Catholic organizations and the Russian Orthodox Church as key players in this movement, given their outsized roles and thus impact as prominent funders and stakeholders in anti-gender movements.

### **3.1 The U.S. Christian Right**

The U.S. Christian Right is "a broad coalition of pro-family organizations and individuals who have come together to struggle for a conservative Christian vision in the political realm" (Herman, 1997: 9-10). U.S. Christian Right groups, who have been actively mobilizing against sexual and reproductive rights, LGBTIQ+ rights, and gender equality in their own context for several decades, have been key drivers in the globalization of the culture wars since the 1990s (Buss and Herman 2003). Existing research shows that between 2007-2019, U.S. Christian Right groups invested approximately USD 280 million in advancing political agendas against reproductive rights and LGBTIQ+ rights globally (Archer and Provost 2020). Among the top spenders were the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, the Fellowship Foundation, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Alliance Defending Freedom, and Focus on the Family. The majority of the funding spent globally was directed towards Europe, Africa, and Asia.

The U.S. based project of the International Organization for the Family (IOF), World Congress of Families (WCF) has taken a leading role in coordinating international actors and groups who advocate against LGBTIQ+ and SRHR rights. Classified as a "hate group" by the Southern Poverty



Law Center, WCF seeks a positive self-definition, describing itself as “the premier project of the IOF which unites and equips leaders, organizations, and families to affirm, celebrate, and defend the natural family as the only fundamental and sustainable unit of society” (World Congress of Families, 2018). Since its founding in 1995, WCF has convened important international and regional conferences in Western Europe (Geneva - 1999, Amsterdam - 2009, Madrid - 2012, Verona - 2019), Central and Eastern Europe (Prague - 1997, Warsaw - 2007, Tbilisi - 2016, Budapest - 2017, Chisinau - 2018), Latin America (Mexico City - 2004 and 2022, Santa Cruz, Bolivia - 2014), and Africa (Abuja – 2009, Nairobi – 2016, Accra – 2019). Among WCF’s partners are some of the largest, wealthiest and most influential conservative organizations in the U.S. and internationally. As reported by Human Rights Campaign Foundation, WCF and its partners had an estimated budget of USD 216 million in 2014 (Human Rights Campaign 2015). WCF conferences regularly feature speakers from all parts of the global South who have become pro-family leaders in their own contexts. For example, South African pro-family activist Errol Naidoo established the Family Policy Institute in Cape Town in 2007 “with the single minded objective of making the restoration of marriage and the family the cornerstone of South African social policy” (Family Policy Institute, 2018). José Manuel Campero Pardo is president of the Mexican pro-family group Red Familia, which works to coordinate organizations “that defend and promote the family institution”, focusing on the issues of “the promotion of human life, childhood, women, comprehensive education, marriage, family and human rights” (Red Familia 2022). In addition to having an impact at country level through its conferences, WCF works with UN delegates of different countries to insert restrictive language on the “natural family” and “traditional values” in UN documents and resolutions (Human Rights Campaign 2015).

### **3.2 Conservative Catholic Organizations**

Catholic actors and institutions with links to the Vatican hierarchy have been central organizers in mobilizing conservative ideologies and policies against gender equality, SRHR and LGBTIQ+ rights at global scales (Datta 2020).

Vatican surrogate groups such as Tradition Family and Property (TFP) have mobilized conservative policies against communism, liberation theology, and SRHR in many countries in the Global South and North. TFP originated in Brazil in 1960 and eventually spread internationally. According to Datta (2020), TFP’s definition of “tradition” involves opposition against socially progressive developments in Catholic teachings as well as support for “the historical primacy of the Church over the secular State” (Datta 2020: 8). The organization’s use of the term “family”, Datta explains, refers to its defense of a “traditionalist approach to marriage – namely, heterosexual, monogamous, patriarchal and geared towards procreation” (Datta 2020:8). In relation to policy, this means opposition against the legalisation of divorce, contraception and abortion, and same-sex relations. While this is standard fare for conservative, religious movements, TFP’s position on property is unique. In defending “property”, TFP specifically means private property in the form of inherited wealth and privileges:

It opposes the notion of socio-economic equality, which it considers dangerously Communist. As such, unlike many other conservative Christian groups, TFP can be

described as not believing in the modern welfare State nor in the redistribution of wealth (Datta 2020:8).

Although it has “withered away” from Latin America (Datta 2020:3), TFP has become active internationally, with over 40 separate organizations in dozens of countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, as well as Europe and North America (Zanotto 2007:284).

The ultra-conservative Catholic organization CitizenGo has also become a leader of anti-gender ideology globally. Originally established in Spain as HazteOir, the organization rebranded itself as CitizenGo in 2013, expanding its activities, which involve “online petitions and action alerts as a resource, to defend and promote life, family, and liberty”, beyond the Spanish-speaking world. According to their website, the organization “influence[s] institutions, governments and organizations in 50 different countries” and has “team members located in fifteen cities on three continents” (CitizenGo 2023). CitizenGo established an Africa office in Nairobi, and has been a driver of opposition against LGBTIQ+ rights and media visibility around these issues.

### **3.3 Russian Orthodox Church**

The Russian Orthodox Church, and conservative Russian academic and civil society actors, have been actively involved in the globalisation of anti-gender politics. While issues animating Western culture wars such as reproductive rights, LGBTIQ+ rights, and sexuality education were not on the ideological map of the Russian orthodox church during, or immediately after, communism, “the picture has completely changed” (Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022:5). Over the course of the past three decades, the Russian Patriarchate has risen to become a “protector of traditional Christian Values” and a “new powerful ally for the American Christian Right” (Michel 2017 in Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022:5).

Today, Russian orthodox actors are vocal opponents of what they consider to be a “foreign” LGBTIQ+ agenda, organizing demonstrations for the protection of the traditional family, and participating in transnational anti-gender networks such as CitizenGo and World Congress of Families (Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022:5). Two Russian sociologists were involved in the formation of the World Congress of Families with American pro-family leader Allan Carlson, playing a leading role in its establishment. According to Stoeckl (2020), Russian pro-family advocacy “differ[s] considerably from the more traditional workings of the Russian Orthodox Church”, operating as a “new type of religious actor in the Russian context, a Russian Christian Right that is modelled on the strategies and manners of the American Christian Right” (Stoeckl 2020: 224).

In addition to anti-gender advocacy in Russia, individuals close to the Russian Orthodox Church have been financing transnational advocacy against gender equality and sexual rights. As Datta explained in an interview in 2021, “privately acting persons, oligarchs close to the Kremlin, with sovereign and religiously conservative ideas” have established foundations which then provide financial support to, and form alliances with, far-right political parties in Europe. He explains:

Among the most important of these are Vladimir Yakunin, an oligarch who created a foundation called *Istoki* (in Russian ‘origins’) to finance the anti-abortion movement *Sanctity of Motherhood Programme*, and Konstantin Malofeev, an extreme right-wing intellectual who created his own foundation called *St. Basil the Great Charitable Foundation* (Leoffred 2020:para. 13).

Further research is required to examine how these, and other conservative Russian state and non-state actors, are working to grow their influence and networks in the Global South, and how they may be supporting anti-gender organizing beyond European contexts.

#### **4. How do they disseminate their messages? Professionalising anti-gender advocacy**

The second key argument this paper makes is that the mechanism by which this co-optation is possible is through the professionalisation of the work of pro-family advocates. Our desk-research reveals the increasing professionalisation that delivers “pro-family” messaging in the same breath as “sustainable development” and in the twin cloaks of “neutrality” and “rigour”, disseminated using mainstream knowledge validation tools.

Although many of these anti-gender and pro-family tendencies emerged from distinctly religious beginnings, these movements have understood, as well as responded to, the need to adopt the veneer of a more politically neutral, academic register in how they communicate their key messages. Many of the stakeholders in this movement are now fashioning themselves as “think-tanks” or INGOs with “branches” and research fellows who produce “peer-reviewed” research overseen by international Advisory Boards and funded by philanthro-capitalists. Under the cloak of “neutrality”, these organizations argue that “sustainable development” is best pursued through valorising not just families, but the essential role of women in the heteropatriarchal family on which the success of the nation-state, and thus development, depends. These messages are disseminated using mainstream knowledge validation tools including peer-review articles, policy briefs, conferences and webinars (see Narayanaswamy 2017; 2019).

As noted in the analysis above, these think tanks, INGOs and UN caucuses are adept at using these tools to gain legitimacy in the global development space, further buoyed by strategic alliances with sympathetic donors, political parties, religious authorities and countries. As noted by Narayanaswamy (2019:243), this level of professionalisation is necessary to be able, and allowed, to engage at this level:

... Legitimacy is achieved not just by alignment with dominant and/or depoliticised, technocratic discourses, but concretised through particularised ‘ways of knowing’ embodied in the written formats in which dominant knowledges are recorded, validated and proliferated.

Key here is how messaging is aligned with the technocratic language of the UN; notions of rigour, engaging in peer-review and claiming links with Higher Educational Institutions all help to ensure that the messaging may not be easily dismissed as partisan or representing the agenda(s) of particular donors, countries or institutions. Widening professional networks, including within the UN system, is also key to this engagement strategy. Several pro-family organizations have Special Consultative ECOSOC Status at the UN, including Family Policy Institute (South Africa), Institute for Family Policies International Federation/Instituto Política Familiar (Spain), Centre for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam) (US), Alliance Defending Freedom (US), World Youth Alliance, Doha International Family Institute (Qatar), Family Watch International (US), and others. Calling out the regressive nature of these organisations and their alliances is made harder by the professionalised nature of their research and dissemination activities, which include but are not limited to reports, peer-reviewed papers and journals, webinars and conferences/workshops, all featured on their dynamic and expertly designed web-pages.

These overviews of the key players and professionalising tactics allows us to now consider how anti-gender movements bring these elements together to lobby for heteropatriarchal-aligned understandings of gender and SRHR, whilst simultaneously lobbying against the expansion of LGBTIQ+ and SRHR rights.

## **5. Aligning anti-gender advocacy with “development” and “sustainability”**

The analysis to this point has made clear that the opposition to women’s reproductive agency and LGBTIQ+ human rights emblematic of anti-gender movements has roots in both colonial histories and religion-based justifications appealing to “traditional” values and moral codes. We have also presented evidence of extensive and diverse funding supporting transnational anti-gender movement building, which includes the establishment of more professionalized forms of engagement to shore up the movements’ intellectual credentials.

We now consider how and why these ideas are increasingly enjoying more mainstream credibility. We offer two key arguments. The first is that some anti-gender actors are actively developing and deploying secular social science-based arguments that co-opt the language of human rights and development. These actors argue, for example, that the nuclear family and compulsory heterosexuality are required for economic development and that abortion is a violation of human rights. While some studies have noted the ways in which these groups have appropriated the language of human rights, investigations have largely overlooked the ways in which anti-gender actors are employing the language of “sustainability” and “development” in their efforts to justify their opposition to women’s reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, and LGBTIQ+ rights. Pro-family groups and activists have recognised the power and importance of aligning their arguments with development imperatives, particularly in their efforts to mobilize pro-family agendas at United Nations international gatherings.

Secondly, we argue that anti-gender movements are able to operate within the spaces of the UN and elsewhere because of what Nagar (2006:147) identifies as the growth of a “gender hegemony”, where she notes that the adoption of the language of “gender” has undoubtedly “enabled new political agendas to emerge”, but in ways that have at times also constrained more “radical politics”. In mainstream development formulations the language of “gender” tends overwhelmingly to align with an instrumentalising “smart economics” approach (Chant and Sweetman, 2012), where questions of gender equality and a focus on “women and girls” have instead tended to become “conduits to achieving broader economic development objectives” (Narayanaswamy 2016:2161). Indeed, we can see this tendency encapsulated in the SDGS, where we may further observe idealized gender norms drawn substantially from Eurocentric, liberal tendencies in which the language of “gender” is so often conflated with “women” in ways that may reinforce gendered roles (Khandaker & Narayanaswamy, 2020; Narayanaswamy, 2017) a point to which we will return later on in the analysis.<sup>1</sup>

We have noted the cynical ways in which more conservative forces seek to strengthen heteronormative patriarchy by framing gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights as Western or liberal impositions, thus cloaking their rejection as anti-colonial and thus emancipatory. What we are keen to highlight here, however, is that “smart economics” approaches that focus on “women” as part of advancing economic development objectives nonetheless create opportunities to in turn centre the primacy of “the family” as the key, socially relevant unit of analysis.

In order to look at these issues in greater depth, three dimensions of pro-family discourse on gender and development are discussed: the co-optation of “UN language” and associated high-level tools, including political organization, to engage with human rights and sustainable development; the articulation of the notion of the “natural family”; and the concept of “demographic winter”.

## 5.1 The UN and High-Level Political Organizing

Pro-family actors who oppose reproductive justice, gender and sexuality diversity, have used international frameworks, notably the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to legitimize and thus advance anti-gender/pro-family agendas. Within the UDHR, Article 16.1 protects the “right to marry and to found a family”, whilst 16.3 states that “The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State”. Pro-family actors contend that these dimensions of the UDHR can be used to assert the supremacy of the nuclear family, and “naturalness” and necessity of the gender binary as foundational to “civilization” and social order. For example, Communications Director of the World Congress of Families, Don Feder, stated at the 2017 World Congress of Families in Antigua: “To say the family is ‘the... fundamental group unit of society,’ means it's the foundation. Demolish the foundation, and the entire structure collapses. Survivors will be buried in the rubble” (Feder 2017, para. 35).

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<sup>1</sup> At a very basic level, ‘gender’ is itself a word that travels poorly, as it does not translate easily into non-English languages; it can for instance, be translated either into ‘women’ (Narayanaswamy, 2017) or ‘sex’ (Samarasinghe, 2014).

The SDGs have also become an area of focus within global-level pro-family advocacy, particularly SDG5 which enshrines “gender equality” as a global objective. Founder of Family Watch International and the UN Family Rights Caucus, Sharon Slater (2017, p. 24), recently produced a pro-family analysis of the SDGs in which she sets out to show that the SDG goals, targets and indicators have consequences for the “natural family”: “UN agencies... in cooperation with UN Member States are complicit in promoting a radical sexual rights agenda ... [and] will likely interpret intentionally ambiguous terms in the SDG goals, targets and indicators to advance controversial rights”. Notably, Slater pays particular attention to the power of language and definition in the SDGs, warning that: “States should take steps to ensure that the many vague and open-ended terms that appear in the SDGs will not be misinterpreted in ways that are harmful to families, or that will destroy the innocence of children” (Slater 2017, p.24).

Exhortations to amplify the natural family, limit misinterpretation and avoid civilisational collapse through reference to UN instruments is only possible because both the UDHR and the SDGs themselves do not have any references to LGBTIQ+ people. In the case of the SDGs, SDG5 only offers a stated commitment to “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”. It is an omission that did not go unnoticed by Stonewall, the largest LGBTIQ+ charity in the UK, whose plea on the release of the SDGs was for all stakeholders to ensure that the “inclusive language” of “gender equality” and “leave no one behind” must include “practical actions and direct support to LGBT groups. Otherwise, the goals will only ever be on paper” (Dorey, 2016). It is important to note that on this issue the UN has been very clear, with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) issuing a report that compiles all of the relevant legal instruments that support LGBTIQ+ rights, which draw on the UDHR’s declaration that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (OHCHR, 2019: vii). Nonetheless, what is clear is that the silences on LGBTIQ+ rights in these headline UN instruments are being used as entry points for anti-gender advocacy.

Nor are anti-gender movements simply reliant on shoehorning pro-family messaging into the existing international discourse whilst critiquing and monitoring the implementation of existing instruments. Extensive efforts are expended to co-opt and deploy UN human rights language within their advocacy for the protection of the “natural family”. Pro-family groups employ UN-style rhetoric and tools within their country and global level advocacy, developing parallel human rights declarations and documents such as the Geneva Consensus Declaration (2020) and the San Jose Articles (Appendix 1) in order to shift the discursive terrain itself. As the subsequent analysis makes clear, professionalised communications and engagement also include amplification of their messages through endorsements of high-level political actors. Together these activities provide ideational legitimacy by drawing both on the language of rights and (social) protection, whilst appearing very much in alignment with the emphasis on supporting women’s “gendered” roles, in service of economic development objectives, emerging out of more mainstream development discourses.

### **5.1.1 Geneva Consensus Declaration**

The Geneva Consensus Declaration (GCD 2020) provides a poignant illustration of how the discourses of gender and development, and the role of “family” in development, are being used by

pro-family actors to advance political agendas that restrict reproductive rights and women's bodily autonomy.

The GCD is an international document that was signed by 35 countries in October 2020, initiated in the eleventh hour of the former Trump administration and unveiled by former U.S Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. Notably, the name of the GCD echoes the much earlier Geneva Declaration (1924), which was the first declaration on the rights of the child and affirmed for the first time the existence of rights specific to children and the responsibility of adults towards children. The GCD was unprecedented, as it was “the first time in history that the governments of the United States, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Brazil, Hungary, Poland, Pakistan, and South Sudan had described themselves as ‘like-minded’ on the subject of women’s roles and rights” (Southern and Kennedy 2021:para. 2). While the U.S. withdrew its endorsement of the GCD soon after President Joe Biden took office in 2021, its creation was cited by the Trump administration as one of their key achievements.

According to the website hosting the GCD, “all the signatories have declared their support for common values and efforts to defend fundamental human rights”, claiming that the declaration is a “commitment of states that are striving to restore the true meaning of the concept of human rights”. The document sets out the following four pillars: Concern for women’s health; Protection of human life; Strengthening the family - the basic unit of society; and defence of the sovereignty of nations in creating their own life protection policies.

While the document is shaped by an effort to promote restrictions on reproductive rights and bodily autonomy, these objectives are presented as being in the interests of individual women and children as well as the collective good of the society. For instance, the signatories of the GCD claim to affirm that “women and girls must enjoy equal access to quality education, economic resources, and political participation as well as equal opportunities with men and boys for employment, leadership and decision-making at all levels”; it also emphasises that “in no case should abortion be promoted as a method of family planning”. Here, the document centers the protection of the child: “the child ... needs special safeguards and care ... before as well as after birth” and “special measures of protection and assistance should be taken on behalf of all children”, based on the principle of the best interest of the child. The GCD cites several UN conventions and declarations, including the UDHR (1948), the Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1955), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995).

With regards to the GCD’s statements pertaining to gender and development, the document takes an explicit focus on family and health in order to construct the prohibition of abortion as a priority for sustainable development. Drawing on existing UN conventions that are cited throughout the text, the signatories of the document state that they “reaffirm ... the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State”; that “motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance,” that “women play a critical role in the family” and women’s “contribution to the welfare of the family and to the development of society”. Here, the “family” and the privileging of motherhood are used to make a development-based argument for the prohibition of abortion and the restriction of reproductive rights and women’s bodily autonomy, rendering compulsory reproductivity as integral to the “critical role of

the family” within social development. The document further states that the signatories “recognize that ‘universal health coverage is fundamental for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals related not only to health and well-being’”, citing the UN General Assembly’s (2019) “Political declaration of the high-level meeting on universal health coverage”. Furthermore, through its focus on “motherhood” and “fatherhood”, the document further erases and discredits LGBTIQ+ families and family diversity in which a “mother” and a “father” may not be jointly present within a family arrangement.

### **5.1.2 San Jose Articles on the Status of the Unborn Child in International Treaties and Law**

The San Jose Articles were signed in 2011 in San Jose, Costa Rica, by 42 individuals representing institutions, political parties, and organizations from the UK, the US, Uruguay, Italy, Ireland, France, Honduras, Germany, Chile, Argentina, Slovenia, East Timor, the Philippines, Venezuela, as well as from numerous pro-family organizations (i.e., Alliance Defending Freedom, Latin American Alliance for the Family, C-Fam) and individuals with institutional power (i.e., a member of the Royal Family of the UK, a delegate of the UN General Assembly).

The San Jose Articles (see Appendix 1) focuses on the rights of the “unborn child”, using a similar rhetorical strategy to redirect attention away from women’s rights and bodily autonomy and towards the unborn child as an entity that requires human rights. The document declares that there is no right to abortion in international law, using this observation to argue that unborn children deserve protection and that there is no human right to abortion. This claim contradicts existing human rights instruments, as the UN Human Right Committee issued clear and unambiguous guidance in 2018 around human rights obligations in relation to abortion as follows: states have obligations to prevent the “violation of the right to life of a pregnant woman or girl”; that “States parties must provide safe, legal and effective access to abortion where the life and health of the pregnant woman or girl is at risk; and states have a “duty to ensure that women and girls do not have to undertake unsafe abortions” (UN Human Rights Committee 2018).

The document concludes that “Providers of development aid should not promote or fund abortions. They should not make aid conditional on a recipient’s acceptance of abortion”. Drawing on Human Rights instruments to enshrine the rights of the “unborn child”, the San Jose articles, and their signatories claim that UN agencies, non-governmental organizations, and wealthier nations are using “subversive tactics ... bullying and manipulating nations into changing their laws on abortion by misquoting treaties” (UK Parliament, 2011).

In addition to being tabled as a motion by representatives of Parliament in the U.K. in 2011, the Articles have been circulated in the several countries represented by its signatories. The Articles have also been publicized and defended within the context of international law, with an article authored by William Saunders (Senior Vice President and Senior Counsel, Americans United for Life, Washington D.C.) appearing in a 2015 issue of the *Ave Maria International Law Journal*.

What both declarations demonstrate is the ability of anti-gender advocates to draw on the language of “rights” and “women” to claim a space within existing development frameworks and human



rights instruments (even where, as we have shown, this claim is demonstrably inaccurate). By linking the strengthening of the “natural family” with notions of “sustainable development”, “women’s empowerment” or inclusion, anti-gender actors make what appear to be affirming or common-sense declarations, in turn endorsed by senior political leaders, written in a jargonized English and debated in peer-reviewed journals that ultimately lend a politically neutral veneer of legitimacy to their ideas.

## 5.2 The Articulation of the Notion of the “Natural Family”

Resistance to expanding notions of the term “gender” to include transgender and gender non-conforming people has been integral to pro-family efforts to defend the nuclear family formation and heteropatriarchal social arrangements. Replacing much of the explicitly intolerant and hateful anti-gay and anti-feminist rhetoric that has historically been associated with conservative sexual politics, the new family-centred vocabulary functions to create a guise of decency and respectability around anti-rights discourse and agendas including, as we have seen, through drawing on international instruments including the UDHR and the SDGs. Pro-family actors have defined what they call the “natural family” as “the fundamental social unit, inscribed in human nature, and centered around the voluntary union of a man and a woman in a lifelong covenant of marriage” (Carlson 2013:3). Within their advocacy, the gender binary is cast as a fixed, biological “truth” that is required for the social fabric and economy to remain intact because of its importance to the nuclear family model. The concept of the “natural family” positions heteropatriarchal norms and social arrangements as universal, apolitical, and ahistorical (see Smith 2010) – a matter of “common sense”.

While pro-family discourses refer to the “natural” family as a God-given and biological/natural truth, pro-family research institutes and think tanks have developed social scientific narratives that appear both neutral and rigorous, designed to operationalise “pro-family” national and global advocacy against SRHR, CSE, and LGBTIQ+ inclusion. From a common sense understanding of the “natural family” derives concepts such as “marriage premium” (Caplan 2012), itself a contested idea that continues to be debated in the social sciences but has been taken up in an unambiguously positive way within pro-family advocacy spaces.<sup>2</sup> The concept of “marriage premium” frames the argument that (heterosexual) marriage is economically productive, while sex and partnership outside of marriage are economic liabilities that threaten economic growth and tax rates. Within this framing, non-conformity to heterosexual marriage becomes an economic liability, presuming that non-married and LGBTIQ+ people do not contribute to economic growth and development.

There is extensive theoretical and empirical research that problematises these supposedly “robust” ideas insisting on the “natural” or “nuclear family” as the basic building block of society, including through the lens of queer theory (Asante & Hinchey, 2021) and coloniality (Lugones 2007). UNRISD research, including that by Cook and Razavi (2012) and Dugarova and Gülasan (2017), draw on a range of theoretical insights and empirical evidence to highlight the ways in which the

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<sup>2</sup> For examples of the debates around whether a ‘marriage premium’ actually exists, see academic articles by Killewald & Lundberg, *Marriage Premium: “New evidence against a causal marriage wage premium”*, which appeared in *Demography* in 2017; and “On the marriage wage premium”, an article published in 2021 by Brendon McConnell (University of Southampton) and Arnau Valladares-Esteban (University of St. Gallen and Swiss Institute for Empirical Economic Research)

existing gender division of labour and unequal access to a range of resources has negative effects for women and girls over the life course in ways that the latter report suggests will make it less likely that the SDGs will be achieved.

What is notable is that it is these very same concerns that are marshalled, both theoretically and empirically, by pro-family advocates to argue that the best way to support women – which they claim is a shared interest – is simply to strengthen families, a purportedly “common-sense” articulation advanced in the following two reports: “Strong Families, Prosperous States” (Wilcox et al. 2015) published by the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for Family Studies and based in the US; and “A Framework for Family-Sensitive Social Protection” (Gilbert et al. 2019), published by the Doha International Family Institute (DIFI) and based in Qatar. Whilst the pro-family literature is extensive, we focus on these two reports because they share some important common features of professionalization that provide insight into how anti-gender actors are able to proliferate their ideas about the “natural family” under the dual cloaks of “neutrality” and “rigour”.

Both reports are authored by tenured Full Professors in U.S. universities, whose academic credentials, including publications records, professional connections and involvement in disciplinary roles such as journal Editors, shores up both the perceived neutrality and rigour of any reports they spearhead, alongside co-authors who also have PhDs, including from institutions such as Princeton. They describe processes to further ensure rigour, including acknowledgments for support with “substantive and methodological counsel regarding this report” (Wilcox et al. 2015:back cover) and a “two-stage review process” that included “a two-day expert group meeting” to discuss the final draft before publication (Gilbert et al. 2019:11). The reports themselves are formatted professionally, with features including branded headers and footers, formatted boxes that highlight important ideas, photos, colourfully presented charts and graphs and extensive notes and bibliographies. The report covers are peppered with the logos of partners and funders; in the case of the DIFI report, two of the co-authors are from the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), and ESCWA’s support for the report itself is separately acknowledged, with the inclusion of its logo on the cover. That a UN regional representative organization is openly supporting a report amplifying the centrality of the “family” to development and social protection confirms that the UN is a site of contestation on these ideas, despite the exhortations for a universal rights position on LGBTIQ+ rights emanating from the OCHCR outlined above.

Nor is this merely about professional messaging and presentation. The “robustness” of the pro-family arguments are underpinned by the extensive use of publicly available large-scale data generated by the UN, the World Bank, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), as well as survey and census data produced by national and regional governments. Both reports synthesise data variously on marriage and divorce rates, religious affiliation, school enrolment and matriculation rates, violent crime, sex-disaggregated employment statistics and wider demographic trends respectively in the US (Wilcox et al. 2015) and the world with a specific focus on the Arab region (Gilbert et al. 2019). These datasets are then further triangulated with a mixture of references drawn from the wider academic and think tank ecosystem, which includes sources articulating pro-family ideas. Wilcox et al. (2015:8), for instance, justifies the focus of their report by combining research on the

“motherhood wage penalty” (Budig and England 2001) and the importance of “public investments” for “growth” and “widely shared prosperity” (Sachs 2012; Summers and Balls 2015) to argue that “at the macro level, states that have strong and stable families are more likely to show high levels of growth, economic mobility, and median family income, and low levels of child poverty”. The DIFI report employs similar tactics, for instance, acknowledging “that there are diverse family arrangements that satisfy human needs” (Gilbert et al. 2021:30), which is an argument that draws on a diverse range of academic sources, only to advocate further on in the report in a section entitled “Procreation” in favour of taking a “long view of parenting” that involves sequencing to avoid “trying to do it all at the same time” (Gilbert et al. 2019:45-46). This approach involves:

... allocating these activities in such a way that stay-at-home parents (*who would usually, though not always, be mothers*) care for the children full-time during the early years of childhood and then spend the remaining thirty to forty years in paid employment (Gilbert et al. 2019:46; our emphasis).

These arguments ignore the extent to which heteropatriarchal norms and systems have actively excluded women and LGBTIQ+ identifying people from equal economic, social and political participation (Smith 2012), including through legally enshrined inequalities (OCHCR 2019). In framing the “family” as a singular, homogenous site, pro-family advocates also selectively ignore the extensive literature that problematizes the “family” itself as a site of “cooperative conflict” (Sen 1990) and where bargaining occurs between different members of a household in ways that are likely to amplify the unequal gendered distribution of resources (Wolf 1990). Using academic voices that draw together theoretically and ideologically diverse ideas underpinned by large scale datasets to then advance a pro-family argument is both subtle and effective. The arguments in favour of pro-family approaches to development are presented as respectful but nonetheless rigorous disagreement, rather than as attempts to ensure that heteronormative patriarchy is and remains part of our “common sense”.

Whilst the pro-family lobby’s promotion of “family” and concomitant rejection of reproductive rights for women is an obviously restrictive way in which control over women’s bodies can be effected, a wider contemporary lens reveals the well-established and widely accepted norms that can be traced back to the colonial gender division of labour that relegated women to the domestic private domain and men to the public sphere (Burke 1996; Izugbara 2004; Banarjee 2010). Pro-family ideas do not exist in a vacuum, but rather are pushing the boundaries of a transnational discursive space that in large measure already centres the heteropatriarchal “family” as a key social unit through which to understand social and economic development, as acknowledged in previous UNRISD research. Cook and Razavi (2012: 15) highlight the tendency for social protection systems to presume variations on a “male breadwinner” model where:

In the advanced industrialized countries of Western Europe, the post-war social contract between capital and labour underpinning state social regulation and provisioning was based on dominant normative assumptions about gender difference, with breadwinning prescribed for men and caring/homemaking for women.

They note that whilst provision has varied widely, with the social contract in formerly colonised countries starting on much weaker foundations, nonetheless the presumption of non-contributory need based on this gender division of labour persists, with women targeted on this basis for social assistance delinked from employment (ibid: 22): “Women have become a visible target of these [social assistance] programmes, not as rights-bearing individuals but, almost by default, in their roles as mothers, carers and family managers”. An over-reliance has emerged, for instance, on policy tools such as conditional cash transfers (CCTs) or other financial/redistributive social protection measures that target women (ibid). Yet these forms of redistribution targeted at women reinforce the gendered division of labour by casting women primarily as “mothers” and/or “caregivers” (Molyneux 2006; Patel & Hochfeld 2011). Targeting support to women in their gendered roles as mothers and carers could also be understood as a “smart economics” or instrumental approach, insofar as these are investments meant not just for these women but to strengthen their families and, by extension, their communities. Echoing Nagar’s (2006) concerns cited earlier, this tendency for some development interventions to reinscribe the gendered division of labour despite professed commitments to “gender equality” or “women’s empowerment” demonstrates how the spaces for more liberatory feminist social movement ideals that seek to challenge these instrumental tendencies may be constrained in practice.

### **5.3 The Concept of “Demographic Winter”**

Pro-family/anti-gender advocacy is also advancing pro-natalist theories of the relationship between reproduction, economic development and “sustainability”. Founder of Family Watch International and the UN Family Rights Caucus Sharon Slater captures pro-family views about the relationship between fertility rates and economic development, stating:

People are a nation’s most valuable resource. Nations that have severely limited their population growth and instituted strict population control measures are heading toward economic and social disaster because they do not have enough children to replace and/or support their aging populations. They are committing societal suicide (Slater 2010:6).

According to pro-family groups, feminism and the gay rights movement have been responsible for this “societal suicide” (Slater 2010:6). Pro-family actors have used the phrase “demographic winter” to argue that sexuality and gender-related rights have caused declining fertility rates in the Global North. This argument has become a common idea used in several countries around the world to reject SRHR, LGBTIQ+ inclusion and CSE. Whilst the reasons for declining fertility are complex – a point acknowledged across ideological divides (Cook and Razavi 2012; Gilbert et al. 2019) – the notion of “demographic winter” functions as a crisis theme within family values politics and is used to mobilise fear of economic, moral, racial, and changing sex and gender norms.

Pro-family actors who are themselves predominantly Christian have worked to package their religious worldviews about gender, sexuality, and family within this pseudo-social-scientific language, presenting their fear-based politics as scientifically legitimate. Rita Trimble (2013) has identified

three key dimensions of how the notion of “demographic winter” aims to secure social norms based on a set of gender and racial hierarchies and in relation to anti-gender political objectives:

- Establishing a tale of global depopulation that is said to be leading towards inevitable economic disaster;
- Committing women to reproductive obligation
- Delineating “family crises” as the cause of population decline.

The idea of demographic winter is embedded within several “pro-family” policies that have emerged in Eastern European countries in particular in recent years, in which nationals are incentivised with income tax breaks and other economic rewards for having children. For example, in Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban introduced the Family Protection Action Plan in 2019, which includes: measures to provide “baby-expecting” loans to couples “where the woman is under the age of 40” when they get married; loan repayment for mortgages taken out by families with two or more children; and a lifetime exemption from personal income tax for women who have raised four or more children.

At the 2021 Budapest Demographic Summit, Orban addressed the socio-political dimensions of the Family Protection Action Plan, commenting on the Hungarian government’s “concern” about “the ever wider and faster spread” in the West of so-called “neo-Marxist”, “neo-leftist”, woke movements which he said, “seek to miseducate our children already in nursery school, want to use children as Pride activists”, and popularise gender reassignment among children.

The notion that reproductive and LGBTIQ+ rights will negatively impact population growth has also gained traction in African countries where fertility rates are at, or above, replacement levels. In these contexts, LGBTIQ+ and reproductive rights are being constructed as population control mechanisms, playing on existing fears of recent, (neo)colonial histories in which population control programmes were implemented in numerous African countries as requirements for states to gain access to loans from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Several political and religious leaders on the continent have associated homosexuality with population control to construct homosexuality as dangerous to the future of African nations. For instance, Ann Kioko, president of the African Organization for Families and Director of the CitizenGo Africa office in Nairobi, equated homosexuality and abortion in an opinion piece, opining that “It’s the West’s Agenda to Control Our Population”, a comment which appeared in a national newspaper. In the piece, Kioko constructs homosexuality as being a threat to the nation’s position within global power relations:

We are under immense pressure to create liberal laws that allow same-sex unions and abortion. The agenda is to control the population because a big one is a threat to the West in many respects. Homosexuality can be a great tool to control population growth as it is the only sure way to have a ‘babyless’ union (Kioko 2016:para. 5).

Referring to anxieties in the West about large populations, high fertility rates, and the “youth bulge” in African countries, homosexuality and abortion are equated as tools used by the West to reduce

fertility in these countries. International organizations that support sexual and reproductive health and rights such as the UNFPA, UNESCO, and the International Planned Parenthood Federation are consistently cited as some of the main actors applying the “pressure” to which Kioko refers.

Whilst pro-natalist positions are clearly tied up with many complex racialised, colonial and gendered dynamics, we would again note that mainstream development discourses engage with questions of demographic change in ways that resonate with some of the pro-natal arguments. An UNRISD-UNDP report outlining the challenges and opportunities of implementing the SDGs (Dugarova and Gülasan 2017:36; our emphasis) uses the idea of “demographic opportunity”: “Developing countries with a young population need to convert a *demographic opportunity into a demographic dividend by investing in human capital* development and promoting job creation”. Whilst Dugarova and Gülasan’s statement is part of a broader and more nuanced argument that seeks also to strengthen social protection and tackle inequality, nonetheless the logical extension of such an argument for pro-natalists is to frame strengthening families as “smart economics”, an investment in “human capital” from which communities, regions and countries can reap a “demographic dividend”.

## **6. Implications of research findings and some preliminary recommendations**

Our desk study has revealed that pro-family/anti-gender stakeholders are not only adept at co-opting the language of “rights”, “development” and “sustainability” to advance their agendas against reproductive justice, gender equality, and LGBTIQ+ rights, but in galvanising financial and ideological resources that confer further legitimacy through professionalised knowledge creation and dissemination mechanisms. These activities function as a strategy to validate what many stakeholders might perceive as regressive ideas around the gender division of labour and the centrality of women in the heteropatriarchal, capitalist system – ideas that would appear at odds with both the words and spirit of the SDGs, even as space is opened up for more conservative interpretations of such global instruments and commitments, both within and outside the UN system.

The findings of this report also reveal further questions around how anti-gender actors are operating “on the ground” within country, regional and global political fora. Furthermore, several urgent questions remain about what strategies can, and have been, used to mitigate, counter, and respond to anti-gender actors. Thus, it may be more productive to understand anti-gender movements not as necessarily “new” or “innovative” in their proposals, but rather as extending existing UN ideological and policy frameworks that have centred the family. Working with the grain of existing policy language about “family” and “gender”, anti-gender actors are able to present their pro-family ideas as merely the offer of “common sense” positions that simply reinforce existing UN conventions (even where as we have shown, these are being misinterpreted), whilst casting those advocating for SRHR, LGBTIQ+ and children’s rights as radical activists who are promoting dangerous policies and discourses that threaten economic stagnation leading eventually to civilisational collapse.

What are the recommended actions needed to address and respond to conservative, neoliberal anti-gender/pro-family activism so as to strengthen feminist and queer inclusive visions of gender

equality and women’s rights? We would argue that research – which should include building on this report to generate a more in-depth understanding of where, how and why anti-gender ideas are taking hold – is crucial, taking into account the following dimensions:

- A mapping and/or audit of existing academic and activist initiatives within and beyond the UN in relation to both anti-gender movements and resistance to these pressures
- Further research with and support to, feminist and queer activists who encounter, and are developing advocacy strategies, in response to anti-gender/pro-family campaigns at country, regional and global levels
- Further research to identify and critically interrogate the purported “scientific” research and policy conclusions derived from anti-gender think-tanks and associated organizations
- More transparency alongside on-going monitoring and investigation of pro-family/anti-gender organizations, strategy, discourses, networks, and funding, including those with ECOSOC status
- Engaging with decolonial queer and feminist scholars who are interrogating normative discourses of “family”, “gender equality”, “development”, and “sustainability”, and other concepts that are being appropriated and co-opted by anti-gender groups
- Working with religious leaders to co-produce shared understandings of how faith can co-exist, and indeed champion, SRHR, LGBTIQ+ rights and CSE.

Developing more in-depth understandings of how and why conservative anti-gender/pro-family movements operate must be followed by action to halt a backwards slide on hard-won rights for SRHR, LGBTIQ+ rights and CSE for all. Concretely what form might action take? On this final point, we want to draw attention to recent research on working with religious communities in East Africa that itself took inspiration from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) support for working with faith leaders, given that they are often deeply embedded in the social, political and economic lives of their communities, which in turn underpins their legitimacy to lead change processes seeking to establish more socially inclusive (gender) norms (UNDP, 2014). As part of their study on “Religious Leaders as Agents of LGBTIQ inclusion in East Africa”, van Klinken et al. (2023) demonstrate the value of undertaking research whilst actively working alongside (queer) communities to co-produce shared understandings of how a more inclusive politics might constructively engage with religion, offering a practical counter to the tendency of anti-gender/pro-family actors to claim that they speak on behalf of entire faith communities and to weaponise religion as a tool to restrict rights to sexual and bodily autonomy. It is situated, time-consuming, painstaking work that raises questions, poses challenges and has, by their own admission, put some faith leaders at risk, but it offers a helpful model and starting point for how we might bring together coalitions of activists and stakeholders to collectively challenge partial (mis)interpretations of religious and neoliberal dogma in ways that aspire to genuinely “leave no one behind”.

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## Appendix(es)

### Appendix 1

#### San Jose Articles

The list of articles is abridged for brevity in this document, and the full articles can be accessed [online](#).

- **Article 1** As a matter of scientific fact a new human life begins at conception.
- **Article 2** Each human life is a continuum that begins at conception and advances in stages until death. Science gives different names to these stages...This does not change the scientific consensus that at all points of development each individual is a living member of the human species.
- **Article 3** From conception each unborn child is by nature a human being.
- **Article 4** All human beings, as members of the human family, are entitled to recognition of their inherent dignity and to protection of their inalienable human rights. This is recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and other international instruments.
- **Article 5** There exists no right to abortion under international law, either by way of treaty obligation or under customary international law. No United Nations treaty can accurately be cited as establishing or recognizing a right to abortion.
- **Article 6** The Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW Committee) and other treaty monitoring bodies have directed governments to change their laws on abortion. These bodies have explicitly or implicitly interpreted the treaties to which they are subject as including a right to abortion.
- **Article 7** Assertions by international agencies or non-governmental actors that abortion is a human right are false and should be rejected.
- **Article 8** Under basic principles of treaty interpretation in international law [...] states may and should invoke treaty provisions guaranteeing the right to life as encompassing a state responsibility to protect the unborn child from abortion.
- **Article 9** Governments and members of society should ensure that national laws and policies protect the human right to life from conception. They should also reject and condemn pressure to adopt laws that legalize or depenalize abortion.