
OHCHR Submission: report on Colonialism and SOGI

The coloniality of anti-gender politics

Haley McEwen and Lata Narayanaswamy

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UNRISD, Palais des Nations
1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland
Tel: +41 (0)22 9173060
info.unrisd@un.org
www.unrisd.org

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Summary

This Submission sets out a key argument we make as part of a forthcoming UNRISD-commissioned working paper entitled “The international anti-gender movement: Understanding the rise of anti-gender discourses in the context of development, human rights and social protection”. The report interrogates 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. For the purposes of this Call for Inputs, we are keen to draw the Inquiry’s attention to the concern we raise in this report of how the language of ‘decolonisation’ is being co-opted as a way of signaling a positive case for the uptake and proliferation of anti-LGBTIQ+ beliefs in global development discourse and practice. The anti-gender argument suggests that pro-LGBTIQ+ rights are themselves colonial, Western impositions antithetical to the ‘natural’ order in diverse developing-country contexts, ultimately working against the achievement of the SDGs. Furthermore, anti-gender actors are using the language of decolonisation in ways that ultimately reinforce colonial-era ideologies in which notions of racial hierarchy were entangled with cis-heteronormative constructions of the gender binary, hierarchy, and the nuclear family model.

Introduction

A new urgency has taken hold for us to better understand what, how and why anti-gender ideologies and actors 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.

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 centering the “family” as a key site of “decolonial” contestation, aligning their outreach with the language of rights and sustainability, found in frameworks like the SDGs, at national, regional and international policy levels.

Who or what is the anti-gender movement?

Before setting out how anti-genderism co-opts the language of ‘decolonisation’, we need to define how we use this term, which has been variously described as a “backlash”, a counter-movement, or emerging forms of illiberalism within academic research.

We use the term “anti-gender” to refer to the forms of resistance and preemptive opposition that have emerged against women’s sexual agency, as well as 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. 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). Notably, these groups do not refer to themselves as ‘anti-gender’, but as ‘pro-family’, constructing LGBTIQ+ rights, SRHR, and CSE (and those who support these causes) as ‘anti-family’ (McEwen 2017).

Anti-gender movements and ‘decolonisation’: historical and contemporary continuities

Anti-gender efforts to police the definitions of “gender” (as binary) and “family” (as heteropatriarchal) 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 before we critique the regressive co-option of “gender” undertaken by pro-family fundamentalists.

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/bourgeoise 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).

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). Yet, anti-gender arguments suggesting that the pursuit of gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights is a uniquely Western/Global North preoccupation is to deny the colonial legacies that underpin the historical and ongoing subordination of queer and gender diverse people. In addition to denying the extensive historical evidence showing that forms of gender and sexuality diversity existed prior to entanglements with diverse European empires, claims that homosexuality is ‘unAfrican’ further deny the extent to which current anti-LGBTIQ+ campaigns have been mobilized and coordinated by U.S. Christian Right groups (McEwen 2017; Archer and Provost 2020; van Klinken et al 2023).

This association of gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights with the West/North has created 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, ‘tradition’, are made in order to re-assert heteronormative and patriarchal asymmetries of power (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 a fixed gender/sex binary and hierarchy. 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).

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.

Recommendations and Conclusions

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 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 generating 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
- Working with religious leaders to co-produce shared understandings of how faith can co-exist, and indeed champion, SRHR, LGBTIQ+ rights and CSE.

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