

# When “Family” is Weaponized Against LGBTQI People

FAITH FOCUS

## 1. Introductory Remarks

The issues of faith, family and traditional values have become highly politicized and utilized within the UN system for a number of years. A review of conservative groups, their discourse and strategies has been extensively reported in recent years including in the NORAD report “Lobbying for Faith and Family: A Study of Religious NGOs at the United Nations” (2013) and the Observatory on the Universality of Human Rights “Rights at Risk” (2017).

Human rights organizations, including LGBTIQ groups and faith-based actors, have been working steadily to counter such actions. These efforts, by faith-based civil society actors notably, are extensively – if non exhaustively - detailed in the Arcus report on “Faith Efforts at the UN to Advance Human Rights Relating to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Intersex Status” (2015). GIN-SSOGIE’s work very much goes in line with these efforts, seeking to bring to the fore the realities lived by individuals and communities from different contexts around the world, particularly from the Global South, and their religious experiences and interpretations. We believe that responding to right-wing groups will require the continued provision of facts and theological research by the very targeted individuals themselves. Continuing to work with representatives within the UN system, and bringing to the fore individuals from different regional contexts, is one strategy we have adopted to respond to right-wing messages anchored in lies

about and manipulation of people’s lived realities, and seeking to dismantle the human-rights system from within.

From 19 to 21 February 2018 at Auckland Lodge, Johannesburg, South Africa, we, the Global Interfaith Network (GIN-SSOGIE) gathered rights-defenders, scholars, researchers, and religious leaders from diverse family backgrounds and traditions, including African traditional religions, Islam and Christianity, for our first dialogue on Family and Traditional Values. The gathering sought to reclaim and affirm the diversity of families in Sub-Saharan Africa, which also include the families of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) people, both those which they create and those into which they are born, and to promote and defend these families locally, regionally and internationally.

The following Fact Sheet seeks to summarize the key points brought forward during our 3-day discussions, and to present them to CSO and faith-based actors seeking to impact the UN system as well.

## 2. What Does The Right-Wing Say and Do: Research Highlights from a Sub-Saharan African perspective

### *a. Right-wing’s messages about Family and Traditional Values*

Who are the Religious Right/right wing?

Briefly they are a network of religious organizations whose membership cuts across religious divides and are both ecumenical (from different churches) and interreligious (from different religions). Although primarily based in the US they have



international networks that share a fundamental commitment to the preservation of the nuclear family against perceived threats foremost of which are equal rights for women and LGBTI people. These commitments drive their advocacy work at national and international levels.

### **The natural family and family rights**

The “natural family” is a term popularized by the World Congress of Families (WCF), which the organization defines as the “fundamental social unit of society,” centered on “the voluntary union of a man and a woman in a lifelong covenant of marriage.” According to WCF, one of the primary purposes of this union is to “welcom[e] and ensur[e] the full physical and emotional development of children.”

“Family Rights” in this context refers to policies and laws that seek to protect the ‘natural family’ against perceived threats. Two of these threats are feminists advocating equal rights for women and LGBTI people. In their social analysis of the oppression of women, feminists distinguish between sex and gender. Sex is biological i.e. one is born either male or female. Gender is the social construction of sex that is the way society/culture socializes and prescribes different roles and status according to one’s sex. In other words one is born either male or female and through gender socialization one becomes a woman or man. Because gender is a social construction that changes over time and differs from culture to culture, feminists argue that the roles and status of women and men can be changed to be empowering for all. Right wing religious groups and their allies oppose this argument on the basis that the roles of women and men are biologically determined and divinely sanctioned and therefore cannot be changed. In other words biological sex is the determining factor that prescribes one’s role and status in life, being woman is fundamentally different from being man and the roles are the same irrespective of historical period, culture and context. Men impregnate and women bear children. Within this framework there is no room for diversity among women and men, let alone for

intersex people – all are the same with the same function and roles in family and society. Therefore anyone who does not fit into these prescribed roles is deemed ‘unnatural.’ The term ‘unnatural’ is used by some religious traditions for LGBTIQ persons and becomes the basis for denying them the right to fully express their humanity including their sexuality in nurturing relationships that may or may not include families. The denial of equal rights to LGBTIQ is seen by the religious right as a means of defending the ‘natural family.’ However, the idealization of the ‘natural family’ comes at the cost of denying violations of human rights, violence and abuse that occur within and outside these families. The high rates of domestic violence globally makes the ‘natural family’ a dangerous place for many women and children. Therefore any discourse on ‘family rights’ needs to include the rights of members of families to live lives free from abuse and violence. Similarly ‘family rights’ as part of the larger human rights agenda must extend to all and be inclusive of multiple forms of families that characterize contemporary society.

### **Complementarity between men and women**

Complementarity is a byproduct of the belief discussed in the previous section that the roles, status and relationship between women and men are defined and determined by their biological sex. By virtue of being born either female or male each person is sexually defined and all persons of the same sex share the same roles and are essentially the same. For example in the ideal ‘natural family’ men are the heads/leaders and women are submissive and confined to domesticity. Therefore as noted earlier, diversity has no place in complementarity and persons who deviate from the divinely sanctioned sex-specific roles are perceived to be threats against the ‘natural family’ and society who must be resisted at national and international policy levels. Hence belief in complementarity of the two sexes is central to the anti-feminist and anti-LGBTI agenda of the Religious Right.

## *b. Religious Right-wing's theological underpinnings:*

The Christian Religious Right's theological framework developed in 19-20<sup>th</sup> Centuries as a reaction to the liberal/modernist and contextual/liberation theologies which reinterpreted the bible using new methodologies such as historical, form and literary criticisms and also integrated knowledge from social and natural sciences and in the case of liberation theologies - experiences of oppressed groups. These new methodologies challenged literal readings of the bible as well as texts used by those in power to legitimize oppression such as slavery, racism, colonialism and sexism. For the Religious Right these contestations and challenges threatened the authority and legitimacy of the bible. In response they developed a theology of the bible as the inerrant, infallible word of God with final authority on all matters of faith, belief and practice. Therefore the bible is read literally not contextually. Other religions also faced the same challenges of modernity creating allies and networks between Christian Religious Right and similar groups in other religions for example some Islamic and Orthodox groups.

Literal reading of religious texts foregrounds the concrete historical, social, political, religious and cultural contexts that influenced and shaped the text. Three examples of challenges related to claims of adherence to literal interpretations of the bible. Firstly, despite claims to literal interpretation and application of the bible there are some laws that are no longer observed even by Right wing religious groups. For example Leviticus which incidentally is one the main texts used against homosexuality (18:22; 20:13), has many other laws which are ignored such as: trimming beards or cutting hair (19:27); selling land permanently (25:23); standing in the presence of elders (19:32); and stoning to death anyone who curses or mistreats parents (20:9). Secondly within the bible there are different interpretations of events and laws. For example the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is another text used to support divine judgement and

opposition to homosexuality. Yet the bible presents different interpretations and reasons for the destruction of the two cities. For example Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Jesus present vastly different interpretations none of which mention sex or homosexuality. In Jeremiah 23:14 the sins aligned to Sodom and Gomorrah are adultery, lies, evil doing; Ezekiel 16:49 the sins likened to Sodom are pride, excess of food, prosperity and not aiding the poor and needy; and Jesus in Matthew 10:1-15 refers to Sodom and Gomorrah (v 15) in the context of those who reject or refuse to receive disciples and their message. Similarly there are many references in the bible where women are fulfilling equal roles to men as national rulers and prophets (Deborah Judges 4:4); prophets like Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20); women disciples of Jesus (Luke 8:1-5) and teachers in early church (Priscilla Acts 18:1-3; 26). Lastly families in the bible were diverse polygamous, levirate, extended and single parent. Jesus' family experience was diverse – he was conceived outside marriage; he was adopted by Joseph; Joseph died leaving Mary as a single mother and on his death on the cross Jesus asked John to take care of her (extended/adopted family John 19:25-27). In his teachings Jesus spoke about nuclear family (Mark 10:7-9) as well as the extended family of faith which was not biological (Matthew 12:46-50) "Who is my mother and who are my brothers? Pointing to his disciples he said, 'here is my mother and my brothers'" (Matthew 12:48-49) and he himself chose not to have a biological family. Family in the experience and teachings of Jesus is multiple, diverse and non-biological.

In contrast to exclusively literal interpretations of the bible contextual and liberation methods of reading the bible bring together in mutual critical dialogue the contexts of the bible with contemporary society and scholarship. In the case of liberation theologies the methodology consists of three consecutive steps popularly described as 'see,' 'judge,' and 'act.' The first step is the 'see' which describes the experiences of oppression by the oppressed. From these experiences further analysis is done to get to the root causes of specific

oppressions particularly ideologies underlying systemic structures of injustice which create and sustain oppression. The second step is 'judge' which in this context means reflecting theologically on the issues raised in the process of 'seeing' and social analysis. The process of judging includes: critiquing oppressive texts in the bible; retrieving subjugated knowledge and voices of specific oppressed groups in the bible that have systematically been silenced; and identifying texts on which to build a liberating theology by and for oppressed groups. The last step is 'action' based on the new liberating theology that will bring concrete change in church and society that will transform oppressive structures. This methodology with variations has been instrumental in the creation of liberating feminist/women's and LGBTI theologies that have led to advocacy work for equality within and outside religious institutions. It is not only Christian theologians who are engaged in liberating theologies but also other religions creating a network of progressive ecumenical and interfaith networks working for the liberation of women and LGBTI. The family is also central to these theologies which recognize and acknowledge diversity of family life and advocate for inclusion of this diversity in policies. Above all liberation theologies address the underlying issues in families of inequality that contribute to violence, abuse and neglect and seek to promote just and equal rights as family values where all members flourish and contribute to a just world. Thus family is diverse, inclusive with members engaged in loving, supporting, non-violent, human-dignity affirming relationships that contribute to their wellbeing and that of the community and wider national and global wellbeing.

In contrast the Religious Right using literal and selective reading of religious seek to impose on the world their contemporary definitions of the family, roles of women and men and anti-feminist and anti-LGBTI agenda in the name of protecting the family and traditional values. Even history attests to the evolution of the family in western societies shaped by major social changes such as industrial revolution and enlightenment. With their political power and financial resources they seek to set an

agenda for the rest of the world, including Africa and to spread a culture of non-tolerance of diversity, denial of equal rights for those who do not fit into their definitions and to impose narrow definitions of family, values and life. For example being pro-life in the African context includes protection of all lives without exception against social, economic and political threats to life which include: war, famine, poverty, violence, lack of sanitation, poor governance, corruption, exploitation, unemployment and environmental crisis. Therefore traditional family values in this context must address these threats through advocating for human rights, dignity and equality of every person, protection of vulnerable including the environment, political advocacy for just laws, non-violence, economic equity and accountability in all spheres of life – government, community and family. All these family values are contained in the millennium development goals signed by all member states of the United Nations.

#### **African Context and LGBTI**

1. Two dominant discourse: National sovereignty (vs. Western influence) and Traditional Values (vs Western Influence)

#### *National sovereignty (vs. Western influence)*

In an African context, LGBTQI rights are often depicted as an import from the West, a modern form of colonialism; therefore, any attempt to promote such rights, is perceived as a lack for respect for African countries' national identity and an infringement of their sovereignty. Yet the penal law and legislation that criminalizes homosexuality is part of the colonial legacy which many African countries have kept while claiming independence from colonialism. Further western influence has also come through the widespread influence of the Religious Right wing groups that have imposed their anti-LGBTI agenda on African countries, Uganda being well documented case study.

#### *Traditional Values (vs. Western influence)*

As above, LGBTQI rights are depicted as part of Western culture, absolutely distinct from African

culture; LGBTQI culture would have nothing to do with traditional African culture, and therefore need to be rejected.

### 3. GIN-SSOGIE's Response: Anchoring "Family" within Lived Realities and Inclusive Faith-based Messaging

As described above, despite some progress, formal acknowledgments of the diversity of families by human rights monitoring bodies are still heavily influenced by the traditional family ideal, without giving sufficient attention to "LGBTQI families" and other diverse types of families, and leaving them without the equal enjoyment of family rights enshrined in international human rights treaties.

Therefore, re-affirming the universality and indivisibility of Human Rights, as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (ACPHR), and building on the aspirations of international human rights' frameworks including as set out in the Maputo Protocol (2003) on Sexual and Reproductive Health, the Angola Resolution 275 on Protection against Violence and Violations against Persons on the basis of their real or imputed Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity (2014) of the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights, and Agenda 2063 of the African Union (AU), the Global Interfaith Network has developed a joint declaration, [the Johannesburg Declaration](#), aiming at acknowledging the rich diversity of family experiences in Sub-Saharan Africa, throughout history and to this day.

Recognizing that a whole range of families, including LGBTIQ families, have been excluded from the definition of 'natural family' by the extreme religious right and that the life-threatening impact of this discrimination and exclusion on our human communities and especially the most vulnerable people including children, single mothers, widows and LGBTIQ people is deep and complex, we call to reclaim and affirm the diversity of natural families in Africa, which also include the families of lesbian,

## SOME KEY MESSAGES

- Human rights, dignity, inclusion and non-harm are core family values.
- Relationship is the core value that defines family.
- A family exists where people are engaged in loving, supporting, non violent, human dignity affirming relationships that contribute to their well being and that of the community and wider national and global well being.
- Family is more than biological.
- Family is created by birth, marriage, adoption, invitation, love.
- Family is extended, communal, interdependent.
- Family is constituted by mutual love, care and accountability.
- Family is especially important for the most vulnerable members.

gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) people, both those that they create and those into which they are born, and to promote and defend these families locally, regionally and internationally.

Our message, values and ideals reach beyond the UN, and aim to broaden the definition of “families” for all nations and people across the globe, as we are seeing alliances formed between right-wing groups (essentially originating from the Global North/USA/Europe), member states (mainly from the Global South) and civil society groups and faith leaders in the Global South.

Recognising the value that many groups worldwide, and especially peoples and States in the Global South, attach to religious and cultural traditions, the Johannesburg Declaration asserts, from within these traditions, the following:

### *Protecting our families*

1. Prior to missionary evangelization and colonialization – Africa in its diversity had and continues to have thriving culture and religion, with Person, Community and Family inextricably linked as an integral part of life.
2. The definition of the “natural family” as being limited to the nuclear family, which is promoted by the Religious Right and the proponents of cultural and traditional values, does not therefore reflect the diversity of family life in contemporary Africa. The family has always been more than biology, both historically and in our sacred texts such as the bible and Koran.
3. Our sacred texts present the family as a unit that provides social, psychological, economic and emotional support and security to all its members, as well as a place of belonging, which is in line with the African understanding of family.
4. Family has always evolved and today manifests itself in many forms such as the nuclear family, single parent (mother/father/caregiver) family, cross-generational (grandparents-grandchildren) family, LGBTIQI-headed family (including same-sex parents), childless family, and child-headed family. All these models of family can and must find their place in the African family and policy-making processes. And

these diverse forms of extended family into which members are born, married, formally or informally adopted, or invited, are all true, natural African families.

5. Extended families are communal, characterized by interdependence, and are constituted by mutual love, care and accountability, especially for their most vulnerable members.
6. And above all, the African family is grounded in the concept of ubuntu – “I am because we are”; “I relate therefore I am” – which does not imply the domination of the one by the many but entails the achievement of balance between the one and the many. Therefore, we affirm Article 18 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights. That it indeed takes a village to raise a child and therefore the communal nature of family, within the diversity of family systems and parental models, promotes the child’s own understanding of being in community.
7. The affirmation of the family in its diverse should not lead to an idealization of the family but rather to a critical reflection in the light of the high levels of violence and abuse in families. The malfunctioning of the family which makes it one of the places dangerous to its members particularly women and children requires that definitions of the family must include not only rights of the individual members but also the nature and values of relationships that should be recognized as constituting a family. In other words family does not exist where there is abuse, violence and neglect irrespective of the type of family but family exists where there is nurturing and flourishing of all members.

### *Celebrating our sexuality, reclaiming our culture*

8. That in the African context, human sexuality has generally been conceived as a divine life-affirming gift which holistically embraces diverse human relationships and sexual expressions that lead to sexual pleasure and renewal as well as, in some cases, procreation.
9. The claim that sexual diversity is “un-African” is refuted by well-researched traditional practices in some communities such as women having female husbands and men having male wives; and sangomas who are inhabited by an

opposite sex ancestor and therefore exhibit characteristics of that sex, including their choice of intimate partner.

10. In African traditions, sexual difference has never been a reason for exclusion from family and community life. On the contrary, those with sexual differences were generally historically revered and considered to have special powers.
11. Decolonial discourses remind us that African traditional knowledge must be protected from the hegemony of western knowledge and western forms of Christianity. In the case of families within African contexts the communal nature of family as well as diversity must be treated with equal validity as western forms of family.

### *Interrogating sovereignty*

12. That claims of national sovereignty to justify non-compliance with international human rights standards are deeply suspect because:
  - these are often a smokescreen for misguided and dictatorial nationalisms, whereby the dominant political and/or religious group/s seek to advance their agendas at the expense of minority groups, who are then made scapegoats for all of a country's ills, particularly in times of crisis which is illegal in terms of international agreements.
  - these play into the agenda of the extreme religious right which uses them to question the legitimacy of international human rights bodies like the United Nations Human Rights Council, and undermine international conventions on human rights.
13. We believe that no nation can be truly sovereign unless all its people are full and free citizens, with equal opportunity to self-actualise, and thus able to make their fair contribution to nation-building, so that the nation can benefit from the whole spectrum of gifts, talents, skills and abilities of all its citizens.

### *Reclaiming our faith*

14. We believe in contextual and liberation orientated readings of religious texts:

Contextual methods recognize the situatedness of the sacred texts in their historical context and applies critical tools to unpack and interrogate texts. Similarly the contemporary context which includes culture, history, contemporary thought forms, social and natural sciences, politics, economics and globalization are included in the interpretation of sacred texts. Liberation theologies also use these resources but prioritize the voices of marginalized and oppressed as starting point for reading sacred texts. It is through their experiences that liberating interpretations emerge.

15. Further, we believe that our sacred texts affirm the goodness and intrinsic value of all of creation. All human beings without exception are created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore any violation of their rights or acts of exclusion or discrimination or harm in anyway contradicts this fundamental belief of our faith.
16. The diversity inherent in all of creation is also expressed in humanity as evident in our unique DNA, gifts and fingerprints. Diversity also extends to sexuality and this is found in our sacred texts. In the Bible there is, for example, mention of eunuchs; while in the Hadith, the Prophet refused to kill a mukhannath (female-presenting man) because, he argued, "I have been prohibited from killing people who pray".
17. Also, we believe "do no harm" to be a core life-affirming principle, and any religion that does not promote love, understanding and compassion violates its own fundamental ethos of contributing to the flourishing and welfare of humanity and therefore is of no use.
18. Finally, we understand freedom of religion to be the freedom to have and practice a religion, as well as the freedom not to have or practice a religion. And using the doctrines of any one religion as the basis of law and policy is a clear violation of the right of people not to practice a particular religion. Further, religious freedom/freedom of consciousness is a fundamental human right that applies to all people, including LGBTIQ people, and we claim

the right to practice our faith in a way that affirms life, both for us and for others.

We believe that one of the key tools in our possession to fight right-wing groups is knowledge and expertise, which includes knowledge and expertise of religious texts. Working with academics, theologians and religious leaders, including LGBTQI people, is enabling us to bring forward the reality of different interpretations of religious texts. We believe that this knowledge, shared with our partners and allies, will be extremely empowering to us all, including conservative religious groups.

### *Further information:*

The Johannesburg Declaration – GIN-SSOGIE, available at <http://www.gin-ssogie.org/johannesburg-declaration/>

*Colonizing African Values - How the U.S. Christian Right is Transforming Sexual Politics in Africa:* Kapya Kaoma, previously of Political Research Associates

*Globalizing the Culture Wars:* Kapya Kaoma

*The Vatican Anti-Gender Theory and Sexual Politics: An African Response:* Kapya Kaoma

The film, *God Loves Uganda*, by Roger Ross Williams

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This fact sheet has been prepared by:

### **The Global Interfaith Network For People of All Sexes, Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Expressions (GIN-SSOGIE)**

Corner Rabie Rd and Fourth Ave North, Fontainebleau, Randburg, South Africa, 2032, Tel: +27104461990 • [WWW.GIN-SSOGIE.ORG](http://WWW.GIN-SSOGIE.ORG)

Contact us for further information : [victoria@gin-ssogie.org](mailto:victoria@gin-ssogie.org) / [toni@gin-ssogie.org](mailto:toni@gin-ssogie.org)

