

ASSEMBLING GOD'S "LAST BEST HOPE": THE EXPANDING REACH OF THE WORLD CONGRESS OF FAMILIES*

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Anti-gender activism is at the heart of contemporary geopolitics, and leading advocates are increasingly leveraging transnational connections. Since 1997, the World Congress of Families has become a premier venue for anti-gender advocates of the "natural family" to interact through its robust conference system. We introduce the World Congress of Families Dataset containing the speakers, organizations, and locations from all global and most regional conferences from 1997 through 2022, which we gathered across a series of archival sources. Across descriptive and network analyses, we document the key organizations and individual leaders involved in the World Congress of Families, and we show that the network has grown substantially. Although actors from the United States are overrepresented, regional leadership is becoming more common as the network spreads, especially across post-Soviet and African countries. Our investigation provides a new resource for understanding how anti-gender advocates coordinate, disseminate, and institutionalize anti-gender scripts on a global scale.

Censoring sex education in Florida. Upending peace deals in Colombia. Restricting LGBTQ+ civil society in Nigeria. Shuttering gender studies programs in Hungary. Banning effeminate men on television in China. While local conditions drive these events (Gunnarsson Payne 2020; Rawluszko 2021; see also Graff and Korolczuk 2022:16-20), each one is but a different manifestation of the same process: transnational efforts to combat "gender ideology" and preserve the "natural family" (Bob 2012; Chappell 2006; Corredor 2019; Cupać and Ebetürk 2020; Friedman 2003; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017).

Indeed, scholars are increasingly considering how similar, disparate events are linked through transnational coordination and shared vision (Sanders 2018). Motivated to preserve and institutionalize a specific image of the family, nation, and larger social order, opponents to "gender justice"—which we consider as broadly encompassing equality in sexual and gender expression (Htun and Weldon 2018)—increasingly turn to transnational networks to achieve such outcomes. Though regionally and nationally grown anti-gender movements are generally more powerful within their own domains (Lo Mascolo 2023; Paternotte and Kuhar 2018), evidence is clear that transnational forces pose a serious challenge to the numerous rights derived from liberal ideas of gender justice (Bob 2012; Bunch et al. 2001; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Velasco 2023b).

In particular, gender justice activists (Butler 2006; Hatewatch Staff 2019; Parke 2017; Vik et al. 2023), journalists (e.g., Goldberg 2009; Levintova 2014), and scholars (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2023; Kalm and Meeuwisse 2023; Trimble 2014; Velasco 2023b) note the importance of the World Congress of Families as a lynchpin site for connecting opponents of gender justice movements from different settings into a global ecosystem. These investigations, often done through first-hand attendance at conferences organized by the World Congress of Families, underscore how diverse actors, embedded in their own local struggles, are nevertheless able to come together over their shared concern in promoting the "natural family," that is, a married

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man and woman with children, over other family forms and social relations (e.g., Carlson and Mero 2007), against the threat of “gender ideology” (Gessen 2017; Kalm and Meeuwisse 2020; Montalbano 2019; Nketiah 2019; Provost 2019; Trimble 2014). These qualitative insights underscore the emotional energy palpating throughout the conference proceedings as well as how a focus on the “natural family” can bind together actors who are each motivated by seemingly distinct concerns, including cultural imperialism, sexual exploitation of children, demographic winter, moral decay, homosexuality, and the apocalypse of civilization itself.

We contribute to the discussion on anti-gender networks, in general, and the World Congress of Families, in particular, by introducing the World Congress of Families Dataset. As mentioned, prior investigations into the World Congress of Families’ conference ecosystem are qualitative examinations that crucially demonstrate this organization’s geopolitical importance. Without systematic data, these studies do not address important questions about the network as a whole: how has it grown, who are the influential individuals and organizations that populate these gatherings, and where is it going? Our new, longitudinal dataset is constructed by collecting data from the conference programs for all thirteen of the World Congress of Families’ main global conferences and 42 of 63 officially recognized regional conferences that occurred since the organization was founded in 1997 through 2022 (see Ayoub and Stoeckl 2023). This dataset reveals the 1,398 distinct individuals representing 1,078 organizations from across 90 countries who had speaking roles at these 55 different events. This dataset does not examine the content of these gatherings, such as through speeches or thematic focus of presentations, but it provides the necessary information to scaffold such future data collections.

We engage in a two-part investigation to demonstrate the utility of these data and their ability to offer new insights. We first outline foundational information about the people and organizations populating these conferences by focusing on who they are, where they are from, and the frequency of such gatherings in the first place. Then, we use social network analyses to document how this network has shifted over these twenty-five years and which actors hold disproportionate influence. Our analyses demonstrate how macro, descriptive insights can help us understand the World Congress of Families’ growth into a transnational force.

Our descriptive investigation helps advance the study of anti-gender movements in several ways. Beyond providing a new dataset, we show that the World Congress of Families’ network’s scale has expanded significantly—in terms of total conferences and speakers. The events of September 11, 2001, proved to be a large disruption, but there has been rapid growth since the late-2000s until the COVID-19 pandemic. This growth, particularly through targeted regional conferences, has diffused anti-gender messages more widely. For example, while actors from the United States dominate conference programs, including at gatherings outside the United States, there is evidence of distinct regional leadership developing. Actors from post-Soviet and African countries have been increasing as a percentage of total participants, a finding that corresponds with scholarly observations about the growth of anti-gender movements in many Eastern European and Central Asian nations (Ayoub et al. 2021; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Tranfić 2022) as well as the coordinated diffusion of anti-LGBTQ+ policies and anti-comprehensive sex education in Ghana, Malawi, Nigeria, and Uganda (Angotti et al. 2019; Moore et al. 2022; Nuñez-Mietz and García Iommi 2017). Additionally, we provide new evidence identifying key brokers that facilitated the network’s international expansion, several of which have not been considered key actors in the World Congress of Families’ historical development. Finally, we observe that the World Congress of Families has become the central meeting point of anti-gender concerns and can be characterized as a network of networks. Many of the top participating organizations coordinate their own networks of influence by hosting international conferences themselves, and most are involved in local and national politics within their home countries surrounding these matters. As a result, the true influence of the World Congress of Families extends beyond its immediate organizational sphere and is manifest in the proliferation of anti-gender movements worldwide.

GENDER JUSTICE AND GEOPOLITICS

An array of studies has emerged analyzing the spread of anti-gender movements within specific societies and institutions. Such work includes Diaz's (2019) novel exploration of masculinity norms as expressed in Philippine state reactions to the drug trade, Sanders and Jenkins's (2022) careful study of American policymakers' tactical opposition to gender-related phrases in United Nations' documents, Diossa-Jiménez and Menjívar's (2021) evaluation of "familyism" assumptions that shape abortion policy and the lack of legal enforcement of violence against women laws in El Salvador, several scholars' examinations of the interplay between Russian churches' teachings about gender and the state's approach to international relations (Agadjanian 2017; Antonov 2022; Soroka 2022; Stoeckl 2016), and much more. These country-specific studies illustrate how unique domestic concerns and historical path dependencies lead to a diverse array of anti-gender movements in response to growing gender justice and local women's movements (Gunnarsson Payne 2020; Rawluszko 2021; see also Graff and Korolczuk 2022: 16-20).

At the same time, local anti-gender activism is also motivated by the growing perceived threat of "gender ideology" in the global arena, such as "the United States' agenda in exporting unwelcome culture," to quote prominent Kenyan anti-gender activist Ann Kioko (2016). As such, there is increasing evidence of transnational coordination among (1) anti-gender activists (Ferguson 2022; Goetz 2020; Velasco 2023b); (2) diverse religious organizations willing to sacrifice centuries of conflict to recognize their relative unity on matters of gender and sexuality (Boyle et al. 2017; Burgess 2017; Sanders and Jenkins 2022; Shishkov 2017); and (3) a range of conservative political parties searching for discursive tools to regain power (Morgan 2023).

Why do these disparate anti-gender advocates collaborate transnationally? In large part, these actors do so because they share a common enemy: global gender justice scripts. Indeed, gender justice has become a crucial pillar of international liberal norms over the twentieth century as it was pushed by influential actors like the United Nations, Gates Foundation, many wealthy and politically powerful governments, feminists, and more (Krook and True 2012; Zwingel 2012). Efforts by actors have been extensive enough that in some select contexts, gender justice scripts now seem ubiquitous and are taken for granted (Meyer 2010). Yet, anti-gender advocates are sometimes willing to set aside their differences to find common ground in their opposition (Buss and Herman 2003; Chamberlain 2006; Franco 1998; McIntosh and Finkle 1995). These differences span national conflicts and rivalries (e.g., Russia and the United States) and religious orientations (e.g., Judaism, Islam, and Christianity). More than being willing, anti-gender activists actively search for support, community, and strategy in their geopolitical resistance. As a countermovement, despite their cultural perspective still largely dominant in the global arena, their shared experience of challenging gender justice efforts unifies them under an anchoring cultural logic: *we endorse the "natural family" and not "various forms of family"* (Corredor 2019). This shared logic provides enough connection to sustain collaborative resistance without pushing the demands of collaboration too far. In other words, they maintain "thin coherence" (Ghaziani and Baldassari 2011).

What results are transnational advocacy networks akin to the more familiar and well-studied networks promoting liberal ideals like democracy, education, and environmental conservation (Bob 2012; Boli and Thomas 1997; Keck and Sikkink 1998). As such, gender justice advocates and challengers both organize transnationally and rely on their international connections to promote their causes (Velasco 2023a). Policy wins by one side are met by heightened contestation and new forms of resistance and backlash, an intertwined dynamic that Philip Ayoub and Kristina Stoeckl (2023) liken to a double helix (see also Cupać and Ebetürk 2021; Pulejo 2024; Terman 2023). The interplay between these countervailing forces occurs internationally in settings like UN conventions and forums (Stoeckl and Medvedeva 2018).

The continual action-reaction dialectic between gender justice opponents and supporters has an important outcome: geopolitics, writ large, becomes increasingly informed by debates over gender justice (Korolczuk and Graff 2018). Anti-gender activist Alexei Komov links gender and geopolitics unequivocally, stating, "Russia has a real historical chance to become

the universally recognized leader of this nascent “pro-family” movement and regain ideological and moral leadership in geopolitics” (Stoeckl 2020: 233; see also Edenborg 2023). Debates about abortion, transgender rights, women’s rights and responsibilities, homosexuality, adoption, domestic violence, sex education, and other aspects of gender justice are, then, all deeply intertwined with broader global cultural and political battles, including democratic governance contra authoritarianism, and civil rights protections versus religious freedom. Summarizing his insightful empirical accounting of homosexuality’s expanding centrality in global politics and culture using multiple correspondence analysis, sociologist Jason Ferguson (2022) observes, “In this highly articulated global social space, formal rationalized laws on homosexuality come to take on a symbolic import, sending signals to the global environment of a nation’s willingness to adhere to or defy the liberal scripts of world culture” (706). We argue that this is the case for gender justice, broadly.

UNDERSTANDING TRANSNATIONAL ANTI-GENDER COORDINATION IN THE WORLD CONGRESS OF FAMILIES

Knowing the geopolitical importance of gender justice, we focus on the underlying social infrastructure enabling anti-gender justice advocates with shared concerns to coordinate transnationally. We recognize the diffuse nature of transnational anti-gender networks, and we begin the process of mapping them by focusing specifically on the World Congress of Families (WCF). The WCF is argued to be one of the most influential global coordinators of “pro-natural family” advocates from around the world, along with coordinators like the Russian Orthodox Church, Family Watch International, and Political Network for Values (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2023; Butler 2006; Cupać and Ebetürk 2020; Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022). Its influential status in global anti-gender movements derives from the fact it is a network-weaving organization, meaning an organization that “provide[s] a context for the continuing or regularly repeated relationships between actors over time” (Ingram and Torfason 2010: 577). As such, the WCF provides an ideal vantage point to assess and comprehend the infrastructure enabling anti-gender networks to flourish transnationally. Below, we briefly: offer a historical overview of this organization, outline current knowledge of this organization’s development, and highlight the research gap we aim to fill with our investigation.

The WCF emerged from a collaboration between American Allan Carlson, a conservative activist and former lecturer in history at Gettysburg College, and Russian Anatoly Antonov, a family demographer based at Moscow State University (Burgess 2017; Stoeckl 2020). At Antonov’s invitation, Carlson visited Moscow in 1995 for a brief but eventful visit in which they hatched the idea of hosting a single global conference on the importance of the “natural family” (Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2020). After the first WCF conference in Prague in 1997, others expressed interest in hosting similar events, and an international network began to form (Rasband and Wilkins 1999). Catholics and Protestant churches, particularly The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and nongovernmental organizations in the United States, like United Families International, were especially active, but others from a range of locales across Europe and other regions of the world also became involved (Butler 2006; Goldberg 2009; Kane 2009). Their initial efforts were, according to Carlson (Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2020:38), stalled following the attacks of September 11. However, the international roots of the network began to bear fruit again in earnest around 2007, and then especially in 2009, with the WCF V and VI global conferences in Poland and the Netherlands, respectively. These global conferences outside the United States opened the floodgates to significant international growth that continued uninterrupted until the COVID-19 pandemic (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2023).

By design, the WCF conferences centered on the “natural family” as the key to a conservative geopolitical future. To provide one example, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán stated in his keynote address at the WCF XI global conference in 2017 (see figure 1):

The family is at the centre of the Hungarian government’s vision of the future. The motto of this conference is ‘Making Families Strong Again.’ And this is right, because strong families will create a strong, competitive society and economy, a strong and competitive Hungary and Europe. ... We know that we are sailing into the wind. In Europe the political and media mainstream is driven more by liberal ideology, which relativizes values and which traditional families find so offensive. But we Hungarians also know that it is possible to sail into the wind. What’s more, it is even possible to make headway against the wind—however surprising that may be. ... It only takes perseverance, courage and the backing of likeminded allies. I am happy to be in such company today (International Organization for the Family 2017).

Figure 1. Orbán at the World Congress of Families XI in Budapest, Hungary, on May 25, 2017.



Orbán’s quote reflects two common WCF themes. First, there is the generally taken-for-granted belief among WCF participants that “strong families will create a strong, competitive society.” Second, there is the common refrain of “sailing into the wind,” no matter the costs. This is the general sentiment among WCF actors that broader forces are working against them and reflects the centrality of anti-gender principles in geopolitics—again, despite the comparative dominance of their cultural perspective around the world (Datta 2021).

Current investigations into the growth and development of the WCF typically fall into one of three types. Each offers an important and different understanding of this organization and the type of anti-gender network it weaves. The first set is focused on historical origins. These studies emphasize the enduring alliance between academics in the United States and Russia and characterize a network anchored in the American West and post-Soviet East (Kane 2016; Stoeckl 2020; Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2020). These studies also showcase an ecumenical Christian network forming between United States evangelicals, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Vatican. The second turns inward to understand the conferences themselves, often asking how diverse anti-gender advocates cohere (Evolvi 2023; Kalm and Meeuwisse 2020; Provost 2017). These studies emphasize the emotionality of the conference speeches and how mutual fears of “gender ideology” can link disparate actors worldwide under a common cause. A final set links WCF gatherings to their external consequences. Here, these studies and investigative reports highlight the deep intertwining between WCF affiliates and local elites (e.g., politicians,

religious leaders, activists) to emphasize this network's ability to shape policy outcomes and the intimate connection between a transnational network and its on-the-ground effects (Lavizzari and Sirocic 2023; Nketiah 2019; Thompson 2019; Torrisi 2019). These investigations also underscore the scale of WCF's influence by showcasing connections in Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the United Nations.

These investigations, mostly qualitative and historical in style, result in a patchwork of insights into particular aspects of the WCF ecosystem that could be best understood if grounded in a systematic understanding of the network itself. Without such an analysis, any general inferences about the entire WCF network are only based on snapshots that may not reflect the whole network. At a more basic level, we need more information about what the WCF is and the type of anti-gender network the WCF has weaved. Additionally, because the WCF receives increasing attention as anti-gender networks spread and alter policy and international norms (Kalm and Meeuwisse 2023), having a firmer understanding of the network itself is imperative.

Consider the two types of events hosted by the WCF to build out their network: global congresses and regional conferences. Locations for the global gatherings are largely set by WCF leadership. Factors that contribute to where events are held include: local pro-natural family support, donor sponsorships, and the symbolic value of the location (Torrisi 2019). Locations typically reflect natural family strongholds like Verona, Italy, Budapest, Hungary, and Salt Lake City, Utah, but, on occasion, progressive strongholds are chosen in defiance, like Amsterdam in 2009 (Kane 2009). These global conference locations give WCF leadership intentionality regarding where and how they want to grow their network based on local conditions. Regional conferences, however, are determined by local organizations petitioning to host an official WCF gathering. Aside from the logistical capacity to host an event, the only other criterion is that the event should "support the purpose and the mission of World Congress of Families and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to affirm the natural family as the fundamental and only sustainable unit of society and to defend the sanctity and dignity of every human life from conception to natural death" (International Organization for the Family 2010). Consequently, regional conferences provide a mechanism for the network to grow anywhere, even beyond the initial intention of WCF leadership. Indeed, to date, all studies on WCF conferences are focused only on global congresses and leave this other important aspect of network weaving unexplored.

What is missing, then, is a systematic analysis of the WCF's development over time (e.g., who participates, the structure of the relationships between actors involved, and how these dynamics change) and the necessary data to answer such questions in the first place. Because network structure and network content are inextricably linked (Carpenter 2007; Gonsalves and Velasco 2022; Murdie 2014), systematically mapping the structure of this network can illuminate important insights. For example, to what extent is the network still anchored in the United States and Russia? Have the network's academic origins given way to other forms of leadership representation? Are regional conferences enabling the network to truly become a global coalition, or do they provide further venues for Americans, Russians, and Europeans to maintain control of the network? Therefore, we contribute to the study of transnational anti-gender networks by providing data on all speakers and their organizational affiliation for WCF conferences since the organization's founding in 1997 through 2022, as described in the following section. These systematic data on the individuals and organizations involved in the WCF act as a gateway to a greater understanding of how anti-gender advocates coordinate, disseminate, and institutionalize anti-gender scripts on a global scale.

THE WORLD CONGRESS OF FAMILIES DATASET

To investigate the changing dynamics of transnational anti-gender networks, we construct and make the World Congress of Families Dataset publicly available, an original, longitudinal dataset of individuals and organizations appearing at WCF conferences from 1997 through

2022.¹ Our dataset stems from the information we gathered from WCF conference programs through multiple archival records. Initially, we began with the official websites of the most recent WCF global conferences (e.g., wcfverona.org), which generally included the conference program. As an example, see the program on the left-hand side of figure 2a, the first page of the WCF XIII global conference program held in Verona, Italy, in 2019. As we searched for earlier conferences, we turned to Internet Archives’s WayBack Machine, which captures websites at different points in their digital histories, to search for conference programs on the now-defunct WCF website (worldcongress.org). For example, we obtained the second program (right) in figure 2a in this manner; it comes from the WCF I global conference in Prague 1997. For some smaller regional conferences, we instead turned to the official websites (sometimes the archived versions) of other conference-sponsoring organizations. Additionally, we used ChristianNewsWire.com, where WCF sent their press releases. Finally, we turned to the Howard Center for the Family, Religion, and Society Records housed at Northern Illinois University for a few conference programs, such as the third example shown on the following page in figure 2b for a regional conference held in Mesa, Arizona, in the United States in 2001.²

From these sources, we gathered programs for all thirteen of the main global WCF conferences and forty-two officially sponsored regional WCF conferences.³ We found at least some passing mention (for example, in an archived WCF monthly newsletter) of an additional twenty-one WCF regional conferences for which we could not locate the conference programs or other information regarding speakers. As a result, our analyses underestimate the overall growth of the WCF network, although these missing conferences are likely to be particularly small.⁴

Figure 2a. Two Examples of World Congress of Families Conference Programs



Note: These are images of the first page of the conference programs: WCF XIII global conference in Verona, Italy, in 2019 on the right. The WCF I global conference in Prague, Czech Republic, in 1997 is on the left.

Figure 2b. A Third Example from WCF Regional Program, Mesa Arizona, 2021.

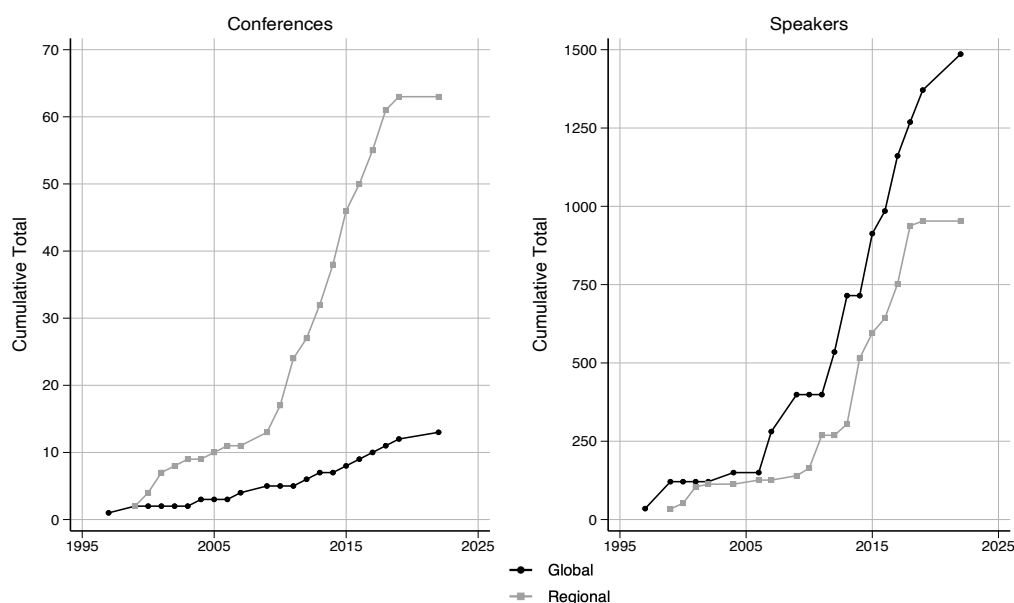
United Families International in association with THE HOWARD CENTER FOR FAMILY, RELIGION, AND SOCIETY AND THE BYU WORLD FAMILY POLICY CENTER present the SOUTHWEST REGIONAL WORLD CONGRESS OF FAMILIES Saturday, November 10 ~ Mesa Centennial Hall ~ Mesa, Arizona			
<i>Welcome</i>	SHARON SLATER, <i>president/ united families international</i>	<i>Musical Number</i>	DR. GLEN BENNETT, <i>director of vocal instruction at msc</i> "This Is Worth Fighting For"
<i>Presentation of Colors</i>	WESTWOOD HIGH SCHOOL R.O.T.C.		
<i>National Anthem</i>	THE HIGHLAND HIGH SCHOOL JAZZ CHOIR, <i>gilbert, az</i>	<i>Speaker</i>	LEN MUNCIL, <i>the center for arizona policy</i> "Preserving Our Culture - How to Effectively Fight for Family Values"
<i>Invocation</i>	LAURALEE CHRISTENSEN <i>executive vice president/ united families international</i>	<i>Speaker</i>	AUSTIN RUSE, <i>the catholic family and human rights institute</i> "The Assault on Religion and the Sanctity of Life"
<i>Opening Ceremonies</i>	THE OSMONDS - SECOND GENERATION REGIONAL CHILDREN'S CHOIR DOUG HOLLADAY, <i>narrator</i>	<i>Musical Number</i>	RICHARD AND MELANY WILKINS "Do You Love Me" from <i>Fiddler On The Roof</i>
	"Freedom's Light"	<i>Special Guest</i>	KENDRA ANDERSON, <i>youth abstinence program</i>
	"One Voice" featuring Stacy LeSueur, Callie Reece, Chris Reece, Preston Merchant and Samuel Andersen	<i>Speakers</i>	GARY AND JOY LUNDBERG, <i>authors</i> "Marriage - A Vital Part of a Stable Society"
	"My Thank You Prayer"		
	"God Bless Our Homes and Families"		BREAK
<i>Introduction of Hosts</i>	SHARON SLATER, <i>president / united families international</i>	<i>Speaker</i>	RICHARD WILKINS, <i>byu world family policy center</i> "United Nations Trickle Down Social Policy"
<i>Hosts</i>	ALAN AND SUZANNE OSMOND & RICHARD WILKINS		
<i>Speaker</i>	ALLAN CARLSON, <i>the howard center for family, religion, and society</i> "The Radical Change in American Culture - How We Got To This Point"	<i>Musical Number</i>	THE ROBERTS SISTERS "Loving Families"
		<i>Special Guest</i>	DR. JANIS FRIEDKALNS <i>former united nations ambassador from latvia</i>
<i>Speaker</i>	PATRICK FAGAN, <i>the heritage foundation</i> "How UN Conventions Undermine Family, Religion, and Sovereignty"	<i>Speaker</i>	SHARON SLATER, <i>president/ united families international</i> "Defending The Family At The Grass Roots Level"
	BREAK	<i>Closing Ceremonies</i>	THE OSMONDS - SECOND GENERATION ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY CONCERT CHOIR <i>Dr. Karen Parthum, director</i> "Remember" - The Goodman Family "Star Spangled Banner and God Bless America" "Heal Our Land"
<i>Video Presentation</i>	DANNY AINGS, <i>professional athlete and former nba coach</i>		
<i>Speaker</i>	KATHRYN BALMFORTH, <i>united families international</i> "Saving Our Children ~ International Policies That Hurt Them"		
<i>Speaker</i>	COLLEEN DOWN, <i>author</i> "It Takes A Mother To Raise A Village"	<i>Remarks and Benediction</i>	IMAN ABDUR-RAHIM SHAMSI-DEEN Iman of the Jewel of Al-Islam Mosque and Amir of the Islamic Council of the Greater Phoenix Area
<i>Musical Number</i>	THE KENNETH AND MARIE NOBLE FAMILY "No Empty Chairs"		

We developed a longitudinal dataset from these conference programs by recording each speaker listed on each program, their organizational affiliation, their affiliation's country of origin, and their affiliation's organizational type.⁵ Some conference programs did not formally list speakers' organizational affiliations or the home country of these organizations, but the speakers' names were hyperlinked to other websites that provided that information, or we used other easily accessible public information about the organization found online. The variable for the geographic region of organizations' country of origin, the categories of which we based on how WCF speakers tended to divide up the world: Africa, Asia/Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, post-Soviet, and "the West" (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United States, and the nations of Western Europe).⁶ The organizational type variable includes five categories: private, for-profit enterprises ("Business"), civil society organizations ("NGO"), education institutions like universities and seminaries ("Education"), churches and mosques ("Religious"), and, finally, official state agencies, organizations, and political parties ("State"). Ultimately, our World Congress of Families Dataset includes 1,398 distinct individuals representing 1,078 organizations across 90 countries.

WHAT CAN CONFERENCE PROGRAMS TELL US ABOUT THE WORLD CONGRESS OF FAMILIES?

To examine the World Congress of Families ecosystem, we first present descriptive findings regarding the number of conferences, which organizations are most represented, and which individuals speak most. Figure 3 begins with a visual demonstration of the WCF's expansion by highlighting the cumulative number of conferences and the number of individual speakers listed in each program. As a cumulative figure, the rate of change, or slope, between two time periods helps demonstrate the relative increase in conferences and speakers. These trends are broken down between global and regional conferences.

Figure 3. Cumulative Growth in the Number of World Congress of Families Conferences and Speakers, by Conference Type, from 1997-2022.



The left side of figure 3 highlights a steady number of global conferences since the WCF I in 1997. Regional conferences slowly expanded in the years following the events of September 11, 2001, mainly around the United States, but accelerated globally after 2009. The more rapid expansion in regional conferences reveals an important, underexplored aspect of how the WCF network has expanded in large measure based on local demand, given that regional conferences generally occur when a local organization petitions the WCF leadership for conference sponsorship and provides resources to host the event.

The right panel of figure 3 tracks the number of speakers on conference programs.⁷ Although there are roughly six times as many regional as opposed to global conferences, the total number of program speakers remains much larger at global gatherings. Gatherings stalled during 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, restarting in the fall of 2022 with the WCF XIV global conference in Mexico City. Still, no regional conferences took place that year.

Where are these gatherings held? Table 1 lists the locations and themes (where applicable) of the 76 WCF conferences we identified. We located conference programs for 55 conferences, for which we provide the number of organizations (“Orgs”) represented among the speakers.

From this list of conferences, we observe important geographic trends. Namely, global congresses are anchored primarily in Europe and post-Soviet Europe in particular, and only three occurred in North America (United States in 2015 and Mexico in 2004 and 2022). With the planned exceptions of Geneva in 1999 and Amsterdam in 2009, global conference locations map onto locales where domestic politics and local movement activity support an anti-gender agenda. One strategy to build a transnational network may be for WCF leaders to bring the “global” gathering place to domestic anti-gender activists already making in-roads so they can showcase anti-gender victories—helping to boost the perception that this network is ascendant (Trimble 2014). To host gatherings beyond Europe and North America, however, it took the work of local organizers to petition to host an affiliated regional conference. There have been eight regional conferences in Africa, six in Latin America, and just one in Asia. So, although there is local demand to be part of this global network, the WCF has yet to intentionally capitalize on this through a global gathering besides the WCF III and WCF XIV conferences in Mexico City. Nevertheless, the continued interest shown by anti-gender advocates in Latin America and Africa shows that the network has considerable opportunities for expansion.

Table 1. List of World Congress of Families Conferences

Year	Conference Type	Conference Theme or Name	Location	Orgs
1997	World Congress I		Prague, Czech Republic	28
1999	World Congress II	Liberty, Family, and Community	Geneva, Switzerland	73
1999	Regional Meeting	The Family: At the Center of Human Development	Manila, Philippines	18
1999	Regional Meeting	The Moral Family Fuels a New World Order: The Case of Population	Melbourne, Australia	10
2000	Regional Meeting	Northern Arizona Congress in Support of Families 2000	Arizona, United States	7
2000	Regional Meeting	Millennium Youth Assembly	Alberta, Canada	10
2001	Regional Meeting	The Southwest Regional World Congress of Families	Arizona, United States	10
2001	Regional Meeting	The Family in the Twenty-first Century: Can it Survive?	Washington, D.C., United States	22
2001	Regional Meeting		California, United States	5
2002	Regional Meeting	The Child and the Family: As the Family Goes, So Goes the Nation, and So Goes the World	New York, New York	9
2003	Regional Meeting	Defend Marriage and Family Conference	Arizona, United States	-
2004	World Congress III		Mexico City, Mexico	27
2005	Regional Meeting		Utah, United States	-
2006	Regional Meeting	Why People of Faith Need to Speak Up for the Natural Family	California, United States	10
2007	World Congress IV	Europe's Last Best Hope in the Battle for the Family	Warsaw, Poland	109
2009	World Congress V	Family: More than the Sum of its Parts	Amsterdam, Netherlands	85
2009	Regional Meeting	Riga Family Forum I	Riga, Latvia	-
2009	Regional Meeting	Dialogue of Civilizations	Abuja, Nigeria	14
2010	Regional Meeting	Riga Family Forum II	Riga, Latvia	-
2010	Regional Meeting	Turkey: Journalists and Writer's Foundation	Istanbul, Turkey	-
2010	Regional Meeting	Family as a Value in Terms of Tradition, Religion and Modernity	Antalya, Turkey	-
2010	Regional Meeting	Family Values Conference	London, United Kingdom	21
2011	Regional Meeting	Euthanasia Prevention Coalition: 3rd International Symposium on Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide	Alberta, Canada	-
2011	Regional Meeting	Endeavour Forum Conference	Sydney, Australia	-
2011	Regional Meeting	Father Foundation Conference	Sydney, Australia	-
2011	Regional Meeting		London, United Kingdom	6
2011	Regional Meeting	International Law Conference on Women and Children	Lagos, Nigeria	12
2011	Regional Meeting	Riga Family Forum III	Riga, Latvia	10
2011	Regional Meeting	World Moscow Demographic Summit: Family and the Future of Humankind	Moscow, Russia	50
2012	World Congress VI	Marriage and Family, Future of Society	Madrid, Spain	95
2012	Regional Meeting	The Dialogue of Civilizations 10th Anniversary of the Rhodes Forum	Rhodes, Greece	-
2012	Regional Meeting		Port of Spain, Trinidad & Tobago	-
2012	Regional Meeting	Seminario Internacional de Recaudación de Fondos	Santa Cruz, Bolivia	-
2013	World Congress VII	Happy Families, Healthy Economy: A New Vision for Prosperity and Social Progress	Sydney, Australia	79
2013	Regional Meeting	Regional Summit for the Balkans	Belgrade, Serbia	-
2013	Regional Meeting	Educating Children in Sexuality: The Complimentary Role of Parents and Teachers Conference	Stockport, United Kingdom	-
2013	Regional Meeting	Rhodes Forum, Dialogue of Civilizations	Rhodes, Greece	8
2013	Regional Meeting	Building a Culture of Life and a Civilization of Love	Port of Spain, Trinidad & Tobago	25
2013	Regional Meeting	First Black Conservative Summit	Illinois, United States	2
2014	Regional Meeting	Coalition to End Sexual Exploitation Summit	Virginia, United States	-
2014	Regional Meeting	International Safer Internet Forum	Moscow, Russia	6

Table 1. (cont'd)

Year	Conference Type	Conference Theme or Name	Location	Orgs
2014	Regional Meeting	International Congress of Families: Leadership, Science, Ethics and Education	Santa Cruz, Bolivia	22
2014	Regional Meeting	East Coast Conference against Assisted Suicide	Connecticut, United States	8
2014	Regional Meeting	Life, Family, and Freedom in Australia	Melbourne, Australia	77
2014	Regional Meeting	International Forum on Large Families	Moscow, Russia	88
2015	World Congress IX	Family: The Promise Begins with Me	Utah, United States	136
2015	Regional Meeting		Port Harcourt, Nigeria	-
2015	Regional Meeting	Regional Conference for the Balkans	Belgrade, Serbia	15
2015	Regional Meeting	Coalition to End Sexual Exploitation Summit	Orlando, Florida	-
2015	Regional Meeting	Natural Family Values in the Modern World	Tbilisi, Georgia	5
2015	Regional Meeting	Conference to Commemorate United Nations International Day of the Family	Nairobi, Kenya	9
2015	Regional Meeting		Chişinău, Moldova	3
2015	Regional Meeting	Inter-American Summit	Washington, D.C., United States	26
2015	Regional Meeting	All Lives Matter / Black Conservative Summit	Chicago	8
2016	World Congress X	Civilization at the Crossroads: The Natural Family as the Bulwark of Freedom and Human Values	Tbilisi, Georgia	49
2016	Regional Meeting	Regional Conference for the Balkans	Belgrade, Serbia	-
2016	Regional Meeting	Argentina Regional Conference I	Salta, Argentina	11
2016	Regional Meeting	Third World Caribbean Conference	Christ Church, Barbados	11
2016	Regional Meeting	African Regional Conference on Families: The Future of the Family in Africa	Nairobi, Kenya	22
2017	World Congress XI	Building Family Friendly Nations, Making Families Strong Again	Budapest, Hungary	142
2017	Regional Meeting	The African Family & Cultural Colonization	Lilongwe, Malawi	40
2017	Regional Meeting	The Family & Development: Strong Families and Prosperous Nations	Castries, St. Lucia	16
2017	Regional Meeting	“Caring Not Killing” Euthanasia Prevention Conference	California, United States	15
2017	Regional Meeting		St. John, Antigua	13
2017	Regional Meeting		Paris, France	8
2018	World Congress XII	East and West Coming around the Beauty of the Family	Chişinău, Moldova	75
2018	Regional Meeting	World Family Forum	Lisbon, Portugal	-
2018	Regional Meeting		Georgetown, Guyana	-
2018	Regional Meeting	Seizing the Future, Protecting the Family	Nairobi, Kenya	11
2018	Regional Meeting	Global Home Education Conference	Moscow, Russia	57
2018	Regional Meeting	The Family in the 21st Century: Strong? In Crisis? Changing?	Mukono, Uganda	12
2018	Regional Meeting	Coalition to End Sexual Exploitation Summit	Washington, D.C., United States	70
2019	World Congress XIII	The Wind of Change: Europe and the Global Pro-Family Movement	Verona, Italy	93
2019	Regional Meeting		Dominican Republic	-
2019	Regional Meeting	The African Family and Sustainable Development: Strong Families, Strong Nation	Accra, Ghana	15
2022	World Congress XIV	Accompanying Families in a Changing World	Mexico City, Mexico	81

The final insight from table 1 stems from the conference themes. These short texts preclude a systematic analysis of the conferences' content, but they help reveal the diversity of substantive matters encompassed within this ecosystem. While promoting the “family,” a very broad concept, is a primary focus, other issues are apparent: fertility, sexual exploitation, abortion, sex education, and euthanasia.

Table 2. Twenty Most Common Speakers at World Congress of Families Conferences, 1997-2002

Name	Organization(s)	Location	Appearances
Allan C. Carlson, Ph.D.	World Congress of Families	United States	36
Don Feder, J.D.	World Congress of Families	United States	28
Sharon Slater	Family Watch International	United States	21
Theresa Okafor	Foundation for African Cultural Heritage	Nigeria	20
Patrick Fagan, Ph.D.	Family Research Council; Heritage Foundation	United States	20
Janice Shaw Crouse, Ph.D.	Concerned Women for America	United States	19
Theodore Baehr, Ph.D.	MovieGuide	United States	18
Alexey Komov, Ph.D.	World Congress of Families - Russia	Russia	17
Christine de Marcellus de Vollmer	Alianza Latinoamericana para la Familia; Pontifical Council for Family and Life	Venezuela	16
Larry Jacobs	World Congress of Families	United States	14
Brian Brown	National Organization for Marriage; World Congress of Families	United States	13
Miguel Moreno	Leadership Institute	United States	11
Dmitriy Smirnov, Archbishop	Russian Orthodox Church	Russia	11
Steven W. Mosher	Population Research Institute	United States	11
Babette Francis	Endeavour Forum, Inc.	Australia	11
Ignacio Arsuaga, J.D.	CitizenGo	Spain	10
C. Gwendolyn Landolt, J.D.	REAL Women of Canada	Canada	10
Natalia V. Yakunina	Sanctity of Motherhood Foundation; Foundation of St. Apostol Andrei Pervozvanni	Russia	10
Austin Ruse	Center for Family & Human Rights (previously Catholic Family & Human Rights)	United States	10
Shelley Locke	Power of Mothers	United States	9

Tables 2 and 3 shift our perspective by looking at the individuals and organizations, respectively, who most frequently populate the panels at these gatherings. Unsurprisingly, many of the most frequent participants are WCF staff. Chief among them is founder Allan Carlson himself, who participates more than any other individual. His enduring presence underscores his ability to shape the ideas permeating this network. Sharon Slater of Family Watch International is the next most frequent speaker. She is connected to the recent anti-homosexuality laws in several countries, including most recently in Uganda (Gilger and Copeland 2023; Kibuti 2023; Wepukhulu 2023). Moreover, individuals representing organizations from the United States dominate, and Russia is the only other country to have multiple individuals in the top twenty speakers. This demonstrates the legacy and continued influence of WCF founding actors (Isaacs et al. 2021; Kaoma 2010). Somewhat surprisingly, eight of the top twenty individual speakers are women, indicating their increased leadership after the WCF's founding period, which men dominated.

As reported in table 3, we see founding actors sitting atop the most common organizations represented among the speakers at WCF conferences. The WCF is the top organization, and the Russian Orthodox Church is sixth. Interestingly, Brigham Young University, owned and operated by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, is second. Scholars and journalists have recognized the church's involvement (e.g., Butler 2006), but our data highlight the exceptional involvement of professors from Brigham Young University's Law School and School of Family Life, primarily during the WCF II and IX global conferences in 1999 and 2015 that they helped organize (see Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2020: 40-41; Rasband and Wilkens 1999). Table 3 further highlights the high engagement among a range of American Christian

Table 3. 20 Most Common Organizations Represented among Speakers at World Congress of Families Conferences, 1997-2022

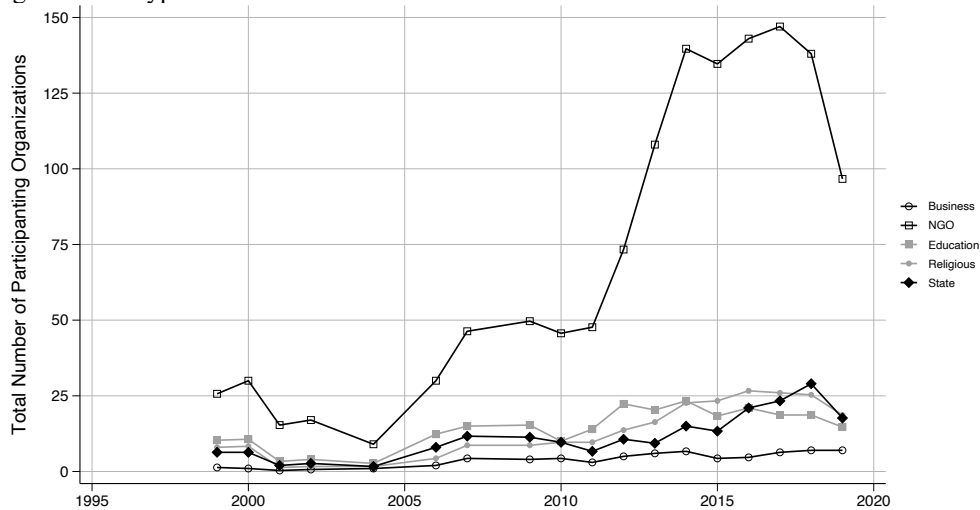
Organization	Location	Appearances
World Congress of Families (previously Howard Center for Family, Religion, and Society)	United States	92
Brigham Young University	United States	33
CitizenGo	Spain	26
Family Watch International	United States	25
Foundation for African Cultural Heritage	Nigeria	25
Russian Orthodox Church	Russia	24
Concerned Women for America	United States	24
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary	United States	20
MovieGuide	United States	20
Leadership Institute	United States	19
Family Research Council	United States	17
United Families International	United States	17
Population Research Institute	United States	15
Alliance Defending Freedom	United States	15
World Congress of Families - Russia	Russia	14
Alianza Latinoamericana para la Familia	Venezuela	14
National Organization for Marriage	United States	13
REAL Women of Canada	Canada	13
Focus on the Family	United States	13
Center for Family & Human Rights (previously Catholic Family and Human Rights)	United States	12

organizations such as Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, MovieGuide, and Alliance Defending Freedom. So, despite these conferences being more likely to occur in Europe, the individuals and organizations that most populate these spaces are from the United States.

Many organizations listed in table 3 direct subnetworks and niches within global anti-gender operations. For example, CitizenGo is a Catholic organization in Spain using digital advocacy to combat “gender ideology” (Shameem et al. 2021). Their numerous online platforms run campaigns across twelve languages and boast over nine million users from fifty countries, with Brazil alone having nearly three million users. The Foundation for African Cultural Heritage, based in Nigeria, seeks “the preservation and promotion of African cultural values . . . [against rising] ideologies that run counter to African pro-family and pro-life values” (FACH 2023). This organization is itself a network of seventeen organizations from several African countries (McEwen 2017). Population Research Institute uses demographic research methods to raise concerns of “demographic winter” across their eighty-country network. The Center for Family and Human Rights focuses on United Nations advocacy, helping to establish the United Nations’ Family Rights Caucus and Civil Society for the Family in 2008 and 2015, respectively. Thus, table 3 helps confirm that while we are only formally investigating the WCF network, the participating organizations and individuals form a network of networks through which the constellation of global anti-gender actors regularly interact.

Finally, figure 4 breaks down the total number of organizations participating in a given year by the type of organization.⁸ An immediate trend in figure 4 is that NGOs dominate these gatherings. Indeed, nearly every organization in table 3 is an NGO. Of course, this does mask the degree to which these organizations have a religious affiliation or identification—something for subsequent research to dive into more deeply. Other types of organizations exist, but their participation is more modest.

Figure 4. Three-Year Rolling Average of Total Number of Participating Organizations by Organization Type from 1999-2019.



Another important observation is the steady increase in state officials and organizations since 2010, especially after Carlson stepped down and Brian Brown—the head of the National Organization for Marriage, a major leader and coordinator in efforts to oppose LGBTQ+ rights in the United States—took over the WCF in 2016. Brown seized upon several developments to gather support for the WCF among far-right politicians and populist parties, namely the United States Supreme Court ruling in support of same-gender marriage in the summer of 2015, Donald Trump’s American presidential election win in November 2016, the growth of the Brexit movement in the United Kingdom, and European populist movements opposing migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea. He succeeded greatly in the post-Soviet states (e.g., Feder 2017).⁹ Our data support the notion that, under Brown, the WCF network is becoming more political and advocacy oriented as opposed to Carlson and Antonov’s initial allegedly academic and theological motivations for protecting the “natural family.” Consistent with this interpretation, we see plateaus or modest declines in educational and religious organizations since the WCF’s leadership transition to Brown.

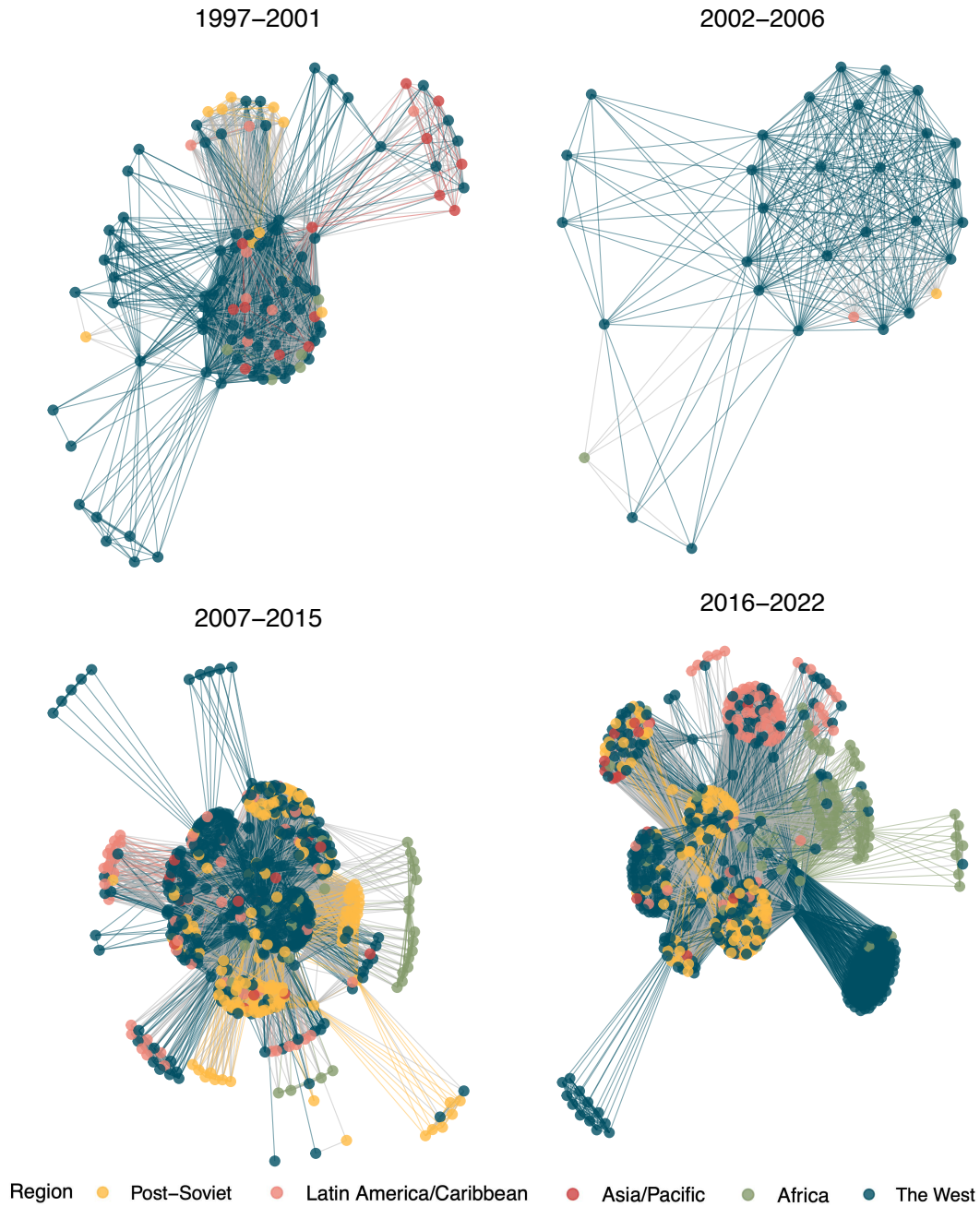
Network Results

We next use social network analyses to reveal the WCF network’s underlying structure—something descriptive counts alone miss. Turning to the network structure can illuminate important insights like whether actors are tightly overlapping, loosely clustered, or largely atomized, all of which shape how information flows and coordination transpires (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Moreover, a network can illuminate actors who hold structural positions of power. For example, even though Carlson appears most often, are there regional leaders who broker between the global and local environments?

We construct an organization-x-conference matrix from our dataset. Each cell in this matrix represents whether an organization (e.g., Focus on the Family) was on the program for a specific conference (e.g., WCF IX in Salt Lake City).¹⁰ This bipartite organization-x-conference network is then transformed into an organization-x-organization network such that cells represent whether two organizations appear on the same conference program. Additionally, rather than analyzing one large network that collapses time, we create four subnetworks that analyze conference appearances in specific windows in WCF history: (1) the origins period from 1997 until international outreach stalled after September 11, 2001; (2) an era of strengthening North American roots between 2002 and 2006; (3) a rebirth of the network’s global orientation from 2007 to 2015; (4) the transition to new leadership under Brian Brown’s leadership with a more explicitly political orientation from 2016 to 2022 (see also Ayoub and Stoeckl 2023; Butler 2006).

Figure 5 visualizes how these network structures change over time. In the figures, nodes are organizations that sent leaders to speak at a WCF conference, color-coded by the organizations' geographic regions. Each organization (node) is connected to the other organizations (nodes) that presented at the same conference; node clusters indicate organizations at the same conference. Nodes between clusters are organizations at multiple conferences. These visualizations help to demonstrate WCF network's growth over time and the increasingly regionalized nature of these events, as represented by the distinct regional clusters that appear over time.

Figure 5. The Network Formations of the World Congress of Families, 1997-2022



The first WCF network graph, covering 1997 to 2001, demonstrates that WCF successfully started from the very beginning as a global coalition. Though actors from the West certainly dominated, all regions were represented. Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean were the least represented, followed by the post-Soviet states. Interestingly, the Asia/Pacific region (indicated with red nodes) was most involved in the WCF during this first historical period. The visualization highlights the importance of the single red node that lies between the upper-right cluster featuring many red nodes (representing the first-ever regional conference for the WCF, which occurred in Manila, Philippines) and the largest, mostly blue cluster in the middle (which is mostly constituted of participants in the WCF I and II global conferences). This particular red node represents Francisco S. Tatad, the Senate Majority Leader of the Philippines. A previously overlooked actor within the literature on WCF history, our dataset reveals that Tatad attended the 1997 and 1999 global conferences and the regional event in Manila in late 1999, the latter of which he and his wife, Fanny Tatad organized based on their correspondence with Allan Carlson and other WCF actors contained in the Howard Center for the Family, Religion, and Society Records at Northern Illinois University.¹¹

In a more formal way, we can further explore which organizations serve as bridges across different aspects of the WCF network by calculating the top five organizations with the greatest betweenness centrality scores from each historical period, as provided in table 4. Betweenness centrality measures the level of influence a node has over the flow of information within a network by occupying “structural holes” (Brandes 2001; Burt 2015). Not surprisingly, Tatad’s Office of Senate Majority Leader in the Philippines is the most central actor in the first historical period. The next three in this first period are Christian-inspired NGOs involved in abortion debates at the United Nations alongside the Vatican in the 1990s, and the fifth is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, all four of which are based in the West.

Table 4. Top Five Organizations with Greatest Betweenness Centrality in Each Historical Period

1997-2001	Score	2002-2006	Score
Office of Senate Majority Leader, Philippines	1159	Department of Health and Human Services, U.S.	57
Endeavour Forum, Inc., Australia	452	Catholic University of America, U.S.	48
United Families International, U.S.	354	Concerned Women for America, U.S.	20
REAL Women of Canada, Canada	354	MovieGuide, U.S.	20
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, U.S.	322	REAL Women of Canada, Canada	20
2007-2015		2016-2022	
National Organization for Marriage, U.S.	7693	Family Watch International, U.S.	45737
Family Watch International, U.S.	7417	CitizenGo, Spain	14368
Associazione per la Difesa dei Valori Cristiani, Italy	7090	Euthanasia Prevention Coalition International, Canada	8178
Leadership Institute, U.S.	6716	Home School Legal Defense Association, U.S.	8090
GrassTopsUSA, U.S.	6031	African Organization for Families, Kenya	7161

Note: Values are rounded to the nearest whole number.

The second network graph covers the post-9/11 period from 2002 to 2006. What is immediately striking from this visualization is that there are far fewer nodes overall, as there were mostly only a handful of regional conferences during this period immediately following the

September 11 terrorist attacks. Of the present nodes, they are overwhelming Western (in this case, American). In addition, the top five bridging actors during this second period, as listed in table 4, were unsurprisingly from North America. The conferences during this era had similar presenters on their programs, but one name that gained prominence was Dr. Wade Horn, who oversaw the Administration for Children and Families—an agency within the United States Department of Health and Human Services during the Bush Administration that had the greatest betweenness centrality in the network in this second historical period (Church News Editor 2002; Horn 1999; Ireland 2002). Horn was a strong proponent of abstinence-only education and traditional marriage, having led the National Fatherhood Initiative in the United States (Horn and Blankenhorn 1999). He helped to create a symbiosis between the WCF and the Bush Administration (Human Rights Campaign Foundation 2015:8). Horn in this period, as well as Tatad in the prior period, showcase how political actors are central to the WCF network and its policy influence despite being fewer in number compared to NGOs. Moreover, the participation of political actors like Wade and Horn likely helped build the WCF's credibility.

The post-9/11 years were then met with rapid global expansion from 2007 until 2015, as the third network visualization in figure 4 illustrates. More regional and global conferences transpired, creating a network expanding its reach and more interconnected amongst its core participants. Several clusters along the outside portions of the visualization indicate conference speakers who only attended a single event, and these clusters often contained people from the same geographic region. The clusters toward the middle of the visualization, though, are comparatively diverse in color, evidence of many actors from a range of regions participating in multiple conferences. During this period, the post-Soviet connections within the WCF network became more evident, and many spoke at multiple events, as indicated by the relative centrality of the yellow nodes in the largest, most central cluster. Interestingly, we see a larger number of speakers from the African region than in the prior periods. However, they are almost exclusively in their own clusters, meaning that were only involved in one of the three regional conferences held in Nigeria and Kenya. Latin American and Caribbean participants were similarly mostly confined to outlying events that were well-attended by participants from the West, as represented in the pink and blue clusters toward the bottom-left of the visualization. Interestingly, there are only a handful of speakers from Asian and Pacific countries, indicating that Tatad's original bridging efforts eroded. So, despite the global expansion of the WCF network during this historical period, it was mostly organizations from countries within the West that attended multiple conferences and thus had the highest betweenness centrality scores, as reported in Table 4. In particular, we see Brian Brown's National Organization for Marriage and Sharon Slater's Family Watch International as the leaders in brokering connections across the WCF network during this time.

Globalizing trends in the WCF network accelerated even more in the last period we examined, from 2016 through 2022. Notably, the size of the network is larger and far more colorful than the previous periods. This figure may likely be even more expansive had the COVID-19 pandemic not caused a two-year disruption. Looking at the network structure, we see that the post-Soviet actors continue to be central, as most participated in multiple events. The same is true for the vast majority of the participants from the West, who continue to lead in betweenness centrality, as indicated in table 4. What is uniquely evident in this visualization is the emergence of Latin American and Caribbean as well as African clusters. The African continent represents a unique regional network within the larger WCF structure: participation is substantial, several conferences were held, and some African speakers attended multiple events within the region—an indication of a new set of informal regional leaders emerging. A Kenya-based organization, African Organization for Families, led by Ann Kioko, earned the fifth-ranked betweenness centrality score during this period (table 4). This is the only incident besides when Tatad's Office of Senate Majority Leader in the Philippines during the first historical period that an organization outside of the West made the top five for such scores. Kioko organized a regional WCF conference in Nairobi in September 2016 (Hatewatch Staff 2016; Nyambura 2016), after which our dataset shows she attended subsequent events in Hungary, Malawi, and Uganda.

A final surprising artifact is the exceptional, dense blue cluster in the lower right corner: this captures a large conference in Washington, D.C., in 2018 entitled the “Coalition to End Sexual Exploitation Summit.” The summit was constituted almost entirely of American speakers that the WCF sponsored. Before this, the WCF had sponsored a regional conference of the same name in Orlando, Florida, in 2015, and at the WCF IX global conference in 2015 there was a panel on child sexual trafficking organized by Tim Ballard’s Operation Underground Railroad (Hay 2015). The tremendously successful movie *Sound of Freedom*, released in the summer of 2023, was written about Ballard, who has since come under significant public and legal scrutiny for many cases of sexual harassment against his volunteers (Conley 2021; Gehrke 2023; Olmstead 2023; Phillips 2023; Scribner 2023). The fact that the WCF sponsored these events is suggestive of the growing importance of child trafficking as a cause for mobilization in global conservative circles, which some have taken to extremes with a plethora of conspiracy theories about a ring of elite politicians and business leaders that sexually traffic vast numbers of children worldwide (Prakash et al. 2022).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Scholars increasingly document the consequential growth of anti-gender networks. We contribute to this line of work by turning our investigation inward: who is behind the inter-weaving of these increasingly expansive networks? We address this question by focusing our analysis on what many consider the lynchpin of these endeavors: the World Congress of Families (WCF). Gender justice activists (Butler 2006; Parke 2017; Southern Poverty Law Center 2019; Vik et al. 2023), journalists (Goldberg 2009; Levintova 2014) and scholars (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2023; Kalm and Meeuwisse 2023; Trimble 2014; Velasco 2023b) note the importance of the WCF as foundational for laying the groundwork internationally for much of the anti-gender activity manifesting today. While others provide qualitative, first-hand accounts from WCF conferences, our contribution is to provide a descriptive, bird’s eye view of this network’s key individual and organizational actors from its inception in 1997 to 2022. Such an overview helps understand the growth and development of the network weaved by the WCF and lays a roadmap for future investigations.

To make our contribution, we developed an original dataset from archival documents of WCF conference programs. Our World Congress of Families Dataset permits mapping the WCF network’s global expansion through its conference system. Ayoub and Stoeckl (2023) offer an initial analysis of this effect by looking at WCF global gatherings. We expand upon this by encompassing dozens of regional conferences officially sponsored by the WCF—taking their name and agenda to new corners of the world—and we make our full dataset publicly available.

Our descriptive and network analyses demonstrate four distinct contributions. First, we show the key actors, composition, and global expansion of the WCF network of organizations. The WCF network expanded in total size due to the increased frequency of gatherings and an increasing number of speakers and organizations present at them. Global conferences, with their locations driven more by WCF leadership, are disproportionately held in the United States and Europe. In particular, post-Soviet nations hosted five of the fifteen WCF global conferences, including three in a row from 2016 to 2018. Where these global congresses occur largely maps onto locales with robust anti-gender organizing and political support. Meanwhile, it took local organizations petitioning to host a regional conference for the WCF network to spread beyond its American and Russian origins. Indeed, we observe six times as many regional conferences as global conferences, and they are located in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. The rapid uptake of conferences in African countries in recent years matches investigative journalism linking the activities of WCF network leaders to new anti-homosexuality laws and concerns about sex education policies in Ghana, Malawi, Nigeria, and Uganda (Gilger and Copeland 2023; Kibuti 2023; Wepukhulu 2023). Consequently, these regional conferences—while smaller in size—are an unexamined pathway through which (1) anti-gender norms can spread in a top-down fashion and spur local mobilization, and (2) local anti-gender movements formed in response

to grassroots, domestic, women's rights activism by showcasing their links to transnational illiberal movements opposing gender justice—enhancing their political legitimacy due to transnational connections.

Yet, there are still regions where the WCF is weak or absent. Our data indicate that they still have no foothold in many of the world's most populous countries, China and India. Nor the nations of the Persian Gulf, though other anti-gender movements are well established in these settings (Moghadam and Kaftan 2019; Yilmaz Sener 2021). And, their reach in Latin America is somewhat small given the vast regional anti-gender movements present there (Corrêa and Gill 2022; Paternotte and Kuhar 2017). Because of the two routes to bringing the WCF to a location, this absence suggests that both WCF leadership has maintained a Western-centric bias and, for whatever reason, anti-gender advocates from underrepresented regions may not see enough “thin coherence” (Ghaziani and Baldassarri 2011) to make the effort and expend the resources necessary to participate in this particular anti-gender network. So, although anti-gender movements exist globally, there are still barriers to establishing a transnational movement reflective of the diverse causes and motivations behind these local objections to gender justice.

Second, we show which individual speakers and organizations are most active at WCF conferences since the network's founding in 1997. Leaders of the WCF itself are most active, followed by a number of core leaders that have been attending WCF events for the past two decades, such as Sharon Slater of Family Watch International, Janice Shaw Crouse of Concerned Women for America, Theodore Baehr of MovieGuide, Christine de Marcellus de Vollmer of the Latin American Alliance for the Family, Babette Francis of Endeavour Forum, and Austin Ruse of the Center for Family and Human Rights. This collection of individuals and organizations reflects the reality that NGOs, particularly from the United States, dominate these gatherings—even when outside the country. But this was not always the case. There was initially much greater representation, as an overall percentage, by academics and religious leaders, especially from Brigham Young University, Moscow Lomonosov State University, and several Pontifical councils. Into the 2010s, and especially when Brian Brown took over the WCF in 2016, more advocacy-oriented NGOs became ascendant, and academic and religious participation plateaued or modestly diminished (though they have not disappeared). In exchange, a steady increase in state officials have made their way onto conference programs, especially those representing populist parties in Eastern Europe. Tracking this evolution of actors helps emphasize the transition from this network's academic origins to political reality.

Third, our network analysis helps demonstrate the utility of these descriptive data even more by turning to insights that raw counts of participation cannot. Namely, we showcase an ever-increasing network that is becoming more interconnected except for the years immediately after September 11, 2001. This increased connection is transpiring through more regionalized clusters. Because the regional conferences can be siloed off from the rest of the network, this makes those who bridge these divides that much more influential, as they are the primary conduit through which specific anti-gender cultural scripts established at WCF main gatherings get shared with locals. These important brokering roles are revealed through network analysis. For example, we highlight the overlooked role of Francisco S. Tatad of the Philippines' national government, Wade Horn of the Bush Administration in the United States, and Ann Kioko of the African Organization for Families based in Kenya. Identifying these interlocutors helps understand how the cultural and political messages advanced by the WCF can become embedded into new locations. And, of course, the network analysis further confirms the centrality of Brian Brown and Sharon Slater to the global expansion of the WCF network in the past decade.

Finally, the WCF has become a network of networks. Several of its participants have gone on to establish their own conferences or umbrella organizations like the Doha International Family Institute, Strengthening Families Conference, Global Family Policy Forum, and Group of the Friends of the Family (see Kalm and Meeuwisse 2023:568; Velasco 2023b:1391-1393). Anti-gender networks that have overlapped and collaborated with the World Congress of

Families have become particularly common across Europe. These include Agenda Europe, CitizenGo, Values Observatory, and Political Network for Values, among others (Datta 2018). Moreover, conservative organizations focused on politics within their own country attend the conferences of other domestically focused conservative organizations to exchange strategy ideas, share policy language, and mimic each other's tactics (e.g., Sanders and Jenkins 2023). The coordination is transnational and top-down even when the aims are domestic and local. This coordination includes transnational advising of anti-gender activists in diverse locales to complain against the "cultural colonization" of gender justice movements (e.g., Kioko 2016; see also Korolczuk and Graff 2018). Consequently, while the WCF is an influential site, it is but one piece of a broader, more loosely organized, global anti-gender network. More work is needed to map out the full complement of subnetworks to truly see how these structures enable the transferring of resources and cultural repertoires, ultimately affecting anti-gender outcomes.

Our descriptive analysis and introduction of a novel dataset help to lay the foundation for future research on the WCF and anti-gender networks more broadly. We briefly note three potential studies building upon these empirical foundations. First, the results from our betweenness centrality scores of the WCF network highlight key actors that have not been studied much or at all. Researching their histories fully would provide a fruitful avenue for strengthening historical research on the WCF network. A related avenue for further research is on the origins of the WCF. We used the newly available archival records of the Howard Center for Family, Religion, and Society to find additional conference programs, but there are many records in these documents that highlight the early interactions of WCF founding actors. This could better describe the positioning of the WCF within American and Russian politics at the time of the organization's emergence, as well as why different organizations became involved over time, and how their involvement in local politics gave way to their transnational visions.

Second, we focus on the *who* and the *where* of the WCF network's development—not the *what* and *why*. Building upon our dataset by including the content of speeches given at WCF conferences and other anti-gender conferences would enable formal, longitudinal analyses of thematic changes over time or across different types of regional actors. Are speakers from post-Soviet and Western nations most likely to discuss "demographic winter?" Is homeschooling of unique interest to anti-gender activists in the West? Given the spread of anti-LGBTQ+ laws across several countries in Africa, is this a primary theme at conferences hosted in that region? How does the emotional valence of speeches vary over time? Do actors from political versus educational organizations differ in presentation style and topic? Are conservative political issues that are not directly focused on gender, sexuality, and family, such as migration and trade, also frequently discussed at WCF conferences? Similarly, have antidemocracy sentiments crept into messages at the WCF conferences in recent years? These questions merit further investigation and, in theory, would be possible through the challenging task of gathering detailed data on the content of WCF speeches.

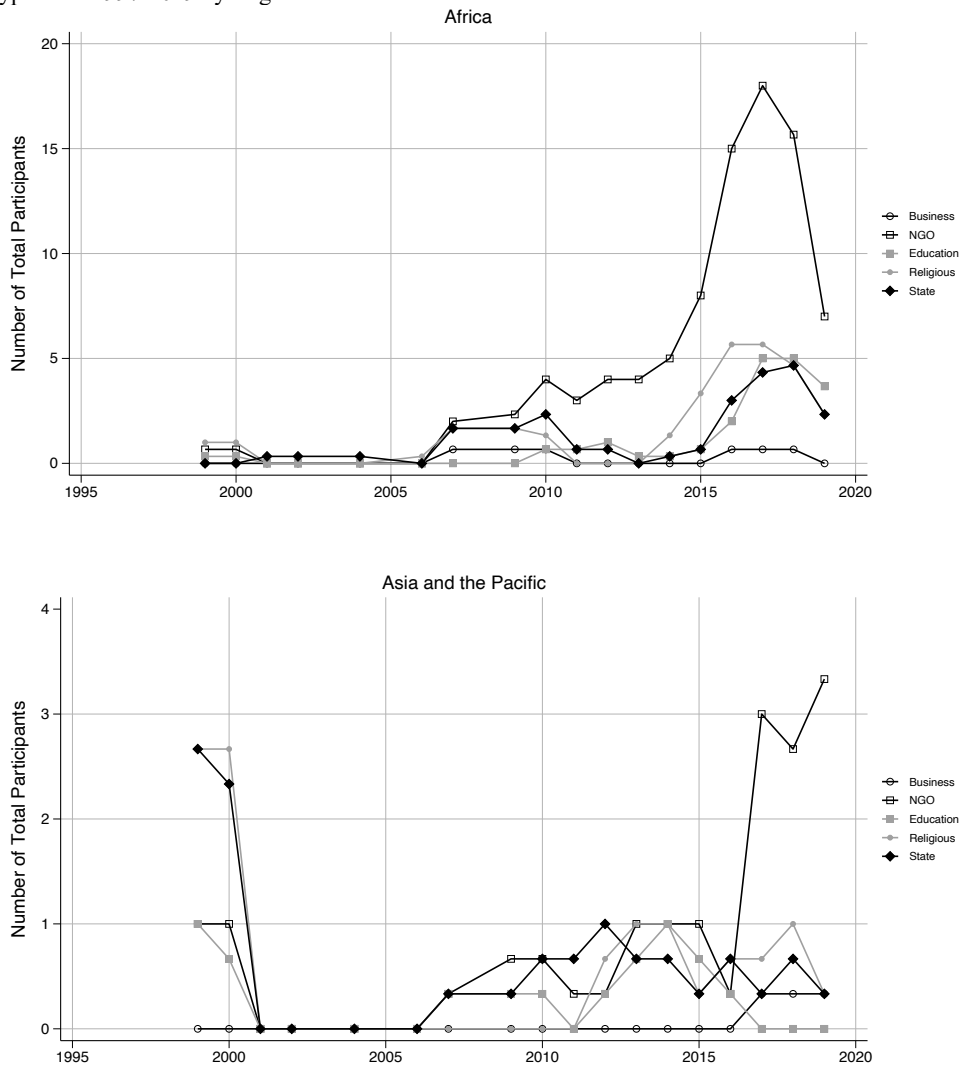
Third and perhaps most powerfully, our dataset could be linked with crossnational data on laws regarding same-gender marriage, sex education, homeschooling, pronatalism, divorce, domestic violence, and other related topics to investigate the relationship between organizational participation in WCF conferences and subsequent legal change. Relational ties between specific WCF actors, such as Sharon Slater and government officials, could also be especially relevant for the adoption of particular laws. Just as numerous studies have linked the power of liberal international organizations with passing human rights laws and policies crossnationally, scholars could do the same for illiberal actors and matching legislative action. This type of scholarship is needed to test journalists' claims that members of the WCF network influence policymakers. Likewise, one could examine the relationship between WCF conference participation at the national-level and individual-level outcomes related to sexuality, gender, and family.

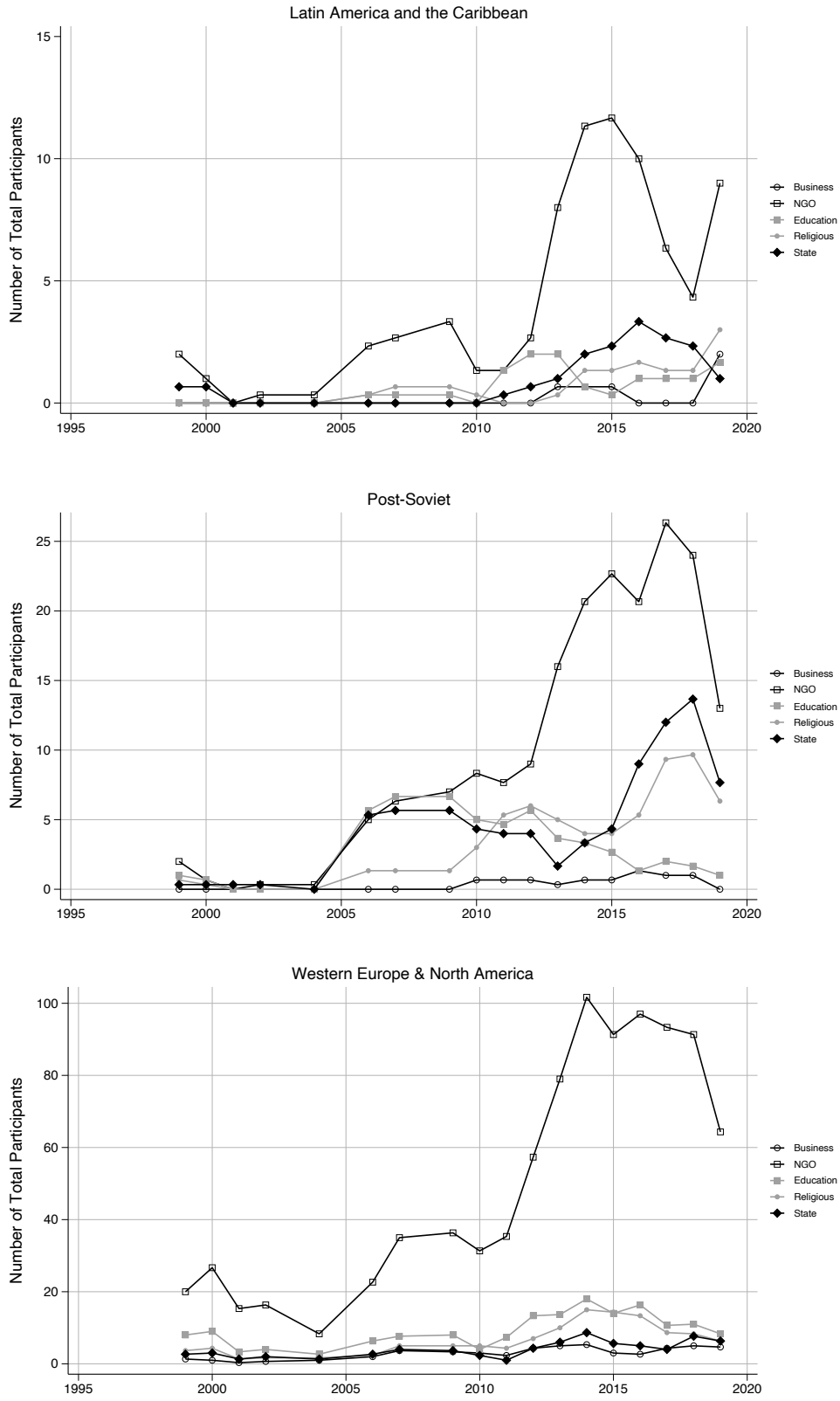
These lines of research are necessary given the rise in anti-gender mobilization campaigns and policy outcomes, along with the impacts of these campaigns and policies on the lives of individual people in diverse contexts across the world (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). New

investigations showcase the inherently transnational currents linking these seemingly disparate events (Sanders 2018). Networks of anti-gender advocates share resources, cultural repertoires, and mutual concern about gender justice programs, and they push countries to reject such global norms (Stoeckl 2020; Velasco 2023a). Consequently, we are now in a heightened moment of gendered geopolitics: a country’s orientation vis-à-vis the liberal and illiberal international political blocs can be determined by how they interpret and manifest gender justice (Ferguson 2022; Ayoub and Stoeckl 2023). Investigating anti-gender networks, as we have done here with the World Congress of Families, uncovers the key actors in gendered geopolitics and the patterns in their networks’ transnational expansion, all of which is crucial baseline knowledge for understanding the political and cultural influences of anti-gender movements around the world.

APPENDIX

Figures A1. Three-Year Rolling Average of Total Number of Participating Organizations by Organization Type from 1997-2019 by Region





NOTES

¹ Data are available at: <https://osf.io/tj68h/>

² Northern Illinois University, Regional History Center, Regional Collections, Howard Center for the Family, Religion, and Society Records (Rockford), 1911+. Series VIII: Allan Carlson Papers, Sub-Series D, Box 265, Folder 18.

³ We include the Moscow 2014 regional conference, the International Forum on Large Families, even though the WCF did not officially sponsor it. Several WCF leaders attended the event, as did many other WCF networks' actors, and the conference largely mirrored the original plans for the canceled WCF global conference, even being held on the same dates (Levintova 2014).

⁴ The geographic distribution of the twenty-one regional conferences missing from our dataset is Africa (1), Asia/Pacific (2), post-Soviet (4), Latin America (4), and the West (10). The geographic distribution of the 42 regional conferences included in our dataset is: Africa (8), Asia/Pacific (1), post-Soviet (8), Latin America (6), and the West (19).

⁵ We also recorded each conference's sponsoring organizations.

⁶ WCF speakers did refer to the Middle East as a distinct region, but we include it under Asia/Pacific, given the limited participation from countries in these areas. Our one participant from Turkey is difficult to categorize, but we placed them under post-Soviet given their geographic proximity to other countries in this category. In addition, there are two participants from the "-stan" countries (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), whom we label as post-Soviet.

⁷ Only organizers know the exact number of people attending WCF conferences outside of program speakers. When Stoeckl interviewed Carlson in 2020, he said there were "about 700" attendees for the first global WCF conference in Prague in 1997 (Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2020: 37). Carlson also reported that the WCF XIV in Mexico City in 2022 was the largest WCF event ever with more than 9,000 attendees, breaking a previous high of 4,000, but this total very likely included digital participants, as there was an online conference registration option for the first time and OneMeta AI provided automatic translation options (International Family News 2022; OneMeta AI 2022).

⁸ Three-year rolling averages are shown due to dramatic year-to-year fluctuations in counts.

⁹ Re-creations of figure 4 are included in the appendix. These figures break down organization type by region. Here, trends are similar, but it is apparent that the increase in state actors, while increasing everywhere, is particularly acute in post-Soviet countries.

¹⁰ Cells are weighted by the number of times an organization was listed on the conference program (e.g., if three individuals from Focus on the Family presented, the cell would have a value of three).

¹¹ Northern Illinois University, Regional History Center, Regional Collections, Howard Center for the Family, Religion, and Society Records (Rockford), 1911+. Series VIII: Allan Carlson Papers, Sub-Series D., Box 264, Folder 1. Interfaith Conference on the Family and Marriage, "The Family of Faith Today is Shaping the Global Future," Philippines, March 27-28, 1999.

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