



WCF unmasked

The World Congress of Families is a global exporter of hate, writes **Jessica Stern**, the executive director of OutRight Action International

Early in November, the World Congress of Families (WCF) held its regional conference in Accra, Ghana. Don't let the seemingly wholesome name fool you — the WCF is a central player in the global export of an anti-choice and anti-LGBTQ agenda across the globe.

The organisation is well-financed, well-connected and influential, and has a long history of successful lobbying across the world. This latest gathering in Ghana, although not its biggest or best-attended event, should be setting off alarm bells.

The WCF was founded in Russia in 1997 by two Russian intellectuals and an American academic. It is probably the largest convention of conservative civil society and governments coming together to exchange tactics, build capacity and unite forces with a view to, in its own words, “affirm, celebrate, and defend the natural family as the only fundamental and sustainable unit of society”. It is designated as a hate group by the US's Southern Poverty Law Center.

Part of its influence lies in the WCF's connections to world leaders. In 2017, Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán hosted and participated in the congress in Budapest. In 2018, it was hosted by the president of Moldova, Igor Dodon. In March this year, the Verona congress was organised with publicly stated support from Italy's then deputy prime minister, Matteo Salvini, and the minister for family and disability at the time, Lorenzo

Fontana. In Ghana, too, the conference was welcomed by the deputy minister for health, Alexander Kodwo Kom Abban.

It is also well-resourced. In addition to funds from American evangelicals, WCF's Russian language website boasts numerous sponsors linked to the Russian government, which not only boosts its financial stability, but also its access to conservative states who share the WCF's agenda of exporting hate against LGBTQ people and gender equality.

What makes the WCF more dangerous still is its adoption of pseudo-human rights

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language. Under the guise of protecting the rights of the family, the child and freedom of religion, the WCF promotes conservative ideologies centred on concepts of “natural law” and “natural family” through laws criminalising LGBTQ people and sexual and reproductive health and rights, in particular, abortion, both at a national and international level.

And it has had notable wins. The WCF and those in their circles have, to a greater or lesser degree, influenced the passing of barbaric laws, such as the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act in

Nigeria, and the notorious so-called gay-propaganda law in Russia.

It also played a role in inciting the passing of the 2014 Anti-Homosexuality Act in Uganda. Although that law was struck down in the courts, a similar bill is being tabled with the backing of the minister of ethics and integrity, who has called for the death penalty for homosexuality and the outlawing of its “promotion and recruitment”.

The expansion of the WCF in Africa is particularly concerning because a majority of the continent's colonial era bans on same-sex relations still exist. As such, coming in with additional hostility sends a shocking message: that imprisonment of people for whom they love is not enough, that we should not exist at all. This additional hostility can also lead to vigilante violence, with attacks on people based on their perceived sexual orientation, gender identity or expression.

What can we do? Stay vigilant. The WCF and its allies are highly resourced, highly strategic and their influence has only grown with the rise of fundamentalism at state level across the world. We have to work across civil society and state boundaries to support activists in West Africa, and wherever the group turns its eye, to hold the line, to ensure that hostile environments don't become even more hostile, and that hard-fought battles on the international level don't backslide.

It's not easy to stand up to fundamentalism. But it is crucial to our survival. 🗨️

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