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Competitive mimicry: The socialization of antifeminist NGOs into the United Nations

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Abstract

Conservative NGOs contesting women's rights in the United Nations are on the rise, and their activity is increasingly described as an antifeminist backlash. This article focuses a new theoretical lens on this development: *socialization*. It argues that conservative NGOs' socialization into transnational practices and the United Nations has played a significant part in facilitating the antifeminist backlash. To support this claim, the article examines socialization comprehensively, applying several analytical angles: its definition, directionality, mechanism, degree and effects. It also treats conservative NGOs' socialization as both a process and an outcome. As a process, it unfolds horizontally, by conservative NGOs *competitively mimicking* feminist NGOs in two domains in particular: their manner of transnational organizing and their skilful use of the UN human rights framework. The article finds that conservative NGOs have socialized into transnational NGO practices and the regulative institutional rules of the United Nations, but not into all its constitutive norms. The chief effect of this kind of socialization is polarization. The article singles out and empirically illustrates three of its manifestations: the struggle for institutional spaces; zero-sum politics based on a sense of existential threat; and the use of a strong moralizing discourse.

Keywords: antifeminist backlash; moralizing discourse; NGOs; polarization; socialization; United Nations

I. Introduction

In the long history of feminist transnational activism, the 1990s stand out as a particularly productive period. It was then that the famous Beijing conference was held, bringing together more than 4000 non-government organization (NGO) representatives (Pietilä 2007: 70). The conference enabled feminists to find a common cause in concepts such as gender, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and the empowerment of women. Importantly, it showed them that they could strongly influence the United Nations if they organized well. This trajectory of transnational feminism was part of a broader trend. After the Cold War, many international organizations (IOs) adopted a governance model that embraced the participation of transnational actors (see Jönsson and Tallberg 2010; Tallberg *et al.* 2013, 2014; Tallberg, Sommerer and Squatrito 2016). In the United Nations, this opening up resulted in a sharp increase in NGOs with Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) consultative status, from around 1000 in the early 1990s to almost 5500 today

(ECOSOC NGO Branch 2020; Willetts 2020). What united these NGOs was that a vast majority of them were progressive and liberal.[1]

In the past decade, however, a new trend has emerged. In the context of the global rise of illiberal actors (see Cupać 2020a, 2020b; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Mudde 2019; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Schopmans and Cupać 2021), right-wing transnational movements and NGOs are becoming better organized and are increasingly orienting themselves towards IOs (Blee and Deutsch 2012; Bob 2012; Buss and Herman 2003; Weiss and Bosia 2013). Conservative antifeminist NGOs that contest women's rights are a part of this group. In the early years after the Cold War, only a few such NGOs were present in the United Nations, and their efforts mostly amounted to a loosely organized antifeminist pushback. Today, however, their number is much greater, and they have intensified their activities in various UN fora. They are also a part of a broader antifeminist alliance that includes many Islamic and post-Soviet states, the United States during Donald Trump's presidency and occasionally groups such as the Organization for Islamic Cooperation, the League of Arab States, the UN Africa Group and the G77 (Goetz 2015; Shameem 2017b; for G77, see Girard 2014). They are united in their opposition to 'gender ideology' and they work on restoring traditional values, the most important being 'the natural family'.

Scholars have already documented this development (Blakely 2010; Buss and Herman 200; Butler 2000, 2006; Goetz 2015, 2020; Halperin-Kaddari and Freeman 2016; Paternotte and Kuhar 2018). Some stress the transnational character of this antifeminist alliance, regarding both the involved actors' linkages and their learning and diffusing practices (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018). They also note that there are multiple arenas where anti-feminist mobilization takes place. Among these, the mobilizations in the European Union (Datta 2018; Ebetürk 2018; Kantola and Lombardo 2020; Yamin, Datta and Ximena 2018) and those in domestic contexts (Grabowska 2014; Graff 2014; Kantola and Lambardo 2020; Paternotte and Kuhar 2017; Verloo 2018) are particularly well researched. These studies indicate that antifeminist actors employ various mobilization tactics, which they use selectively depending on the context (Yamin, Datta and Ximena 2018). Paternotte and Kuhar (2018) encourage researchers to 'disentangle' antifeminist mobilizations based on the context in which they operate. Following their call, our contribution zooms into the United Nations and describes antifeminist processes unfolding there.

Scholars have also sought to capture antifeminist mobilizations theoretically, with two perspectives standing out in particular. One is rooted in the sociological literature on social movements. Here, transnational antifeminist NGOs are conceptualized as a counter-movement to the women's rights movement (Chappell 2006; Corredor 2019; Roggeband 2018, 2019). The other perspective comes from International Relations (IR) norms research. In this perspective, the activities of antifeminist NGOs are portrayed as practices of norm spoiling (Sanders 2018), counter-norming (Roggeband 2019) and norm contestation (Voss 2019), with women's rights norms being the target of spoiling, countering and contesting. As can be seen, the two perspectives employ a very similar theoretical strategy. In explaining transnational antifeminist NGOs, they draw on concepts that have already been used to theorize the feminist movement; however, they flip these concepts in such a way that antifeminists become mirror antagonists of feminists. We argue that this mirror effect is not merely conceptual, but reflects an underlying institutional process—*the socialization of*

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[1]We use these concepts as umbrella terms to denote NGOs that have advocated for causes such as democracy, the rule of law, human rights, women's rights, social justice and material progress.

antifeminist NGOs into the UN system. We further argue that this socialization has allowed conservative NGOs to turn the antifeminist pushback of the 1990s into the backlash we are currently observing (Cupać and Ebetürk 2020).

By socialization, we refer to the process of antifeminist NGOs adopting the behavioural rules and practices of global governance as they pertain to transnational actors. The mechanism of socialization we identify is *competitive mimicry*, which occurs when an actor imitates its rivals out of the pressure to prevent the (perceived) erosion of its material gains, political status or a value system (cf. Henisz, Zelner and Guillén 2005). The rivals are imitated because they have a track record of notable achievements in a given context. We therefore argue that antifeminist NGOs have socialized into the UN system by competitively mimicking feminist NGOs. Over the years, feminist NGOs have successfully inserted their agenda into the UN system, threatening many conservative values in the process. By mimicking feminists, antifeminists hope to reproduce their successes but with a conservative agenda. The mimicking is particularly evident in two domains: their formation of a broad transnational network and their skilful use of the UN human rights framework. However, this is not all. We also examine the effect of this kind of socialization, namely the polarizing dynamic it has spurred. Feminist and conservative NGOs are now sparring in various UN fora, exhibiting striking behavioural similarities while advocating for incompatible norms.

Our purpose in this article is to add an institutionalist perspective to social movements and norms research on antifeminist NGOs. We hope to provide another layer of understanding of the ongoing antifeminist backlash in the United Nations and the mechanisms driving it. At the same time, we aim to contribute to IR institutionalist literature. Unlike sociological institutionalists (see Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse, Ropp and Sikkink 1999), we do not treat NGOs as socializers but rather as socializees. We are not interested in how antifeminist NGOs conduct norm entrepreneurship, advocacy and persuasion; instead, we focus on how such NGOs get socialized into carrying out these practices on the global stage. IO politicization is another strand of institutionalist literature to which we contribute. So far, this literature has largely overlooked illiberal actors who seek to utilize IOs for their purposes (see De Wilde, Leupold and Schmidtke, 2016; Zürn 2019; Zürn, Binder and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012). By extension, it has also neglected to examine the interaction between ideologically opposing IO utilizers. The concepts of socialization and polarization we develop in this article hint at how these gaps can be filled. However, given that this is not the main focus of the research, we offer more detail on this issue elsewhere (Cupać and Ebetürk 2021).

The remainder of the article is split into five sections. Together, these sections amount to a comprehensive overview of antifeminist NGOs' UN socialization. First, we define socialization. Second, we examine its directionality, arguing that for conservative NGOs, it unfolds horizontally. Third, we tackle the socialization mechanism of these NGOs by introducing the concept of competitive mimicry. Fourth, we discuss the degree to which they have been socialized. In the fifth section, we examine the effects of their socialization through the prism of polarization. The conclusion summarizes our argument, emphasizes our contribution and sketches avenues for further research.

II. Definition of socialization

A widely accepted definition of socialization in IR is that provided by Jeffrey Checkel (2005). Socialization, Checkel (2005: 804) maintains, is 'a process of inducting actors into

the norms and rules of a given community'.[2] Through socialization, a novice adopts ways of thinking, talking, feeling and acting that are considered appropriate in a given social context. Successful socialization entails sustained normative compliance that is based on internalization rather than on instrumental calculation or coercion. Therefore, a socialized actor is one who has acquired a context-specific identity and can thus take part in an organized pattern of social interactions.

Defining socialization in IR has provoked a debate on whether socialization is a process or an outcome. Some treat it as a process (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998), while for others it is an outcome (Alderson 2001; Wendt 1999). However, many scholars see it as both a process and an outcome (Kent 2002; Park 2010; Schimmelfennig 2000; Thies 2003). We side with this group and argue that socialization as a process and socialization as an outcome are intertwined, so that at every stage of the socialization process, we see some degree of socialization. In line with this approach, we discuss both the mechanism by which conservative NGOs socialize into the UN system (thus exploring the process) and the degree of socialization this mechanism has so far produced (thus exploring the outcome). First, though, we need to take a closer look at the directionality of socialization, which influences both the mechanism by which agents socialize and the degree of their socialization.

III. Directionality of socialization

The directionality of socialization is an important theme in the socialization literature. Scholars who wrote about socialization in the early post-Cold War period conceptualized socialization mostly as a top-down process. They used the concept to explain the integration of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries into the Euro-Atlantic community (Flockhart 2006; Gheciu 2005; Kelley 2004; Linden 2002; Schimmelfennig 2000, 2005), the association of rising powers and non-Western states with the international system (Atkinson 2006; Johnston 2014; Kent 2002; Suzuki 2005), and the relationship between hegemons and secondary states (Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990; Wang 2003). In these studies, socialization is seen through the prism of power asymmetry and hierarchy. As a result, the actors involved are divided into socializers and socializees.

Over the years, however, many scholars grew dissatisfied with this unidirectional understanding of socialization. Socializees, they argued, are not passive recipients of norms (Chin 2012; Paciorek-Herrmann 2012; Terhalle 2011; Xiaoyu 2012). While being socialized, they also spread their own norms and ideas. Based on these observation, Paciorek-Herrmann (2012: 249) suggests that, in certain contexts, socialization is not merely a 'process of inducting actors in the norms and rules of a given community', as Checkel suggests, but also a process of 'the induction of a given community with the norms promoted by an actor'. The contexts Paciorek-Herrmann (2012) particularly has in mind are those in which power asymmetry and hierarchy between actors are not pronounced. CEE states, she argues, have been operating in such a context since joining the European Union. The social distance between earlier EU members and CEE states has shrunk considerably, making CEE states' socialization less hierarchical and more horizontal than before they joined the European Union. Formally, the two groups are now interacting on an equal footing. The influence is bidirectional, and so is their socialization.

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[2]For an overview of other socialization definitions, see Checkel (2004/05).

We argue that conservative NGOs operating in the United Nations are involved in horizontal socialization *vis-à-vis* progressive feminist NGOs. Although feminist NGOs are veterans of transnationalism, and conservative NGOs have only recently started to play 'the game' on a similar scale, they are equal in the institutional context of the United Nations. Of course, there can be power asymmetry between the two, with one side being considerably more influential than the other due to, for example, finding the right allies or generally being a more competent advocate. But, in formal terms, they have equal status within the United Nations. This does not mean, however, that UN-affiliated NGOs cannot split into socializers and socializees. Feminist NGOs have most certainly helped many new progressive NGOs socialize into the complex UN system. However, given the vast ideological distance, they are unlikely to offer such help to conservative NGOs.

Horizontal socialization, however, is not the only type of socialization to which conservative NGOs are exposed in the United Nations. As constructivist scholars point out, agents can also 'download' rules and norms from a given social structure in a top-down fashion. Therefore, conservative NGOs' UN socialization must also include a top-down effect of the rules and norms enshrined in this system. Some of these rules and norms are *regulative* (describing institutional obligations, prohibitions and permissions), while others are *constitutive* (having the power to bring someone or something into existence). Socialization into regulative norms is 'superficial', as it does not require an agent to adopt a new identity but merely to adhere to a given set of behavioural standards (Zürn and Checkel 2005: 1056). In contrast, socialization into constitutive norms is 'deep', as it fundamentally transforms agents. We are primarily interested in conservative NGOs' deep socialization in one regard: them turning into competent transnational actors. This, we argue, does not happen by them 'downloading' the constitutive norms of the United Nations – or at least not primarily in this manner. The constitutive norms of the United Nations, such as human rights, have been progressively inclined, and rather than internalizing them, conservative NGOs have sought to reinterpret or reject them. The deep socialization of conservative NGOs has, therefore, primarily taken place horizontally. This has influenced the mechanism, the degree and the effects of their socialization. We discuss each in turn.

IV. Mechanism of socialization

Before stepping onto the global stage, conservative NGOs (and, generally speaking, most NGOs) have usually already internalized certain norms – after all, advocating for the norms they favour is their job. It is also important to emphasize that these NGOs do not need to be pushed to socialize into transnational practices; they seek it voluntarily. Consequently, once they step onto the global stage, they are not subject to norm entrepreneurship and persuasion of some third actors – or, at least, that is not the dominant mechanism by which they socialize.

Norm entrepreneurship and persuasion are socialization mechanisms theorized by sociological institutionalists (Brysk 1993; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Klotz 1995; Nadelmann 1990; Risse, Ropp and Sikkink 1999; Sikkink 1991). When discussing these mechanisms, they usually portray NGOs as socializers and states as reluctant socializees (Checkel 2004/05). Our perspective is different: we treat NGOs as socializees and, given that they are not reluctant to socialize into transnational practices and that they have already internalized some set of substantive norms, we exclude norm entrepreneurship and persuasion by some third agents as their primary socialization mechanism. On similar

grounds, we also exclude those socialization mechanisms that rest on social influence, such as shaming and social opprobrium (for an overview of these mechanisms, see Chayes and Chayes 1998; Johnston 2001, 2005, 2014; Susskind and Saleem 2014; Young 1992).

After taking the aforementioned into account, we can surmise that conservative NGOs' socialization mechanism unfolds under the following conditions: conservative NGOs actively seek to socialize into the UN system; they have already internalized a set of substantive norms; and their socialization unfolds horizontally against an ideological opponent. Some of these conditions are met in mimicry and role-playing, which is another set of socialization mechanisms theorized by IR scholars. Alastair Johnston has most thoroughly engaged with mimicry (Johnston Johnston 2001, 2005, 2014). He defines it as a process by which 'a novice initially copies the behavioural norms of the group in order to navigate through an uncertain environment' (Johnston 2014: 23). For Johnston, mimicry is a survival strategy. A novice is not motivated by any detailed ends–means calculation. They mimic precisely because they have not yet made such calculation but know that they need to survive in a given social environment. Mimicking enables a novice to access procedures, norms, language, perhaps even preferences immediately upon entering a social setting. They operate on the assumption that everybody else is surviving by following that exact behavioural repertoire. Checkel (2005: 810) defines role-playing similarly. He sees it as a 'noncalculative behavioural adaptation'. In other words, agents take up particular roles not because these will bring them benefits, but because they are considered appropriate in a given context.

Johnston's theorization of mimicry and Checkel's theorization of role-playing are both based on a cooperative model of socialization in which mimicking agents see each other largely favourably. However, aware that mimicking agents can also see their peers as competitors and adversaries, Johnston proposed a distinction between mimicry and emulation (Johnston 2014: 3–4). Emulation is not different from mimicry in the way it plays out: a novice simply follows procedures and imitates behaviours dominant in a given social environment. The two differ in terms of motives, for which agents engage in imitation. In mimicry, their motive is survival; in emulation, it is the maximization of some expected utility relative to their peers (for a similar account of emulations, see Thies 2003, 2010). As such, emulation requires a search for success stories, careful study of why these stories are successful and, ultimately, the application of inferred lessons.

We argue that the emulation of feminist transnational NGOs is the dominant socialization mechanism of conservative NGOs in the United Nations. However, before we illustrate this argument empirically, we wish to rename the concept of emulation into *competitive mimicry* for two reasons. First, the term 'emulation' is merely a synonym of the term mimicry. As such, it does not capture the competitive character inherent in this socialization mechanism. Second, Johnston has not theorized emulation extensively; he has only addressed it in passing. In contrast, competitive mimicry is a subject of deeper theorization in sociological neo-institutionalism, where it is seen as one of the mechanisms of global policy diffusion (for an overview, see: Henisz, Zelner and Guillén 2005). Such a focused approach to the concept comes with theoretical payoffs. One is the observation that the pressure to mimic a competitor or an adversary can also be motivated by the need to prevent the perceived erosion of one's political status or a preferred value system, and not just by the desire to increase relative material gains. Indeed, the antifeminist backlash of conservative NGOs in the United Nations is based on one such motive: the need to prevent and reverse the diffusion of progressive values. Of course, the twist is that for this backlash to succeed, conservative NGOs first needed to socialize into a system about which they are deeply sceptical. We argue that conservative NGOs' competitive mimicry of feminist NGOs

is evident in two domains in particular: their formation of a broad transnational network and their skilful use of the UN human rights framework.

Transnational organizing as an indicator of conservative NGOs' competitive mimicry

Feminists have been active transnationally for over a century. They advocated vigorously for the end of World War I, and they strongly supported the creation of the League of Nations. Their activism was also instrumental in establishing the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). In the 1970s, the international feminist movement gained momentum, prompting the United Nations to declare 1975 the International Women's Year and organize the first World Conference on Women in Mexico City. At the Conference's initiative, the United Nations declared the subsequent decade as the Decade for Women, during which the General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The United Nations organized three more conferences on women – in Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995 – with each attracting thousands of women's rights activists. During the Beijing conference, owing to the reduction in Cold War divisions, their transnational ties and activism strengthened further. The result was an unprecedented influence on the United Nations, including successes such as the inclusion of gender-based violence in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, the Security Council adopting a resolution acknowledging the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on women and girls (Resolution 1325) and the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals recognizing the centrality of gender equality.

Unlike women's rights activists, antifeminist NGOs do not have a long history of transnational organizing and UN advocacy. Their transnationalization and concerted UN utilization are recent phenomena, dating to the 2000s (Bob 2012; Goetz 2020; Shameem 2017b). The leading cause of this development is their recognition that feminists are very successful at using the international space to articulate their demands and change respective policies, thereby eroding conservative values. In this sense, antifeminist actors did not have much alternative other than to go transnational. They recognized the importance of international organizations and saw that normative landscapes could be changed using them. In an article titled 'Today is United Nations Day – Why Should I Be Concerned?', the United Family International (UFI 2011), a pro-family NGO, emphasizes that when countries sign treaties such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the effect is binding. The article warns that 'under international law, the treaty overrides even our constitution'. In another article, the UFI explains how resolutions can have real effects:

> It is absolutely crucial to understand that even though a resolution is 'non-binding', it will impact you and your family. UN resolutions direct the work and the allocation of UN funds. Resolutions are regularly implemented through executive action. They are seen as definitive by agencies that run youth, sports and educational programs and activities. They are examined by judges and referenced in court decisions. (UFI 2019)

This recognition of UN authority has not led the conservative NGOs to reject it. On the contrary, they point out the need to be more present in the United Nations.

The following quote from Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) International's leadership is telling:

> Conservatives cannot afford to abandon the institutions of power that seek to redefine human rights for the entire world. While the roar of false rights likely will not diminish, it is by standing firm in defense of fundamental freedoms that we can hope to see progress in the fight to end global human rights abuses. The temptation may be to forsake the international institutions and resist any appearance of assimilation with progressive agendas. The best solution, however, is to stay in the fight and proceed with the best and most truly universal resource at our disposal – the Declaration. (Koren and Colemann, 2018)

By deciding to target the United Nations and other international organizations, antifeminist actors' goals are not too different from those of feminists: they want to gain more outreach, build more alliances and change policies. One way of realizing these goals, and thereby becoming a competent and competitive UN utilizer, is to socialize into UN practices by mimicking feminists. Accordingly, antifeminist NGOs have come together by forming the UN Family Right Caucus and Civil Society for the Family,[3] pro-family coalitions aimed at confronting attempts to redefine marriage and the family in the United Nations. They have also sought close ties with sympathetic states. Therefore, they have closely affiliated themselves with the Group of the Friends of the Family, a state-based UN group formed in May 2016.

The 2004 Doha Conference, which marked the tenth anniversary of the International Year of the Family (IYF), in many ways mimicked the feminist commemoration of the International Women's Year that started in 1975: it was announced by a UN resolution; it included regional preparatory meetings; it produced numerous background papers and publications; hundreds of state and NGO representatives attended; and it had an NGO committee, mostly including conservative NGOs.[4] The Doha Conference is frequently seen as a formative moment for the conservative coalition in the United Nations. In 2014 and 2019, with similar organizational zeal and such titles as 'Uniting Nations for a Family Friendly World', they commemorated IYF's 20th and 25th anniversaries. They have also been active in honouring, on a yearly basis, the International Day of Families.

Transnationalization of conservative NGOs and their alignment with sympathetic states also takes place outside of the United Nations. Particularly prominent in this regard are the World Conferences organized by the World Congress of Families (WCF), which describes itself as 'an international network of pro-family organizations, scholars, leaders and people of goodwill from more than 80 countries that seek to restore the natural family as the fundamental social unit and the "seedbed" of civil society' (Perugini and Gordon 2015). The frequency of its conferences illustrates the recent intensification in the group's transnational activity: between 1997 and 2012, the Congress organized only five of them; since 2012, it has organized them yearly. At these conferences, NGOs learn from each other, outlay roadmaps for the future and build alliances with governments subscribing to similar ideologies. In this regard, the WCF events resemble various feminist gatherings

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[3]For more information on these groups, visit <https://civilsocietyforthefamily.org> and <https://unfamilyrightscaucus.org>.

[4]For more information, visit <https://www.un.org/development/desa/family/tenth-anniversary-of-the-iyf.html>.

held inside and outside the United Nations. They are similarly geared towards mutual learning, mobilization and recruitment.

Several more instances of organizational mimicry can be observed. As the *Rights at Risk* (Shameem 2017b) report notes, conservative NGOs do what feminist NGOs did earlier: they provide training to UN delegates; they move their headquarters to cities such as New York and Geneva, as they are important hubs for transnational advocacy and networking; and they train and mobilize youth to build a global coalition of young people defending the family.

As can be seen, the coalition of conservative actors consists of groups and states with diverse religious identities, nationalities and political backgrounds. Given this reality, one would expect trouble in sustaining their coalition. However, they have used its various gatherings to fashion a unifying master frame: 'the natural family' (Carlson and Mero 2007; Shameem 2017b; Slater 2009). This family concept entails a mother, a father and their children, as well as firm embedding in traditional values. 'The natural family' is supposed to counter the feminist master frame of gender and the concepts that relate to it, such as birth control, same-sex marriage and the diversity of gender identity.

The use of the UN human rights framework as an indicator of conservative NGOs' competitive mimicry

Feminist NGOs do not owe their success in the United Nations only to good transnational organizing. The close ties they foster with feminist scholars, as well as the skilled use of decision-making and legal procedures in the United Nations, have also been critical. By underpinning women's rights with scientific justification and framing them as a paramount social and legal principle, feminist NGOs were able to influence the UN human rights framework in line with their agenda. Conservative NGOs have tried to follow the same recipe. To make 'the natural family' resonate in the United Nations in the way 'women's rights' have resonated, they have largely secularized their justifications. Religious arguments are thus sparsely used to defend the claim that the natural family is the fundamental unit of society. Instead, conservative actors increasingly rely on scientific justification and data (Buss and Herman 2003; Shameem 2017b: 100; Vaggione 2005). This development has been labelled 'the NGOization of religion' (Alvarez 1998) and it has gone hand in hand with conservative actors' attempts to embed 'the family' and other conservative values into the language of human rights and international policy, and ultimately into international law and human rights regimes.

Scientific justification for a conservative transnational agenda is supplied by religiously affiliated think thanks. Among these, the Howard Center for Family, Religion, and Society is particularly prominent. The Center is closely affiliated with the World Congress of Families, and it has its own scientific journal, *The Family in America: A Journal of Public Policy*,[5] whose main topics include the ill-effects of divorce, same-sex partnership and abortion, and the positive effects of the traditional family and complementary gender roles. Other prominent organizations that publish conservative scholarship and policy literature include the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute (C-Fam) and Family Watch International (FWI). As its mission, C-Fam highlights the re-establishment and preservation of the proper understanding of international law, and, towards this end, its International Organizations Research Group, Center for Policy Studies, and Center for

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[5]See: http://familyinamerica.org

Legal Studies regularly publish policy and legal studies. For its part, FWI is mainly focused on supplying conservative NGOs with talking points, negotiating techniques and training materials that translate conservative positions into UN-appropriate language. Its main publication in this regard is *Resource Guide to UN Consensus Language on Family Issues* (FWI 2020).

As a consequence of these efforts, conservative NGOs are using the language of human rights with increasing competence, and they are increasingly more successful in injecting their values into the UN human rights framework. In this regard, their central aim has been to ensure that 'the family', 'parental rights' and their version of children's rights be acknowledged as categories deserving of UN human rights protection (see FWI and UNFRC 2016). Children's rights, they argue, can only be achieved in traditional families, with parents having full control over them except in cases of abuse or neglect. This approach is contrary to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is based on the concept of the best interests of the child.

The other aim of conservatives has been to present their interpretation of the United Nations' long-standing human rights concepts as *the* correct interpretation. Here, the right to life has been the most controversial topic. Conservative NGOs argue that 'the human rights of the unborn child were clearly recognized in the foundation of modern international human rights law' (FWI 2015). To substantiate this claim, they cite the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Right of the Child. They maintain that, combined, these documents stipulate that life begins at conception, thus rendering abortion an act that clearly violates the right to life. Other human rights categories that conservative NGOs claim to interpret correctly include the relationship between women and men and the concept of universality. Women and men, they maintain, should not be seen through the concept of equality, but complementarity, with each holding an appropriate role within the family (Case 2016). Conservatives interpret universality as a principle that suggests certain human rights are fundamental (mostly those for which they advocate), rather than as a principle delineating the indivisibility, interrelatedness and equal application of all human rights (Shameem 2017a).

Feminists are skilled at producing soft law. It has allowed them to enshrine many women's rights standards into the United Nations' legal framework. Examples include documents produced during big conferences such as the 1995 Beijing Declaration and the UN declarations such as the General Assembly's 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Soft law is not legally binding; however, it can act as an entry way into international law-making when other avenues are not available. It can also produce legal effects, as it influences the interpretation of legally binding commitments. Given this reality, conservative actors in the United Nations have also embarked on the production of soft law. A good example of this is the Doha Declaration produced during the abovementioned IYF Doha Conference. While not legally binding, the declaration is now a part of the UN soft law catalogue. It refers to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to reaffirm the 'right of men and women' to marry, as well as to emphasize that the family is the 'natural and fundamental group unit of society' (UN 2004).

The production of 'shadow reports' is another mimicking strategy employed by conservative NGOs to compete with feminists for influence over the UN human rights regime. Feminists have been using 'shadow reports' to educate and sensitize international bodies on issues such as sexual and reproductive health and rights (Yamin, Datta and Ximena 2018). They usually present these reports to the UN Treaty Monitoring Bodies, often successfully affecting their general comments and recommendations. In recent

years, conservative NGOs have started to employ the same strategy. One example of their influence is the revised 'Right to Life' General Comment of the UN Human Rights Committee published in 2018 (Yamin, Datta and Ximena 2018: 564).

Lobbying activities and the alliance that conservative NGOs formed with sympathetic states are also increasingly resulting in conservative norms being enshrined in documents issued by various UN bodies. The Human Rights Council thus adopted the resolution on protection of the family four years in a row (2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017). In 2017, 'parental rights' made it into three General Assembly resolutions about children. Such efforts at inserting conservative norms go hand in hand with blocking efforts; that is, conservative NGOs and states work hard to block and water down the progressive language in UN documents. The elimination of 'sexual and reproductive health' from the 2019 Security Council's ninth Women, Peace and Security resolution was the most visible episode in this regard, but similar efforts can be observed in the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the General Assembly and the Human Rights Committee, where references to 'safe abortion', 'sexual orientation and gender identity', 'women in all their diversity' and 'sexual and reproductive health' are fiercely opposed (for an overview, see Shameem 2017b: 107–29).

VI. Degree of socialization

An objection might be raised that what we observe in our analysis is not socialization at all, but rather an instrumental behavioural adjustment. A critic following rationalist logic (see Schimmelfennig 2005) might argue that conservative NGOs in the United Nations are not internalizing any context-specific *logic of appropriateness*, but are instead following the *logic of consequence*. In other words, they are adapting their behaviour but not changing their views, interests or identities. We argue that even if conservative NGOs' competitive mimicry started as instrumental calculation, the sustained compliance with context-specific norms of appropriateness has nonetheless led to the change in their views, interests and even identities. The previous empirical discussion offers evidence for this. It shows that conservative NGOs have embraced transnationalism as a legitimate way of political action. Despite the parochial nature of their value system, they have nonetheless adopted cosmopolitan methods of fighting within that system. By the same token, despite holding the sovereignty norm in high regard, they have accepted that certain norms – namely those relating to 'the family' – can have supra-national status.

Our observation that sustained norm compliance leads to socialization even if, initially, the compliance was instrumentally motivated has also been a theme in socialization literature. Many scholars hold that by mimicking a practice over long periods, actors can get locked into behaviours, procedures and language of a given social environment (Checkel 2005: 808–10; Hooghe 2005: 870). They have also observed that, in this case, internalization might not go all the way – there are degrees of socialization.[6] We argue that the socialization of conservative NGOs has not gone all the way. They have socialized into the regulative rules of the United Nations, they have also socialized into some constitutive norms (namely, they have turned into competent transnational actors),

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[6]In this regard, Checkel (2005: 804) distinguishes between type I and type II socialization. Type I socialization refers to an actor 'acquiring the knowledge that enables them to act in accordance with expectations- irrespective of whether they like the role or agree with it'. Type II socialization occurs when an actor accepts 'community or organizational norms as "the right thing to do"'.

but they have not socialized into the most important constitutive norms in that arena – progressively leaning human rights regime. This degree of socialization has allowed conservative NGOs to turn antifeminist pushback into antifeminist backlash, which has, in turn, spurred a polarizing dynamic in the United Nations. Polarization is thus one of the most important effects of conservative NGOs' UN socialization. It describes the return-effect of horizontal socialization that unfolded competitively. While conservative NGOs were socializing to look more like their feminist competitors, the behaviour of these competitors started to change. The two are now trapped in a polarizing dynamic that comes with a myriad of mirroring practices. The conservative NGOs are, therefore, continuing to socialize in the UN system, but the signs are emerging that they are also changing that system.

VI. Effect of socialization: Polarization

Polarization is 'a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of "us" versus "them"' (McCoy, Rahman and Somer 2018: 16). Therefore, polarization is not based on a mere difference between groups, but on that difference being mobilized for political purposes. Having acquired certain institutional capabilities through socialization, conservative NGOs can now credibly mobilize their identity and threaten feminist positions in the United Nations. In turn, feminists have little choice but to reciprocate. This dynamic can have many manifestations. For illustrative purposes, we single out three: the struggle for institutional spaces; zero-sum politics based on a sense of existential threat; and the use of strong moralizing discourse.

In institutional settings such as the United Nations, spatial strategies are particularly important. Being present and having a voice, or even a vote, in institutional bodies are crucial if actors wish to be influential. For this reason, they direct many of their strategies towards ensuring access to institutional decision-making fora. This access becomes even more significant if a competing group is trying to do the same. Competing sides believe that the failure to influence a certain institutional body amounts to the ceding of territory to the other side. Consequently, besides ensuring their own access to these bodies, the groups also seek to deny that access to their rivals.

The mutual perception of existential threat is another manifestation of polarization. As a result, the relationship between the groups takes the form of a battle where only one side can eventually win. Therefore, they adopt a zero-sum approach to politics. In this kind of politics, the goal is to overturn policies associated with competitors (McCoy, Rahman and Somer 2018: 19). An actor sees its own gains as the other side's losses and vice versa. The space for compromise is shrunk or nonexistent. Crucially, the zero-sum character of polarization 'hollows out' the middle or neutral positions (LeBas 2018: 59). Those who are not part of either side risk being shamed and labelled as traitors and sell-outs (Somer and McCoy 2019: 13).

The third manifestation of polarization we single out is the use of strong moralizing discourse. In this discourse, one's own group is defined as good, while the other is depicted as evil. Both sides claim moral superiority by glorifying their own virtuousness while pointing to and condemning the harms the other side is causing to society. To gain moral legitimacy, both sides re(create) their sacred entities, which can be a document or a historical event. The claim to be the sole representative of oppressed groups also appears

as an important source of moral legitimacy. In what follows, we empirically illustrate each of these manifestations of polarization.

The struggle for institutional spaces

One of the main strategic concerns of conservative and feminist NGOs is ensuring access to various UN bodies (we make a similar point elsewhere, see Cupać and Ebetürk 2021). To miss an opportunity to influence these bodies is to cede territory to the other side. This is particularly true for the CSW. As a space where feminists have been present for decades and where the most frequent encounters of two groups occur, keeping the CSW as a stronghold is essential. For instance, the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC) states that:

> In a context of increasing attacks on the human rights of women and girls and closing space for civil society at all levels, from the national to the global, we had held up the CSW as a place where we could express our views and influence the development of critical policies that affect our lives and futures. (IWHC 2015)

Taking back the United Nations from the conservatives is a recurring theme in feminist gatherings. For instance, in a large UN gathering in Montreux, women's rights activists who organized a parallel meeting declared that 'it is time to reclaim the UN' (WILPF 2017). Furthermore, their Bejing+25 action plan emphasizes that they need to 'fully occupy the space', as they 'know all too well how easily spaces get hijacked even when there is the tiniest vacuum or crack' (NGO CSW 2020). The verb 'hijack' also appears in conservative vocabulary. To quote a member of the UFI:

> I used to think that what happened at the UN stayed at the UN but in becoming an active participant in the political conversation I have learned otherwise. We in the United States need to give closer heed to the goings on in this group or it will be hijacked for purposes against our interests (UFI 2009a).

However, feminists and conservatives want more than just to be present in UN negotiating fora. They also want to exclude the other side. One reason why there has not been a strong feminist initiative for another major conference on women's rights is the fear that conservatives might use it to roll back these rights (Goetz 2015). Feminists' fears that they are increasingly being excluded from UN negotiations were confirmed in 2015 when the CSW changed its way of working. Until 2015, it was common for the CSW to negotiate its declarations during the national delegates' meeting. In 2015, however, it was decided that the negotiations would take place before the delegates arrived in New York. This decision deprived feminists of the opportunity to lobby from the sidelines. To make things worse, the aim of the 2015 CSW Declaration was to review 20 years of the Beijing Platform implementation. In protest, feminists issued a statement, signed by over a thousand organizations, condemning the Declaration for 'threatening a major step backward' (Astra Network 2015).

For their part, conservatives have been frustrated with the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). In the run-up to the 2019 Nairobi Summit marking the 25th anniversary of the Cairo Conference on Population and Development, UNFPA sought to formulate a Statement through 'global consultation' (ICPD 2019). This meant that no direct

negotiations took place. Instead, states were asked to endorse a set of commitments. Conservative organizations believe this arrangement was intentional. Its aim, they maintain, was to exclude those with 'pro-life concerns' and thus to get states to agree on provisions that include sex education, sexual and reproductive health and rights (C-Fam 2019c). They further argue that, despite the UNFPA's website claiming that the Summit would offer an inclusive platform, none of the major pro-life groups with the ECOSOC consultative status was granted access (C-Fam 2019b). In contrast, they pointed out, organizations 'which profit from or aggressively promote abortion' were a part of the Summit's organizing team (C-Fam 2019b).

The sense of existential threat and zero-sum politics

The increased conservative presence in the United Nations is a major concern for feminists. The threat of being disempowered, or even eliminated, from the United Nations' political arena is now real. They fear losing all they have achieved so far. We observe this existential fear in their conceptualization of the conservative backlash and the urgency they evoke to fight it. In a piece published by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), feminists point out that this is not the first time there has been a backlash against gender rights, but claim that 'the scale and power of the global anti-human rights movement warrants serious attention, especially in the context of the striking rise of right-wing movements around the world'.

While the erosion of human rights is the alarming issue for feminists, for conservatives it is the 'dangerous attempts to restrict parents', as well as 'the disintegration of the family' incited by feminists who are 'coming for your children'. The following quote from a UFI document is telling:

> Evil and destructive policies begin with ideas and theories. When we are silent in the face of that evil, it proliferates. It harms our homes and our families. We can't afford to be silent in the face of this threat to womanhood. (UFI 2019)

In addition to evoking existential urgency, each side frequently uses battle analogies to describe its struggles. For instance, in an article reporting on its work in the United Nations, UFI emphasizes that it is a 'well-armored stronghold and a leader on the front lines in the war on the family' (UFI 2016b). On their part, feminists use battle analogies to label the conservative agenda as 'an attack on the very basis of the human rights system' (AWID 2014b), thereby emphasizing the need to defend the United Nations 'as the bastion of human rights and progressive policies' (EWL 2019). It should be emphasized that evoking existential threat and thus raising alarm is also one of the tactics of fundraising. In its 'Friday fax' newsletters, C-Fam regularly invites its supporters to donate so they can continue 'to fight for the unborn child, the natural family, and religious freedom at the UN' (e.g. see C-Fam 2020b).

In the institutional context, the sense of existential threat breeds zero-sum politics. When they 'kill the document' (C-Fam 2017), succeed in deleting a phrase from it or obtain 'hard won achievements' (Plan International 2019), they make a point of framing and celebrating it as a big victory. In short, there is no rapprochement. Compromise is seen as a betrayal of values. Both sides have developed a 'my way or no way' mentality. The zero-sum approach prompts them to reject any possibility of a middle ground, and they

often shame states that have not yet taken a clear position. As a good illustration, consider this passage from the C-Fam's website:

> Despite having captured the pro-life and pro-family vote in their respective countries, once elected, nationalists in Hungary, Poland, and Italy have only been willing to defy EU policy when it comes to border control and other internal issues. When it comes to EU abortion and LGBT advocacy on the international stage, they have mostly allowed the Germans and the French do as they please. (C-Fam 2019a)

The use of strong moralizing discourse

Conservative and feminist NGOs in the United Nations characterize each other's strategies in derogatory terms. Feminists portray the strategy of conservatives as 'aggressive' (Plan International 2019), consisting of 'canny and coordinated' and 'unprecedented' attacks (AWID 2016; DAWN 2019) designed to 'strategically abuse UN mechanisms' (HRC 2015). Conservatives, on the other hand, see feminist strategies as 'outrageous' and 'deceptive' (FWI 2019). The feminists, they assert, 'lie, they cheat, they bully, and they abuse the UN system' (FWI 2019). The two sides do not see their own positions as merely political solutions to social problems; they see them as morally superior positions. For both sides, justifying their own moral legitimacy is strongly linked to morally denouncing the other side.

As we have indicated earlier, conservative NGOs often argue that they are not religious organizations and that their 'arguments are based in social science' (UFI 2020). They use social scientific concepts and methods to argue that abortion is bad for development (C-Fam 2020a), that sex education is harmful to children (UFI 2016a), and that a strong family is a solution for realizing Millennium Development Goals (Royland 2012). While claiming the ownership of science, conservatives label the feminists' use of science as fake and an instrument of their hidden agenda (Ruse 2017). Similarly, feminists accuse conservatives of using fake scientific concepts and methods. Science is also an important source of legitimacy for feminists. They believe that they have an epistemological role to play in guiding governments towards the 'truth' (AWID 2014a).

Claiming to care for those who do not have the power to do so is a particularly strong moral strategy for conservatives (IYC 2018a). By accusing feminists of engaging in 'ideological colonization' (Melton 2019), conservatives claim that the powerless nations need help to fight back. Referring to the 2009 CSW meeting, UFI asserts that, thanks to its presence, 'Once again, a few delegates from small countries had the courage to stand up against the onslaught of the rich and powerful nations. Once again, they showed that there are those who are willing to stand up for what they believe despite the odds' (UFI 2009b).

In presenting themselves as protectors, conservatives seek to delegitimize feminists. They accuse them of using 'intimidation tactics' to force small countries to accept the feminist agenda (UFI 2009c) and frame this agenda as indifferent to women and children's real needs in smaller nations. For instance, an IYC member says that feminists are 'pouring money into their pro-choice agendas as they watch newborns die from lack of basic necessities like clean water and soap' (IYC 2018b).

Another way of delegitimating feminists is by characterizing them as elitists (IYC 2018b). To do so, the conservatives often refer to African countries' and other NGOs' reception of conservatives' presence in the United Nations. For instance, the UFI reports that in CSW 2014, many who attended their parallel events 'seemed hungry to hear our pro-family message' (UFI 2014).

A significant portion of feminists' claims to moral legitimacy comes from their long-lasting presence in the United Nations and the major documents they helped to produce. As such, feminists frequently appeal to CEDAW, gains of the Beijing Conference and their years-long presence in the UN bodies. The human rights framework provided feminists with the ground on which they built their advocacy. When conservative groups claim moral legitimacy through human rights concepts and the UN documents, this creates a crisis of ownership. Feminists respond to this by re-emphasizing the role of important UN documents to which they contributed. Any discourse against these documents is framed as 'betrayal' by feminists (AWID 2015).

In the decades following the end of the Cold War, feminists did not have skilful competitors in the United Nations. Thus, their sense of moral superiority did not have to be asserted as strongly. With the increasing presence of conservatives, they have had to re-emphasize their claim to moral superiority. Most frequently, this takes the form of delegitimizing the conservatives and their claims to use social science and to be the protectors of small states. For instance, in their report about World Congress of Families, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) says that 'WCF has cheered as its rhetoric is used to legitimize the terrorizing and murder of LGBT Africans' (HRC 2015). Similarly, the AWID report on conservatives describes their use of science as 'based on misleading quotes and framing and dubious' (Shameem 2017b: 68).

VII. Conclusion

Conservative NGOs contesting women's rights in the United Nations are on the rise, and their activity is increasingly being described as an antifeminist backlash. In this article, we have argued that this backlash has been facilitated, to a substantial degree, by the socialization of conservative NGOs into transnational practices and the United Nations. We have examined this socialization comprehensively, applying several analytical angles: its definition, directionality, mechanism, degree and the effects. As a result, we have treated conservative NGOs' socialization as both a process and an outcome. We have also asserted that this socialization developed horizontally, via competitive mimicry of feminist NGOs in two domains: the manner of transnational organizing and the skilful use of the UN human rights framework. Our assessment is that conservative NGOs socialized into transnational NGO practices, and also socialized into the UN's regulative institutional rules, but they have not socialized into its constitutive norms that pertain to progressively leaning human rights framework. This framework is what they are there to contest. The chief effect of this kind of socialization is polarization. Conservative NGOs and progressive NGOs are now exhibiting many behavioural similarities in their bid to enshrine their preferred norms into the United Nations' normative framework. We have singled out and empirically illustrated three of these: the struggle for institutional spaces, zero-sum politics based on a sense of existential threat and the use of strong moralizing discourse.

This article makes several contributions. First, it specifies an institutional mechanism that accompanies counter-organizing, counter-norming, norm-spoiling, and norm-contestation of conservative NGOs theorized by sociological social movements literature and IR norms literature. Second, by identifying this mechanism as socialization, the article draws on and contributes to IR institutionalism. First, it flips the role of NGOs in the socialization literature. Rather than treating them as socializers, it treats them as socializees. This move, along with the identification of competitive mimicry as the dominant mechanism of conservative NGOs' socialization, reveals that socialization can also produce contentious effects (i.e. polarization). Studies that have focused on state

socialization into the international system and institutions have largely neglected these effects. They have mostly treated socialization as harmonization. By identifying the contentious effects of illiberal actors' socialization into the United Nations, we have also contributed to the literature on the politicization of IOs. Namely, we have shown that these actors are more eager to use these organizations for their purposes than politicization literature anticipated. We have also given an account of the dynamics of IO politicization that develops between two groups of ideologically opposing IO utilizers – an account that is still missing in the politicization literature.

Overall, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the rising illiberal actors and the liberal international order. The concept of socialization had been in scholarly focus during the 1990s and early 2000s when the liberal international order seemed to go from strength to strength. In recent years, as the liberal order has come under considerable pressure, the concept of socialization has lost its appeal. We argue, however, that the concept is still relevant. As our analysis of conservative NGOs in the United Nations shows, while illiberal actors are rejecting substantive liberal norms, they still find a certain degree of multilateralism, transnationalism and rule-based governance to be legitimate. The concept of socialization, therefore, holds promise for further research on the current contestation of the liberal international order, as it provides a more granular image of the current developments: it considers both the elements of rejection and the elements of acceptance of that order.

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