

*'Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman, always'*  
*Khaled Hosseini, Author*

## **FAMILIES MUST WORK FOR AFRICAN WOMEN AND GIRLS**

We have learned with deep chagrin of the upcoming 3rd Inter-Parliamentary Conference on Family Values and National Sovereignty slated to take place in Entebbe, Uganda, from 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> May 2025, and the Pan-African Conference on Family Values slated to take place in Nairobi, Kenya, from 12<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> May 2025. These conferences bring together African legislators to strategize on pushing for family values within laws and programs.

While we are not opposed to critical discussions around strengthening families and forging better protections for people within families, we have learned that prior similar family conferences have often resolved to strip women and girls of their basic human rights and dignity and reinforced exclusion, discrimination, and objectification using conservative family values as a vehicle.

It is noteworthy that anti-gender narratives on the continent of Africa have marred the last five years. "Family protection" policies seeking to give the family structure impenetrable protections whilst watering down the rights of individual members of families have emerged. For instance, in Kenya, the family protection policy launched in October 2023 seeks to whittle away at no-fault divorce by limiting the discretion of the court to issue divorce and subjecting couples seeking divorce to arbitration instead.

Uganda has followed suit by introducing a National Family Protection policy in the offing. This policy has a skewed focus on promoting the rights of the 'traditional' Christian nuclear family, conspicuously invisibilizing other forms of families, even though available data indicates that Ugandan families are not monolithic but diverse, including women-headed, child-headed, and even grandmother-headed. Equally, the Parliament of Uganda is proposing a Marriage Bill that seeks to, among others, criminalise cohabitation and grant more protections to men than women within marriages.

This legal direction by Uganda seeks to buttress patriarchal norms and establish a political economy where women are subservient and continue to be reduced to mere chattels of reproduction and production. This, among others, now stands as a huge threat to the hard-earned gains and progress in gender equality and recognition of all human rights.

Women stand at the core of families, often taking on the role of caregivers, nurturers, and bearing the burden of keeping families together. Yet, it is also within families that women suffer the most abuse and violence, with little to no protections offered both within the law and in society. Instead, we are expected to carry this 'God' given role without complaint.

Families must work for women and girls. Article 33 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda recognises the rights of women and their historical marginalisation within society. Article 31 of the same Constitution recognises that men and women have equal rights before, during, and upon

dissolution of marriage. It is therefore regrettable that African legislators are gathering to reinforce the marginalisation of women and girls within families, thereby reducing them to reproduction and caregiving roles.

The Groups and institutions that are behind these conferences are closely tied to the broader political environment characterised by gaps in democracy and political intolerance. This has resulted in constrained civic space. In addition, the movements that organise and fund anti-gender work are linked to state and non-state actors, which compounds the complexity of countering them. Some state actors are leaders of government institutions like Parliament, which, in Uganda's case, has been the biggest anti-gender body. On the other hand, non-state actors include religious fundamentalists, who are weaponizing religion as a tool to undermine the rights of women and girls, often with state backing.

We are also concerned with all the foreign actors, especially from the US, who are dictating to Africans what family values are. We pray our legislators resist any foreign influence that will set our continent back. Any agenda that legislators/parliamentarians take should be one that puts Africa and African interests first. They should not allow external influence to push us back.

If African legislators seek to discuss families and the roles of women and men within them, they have first to understand that families must work for women and girls, and to do so, they have to strengthen the protection of women and girls within families because this is where most women suffer abuse and violence with 56% of Ugandan women reporting having experienced some form of intimate partner violence (National Survey on Violence in Uganda UBOS 2020), and 10,792 women reporting domestic violence cases to police in 2024 alone (Uganda Police Force Annual Report 2024).

We therefore urge our legislators and all other participants in the Inter-Parliamentary Conference on Family Values and National Sovereignty, and the Pan-African Conference on Family Values, to prioritise recommendations that make families work for women and girls rather than marginalise them. Today, we are

1. Calling on our leaders to protect, respect, promote, and fulfil the full rights of women and girls as provided for under the African Charter and the Maputo Protocol.
2. Calling for the passing of the Marriage Bill of 2024 after removing regressive clauses that criminalise women and offer them no protection under the law, especially the clause that criminalises cohabitation.
3. Calling for the passing of the Sexual Offences Bill of 2024 after removing the clause that criminalises sex work.
4. Calling for the passing of the EAC SRH bill through the East Africa Legislative Assembly (EALA) in its entirety.

5. Calling for the recognition of the value of unpaid care work throughout all our laws and programs
6. Calling for the prioritisation of the National Social Protection Policy for funding and expanding it to support single parents, unemployed people, and people with disabilities who cannot work, through implementing programs designed to support individuals and families going through difficult times.
7. Calling for designing interventions to support families in balancing their work and personal life responsibilities. For Instance, expanding maternity leave to the time recommended for exclusive breastfeeding (6 months), guaranteeing breastfeeding rooms in work and public spaces, establishing childcare facilities, and allowing part-time work for parents with infants.
8. Calling for tax reforms that take into account women's unique health and social needs, including the tax on pads, adult and child diapers, etc.

Family values are not just about putting women and girls in their place, it is about making sure that every single person in a family lives life with dignity. As a society, priority must be placed on taking care of our most vulnerable rather than policing them.

As we conclude, we want to categorically state that families must work for women and girls; families should never be a place where women are oppressed and their rights are stripped away. WOMEN AND GIRLS need not live as second-class citizens. Instead, families should be a place of liberation where women and girls can thrive and live life to the fullest on their terms.

Let families work for women and girls!

For further information, please call us on 0323002800

**#FamiliesForAll**