

PRESENTATION

Dear Colleagues,

It is our pleasure to share with you a fascinating and alarming report on the rise of religious conservatisms and the threats such movements pose to feminist and LGBTI movements worldwide. For funders concerned with sexual and reproductive rights and sexual orientation and gender identity rights, this report should function as a wake-up call.

The Global Philanthropy Project commissioned this research with a sense of urgency. Members of the GPP have witnessed the increasingly politicized use of religion in multiple fora – from U.N. debates on human rights to local battles over textbooks. Many of us observed a backlash to the movements we fund and the organizations we support. At the same time, some GPP members were engaged with progressive faith organizing and/or worked closely with women's rights, feminist and LGBTI movements. GPP itself had sponsored research on closing civic space¹ and had been an active participant in European donor discussions about reaching the "moveable middle" and supporting LGBTI and feminist communities in reclaiming the concept of "family values." Each of us connected to this phenomenon in different ways, and yet we were unable to collectively name and understand it.

This report is the largest and most comprehensive study to date of the way that religious conservatism is currently operating around the world. It presents the tactics, discourse, funding patterns, and institutional and organizational actors, and includes case studies focused on Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa. More than that, the report explains how religious opposition to sexuality and gender equality has been transformed in the past two decades by the establishment of large, well-funded NGOs. A direct response to the U.N. Conferences in Cairo and Beijing in the mid-1990s, these NGOs are mostly but not exclusively based in the US and are founded in Evangelical Protestantism, Catholic, and Mormon faiths. Working alongside political actors such as the Russian Federation or the OIC as well as religious institutions, these NGOs have adopted collective mobilization and the secular language of human rights as winning strategies. They engage in interreligious alliances and host international conferences to build grassroots support. They claim to "protect the family" and use the empty construct of "gender ideology" to attack feminism and LGBTI equality.

¹ *The Perfect Storm: The Closing Space for LGBT Civil Society in Kyrgyzstan, Indonesia, Kenya, and Hungary*. Global Philanthropy Project, 2016. <https://globalphilanthropyproject.org/2016/04/22/perfectstormreport/>

With a perspective that is simultaneously global, regional, and national, the authors describe and analyze a phenomenon that is characterized by a politicized use of conservative religious ideology but is also complex, varied and endlessly adaptive. This report connects the dots between different movements and geographies, illuminating key themes and providing a theoretical framework for understanding – understanding that will be essential to an effective philanthropic response.

This report is based on extensive research and documentation and presents clear and compelling analysis. This letter is our call to action. We call on fellow funders to act. We need funders of sexual and reproductive rights and health, women's movements and feminism, defenders of secular democracy and civic space – we need all of us to come together to develop a shared response. We need our institutions to have clarity of purpose and we need to understand these threats as part of a global phenomenon that is not only dangerous but ascendant. Now is the time to break down our funding siloes and engage in the conversations, strategy development, and funding strategies that will prevent the loss of equality and the rollback of rights. The opposition has united across different denominations, national borders, and ideologies. It is long past time for us to unite too.

Alli Jernow

Program Director, Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity
Wellspring Philanthropic Fund

Matthew Hart

Director, Global Philanthropy Project