

# MANUFACTURING MORAL PANIC:

## Weaponizing Children to Undermine Gender Justice and Human Rights

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The **Elevate Children Fundators Group** is the leading global network of fundators focused exclusively on the wellbeing and rights of children and youth. We focus on the most marginalized and vulnerable to abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence.

**Global Philanthropy Project (GPP)** is a collaboration of fundators and philanthropic advisors working to expand global philanthropic support to advance the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people in the Global South and East.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is about **how faith-based, gender-restrictive groups that work across religious denominations and often operate transnationally are using children and child protection rhetoric to manufacture moral panic and mobilize it against human rights, particularly those related to gender justice:** sexual health and reproductive rights (SHRR); the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people; gender equity; and, ironically, children's rights worldwide.

It also highlights how these groups work towards the enforcement of a gender-restrictive worldview, feeding on and further strengthening the illiberal politics that have seriously undermined democracy in the first two decades of the 21st century.

To offer a more nuanced understanding of how gender-restrictive groups instrumentalize children through the mobilization of moral panic in local contexts, the report presents three case studies, each on in a different region: Peru in Latin America, Bulgaria in East Europe, and Ghana in West Africa. The comparative analysis underscores recurring strategies, narratives, and actors and gives insight into how gender-restrictive groups collaborate and engage in coalitional work across the globe. It also highlights meaningful differences between them, some of which account for their particular success or more notable limitations in specific contexts.

The report is based on a year of desk-top research and analysis, and interviews with scholars, civil society organization members, activists, and other stakeholders. It uses this information to develop a picture of who these gender-restrictive actors are, how they operate, and what strategies account for their significant success.

**One of the document's main contributions is the use of "gender-restrictive groups or actors" as an umbrella term to refer to individuals, organizations and institutions that, despite their many differences, work together towards the defense of a gender-restrictive world order.** A gender-restrictive order organizes economic, political and social life through the imposition of a restrictive and hierarchical vision of gender, which has two main and interdependent components: the naturalization of the gender binary, and the enforcement of gender-normativity.

**The main strategy of gender-restrictive groups is simple: weaponizing children against human rights and gender justice by manufacturing and mobilizing moral panic.** They frame gender justice initiatives as detrimental to children, and use child protection rhetoric to mobilize people against laws, policies, and other initiatives that protect and advance women's, LGBT, and even children's rights.

This strategy is particularly effective at broadening their base of support. Gender-restrictive groups

prey on our collective desire to protect children. By presenting themselves as “concerned adults” with children’s wellbeing and safety, they appeal to a more moderate, nonreligious audience. Also, moral panic is especially useful because it rapidly and effectively creates social cohesion.

**Indignation, rage, and fear about the wellbeing of children are easily manipulated and translated into social and political support for gender-restrictive initiatives, which increasingly coincide with autocratic and de-democratizing forces.** Moral panic does not only—or even mainly—have a “moral” function. Its main role is political, particularly in contexts of economic, social, and political upheaval and anxiety.

**Three factors have been essential for the success of the manufacturing of moral panic through child protection rhetoric. First, different political, social, and religious actors have come together to oppose what gender-restrictive groups call “gender ideology.”** Originally conceptualized by the Vatican, “gender ideology” is a pejorative term used to undermine human rights and gender justice. By replacing terms like “women’s rights,” “equality,” “the best interest of the child” and “LGBT rights” with “gender ideology,” faith-based, gender-restrictive groups discredit human rights efforts and present them as a neocolonial imposition contrary to local values. The arguments grouped under the opposition to “gender ideology” are used opportunistically, rapidly adapting its meaning to specific contexts, social concerns and political struggles. **Therefore, the most important thing about “gender ideology” is not what the term actually means, but the gender-restrictive worldview it conveys and seeks to impose through disinformation and moral panic.** Comprehensive Sexual Education, same-sex marriage and adoption, trans rights, reproductive rights, and protections against domestic violence are the issues that consistently trigger accusations of peddling “gender ideology,” and mobilize public opposition to gender justice.

**Second, framing children and progressive demands as fundamentally opposed.** This opposition feeds on misconceptions that portray LGBT people and feminists as a danger to society. Gender-restrictive groups claim that LGBT people are sexual

predators while feminists are likened to “death agents” in their defense of sexual and reproductive rights.

**Third, strategic secularization** (Vaggione, 2011). That is to say, the conscious decision to de-emphasize religious rhetoric and legitimize their opposition to gender justice through the appropriation and resignification of secular concepts, language and spaces. This has happened in three main realms: the academy, human rights, and gender theory and feminism. For example, gender-restrictive groups are succeeding at using the language and legal tools of the human rights framework to present their anti-rights efforts as right-affirming initiatives. This strategy is highly effective because it expands opposition to gender justice and galvanizes anti-LGBTI sentiment without using religious language or references. **That is to say, it advances a patriarchal, gender-restrictive worldview through secular narratives with broader appeal.**

**A key aspect to keep in mind about contemporary faith-based, gender-restrictive groups is that they are heterogenous, but they are also highly motivated and goal-oriented, which makes them excellent at working across differences.** Gender-restrictive groups compromise and sacrifice particular details of their political convictions and religious beliefs to establish a social, political, and economic order coherent with their gender-restrictive, patriarchal worldview. By so doing, they have become a multifaceted and heterogeneous—yet highly coordinated and effective—faith-based, gender-restrictive movement capable of working across religious denominations, political parties, and regions. In the last decades, they have formed alliances within different denominations of the same faith (i.e Protestants and Catholics) and, in some cases, particularly in Africa, with representatives of other religions (Muslims and Christians). The term “gender ideology” has been crucial to the coordination of these efforts. **In their shared opposition to “gender ideology” a diverse group of gender-restrictive actors found a common rallying cry that allowed them to expand their support and influence.**

Another important aspect of contemporary gender-restrictive groups is that **the patriarchal and hierarchical worldview they promote resonates**

**strongly with nationalist, autocratic parties and movements across the political spectrum. A growing number of left and right-wing authoritarian-leaning politicians are using the rhetoric of “fighting gender ideology” to tap into the deep pockets and expanding influence of gender-restrictive groups, and court their disciplined voters.**

The connection between the attack on women’s, children’s, and LGBT rights and current de-democratization efforts across the globe must be recognized. **Contemporary gender-restrictive groups are playing a major role in the advent of autocratic regimes in different regions around the world, with devastating consequences for human rights, gender justice and democracy. It is urgent that philanthropic organizations and grantmakers seeking to uphold gender justice work proactively and consistently with the pro-democracy funding ecosystem.**

Progressive circles commonly refer to this renewed attack on democracy and human rights, particularly gender justice, as a “backlash.” This framework is partially correct. These attacks are indeed a reaction to the important gender mainstreaming efforts and progressive victories of the last three decades. However, the backlash narrative can also hide the fact that contemporary gender-restrictive initiatives are part of a long-term political, social, and cultural strategy. Gender-restrictive groups have a long-term commitment to cultural shift and narrative change. Their theory of change plays out in three temporal dimensions: short-term initiatives that require immediate action; mid-term projects to reshape legislation and other relevant policies; and a teleological or “purpose-oriented” vision of history that seeks to establish a worldview, literally, for eternity.

**Gender-restrictive funders, donors, and grantmakers act accordingly. Since they are primarily interested in consolidating a gender-restrictive world order (not in funding a specific program or a single issue), they prioritize block grants, gifts and endowments.** This allows gender-restrictive groups to go beyond the short-term, results-oriented projects preferred by many funders of

women’s, children’s, and LGBT rights, and to develop long-term strategies to advance their worldview. It also enables them to take risks and invest in paradigm-shifting messaging campaigns that do not depend on deliverable-driven revenue streams. Another advantage of this type of support is that because the funds come with no or few strings attached and avoid cumbersome reporting requirements, it is easier for organizations to use them according to their shifting priorities, and to quickly adapt to relevant political or social events.

Long-term, sustained investment in cultural shift and narrative change gives gender-restrictive groups another key advantage: **it makes them highly resilient to concrete defeats, securing their ability to continue to work towards the long-term accomplishment of their goals.** In other words, it keeps their eyes on the prize. This is why, even in contexts where gender-restrictive groups have lost all or most legal and policy battles, **they seem to be winning the cultural and communications war, consistently increasing their social, and political influence. Therefore, it is of outmost importance for gender justice and other progressive funders to invest and support sustained, long-term, non-reactive, worldmaking strategic communication campaigns, and formal and informal education efforts.** These initiatives are essential to explain key concepts and build consensus around the need to advance women’s, children’s and LGBTI rights, as well as democratic values.

The crisis caused by the global pandemic has had a devastating effect around the world, but it did not slow down gender-restrictive groups. In the last year, they have amplified and mainstreamed their influence, broadened their audience, and deepened their support within their existing base. In particular, 2020 showed their adaptability, creativity and social media savviness. **In the COVID-19 era, gender-restrictive groups are thriving.** By capitalizing on the anxiety and isolation millions of people are enduring, they are intensifying their disinformation campaigns, and continue to instrumentalize child protection rhetoric to manufacture and mobilize moral panic against human rights and gender justice initiatives.

To summarize, gender-restrictive groups spread the false claim that expanding human rights and advancing

gender justice harms children. Through the use of the term “gender ideology” they weaponize children to cause moral panic and mobilize it against bills and other initiatives that seek to affirm and or expand SHRR and LGBTI rights. However, their crusade is broader than the curtailment of specific rights. It seeks to reinstate a gender-restrictive order that leads to widespread discrimination and violence against cisgender women, LGBTI people and children; and presents a serious threat to human rights and democracy worldwide.

A word of caution before concluding: Equating religiosity with support for a gender-restrictive, patriarchal and authoritarian world order is part of the narrative and goals of gender-restrictive groups, but it is not always a reality on the ground. **It is of utmost importance to identify, support, and amplify the work and voices of religious organizations and regular citizens that uphold their faith while rejecting the gender-restrictive agenda.**

It is our hope that this report **both deepens and broadens our shared understanding** about how the manufacturing of moral panic through child protection rhetoric has become a Trojan horse for immense prejudice against women’s, children’s and LGBT rights and their advocates. We also hope that the **actionable recommendations we offer become a valuable resource** for all those interested in upholding and advancing gender justice; and that our findings encourage child rights and protection donors, grantmakers, philanthropic networks and other stakeholders to denounce the multiple ways in which gender-restrictive groups are weaponizing children and child protection rhetoric to attack human rights, gender justice and democracy. Finally, **we urge progressive funders to come together and commit resources to protect the rights and lives of all people; and create a better future for all children, LGBTI or not.**

## **REPORT OUTLINE**

This report is divided into four chapters, and a list of actionable recommendations.

The first chapter identifies the global characteristics of the contemporary gender-restrictive movement. It begins by presenting a timeline of its development and consolidation, and provides key contextual information to understand the gender-restrictive movement’s rise and expansion. It also outlines its ideological underpinnings, and explains the values at the center of the gender-restrictive worldview these groups are trying to impose. The chapter closes by summarizing their main and most effective strategies.

The next three chapters present the findings of the case studies: Peru, Bulgaria and Ghana. Each one starts with a description of the specific events that illustrate how gender-restrictive groups operate within their regional context. Then, each chapter provides key facts about the local historical, cultural, and religious background to suggest why gender-restrictive groups gained traction and how they achieved their goals. Later, the case studies analyze the messages and strategies used by gender-restrictive groups and identify the main gender-restrictive actors.

Throughout the report, key takeaways appear at the beginning of each section. The light blue boxes correspond to crucial moments in the development and deployment of “gender ideology.” In the case studies, there are also boxes with examples of the strategies used by gender-restrictive groups in local contexts.

The report closes with a list of actionable recommendations for funders, philanthropic organizations, grantmakers, and other members of the progressive funding ecosystem seeking to advance human rights, gender justice and democracy.