

A Report from LGBTI Philanthropy

EZRA BERKLEY NEPON

Progressive grantmakers around the world are witnessing accusations of “gender ideology” and related models of manufactured gender panic used as oppositional tools to block, erode, and attack the goals and activities of their grantees. This especially impacts those who fund feminist organizations and groups working for LGBTI human rights. Grantmaking programs that focus on children and youth, sexual health and reproductive rights/reproductive justice, sexual orientation, HIV/AIDS, health-care access, sports, defense of democracy, environmental justice, and other fields are also impacted. Indeed, grantmakers with focus areas that may seem unrelated are called to find common cause, given their shared experiences of opposition from the “anti-gender” movement.

At the same time, progressive funders come under direct attack by those within the anti-gender movement and their political allies whose conspiracy theories often center around George Soros and the Soros-funded Open Society Foundations (OSF) and other progressive grantmakers. For example, a June 2021 article in the *American Conservative* accused OSF of being “highly instrumental in driving gender identity” (Bilek 2021).¹

In the past five years, progressive grantmakers have developed increasingly coordinated responses to the global anti-gender movement. These responses include research and assessment of the anti-gender movement at global and regional levels; donor peer education through online and in-person convenings and workshops; strategic cofunding and development of new grant funding to support those resisting anti-gender attacks; and coordination across geographic and issue areas through a philanthropic task force.

Background

This is a short field report based on the work of the Global Philanthropy Project (GPP), a network of funders collaborating 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. In 2019–20, GPP’s twenty-two member organizations represented half of all foundation funding to LGBTI communities in the Global South and East. These organizations coordinate within GPP to develop a shared research and advocacy agenda toward increasing global LGBTI funding from other foundations, donor governments and multilateral agencies, and high net wealth individuals. For example, our biennial *Global Resources Report: Government and Philanthropic Support for LGBTI Communities* provides detailed data on the global distribution of LGBTI funding by geography, issue, strategy, and population focus, offering a tool for identifying trends, gaps, and opportunities in the rapidly changing landscape of LGBTI funding (GPP 2022). The *Global Resources Report* provides a tool for funders and civil society organizations making the case for funding needs, and it is used by funders in developing and reevaluating their funding priorities.

Founded in 2009, GPP first brought on staff members in 2015. From that point on, the network launched a working group focused on increasing and improving funding to global trans and intersex communities. That working group and the foundations that make up its membership have been instrumental in developing research (e.g., GPP 2019) and donor peer education opportunities to make the case toward these goals, conducting targeted advocacy with private foundations and donor governments, and supporting the development of the International Trans Fund and the Intersex Human Rights Fund.²

In 2018 GPP organized a global meeting, “Growing Solidarity: Funding at the Intersection of Faith, Religious Fundamentalism, Human Rights, and Social Justice” (GPP n.d.), bringing together funders supporting LGBTI-affirming faith organizing and those funding opposition to fundamentalist faith agendas. The event was held in Southern Africa adjacent to the biennial conference of Pan Africa ILGA (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association), a regional network of LGBTI civil society organizations (ILGA n.d.). Growing Solidarity brought together eighty attendees across grantmaking programs focused on LGBTI human rights, sexual health and reproductive rights, and feminist issues to build solidarity, strategy, and momentum around resistance to the use of religion to harm or advance discrimination against LGBTI people around the world. Grantmakers and civil society expert panelists shared stories and information connecting these issues across world regions. For many attendees it was a first opportunity to recognize the scale of the opposition’s coordination, beyond the geographic or issue-based focus of their own institution. The GPP also published private research for the convening participants, later developed into a public report: *Religious Conservatism on the Global Stage: Threats and Challenges for LGBTI Rights* (Peñas Defago et al. 2018).

In the next two years, a series of related smaller meetings and donor education events followed, often developed in collaboration with GPP member

institutions and/or with allied philanthropic networks including Human Rights Funders Network, Funders for Reproductive Equity, Gender Funders CoLab, Elevate Children Funders Group, Funders' Initiative for Civil Society, and Funders Concerned About AIDS.

These activities led GPP to increase focus on organizing a progressive philanthropic response to the anti-gender movement. In 2020 GPP again initiated private research, which was developed into a public report: *Meet the Moment: A Call for Progressive Philanthropic Response to the Anti-Gender Movement* (GPP 2020a). This report includes a comparative mapping of the funding of the global anti-gender movement and the current progressive philanthropic response. Additionally, we share insights based on comparing global and regional LGBTI funding data as documented in the *2017–2018 Global Resources Report: Government and Philanthropic Support for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex Communities* (GPP 2020b). The findings offer a clear call to action to counter the enormous financial resources are flowing to these anti-rights movements, leveraged into acceleration across global regions and yielding both the attrition of human rights infrastructures and the increasing rise of authoritarianism. Progressive movements and their philanthropic partners are being outspent by hundreds of millions of dollars each year, and the institutions providing that opposition funding have developed sophisticated and coordinated systems to learn, cofund, and expand their influence. We found that between 2013 and 2017, LGBTI movements worldwide received \$1.2 billion, while the anti-gender movement received at least \$3.7 billion—more than triple the LGBTI funding. Despite this, in our 2020 research looking at the philanthropic responses, we found that the majority of progressive funders did not yet have a focused strategy for this work, and the overall field development in this area was nascent.

The GPP and Elevate Children Funders Group have partnered to develop a number of resources specifically focused on the ways that the opposition, which we are calling “gender restrictive” groups, use child protection rhetoric as a wedge to achieve their political goals. In 2021 we copublished *Manufacturing Moral Panic: Weaponizing Children to Undermine Gender Justice and Human Rights* (Sentiido 2021), which includes comparative analysis of three country case studies (Bulgaria, Ghana, and Peru) and underscores recurring strategies, narratives, and actors, offering insight into how gender-restrictive groups engage in coalitional work across the globe.

The Necessity of “Breaking Silos”

In all this work, the GPP has partnered with other funder networks who see their focus issues as intrinsically connected to issues of gender self-determination. In some cases, the connection is clear. Women's funders, those funding feminist

movements, and those funding sexual health and reproductive justice are in the direct line of attack for anti-gender movements whose ideologies align with the most regressive models of biological essentialism and patriarchal visions of women's prescribed social roles. Those funding around HIV/AIDS are well aware of the dangerous roles homophobia, transphobia, and sexism can and do play in blocking or destroying competent public health responses to the pandemic. Many of those funding issues around children and youth have witnessed that LGBTI youth are under attack globally, and at the same time that broader human rights movements are being disrupted by rallying cries to "protect the children" used to attack everything from LGBTI-affirming media to vaccination access to anti-racist education.

For other fields, the connection is not as obvious.

How does this impact grantmakers focused on defense of democracy? GPP has partnered with networks such as Funders' Initiative for Civil Society and Peace and Security Funders Group because donors in these fields are aware that individuals and groups trying to attain or maintain political power, especially in contexts of unstable democratic institutions, are increasingly using the notion of "fighting gender ideology" as a critical component of their campaigns, supporting authoritative, nationalist, and anti-rights political platforms. An example from the *Manufacturing Moral Panic* report: in 2016 a coalition of gender-restrictive and far-right forces successfully mobilized the idea of gender ideology to create moral panic and oppose the plebiscite to ratify the peace process between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and the government in Colombia (Sentiido 2021: 52).

How does this impact grantmakers focused on the environment? While this connection may seem the least obvious intersection among our collaborative efforts, environmental funders and the movements they support are indeed impacted by the anti-gender movement. Climate denialism and policy agendas that escalate the global climate crisis are common features of authoritarian governments and those leaning toward authoritarianism. These governments commonly share another set of characteristics rooted in ethnonationalism, state-sponsored homophobia and transphobia, and overall mistrust for the institutions of democracy—together, a perfect storm that undermines progressive philanthropic objectives. Cynical actors in the anti-gender movement, aiming to control power and narrative, often weaponize both climate denialism and manufactured moral panic based in fear of "the other" (whether LGBTI people, migrants or refugees, or other groups) toward their political aims. The *Manufacturing Moral Panic* report explains, "Under the false premise that the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs; see UN n.d.] are part of a neocolonial agenda, gender-restrictive groups in the [Latin American] region are seeking to act against

them and oppose environmental policies. Through this kind of messaging, gender-restrictive groups align themselves with powerful actors who have political or economic reasons to oppose environmental regulations in general, and the SDGs in particular. Jair Bolsonaro's government in Brazil is a case in point" (58).

While conversations within philanthropy tend to repeat the necessity of "breaking out of our silos," that truism has been put into action as funders connect the dots between the shared attack and the crucial need for shared response.

A Shimmering Response

In 2021 the GPP hosted the "Shimmering Solidarity: Global Rights Summit," a four-month online convening focused on grantmaker responses to the anti-gender movement and related anti-rights agendas (GPP 2021). The summit served as an opportunity for aligned colleagues to build shared analysis around anti-rights attacks and strategize toward multi-sectoral progressive philanthropic responses. Over 380 attendees participated, represented grantmaking organizations, funder networks, and civil society partner organizations.

Why "shimmering solidarity"? The organizers took inspiration from honeybees, who flip their abdomens upward in split-second synchronicity to produce a wave-like pattern called shimmering in order to repel hornets and other predators. The shimmering mechanism is both sophisticated and magical, demonstrating the bees' remarkable capacity for rapid communication and aligned, coordinated action. Shimmering works by confusing and disorienting opponents through collective movement, making the many appear as one moving body. This self-defense strategy protects the community, not the honey or the queen. Shimmering enables bees to live in hives that are out in the open, and even small-scale shimmering can be effective.

We also looked to honeybees for their cross-pollination function, and for their use of a vigorously democratic consensus-building process while seeking and assessing potential new homes for their hive. We saw all these honeybee technologies as a generative metaphoric space for our work together imagining, exploring, and sharing ideas about our future visions, the paths to get there, and our strategies for undermining the opposition's attack. The shimmering metaphor also helped communicate, in our outreach to potential summit attendees and beyond, that the summit was being organized by queers, that the culture of the event(s) would be creative and collaborative, and that we were rejecting the opposition's narratives about who is or is not part of the "natural" world.

The summit included over fifty sessions on a diverse range of topics. Sessions were categorized into a number of different tracks, including "cross-pollination" or exploration of connections between impacted funding areas; skill sharing including grant-making tools, approaches, models, innovations,

and lessons learned; building shared awareness of and resistance to the opposition; highlighting local and regional examples and areas for collaboration; and exploration of how some grantmakers are funding “world building,”³ narrative change work, and other transformative strategies to develop our visions and movements toward a more just and liberatory future.

What’s Next

We are heartened to see a growing number of funders and increasing funding infrastructure with explicit programmatic focus in this area. Building on this momentum, the Global Philanthropy Project has launched a grantmaker task force focused on mobilizing progressive philanthropic responses to the anti-gender movement. In the coming years, additional research and donor convening spaces will be developed in response to task force member priorities.

Ezra Berkley Nepon is senior program officer for knowledge and learning at the Global Philanthropy Project and leads development of the biennial *Global Resources Report*. Nepon is the author of *Dazzle Camouflage: Spectacular Theatrical Strategies for Resistance and Resilience* (2016) and other publications.

Notes

1. Anti-gender movements often mobilize significant antisemitism in their attacks on those funding LGBTI human rights, trading simultaneously on medieval-era tropes claiming Jewish conspiracies to destroy the “natural family” and Jewish global financial control. Ironically, but not surprisingly, a number of anti-gender attacks have also misidentified top LGBTI funders as Jewish.
2. IHRF is a program of Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice.
3. Strategies including arts and culture, education, and media.

References

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