

Manufacturing moral panic



Heather B. Hamilton is executive director of Elevate Children Funders Group.

✉ Heather.Hamilton@ElevateChildren.org

📍 @heatherbrie

Matthew Hart is director of the Global Philanthropy Project.

✉ mhart@globalphilanthropyproject.org

📍 @GPP_Updates

Think the ‘anti-gender’ movement has nothing to do with your philanthropy? Think again

Four years ago, Elevate Children Funders Group and the Global Philanthropy Project began working together to increase philanthropic awareness of the issues facing LGBTI children and youth around the world. In the course of this collaboration, we noticed worrying trends about the harmful impacts that ‘anti-gender’ actors have had on women, children and LGBTI people.

A working group of members from both networks set out to more fully understand and document this global phenomenon to enable a better articulated and strategic shared approach. We discovered that the impact of this ‘anti-gender’ movement has reached far beyond the violation of women’s and LGBTI rights and is undermining a range of progressive priorities. In fact, according to the resulting report, *Manufacturing moral panic: weaponizing children to undermine gender justice and human rights*, ‘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.’

The report unpacks the tactics used by these actors, and documents the impact of their attacks across a range of issues.

It explores three country-level case studies (Bulgaria, Ghana, and Peru) and offers recommendations for funders to develop an effective, practical and multi-sectoral approach to countering this movement.

It proposes a new term, ‘gender restrictive’, to refer to what are more widely known as ‘anti-gender’ groups: the wide, transnational movement of religious groups, politicians, secular researchers and civil society organisations who oppose what they call ‘gender ideology’, a pejorative term they use to describe efforts to support women’s, LGBTI, and sexual and reproductive rights.

In Ghana, the report documents the efforts of a national alliance of religious institutions whose stated aim is to combat homosexuality. This alliance has defeated national comprehensive sexuality education by claiming that children are at risk of being exposed to sexually charged content in textbooks, and that they would thus be encouraged to ‘become’ gay. These groups have also established close relations with political elites, which has intensified state-sponsored homophobia.

Their primary tactic is to manipulate concerns about child protection to create moral panic, which they then use to push



for social, political and legislative changes. In Bulgaria, for instance, gender-restrictive groups created a conspiracy theory that social services remove children to give them to homosexual couples. Ironically, it is this myth that poses the threat to children's rights and well-being, for, as a result, children's advocates report that social services are afraid to investigate or intervene in cases of suspected child abuse, and the groups have successfully blocked the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, several comprehensive sexual education initiatives, and the implementation of the Social Services Act.

Winning the narrative war

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Even where they lose policy battles, they often win communications wars and increase their influence. Although gender-restrictive groups in Peru were largely unsuccessful in their attempts to block comprehensive sexual education in schools, they consolidated powerful alliances between evangelical churches, the Catholic church, and key political actors, and garnered significant public support for their attack on women's and LGBTI rights. For millions of people in Peru, comprehensive sexual education now signifies the moral and sexual corruption of children and an attack on life, parental authority and religion.

How can progressive philanthropy respond?

The success these groups have had in expanding their influence and mainstreaming their worldview is not only due to the amount of funding they get, but more significantly, to how they are resourced with cross-issue, world-building, long-term funding. Our research found that to effectively counter these movements, progressive funders need to be similarly willing to invest in sustained cultural shifts through long-term, unrestricted funding, as well as more immediate strategic communication campaigns for narrative change. These initiatives should increase capacity, provide direct financial support for the security of front-line change-makers, and seek to identify alternative ways to measure and understand the impact of long-term cultural change efforts. To build a winning strategy, progressive funders also need to support the development of cross-issue, cross-national, and intersectional alliances with key groups in the development and humanitarian sectors, including those who don't necessarily see themselves as rights-based.

More broadly, the report is a rallying cry to philanthropists across a broad spectrum of progressive issues - from human rights to democracy to the environment - to learn and act boldly together to counter the anti-gender movement. It demands that we reflect on whether our funding, or the work of our grantees, is inadvertently fuelling 'gender-restrictive' groups. It asks us to make essential pivots in our analysis and develop a more thoughtful multi-sectoral approach to problems that no institution, programme officer, or network could resolve alone.

We invite you to join the nascent community of grantmakers who are shaping and building a response to this anti-rights agenda. ●

