MANUFACTURING MORAL PANIC

Weaponizing Children to Undermine Gender Justice and Human Rights

This report explores how gender-restrictive actors use child protection rhetoric to manufacture moral panic, then mobilize it against human rights, gender justice, democracy, multilateralism, and environmental protection worldwide. It explores 3 case studies (Bulgaria, Ghana, and Peru) and offers recommendations for funders to develop an effective, practical, and multi-sectoral approach to countering this movement.

Who are **gender-restrictive actors**?

- A wide range of religious groups, politicians, secular researchers, and civil society organizations **cooperating transnationally**.
- They oppose what they call "**gender ideology**," a pejorative term used to describe efforts to support women's, LGBTI, and sexual and reproductive rights.
- They are united in **commitment to a gender-restrictive world order** - a world where women's rights are contingent on men's needs, women remain constrained to the reproductive mandate, and where LGBTI people (including children and youth) are criminalized or categorized as sick or deviant.

Mobilizing **moral panic** about children is their **primary strategy**.

- They **prey on our collective desire to protect children by creating moral panic about child protection**. Indignation, rage, and fear about the wellbeing of children are easily manipulated and translated into social and political support for restrictive initiatives.
- They **portray demands for rights as fundamentally opposed to the wellbeing of children**, portraying LGBTI individuals as sexual deviants and predators, and feminists as "death agents" who attack life.

As explored in the report's case studies, these groups have been **strikingly effective** at **mobilizing the public, broadening their base of support, changing laws and policies**, and **supporting politicians and governments who reflect their worldview**. Their campaigns impact a broad spectrum of progressive priorities; they have:

- Undermined laws and policies that protect and advance women's, LGBT, and – ironically – children's rights.
- Divided the funding and advocacy landscapes of women's rights, LGBT rights, and child rights, preventing or stalling collaborations and coalitional work between them.
- Attacked progressive organizations' funding streams and regulatory status.
- Undermined child protection institutions and services, and reduced or eliminated sexual and reproductive health services, comprehensive sexuality education, and gender-based violence (GBV) programs.
- Allied with and built support for authoritarian regimes, amplified anti-democratic forces, and strengthened illiberal politics while amplifying and disseminating disinformation.
- Undermined public support for the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and international norms, laws, and institutions, including for international human rights and environmental protection.

By **working across differences** in the interest of their common goal, they are **winning the communications war**.

- → Even in contexts where gender restrictive groups have lost policy and legal battles, they seem to win cultural and communications wars, consistently **increasing social and political influence.**
- → Their funders support them with a **long-term goal in mind rather than funding a specific program or a single issue.** They prioritize block grants, gifts, and endowments, allowing them to go beyond short-term, results-oriented projects to develop **long-term strategies to advance their worldview.** This enables the groups to **take risks, encourages them to see diverse issues as interconnected, and allows them to adapt quickly** to relevant political or social events – thus **maximizing resources and avoiding the creation of silos.**

SO WHAT?

How gender restrictive groups are attacking and undermining ***the rights of girls and women***

Denying girls and women their rights is a core objective of these groups. The report details how these groups have effectively **halted or reversed public policies to advance gender equality** (Poland, Spain, USA p. 21; Bulgaria p. 65) and restricted or **eliminated programs to provide sexual and reproductive health services**, **reduce gender inequality and violence** (Bulgaria pp. 75 & 78), and provide comprehensive sexuality education (Bulgaria p. 65-67; Ghana p. 87 & 97; Peru p. 47). This has led to **increased violence against women and girls** (Bulgaria p. 65), unwanted pregnancies, including among girls; and decreased funding for women and girls work (Bulgaria, p.78).

These tactics have also caused rifts within feminist movements, particulalry in relation to LGBT rights. (p. 32; Ghana p. 93)

This report is a **rallying cry to philanthropists** across a broad spectrum of progressive issues – from human rights to democracy to the environment – **to learn about this movement and act boldly together.** It asks us to make essential pivots in our analysis and develop a more thoughtful multisectoral approach to problems that no institution, program officer, or network could resolve alone.

NOW WHAT?

Actionable recommendations

See page 101 for a comprehensive list of recommendations

What to fund:

- Sustained, long-term strategic communication campaigns supporting cultural shift and narrative change.
- Initiatives that increase communications training and capacity development at the national level in key countries.
- Work that frames scientific research and evidence in a way that "humanizes the data" for the "movable middle."
- Direct financial support for security: personal, infrastructure, physical, etc.
- Cohorts, networks, collective impact at the national and local levels.

How to fund:

- Build 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.
- Develop alternative ways to measure & understand the impact of long-term cultural change efforts.
- Ensure a diversity of actors/voices and be conscious of limiting donor influence.
- Engage communities authentically and support grantees in identifying their own priorities.
- Ensure access to long-term, unrestricted funding.