

# Report

## **Troubling Anti-Gender Attacks – Transnational Activist & Academic Perspectives**

A roundtable hosted in cooperation with, and partially funded by, Transnational Feminism, Solidarity and Social Justice program, an Open Society University Network project

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### **Roundtable Details:**

**Date:** 25<sup>th</sup> May 2022

**Time:** 15:00-17:00 (London)/16:00-18:00 (Johannesburg)

**Venue:** Zoom

**Session Format:** Virtual Roundtable Discussion

**Moderator:** Dr. Haley McEwen

**Rapporteur:** Yukako Ban

**Organizers:** Aiko Holvikivi (Gender Studies, LSE), Tomás Ojeda (Gender Studies, LSE), Billy Holzberg (Social Justice, King's College London), Haley McEwen (Wits Centre for Diversity Studies, WITS)

KEY THEMES: transnational feminism; LGBTI rights and inclusion; human rights; trans and queer activism; anti-gender politics
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### **Recommended citation**

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## **Introduction**

This virtual roundtable discussion was coordinated by the Department of Gender Studies, London School of Economics, and the Wits Center for Diversity Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. This webinar was made possible with the cooperation and partial funding from the Transnational Feminism, Solidarity, and Social Justice Program, an Open Society University Network project. As part of a broader project, the transcription of the roundtable will be available as a chapter in the edited volume *Transnationalising Anti-Gender Politics*, which will be published in the Palgrave book series *Thinking Gender in Transnational Times*.

The purpose of the webinar was to provide a space for critical interrogation and reflection on the ways that anti-gender activism *troubles* and can *be troubled by* transnational queer and feminist perspectives, solidarity and action. In addition, the webinar aimed to explore the transnational dimensions of 'anti-gender ideology', considering the recent rises of hostility, censorship, and disenfranchisement against LGBTIQ+ individuals, feminists and political allies as 'anti-gender' groups have gained political power and influence globally, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The dialogue was guided by four key discussion questions:

- What do anti-gender or anti-feminist mobilizations at various geographic sites have in common?
- What important contextual differences need to be taken into account when we try and develop common conceptual, as well as political grammars, for understanding these mobilizations?
- What can examining these mobilizations together tell us about the politics and global contestations of gender today?
- What can feminist and queer communities do in the face of these attacks?

This commentary report aims at sharing some of the key arguments and ideas discussed by the speakers for interested audiences who were unable to attend the event. It builds on the author's notes, which were checked against a transcription of the conversation held on Zoom. The report proceeds by introducing the speakers' background and main lines of work followed by their opening remarks, which situate their approach and understanding of anti-gender politics in relation to their specific contexts, activist and academic trajectories. The report concludes by summarizing some of the analytic features that were discussed during the conversation and in response to questions from the audience.

## Summary of Webinar Proceedings

The moderator began the session by introducing the four speakers that would be guiding the conversations. Speakers were activists and academics invited from different transnational contexts who have experienced the effects of anti-gender attacks.

- **Stella Nyanzi**

Stella Nyanzi is a Ugandan human rights advocate. She is also a poet, medical anthropologist and radical queer African feminist, fighting against anti-queer laws and for freedom of expression. Stella is a researcher of sexuality, family planning and public health, and is a leading scholar in the field of Queer African Studies. She has been a vocal critic of Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and was arrested in 2017 for insulting him. Stella is currently living in Germany under the Writers-in-Exile program of PEN Zentrum Deutschland.

- **Mauro Cabral**

Mauro Cabral Grinspan is Argentinian, and has more than 20 years of experience in the field of trans and intersex advocacy. He co-founded GATE in 2009 and served as its Executive Director for five years. He is currently in charge of coordinating the Task Forces on ‘Trans and Intersex Funding’ and ‘Responding to Anti-Gender Ideology’ at the Global Philanthropy Project. Mauro participated in the elaboration of the Yogyakarta Principles and the Yogyakarta Principles+10, being a signatory of both documents. He holds a degree in History by the Universidad Nacional of Córdoba (Argentina) and had continued postgraduate studies in the field of philosophy and public policy.

- **Jules Gill-Peterson**

Jules Gill-Peterson is a US-based historian and trans writer. She serves as the general co-editor of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* and is also the author of *Histories of the Transgender Child* (2018), the first book to challenge the myth that transgender children are a brand new generation in the twenty-first century. Jules has published extensively in different media outlets on issues related to trans history and the history of sexuality, gender nonconforming childhood and youth, and current attacks on gender affirmation care and anti-trans legislation in the US context.

- **Alia Amirali**

Alia Amirali is a political worker based in Pakistan and associated with the left-wing Awami Workers Party. She has worked closely with various grassroots movements in Pakistan over the last two decades and contributed to mobilizing students, workers, women, slum dwellers, and landless tenants in various parts of the country. Alia is also a feminist scholar, teaching Gender Studies at Quaid-e-Azan University, Islamabad, and is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Gender Studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

## **Opening remarks**

The first speaker, Dr. Stella Nyanzi, shared the Ugandan context in relation to anti-gender politics. In Uganda, the anti-homosexual bill had been introduced in parliament in 2019 as a number of African countries have had legislation tabled before their parliament, specifically re-criminalizing diverse forms of same-sex desire and same-sex practices, alongside individualizing alternative genders beyond the sex of male and female. Nyanzi critically reflected on her positionality in the university and its limitations, and her decision to be involved in activism as a radical feminist to include trans and intersex people in queer rights movements and politics. Also, in her running to become a Member of Parliament, Nyanzi attempted to address sexual and reproductive health rights, and queer rights in Uganda. As a result of her creative and political activism, she was charged with insulting the Ugandan president, Yoweri Museveni and his wife. Subsequent to this activism, there was a tremendous backlash against her - she was called un-African, pro-Western, immoral, and lesbian. In addition to being a scholar, politician, and activist, Nyanzi is also a poet. Dr. Nyanzi reflected that artistic modes of expression travel much further than academic discourse and are more amenable than even activist discourses. The knowledge produced by the artistic media is more palatable and more consumable. Nyanzi questioned if it is reasonable to separate academics and artists, because both are producers of knowledge and participate in meaning making processes.

The second speaker was Mauro Cabral Grinspan, whose work on anti-gender issues is organized through two different forms of interventions. Cabral introduced the first area of his work by discussing the organization called GATE, which initially stood for Global Action of Trans Equality, and later was renamed to Trans, Gender Diverse and Intersex Advocacy in Action with the expansion of activities about gender diverse and intersex people. Cabral has been working as a part of a coalition of activists determined to depathologize transgender and intersex people, by focusing on the reform of the World Health Organization (WHO) clinical manual called the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) for 10 years. Efforts to depathologize transgender people was considered a dangerous move amongst anti-gender groups who were worried that by removing ‘a key scientific authority over trans lives... [that] would support a legal and ethical principle – that is also a Human Rights principle – to self-determination’.

Cabral also discussed the issue of funding, explaining that anti-gender groups accuse gender and sexual diversity activists such as himself, of being funded by ‘global capitalism’. He continued to explain that anti gender groups spread ideas that George Soros and the Open Society Foundation, Bill Gates and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are believed to be in a conspiracy to ‘buy the WHO and force them to depathologize trans people’. He explained that GATE is monitoring how anti-gender movements are working against the depathologization of trans people at the World Health Organization. He further noted with concern that anti-gender groups are also trying to re-pathologize gender variant children.

The second area of his work that Cabral spoke about, is at an NGO called the Global Philanthropy Project (GPP), where he works on two task forces: one that addresses Trans and Intersex issues, and one dedicated to responding to anti-gender ideologies. The purpose of the GPP is to mobilize funds to support research and advocacy and other activities focusing on responding to anti-gender movements.

The next speaker was Jules Gill-Peterson. In addition to a focus on gender diverse children, her work unpacks the history of the medicalization of sex and gender and particularly its racial history. Gill-Peterson pointed out the importance of developing public-facing advocacy. One of the challenges is facing disinformation laden in moral panic and the corporate media sphere in which the stories being told about trans people, especially trans children, are horrifically distorted. Her development and analysis of anti-trans political violence, particularly in a legislative and administrative political sense, shows that anti-trans politics in the US are largely concentrated on the right. When it comes to the operation of moral panic, the function of media ecology helps facilitate the flow of discourses, ideas, and concepts that were previously restricted to far extremist groups in the United States.

In that broader context, Gill-Peterson points out two problems or riddles of the role of the United States. On the one hand, the US plays an over-determined and neocolonial role in exporting global tropes around sex, gender and sexuality, liberalism, and political extremism in the sense that its ideas around what gender is or what LGBTIQ identities are, have distorting effects all over the world. On another hand, the role of the US gets overblown as a model against which all other contexts are measured. Then at the same time, the United States is directly exporting the right-wing evangelical Christian version of anti-gender politics, developing materials and providing funding for this ideology to become popularized around the world.

Gill-Peterson explained that ‘Global trans panic’ is the kind of trans panic defense where non-normative gender embodiment or transness is seen as ontologically threatening to the normative order of things, and therefore is seen as justified and deserving of violence. The histories she shared do not refer to the US or even metropolitan Europe alone, but also refers to the work of the British Raj in the mid to late 19th century in Northeastern India. These are processes that we can see in an array of colonial contexts. Gill-Peterson mentioned that when we think about these long processes of statecraft and violence that install that very word ‘gender’ and ‘sex’, it matters to understand that this is a global history that is beyond a local context.

The last opening remark was from Alia Amirali, who is based in Islamabad and has been involved with left political organizing in Pakistan for over 20 years. Over the last decade, in particular, Amirali has been working with others to build a left political party in Pakistan called the Awami Workers Party (AWP).

Amirali’s introduction spoke of the fact that in Pakistan, inflation is at the highest that it has ever been resulting in severe economic hardship for the majority, and a widening gap between rich and poor which was already evident; a drought is afflicting the southern regions of the

country, which is killing both people and livestock; and there is direct military control of various ethnic peripheries under the garb of so-called ‘fighting terrorism’. Accordingly, the frequency and intensity of violent attacks on women and transgender persons have increased in addition to a political crisis at the center. Both increasing patriarchal violence and the radicalization of the feminist movement should be understood in this larger context. Amirali explained that the new wave of the anti-gender movement is embedded within the global crisis of capitalism and liberal democracy. This forms part of the explanation for the rise of the right-wing all over the world as well as the concurrent national level crisis.

Amirali elaborated on the backlash that feminists have faced in Pakistan, which has been precisely to put them ‘back in their place’ and to insist upon gender as a ‘core essential, natural and divinely ordained’ difference which, if challenged, is paramount to challenging the tenets of religion and culture. Amirali shared her experience of being one of the organizers of the *Aurat Azadi* march in 2021, which translates to the ‘women's liberation march’. The organizers were slammed with nine different legal petitions with accusations of committing blasphemy and in one petition, for being foreign-funded, using doctored images and videos as evidence which created a life-threatening situation for the organizers, one of whom had to temporarily leave the country.

The organizers of this march were repeatedly reminded both before and after the march, and by men and women across classes and regions, of the inappropriateness of seeking *Azadi* which means freedom for women and trans people. The growing intensity of these reminders and the backlash to the march is an indicator that feminism – however contested the term – which has always had to deal with the accusation of being an imported Western idea, is finally growing in Pakistani society, which is not to say that there were no feminists or women struggles before this point. Amirali sees the current so-called ‘indigenization’ or an expansion of feminist discourse in Pakistan as connected to demographic changes, such as an increase in youth, which is becoming true for much of the world and certainly in the Global South.

Amirali further spoke about the intensification and expansion of public debate about gender in Pakistan. Amirali explained that gender is a term that implicitly refers to women and so-called women's rights but within which the transgender community has become increasingly visible over time, mainly due to their unrelenting struggle. Amirali noticed the emergence of a new status quo or a common-sense idea that holds that it's fine now for women to have rights but not freedom.

Amirali closed her remarks by saying that even though much of this movement is taking place transnationally towards the right, we're able to connect feminist, socialist, anti-racist, and environmental struggles across sometimes what are starkly different contexts.

## **Discussion**

Following the opening remarks by the speakers, the moderator posed three key questions for response:

1. What do you think is behind the anti-gender movement?
2. What do we do moving forward?
3. Considering how space for thinking about alternatives is being constrained, how are these groups and actors in these movements trying to shrink that space?

The responses to these questions by the speakers and the key points raised alongside the queries from the audience are summarized below:

### *Role of Languages*

Nyanzi raised the question of whether we need a new language in terms of naming and categorization to counter anti-gender movements. In the case of Uganda, she explained, there's no usage of Western medical language for naming gender diversity, telling that the language of pathology or pathologization 'has not even landed' in Uganda. What is commonly used is the language of demons and exorcism, which has also been propagated by American right-wing conservative Pentecostal presbyterian evangelicals. Moreover, in the Ugandan context, the anti-homosexuality groups have subsumed transgender people, intersex persons, alternative gender people, and non-gendered people under the label 'homosexuality'.

Nyanzi also reflected on the widespread narrative that states that human rights are a Western import, criticizing the murder of those who do not perform rigid gender binary performances as a method of opposing Western values. In the context of Uganda, however, the point is to go back to the languages used by ancestors and to find local vernaculars in the local languages that are amenable.

### *'Protection' of intersex children*

Nyanzi also mentioned that the label of intersex seemed to have been received with more empathy than other categories, although this perspective is largely framed as child protectionism with people often referring to the danger of pedophiles. Cabral agreed with Nyanzi's remark and also critiqued the extent to which intersex people are infantilized through this child protectionist rhetoric. He argued that in theory, everyone wants to protect intersex children's bodies but that the recommended 'treatments' are problematic in their aim to 'normalize' intersex children and adults. This approach, he argued, silences the voices of intersex children and adults.

### *Crisis of Capitalism and Subjugated People*

Gill-Peterson expanded the point raised by Nyanzi that there is no singular explanation for this complex global transnational anti-gender movement. The crisis of capitalism can be a cause of these moral panics and shifts in state power in many cases. She argues that the US. has declared itself a 'cisgender state', which labels some populations as 'uncivil' in order to eject them from the public sphere, criminalize their everyday lives, and forcing them out of the formal economy. Gill-Peterson sees that anti-gender movements in different contexts are different forms of the same process in which state powers are attempting to emancipate themselves from the political power of queer, trans, intersex, 'and all sorts of other kinds of populations who become symbolic avatars for disorder'.

Discussing the challenges of forming a transnational response to anti-gender attacks, Gill-Peterson mentioned that there is no 'boardroom' for gender or anti-gender, just as there is no 'boardroom' for global capitalism. Organizing, she explained, has to happen within its own specific political and especially cultural contexts. Therefore, dependence in the Western context does not serve the working class, people of color, or indigenous people. Within global and transnational anti-gender attacks, the frameworks of anti-colonialism and feminism and anti-capitalist critique are used to construct gender and sexual diversity as forms of western imperialism, and work is required to engage with these arguments within our own contexts rather than seeking a one-size-fits-all model of action or solidarity.

### *Engaging with differences and universalism*

Amirali argued that critical, or radical, universalism can work as a political orientation that emphasizes our interdependence and an aspiration through which solidarity can be achieved. Noting her own caution in using the term given 'what has happened in the garb of universalism and universalizing narratives', she explained that she sees the 'universal as an orientation rather than as a structure that sits on top and governs everything underneath...Universal as an orientation, as something to aspire to without controlling, without having to manage and deciding things for others.' Amirali placed emphasis on the importance of collaborating with others 'and at our core being reminded of our connectedness and interdependency'.

Amirali further shared that these reflections stem from her experiences as a political organizer and her realizations about the importance of recognizing our structural interdependence. Amirali explained that we become aware of this when we are part of something larger than ourselves. Although structures can enable the realization of imaginaries, they can be a limitation and constraint with regards to working with our interdependence. With regards to the question of how we can 'transform this rapidly deteriorating world', including and beyond the effects of anti-gender movements, she argued that 'political organization is about embodying and living that change while you fight it'. Politics, she argued, are both collective and creative and



have the potential to inspire. In this regard, Amirali put forth the view that over-emphasis on differences can work against transformation.

*Strategy for solidarity and moving forward*

Cabral argued that revolution cannot happen in just one way and that we need to have resistance at all different levels (local, national, global). He argued that we need a diverse ecosystem of actors in order to respond to anti-gender attacks, and emphasized the importance of collaboration across sectors and getting involved in politics. Progressive donors for instance are currently developing strategies to support groups who are responding to ‘anti-gender’ opposition around the world.

Cabral also argued that in terms of building solidarity, we may not have a linguistic problem and that we should not attempt to find a ‘clean new language’ in responding to and countering anti-gender attacks. According to Cabral, the problem is opposition groups, which can be called ‘anti-gender’ groups, ‘fascists’ or by different names in local languages. Regardless of the terms we use to describe them, these groups are similar regarding the various tools that they use to oppose transgender and intersex rights. Moreover, he discussed that the language of ‘anti-gender’ can provoke many different ideas, and that we need to find common denominators that we can build on to reduce internal or horizontal hostility and to get people more informed, which will contribute to the ability to build political responses. In closing, Cabral emphasized the importance of reclaiming queer imaginations and imaginaries that are constantly attacked by right-wing groups.