

OPINION

MacKenzie Scott's Investment in the Global Queer and Transgender Movement Is a Game Changer

By *Katie Hultquist*

FEBRUARY 9, 2022



OUTRIGHT ACTION INTERNATIONAL

Volunteers for OutRight Action International at New York City's Pride parade in 2019.

Among the many philanthropic practices MacKenzie Scott upended in the past two years, one of the most overlooked was her quiet support for and outsized impact on severely underfunded global queer and transgender organizations. To date, at least 16 nonprofits focused on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer issues have received gifts from Scott totaling more than \$60 million — an unprecedented level of investment in groups like mine.

Why does this support matter so much right now? Because LGBTIQ nonprofits around the world face extreme funding shortfalls even as those they serve remain among the most marginalized and mistreated. Just [28 cents for every \\$100](#) awarded by foundations in the United States target LGBTIQ groups and issues. Globally, only [\\$560 million](#) in philanthropic funding went to queer and transgender causes in 2017-18, according to the latest available data, with less than half supporting programs outside of the United States and Canada.

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This paltry funding has continued during the pandemic. Out of nearly 4,500 pandemic relief grants and funding pledges made worldwide during the first year of Covid-19, only one explicitly supported LGBTIQ people, according to [research](#) by the Global Philanthropy Project. This finding is particularly devastating because a [report](#) from my organization, OutRight Action International, found queer and transgender people have been severely affected by the pandemic in areas such as employment, access to health care, and social isolation. Yet too often, they are left behind or even excluded from traditional humanitarian efforts.

Even before Covid-19, LGBTIQ people fared [disproportionately poorly](#) on a wide range of social and economic indicators, with higher rates of poverty, food insecurity, barriers to health care, and joblessness compared with the general population. To this day, approximately [68 countries](#) criminalize same-sex relations through laws predominantly left over from colonial times. Only [15 countries](#) legally recognize a person's gender self-identification. And incredibly, just [seven countries](#) have banned so-called conversion therapy, which aims to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity and often leaves [lasting psychological and sometimes physical scars](#).

On top of these challenges, [a concerted and well-funded backlash](#) against LGBTIQ people is on the rise around the world, with queer and transgender people accused of threatening so-called traditional values, families, and societies as a whole. In the United States, [more than 100 bills](#) targeting transgender people were introduced in legislatures across the country in 2021, including proposals to forbid students from using bathrooms or playing on sports teams that don't match their sex assigned at birth. [Similar efforts](#) are also gaining steam in Europe.

In the face of such obstacles, LGBTIQ organizations need resources to fight for the recognition that human rights are not conditional on sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other distinguishing feature.

A Human-Rights Test

In this context, MacKenzie Scott's support of organizations led by and for queer and transgender people, especially those with a global focus, matters a great deal.

LGBTIQ individuals are often a canary in a coal mine: How we are treated is a test for human rights for everyone. Discrimination and violence against our community frequently go hand in hand with persecution toward racial and ethnic groups, women and girls, religious minorities, and other marginalized groups. Conversely, when we secure human rights for queer and transgender individuals, we reinforce the principle that all people have basic dignity and deserve full freedom and equality.

Donors such as Scott who make significant, unrestricted contributions empower LGBTIQ leaders and organizations to do what they do best on a larger scale, with greater impact. These creative and dedicated activists know what the people they serve need but are held back by constant funding shortfalls.

Responding in Afghanistan

In our case, the gift from Scott and her husband, Dan Jewett, was the largest in OutRight's 31-year history and has allowed us to accelerate our vision of protecting and lifting up at-risk LGBTIQ people around the world. This includes advocacy for new laws and policies that codify queer and transgender equality and supporting activists and organizations especially in countries that receive little attention.

For example, in the weeks following the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, OutRight was able to immediately launch a [research project](#) based on interviews with 60 queer and transgender Afghans to document the violence and threats they were facing.

Our report, published in January, provided recommendations to governments, U.N. agencies, relief organizations, social-media platforms, and the Taliban itself to ensure the safety of LGBTIQ people.

This spring, we will also use funds from Scott and other donors, including the [Global Equality Fund](#), to launch a program to support underserved lesbian, bisexual, and queer women. The program will provide mentorship to 100 leaders, offer small grants for their projects, and amplify the voices of these advocates in key countries.

Importantly, Scott's funds will allow us to broaden our work to ensure LGBTIQ people are not left behind in the recovery from the pandemic and future humanitarian crises. That work began for us in 2020 with the launch of our [Global LGBTIQ Covid-19 Emergency Fund](#), which so far has distributed more than \$3.2 million to some 300 groups in more than 100 countries. Soon, we will award new grants to support vaccine access and education.

Scott's investments in queer and transgender causes demonstrate the power of such philanthropic partnerships at a pivotal moment. On the one hand, significant landmarks have been achieved in recent years. [Ten countries](#) have decriminalized same-sex relations in the last five years, and [29 countries](#) have codified marriage equality — half of them since 2015. On the other hand, the growing backlash against LGBTIQ people threatens these advances.

We have a tremendous opportunity to accelerate transformational change right now — and to ensure that our progress is not erased. But we can't do this alone.

Philanthropy needs to significantly increase investment in LGBTIQ organizations and leaders, while also giving us the freedom to create the programs we know our communities need. We've achieved a great deal in recent years, but we need more donors like Scott to recognize that we still have much to accomplish and many fights ahead.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

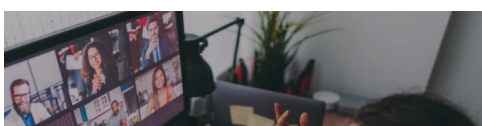
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