

# TRENDS

## in Global Grassroots Organizing

# 11 DAYS OF GLOBAL UNITY

September 11th - 21st

Peace Week

September 16th - 23rd

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# FROM EXCLUSIVENESS TO UNITY: BUILDING A WORLD WHERE WE RISE TOGETHER

*by David Balashinsky*

One of the basic questions that every progressive organization has to consider is whether to form strategic alliances with other organizations dedicated to the pursuit of goals that may seem to be entirely different from its own but whose objectives still fall under the rubric of human rights or simply that of making the world better, fairer, healthier, safer and more habitable for everyone. On a grand scale, this question applies to reform movements themselves. Should climate activists and environmentalists make common cause with Black Lives Matter? Should women's rights activists make common cause with those seeking to end poverty and income inequality? The reality is that strategic alliances such as these are not contrivances or arranged marriages but the opposite. For example, now that the concept of [environmental racism](#) is widely recognized, it's evident that one cannot effectively fight the totality of systemic or structural racism without addressing the problem of industrial pollution. By the same token, one cannot combat climate change or pollution without recognizing the disparate effect these have on marginalized communities. Similarly, the fact that [more women than men live in poverty](#) means that women's rights and economic justice are not fundamentally different objectives but, rather, fundamentally the same.

Notwithstanding these root points of intersection, there are those who oppose making common cause with other movements or organizations. Whether this opposition arises from mistaken notions of ideological purity or whether from overzealous single-mindedness, the result is inevitably a net loss on both sides, if for no other reason than that there is strength in numbers.

This is no less true of the genital autonomy (GA) movement, a worldwide movement that seeks to end all medically unnecessary genital cutting of unconsenting minors. The GA movement consists of three main branches, each of which is organized around opposition, respectively, to female genital cutting (FGC, known also as female genital mutilation - FGM), male genital cutting

(MGC, or nontherapeutic penile circumcision) and intersex genital cutting (IGC, which also includes a variety of surgeries that go beyond "normalizing" genital surgeries). Like every human rights movement, the GA movement has its share of "purists" who frown on making common cause with other human rights movements and organizations. Some want nothing to do with organizations not involved in combating genital cutting specifically while some within one or the other of the three branches of the GA movement even regard the other two branches as being beyond the scope of their concern.

At the [Genital Autonomy Legal Defense and Education Fund \(GALDEF\)](#), we do not share this view. Although the purpose of GALDEF is to facilitate impact litigation in order to obtain a measure of justice for individual victims of penile circumcision while creating a powerful financial disincentive for the continued imposition of this harmful genital surgery on unconsenting children, we recognize that all genital autonomy movements stand on the same philosophical foundation. Indeed, if one accepts the premise that a medically unnecessary, nonconsensual body modification is a harm *in and of itself* because it violates a person's rights to bodily integrity and self determination, it is difficult to see how can one look at FGC, MGC and IGC - practices that are identical in this fundamental respect - and not come to the same moral conclusions about them. Ultimately, it doesn't matter what the surgery is and it doesn't matter what the sex or the gender of the victim is. Either there is a fundamental right to bodily self-ownership that applies to everybody, regardless of sex, or there isn't.

It should be a foregone conclusion that, on the most basic level, one form of genital cutting is morally indistinguishable from another, but the GA movement also shares important characteristics with other reform movements. For example, there are striking similarities between the way homosexuality and the penile prepuce have been "pathologized" by the medical establishment. A fact not generally appreciated now is that it was

not until 1973 that [the American Psychiatric Association \(APA\) formally dropped its classification of homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder](#). Although it's hard to believe that gay women and men were once subjected to electroconvulsive therapy (ECT, or "shock therapy") and other "treatments," for decades the APA viewed homosexuality as a condition that needed to be "cured." Women and men were not merely stigmatized for being gay; their homosexuality was actually defined as a pathological condition by the medical establishment. As a result, gay people were subjected to interventions that would now be condemned as medical malpractice. It took years of advocacy before the APA was finally persuaded to revise its official stance on homosexuality. (The story of how gay rights activists overcame decades of entrenched thinking within the APA is movingly told in the powerful, heartbreaking yet inspiring documentary, ["Cured."](#))

In parallel to this, during the 19th and 20th centuries, the medical establishment pathologized the penile prepuce, attributing to it a host of ailments and diseases, including that scourge of Victorian-era health and social order, "masturbatory insanity." The "cure" for being born with a normal penis, of course, is circumcision.

In both cases, what is in fact normal, natural, healthy, good and beautiful was vilified and pathologized. The result was that untold millions of perfectly healthy people were subjected (and, in the case of MGC, continue to be subjected) to "treatments" they neither needed nor desired.

Thirty years ago, GALDEF president and founder, [Tim Hammond](#), recognized that intactivism (as the movement to end MGC has

come to be known) had much in common with the struggle for gay rights. As someone with extensive experience in both movements, Hammond suspected that the LGBT community would be receptive to the idea that everyone has a right to do with their own genitals what they wish. For this reason, he argued in favor of building alliances with the gay community by participating in Pride events. At the time, some intactivists countered that the two movements had nothing in common and even warned that it would be political suicide to align the GA movement with the gay rights movement. And yet Tim's prescience has been vindicated. Intactivists are now fixtures at Pride festivities across the United States. Last July, for example, GALDEF was honored to hold its [first public education and outreach event at Los Angeles Pride](#). In September, the producers of "Cured" graciously made their film available to GALDEF for a [special screening and fundraising event](#). GALDEF was again represented - and represented the GA movement - last September at the [Second Annual Riverside Pride Festival](#).

These collaborations amply demonstrate the utility of rights organizations forming strategic partnerships. They also demonstrate the principle that the objectives of socially conscious movements are not trivialized nor their impact diminished when they unite and make common cause with one another. Perhaps most importantly, they illustrate the principle that, when distilled down to their essence, most human rights movements embody the same fundamental values. Thus, it is not their joining forces that is in any way forced or unnatural but their insisting on exclusivity from one another that is. By working together for the Common Good, the efforts of all socially conscious organizations, whatever their individual goals, can only be enhanced and their collective impact magnified for the benefit of all of humanity.

<https://dbalablog.blogspot.com/2023/12/the-importance-of-unity.html>

