

RACE MATTERS¹

**Mariana Berbec-Rostas • Soheila Comminos
Mary Miller Flowers • Sue Gunawardena-Vaughn
Michael Heflin • Nina Madsen**

- *Reflections on Employing a Racial Equity Lens* •
to Funding Human Rights Struggles

ABSTRACT

There have been numerous debates about rising authoritarianism and its impact on democracy and human rights. As a human rights funder whose central goal is to strengthen the resilience of the human rights movement, employing a racial justice lens to all our work is critical, now more than ever. Some have argued that highlighting structural racism and discrimination has shifted the focus away from economic inequality and undermined some of the relevance of the contemporary human rights movement. We contend, however, that deep economic inequality is frequently a reflection of deep inequality in the underlying power structures that govern societies. Employing a racial justice lens offers us the opportunity to deconstruct structures that contribute to a host of rights violations and allows us to gain a deeper understanding of how oppressive structures intersect. This essay is a reflection on some of our learning to date.

KEYWORDS

Human rights | Human Rights Movement | Implicit bias | Intersectionality | Power | Racial equity | Racial justice | Social privilege | Structural racism

“The better we understand how identities and power work together from one context to another, the less likely our movements for change are to fracture.”

Kimberle Williams Crenshaw

1 • Racial Equity and Power

The Human Rights Initiative (HRI), a global human rights grant making programme within the Open Society Foundations (OSF), is committed to dismantling racism and fighting discrimination across rights issues and countries. We have supported civil society and social movements across the globe to promote rights and hold abusers to account whenever possible. It was only in the past few years, however, that we became explicit about challenging institutional racism and racial bias.

The impetus to view our work – and explicitly make grant making decisions – using a racial equity lens came in large part from our partners on the ground. Whether it is Roma-led groups in Europe, Dalit-led organisations in India or Black-led movements in Brazil and Colombia, many organisations recognise first-hand that challenging racism is key to changing systems. As Alison Hannah, advocate working on penal reform argued, “At heart, criminal justice reform is about power and politics; who the state chooses to lock up often has little to do with the law.”

This sentiment rings true beyond the justice system. Oftentimes, those most vulnerable to rights violations are racial, ethnic and religious minorities, which is a reflection of the systems that privilege certain dominant groups over others. While we seek to take an intersectional approach to our work, an explicit racial equity lens has helped us uncover patterns of inequality and power imbalances that result from structural racism. It has challenged us to look at the root causes of disparities and to name race explicitly when discussing solutions to human rights violations. This essay seeks to share reflections and bring practical suggestions to grant makers and others seeking to apply a racial equity lens to human rights work.

2 • Social Privilege and the Anti-Racist Struggle

As grant makers, we have learned that often, the people who need our support the most do not have access to us or even know of our existence. An important part of social privilege is having access to contacts and networks and the knowledge to craft proposals in language that is familiar to funders. In our efforts to employ a racial equity lens, we have learned that as donors, we need to move beyond our regular circles if we are to build partnerships with impacted communities fighting for racial justice on the frontlines. Illustrative of this is a notable experience that a group of us had when we visited a community organisation situated in a favela in Salvador, Brazil. As we took our seats in a makeshift circle, we learned about the mission of the organisation, which was struggling for the rights of Black and

Brown people to gain access to housing, education and health services and to push back on rampant police violence in their city. We were in an environment that was largely alien to us, where the poverty, heat and security threats were palpable.

After the introductions, one of the group's leaders steered our attention to a group of young boys occupying a corner of the packed room. She asked each of them to share their name, age and motivation for being a part of the organisation. One boy, about 15 years old, introduced himself as Eduardo. He then stood up and pointed to his hair. He told us that before he joined the group, he had kept his hair short and tried to fit in with his non-Black peers. After learning more about his heritage as a Black person growing up in Salvador and the racism that kept his family and so many of his neighbours in entrenched poverty, he decided to grow an afro. For him, sporting an afro was a sign that he had profoundly changed the lens through which he understood his own lived experience. With this newfound pride in his identity and culture, he began think and act differently, which led him to his eventual activism in the Black movement.

In many ways, it is individuals like Eduardo in Brazil and others that we have met, such as Ashok in India, Luisa in Colombia and Ahmale in South Africa, who have pushed us to change our lens as grant makers. By thinking about race more intentionally, as Eduardo does, we have found ourselves thinking differently about the strategies we pursue, the practices we adopt and the partners we fund. We have shifted our budgets to support impacted communities directly and changed the way in which we assess our impact. We have also learned the importance of building multi-generational movements from the bottom up and cultivating and supporting youth activism and leadership. A racial equity lens has helped us understand the underlying power dynamics that perpetuate structural racism and allowed us to develop strategies that address some of the root causes of human rights abuse.

Racial and ethnic discrimination manifest themselves differently in different geographies. South Africa's history of apartheid created a brutal, codified system of discrimination that was difficult for outsiders to comprehend. Brazil's experiment with "whitening" (or *branqueamento* in Portuguese), wherein immigration from Europe was encouraged to dilute or even destroy the country's Black population, is substantively different from the legalised segregation that took place in the United States. While the caste system in India is often described in socioeconomic terms, Dalit movements often compare this system of oppression to structural racism. The Roma movement views the pervasive discrimination against Romani people through a similar frame. While othering, discrimination and marginalisation are found in every society, the specific ways in which people are oppressed are rooted in a country's specific history. The ways in which these phenomena manifest themselves are highly contextual and culture-bound. As such, there is no overarching blueprint for fighting racial and ethnic discrimination across geographies. However, as a global human rights funder, we have gleaned some learning from supporting racial justice struggles in various places and these are some of our reflections.

3 • Lessons from a Grant Maker in Advancing Racial Justice

- If our goal is to end racism, we must name race explicitly.

Many grant makers and human rights organisations embrace a commitment to equality. Fundamental to this vision is the creation of societies where race does not determine status and where resources and opportunities are distributed equitably across social groups. It can be difficult, however, for organisations to name race explicitly. In some places, discussions of race or ethnicity are controversial and thus, discouraged. Racial bias is often implicit, on one hand, or perceived to be overly complex, on the other, providing few clear paths for action. Many assume that programming and grant making, which seek to advance human rights protection for all, will improve opportunities across society, thus failing to acknowledge the deeply-rooted power dynamics at play for racial, ethnic and other marginalised communities.

By naming racism explicitly, grant makers improve their ability to help support efforts to dismantle it. In doing this, we must acknowledge that racism is multi-dimensional and manifests itself at the individual, structural, institutional and historical level. Countering structural racism requires a diverse set of tools that can address the power structures that allow discriminatory practices to persist, the institutions that serve as vehicles for perpetuating the status quo and the historical factors that “normalize” these practices. We must also challenge racist norms and beliefs, educate ourselves and support organisations that are unafraid to call out racism in coded language and practice.

- We must redistribute resources to organisations and movements directly impacted by racism.

To be effective, grant makers must support organisations led by people from impacted communities who have the lived experience and knowledge to develop solutions for systemic rights abuse. This does not preclude supporting allies for this work, but the leadership and the direction must come from the communities themselves. At the same time, the struggle for racial equity should not be the burden of people of colour alone. Our work must include engaging allies in the fight for racial justice and being honest about the ways in which bias plays out in the distribution of resources. Grant makers should adopt a posture of continuous learning, adaptability and humility in supporting these efforts.

- Intersectionality is imperative to targeting the dynamics at play.

Even as we apply a racial equity lens, grant makers must also adopt an intersectional approach to funding. Other lenses, such as gender, sexual orientation, class or disability often converge in situations of endemic discrimination and marginalisation. Intersectionality helps grant makers to understand the nature of power and the dynamics that play out in specific identity-based movements. There is a need for greater awareness that some people belong to

multiple marginalised communities and, therefore, that their discrimination is amplified on numerous levels. People with intersectional identities are generally marginalised the most even within identity-based movements and their specific experiences of multiple forms of discrimination are often overlooked and ignored.

As grant makers, we must recognize the multiple drivers of discrimination and develop strategies to support intersectional work. For instance, we could fund the development of women's or LGBTI leadership among communities of colour or ensure that racial or ethnic minorities play leadership roles in the women's or LGBTI movements. In our experience, leaders that represent these intersections play a critical role in bridging constituencies by challenging, for example, white privilege in the women's or LGBTI movement as well as patriarchy, homophobia and transphobia among racial and ethnic minority communities.

- We need to be frank, transparent and respectful in our engagement with our partners on questions of diversity and inclusion.

When supporting human rights groups that are not led by impacted communities, grant makers need to be prepared to engage them on questions related to diversity and inclusion. This includes not just the diversity among their staff and board, but also how they include an analysis on race and ethnicity in their work. We must do this in a way that is respectful and open, while recognising our own power as a donor and how that shapes the dynamics of our interactions with our partners. We also need to be mindful that we do not impose on others our own preconceived notions of what diversity and inclusion should look like.

- We need to be comfortable with risk and rethink the types of groups we fund.

In many places, loose coalitions, fluid social movements and nascent grassroots groups are spearheading the most innovative anti-racism efforts. These actors may need different kinds of support than formally structured organisations. As grant makers, we must work with them to determine how best to support them and also recognise when funding may not be what is most needed. We need to take our cue from frontline activists doing the work and support initiatives that build alliances and forge strong solidarity networks with other social movements.

- Supporting racial justice work takes time and patience.

Changing social structures requires considerable time and patience. The trajectory is not linear and for every advance that is made, a corresponding backlash can be expected. As donors, we need to shift our expectations and timelines and embrace these issues in all their complexities and contradictions. We need to be willing to take the long view of history and consider our investments as a long-term commitment to building strong, sustainable and resilient racial justice movements.

4 • Race Matters

There have been numerous debates about rising authoritarianism and othering and its impact on democracy and human rights. Nationalist rhetoric has often bordered on hate speech and scapegoated racial, ethnic and religious minorities. Some have argued that highlighting structural racism and discrimination has shifted the focus away from economic inequality and undermined some of the relevance of the contemporary human rights movement. We contend, however, that economic inequality is frequently a reflection of deep inequality in the underlying power structures that govern societies. These, in turn, are inextricably tied to the power dynamics between dominant groups that enjoy social privilege and those that are marginalised based on their identity. As a human rights funder, whose central goal is to strengthen the resilience of the human rights movement, we believe that employing a racial justice lens to our work is critical, now more than ever. It offers us the opportunity to deconstruct structures that contribute to a host of rights violations and go beyond treating the visible symptoms. It also provides us with a deeper understanding of how oppressive structures intersect. Such an understanding will enable us to make more thoughtful and impactful interventions that can address both the political and economic dimensions of human rights abuse.

NOTES

1 • This essay was co-authored by a team of Open Society Foundations Human Rights Initiative staff who work on portfolios with a major racial justice focus. The Human Rights Initiative supports advocates to promote justice, equality, and

participation of all. We support some of the largest international human rights organizations, national advocacy organizations, and small and emerging groups working directly with those whose rights have been violated.

MARIANA BERBEC-ROSTAS – *Romania*

Mariana Berbec-Rostas is a Vienna-based program officer who works on equality, advancing the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, and supporting equality movements in Europe and globally.

SOHEILA COMNINOS – *France*

Soheila Comninos is a Washington DC-based program officer whose work focuses on criminal justice issues and the right to liberty.

MARY MILLER FLOWERS – *U.S.*

Mary Miller Flowers is a Washington DC-based associate director for justice and manages a global grant-making portfolio focused on supporting civil society to combat the overuse of pretrial detention and increase access to legal aid for indigent criminal defendants.

SUE GUNAWARDENA-VAUGHN – *Sri Lanka*

Sue Gunawardena-Vaughn is a Washington DC-based associate director for campaigns. Her work centers around equality and non discrimination issues with a specific focus on advancing racial and ethnic justice.

MICHAEL HEFLIN – *U.S.*

Michael Heflin is a Washington DC-based director of equality who oversees portfolios on LGBTIQ, disability rights, intersectional women's rights, and racial and ethnic justice.

NINA MADSEN – *Brazil.*

Nina Madsen is a Washington DC-based program officer who manages a portfolio that centers on intersectionality and women's rights. She is a feminist and human rights activist from Brazil.

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