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# INTERSECTIONALITY IN LGBTI ADVOCACY

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## INTERSECTIONS

*"There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we don't live single-issue lives."*

Audre Lorde

Sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE) activism often does not account for the many contexts oppression is expressed in – for example, race, ethnicity, gender, disability, age, class – in which discrimination, violence and other human rights violations play out. Yet LGBTI people who experience these multiple types of oppression are not necessarily able to unpick which thread they suffer from most – these oppressions are experienced intersectionally.

To conceive LGBTI people's rights as isolated and exclusive of that group – just like rights of any other groups or individuals, or those associated with any particular issue – is to overlook the existence of the multiple identities and circumstances that shape and determine how people experience their lives. An intersectional approach has great scope to address discrimination and violations perpetuated by both State and non-State actors.

We all are equal, but definitively, we are not all the same. Do violations of human rights based on SOGIE impact equally on all LGBT people? Can violations to any right, such as right to take part in governments, to free choice of employment or to an adequate standard of living affect LGBTI people in similar way to the rest of the population? Are grounds of violence against gay men and lesbians the same or even comparable with each other? Is the discrimination faced by a gay man, whose gender expression is more feminine according to cultural patterns, identical to that faced by a masculine gay man?

The experience of an indigenous gay man in any Latin American city is qualitatively different than that of a white in that same city. In the same way, the experiences of being lesbian, old, disabled, poor, trans woman, or any other identity, are unique and different. Also, LGBTI people may face homophobia, biphobia or transphobia from family, racism within LGBT spaces and both at work, in public or online.

Intersectional approaches reveal and address these multiple identities, exposing the

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<sup>16</sup> The authors are from the Sexual Rights Initiative, see: [www.sexualrightsinitiative.com](http://www.sexualrightsinitiative.com).

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different types of discrimination and disadvantages that happen as a consequence of the combination of identities. This approach aims to address the way in which ethnicity, patriarchy, class oppression and other systems of discrimination create inequalities that structure the relative situations of marginalised people. It takes account of historical, social and political contexts and also recognises unique individual experiences resulting from the coming together of different types of identity.

Also, answering questions such as those listed above leads to an understanding that LGBTI people's rights can neither be considered nor addressed separately from the rights of women, children and youth, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, or the rights within a variety of other categories. Therefore, each time that any related mechanism or instrument addresses and recognises such rights, is also includes LGBTI people in the scope of its application and vice versa.

Intersectional analysis posits that we should not understand the combining of identities as additively increasing one's load, but instead as producing substantively distinct experiences. In other words, the intention is not to demonstrate that one group is more victimised or privileged than another, but to reveal meaningful distinctions and similarities in order to overcome discriminations and put the conditions in place for all people to fully enjoy their human rights.

Intersectionality is a tool for analysis, advocacy and policy development that addresses multiple discriminations and helps comprehension of how different circles of identities impact people's access to rights and opportunities. This approach is critical in human rights and development work, and it suggests new and different approaches for the efforts of LGBTI human rights advocates.

There are many examples where intersectional approach has been used to advance human rights of LGBTI people, where intersecting identities inevitably led to higher vulnerability. These offer visions of how the approach could be used.

For example, in 2014 a story of a large group gay and transgender people (mostly youth and even children), who were living in a storm drain in New Kingston, Jamaica, was widely distributed across news (internet and print) media. Their situation was made visible and gained the attention of the Jamaican government and general public because of a series of local and international investigative journalistic pieces that highlighted their plight.<sup>17</sup>

Homeless and street youth who identify as gay or trans are made more persistently and more severely vulnerable than heterosexual or cisgender homeless counterparts; yet, existing policies do not separately identify or address this particular vulnerability. Furthermore, human rights violations faced by LGBTI homeless youth are rarely addressed by traditional means of law enforcement, largely due to the fact of longstanding and too-

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<sup>17</sup> See the following for reportage on this situation: [http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/Cop-proposes-shelter-for-gay-homeless-men\\_17238821](http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/Cop-proposes-shelter-for-gay-homeless-men_17238821); [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/02/planting-peace-lgbt-homeless\\_n\\_6255526.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/02/planting-peace-lgbt-homeless_n_6255526.html); and <http://www.advocate.com/world/2014/03/12/judge-rules-homeless-jamaican-lgbt-youth-can-keep-living-sewers>.

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often reinforced mistrust of police. As a result, crimes and police misconduct often go unreported. Hate crime laws often create a false dichotomy in public discourse: though important in addressing crimes directed against LGBTI identities their existence can erase the relevance of the crime as being specifically directed at LGBTI people. A full understanding of the problem of the vulnerability of LGBTI homeless people demonstrates that though some of the crimes they fall victim to may be addressed by hate crimes law, changes in structural support are necessary to remedy the systematic victimisation of homeless LGBTI youth. This case is a clear example of how an intersectional approach - where being both homeless and LGBTI constructs a combined base of vulnerability - could and should be used to design remedies and meaningful policies.

In the US where the problem of discrimination and violence based on ethnic difference - mainly between white and black population but not exclusively - remains unsolved, there are several studies that link human rights violations perpetuated against gay men with discrimination based on ethnicity. Amongst these, studies, there is evidence of significant differences in the reporting of harassment at school for students from different ethnic groups, access to healthcare and employment, rates of HIV prevalence. All of them show the vulnerability of non-white LGBTI people and many of them examine differences based on racial identity and sexual orientation, and examined the intersections of race and LGBTI identity.

But the group where intersections such as gender, gender identity, class, ethnicity, activity, homeless status, among others could be identified most easily, with no doubt and all around the world, is the trans women population. Every year in November Transgender Europe<sup>18</sup> provides a special update of the Trans Murder Monitoring (TMM) Project<sup>19</sup> results for the International Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR), so as to assist activists worldwide in raising public awareness of hate crimes against trans people. The TDOR 2014 update has revealed a total of 226 cases of reported killings of trans people, in particular trans woman, from 1 October 2013 to 30 September 2014. These murders don't happen in a vacuum. They are related to the systemic oppression of trans women that exposes the most vulnerable to violence. It's directly related to the extreme exclusion that trans women face in access to housing, employment, healthcare access, physical and sexual assault amongst other areas. Extreme poverty and a lack of employment options can lead to homelessness, and often means sex work is the only job option available. And because sex work is stigmatised, and in many countries criminalised, there is a lack of resources put into protection of sex workers, and neither are there policies to address their various needs in place.

In fact, in most countries of Latin America, the specific intersection of trans women of indigenous origin doing sex work holds a particular cultural position. Organisations that support them represent a set of people who are barely valued as fully human. Sadly,

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<sup>18</sup> See: <http://tgeu.org/>.

<sup>19</sup> See: [http://www.transrespect-transphobia.org/en\\_US/tvt-project/tmm-results/tdor-2014.htm](http://www.transrespect-transphobia.org/en_US/tvt-project/tmm-results/tdor-2014.htm).

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commonly this perception is strengthened by LGBTI advocate organisations that actively ignores trans sex work, and thereby contributes to erasing this core intersection. It is in this context that talking about or acknowledging the fact that murdered victims are often sex workers is avoided because of some version of “respectability politics”. These identity intersections of ethnicity, sex work, gender identity, migrant status and class, are not limited to Latin America, but appear to be present in all regions of the world where similar phenomenon is evidenced and rarely addressed, or even documented, properly.

However, an example on how these intersections that shape complex systems of oppression can be used not only for resistance but also for fighting against exclusion and advancing rights can be seen in South America. Here intersections of gender identity, class, activity and ethnicity molded a new identity within some groups of trans women, who took the term ‘travesti’ – a term originally used in medical and police contexts, and appropriated and re-signified it for themselves. They started using it for rights recognition, and gradually through staying with these particular intersections, have gained both respect as an identity and some significant policy changes.

The movement for human rights for LGBTI people is often thought of as separate to struggles for race, gender, disability, age, class, faith equality and various other movements. In fact, the rights of LGBTI people are sometimes represented as competing with other groups such as people of faith. However, that ignores the fact that LGBTI people exist within every community, identity group, faith and context; and that people from all those groups exist within LGBTI communities. Many people with intersectional identities face heightened discrimination and exclusion.

Intersectionality is a vast subject which a narrowed approach cannot do justice to and, if we do not look at the intersections, we are at risk of painting an incomplete picture which fail to see or acknowledge the very real ways that multiple marginalised identities play out in LGBTI lives.

Addressing human rights violations against LGBTI people through the intersectional perspective of any relevant subject will help to move towards meaningful and comprehensive advances. It will demonstrate the multiple ways that intersectionality can be used, and how it has the potential to reveal interlocking relationships of oppression and privilege, exposing how experiences of LGBTI people vary due to the intersections of gender, ethnicity, class, religion, birthplace, politics, etc.

With an intersectional lens, activists, human rights defenders, policy makers, stakeholders can also uncover how political, economic and social structures such as patriarchy, capitalism and neo-liberalism generate and perpetuate social inequality in all spaces of societies. It can show how the State’s institutions produce and replicate systems of oppression based on gender, sexuality, class, race, gender, religion, ability, amongst others, all of which play in simultaneous ways and affect particularly the most marginalised individuals and groups.

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The intersectional approach can also encourage leaders and advocates for LGBTI people rights to make the necessary links and connections between various and concurrent forms of oppression and discriminations, making them realise that social injustice cannot be eliminated in isolation.

But most important, intersectionality should inspire advocates and other human rights defenders to work together, collaborating and supporting one another among different movements and initiatives for human rights such as the rights of women, workers, people with disabilities, environment, indigenous, and migrants. In fact all groups rendered vulnerable by State and non-State actors that suffer consequences of marginalisation, exclusion and violations to their rights in a world where structures are used to sustain gender, class, heterosexual and cisgender privilege can benefit from an intersectional approach to their work.

Further resources:

- Andy Kopsa, “Intersectionality, Women’s Rights, LGBT Rights and Moving the Conversation Forward” *Huffington Post*, 9 March 2015 [www.huffingtonpost.com/andy-kopsa/intersectionality-womens-rights-lgbt-rights-and-moving-the-conversation-forward\\_b\\_6810974.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/andy-kopsa/intersectionality-womens-rights-lgbt-rights-and-moving-the-conversation-forward_b_6810974.html).
- Jarune Uwujaren and Jamie Utt “Why Our Feminism Must Be Intersectional (And 3 Ways to Practice It)” *Everyday Feminism*, 11 January 2015 <http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/01/why-our-feminism-must-be-intersectional/>.
- Kimberly Crenshaw “Demarginalising the Intersections of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (1989) *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 142 at: <http://philpapers.org/archive/CREDTI.pdf>.
- Svati P. Shah “Sexuality and “The Left”: Thoughts on Intersections and Visceral Others”, (Summer 2009) *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 7(3) at: [http://sfonline.barnard.edu/sexecon/shah\\_01.htm](http://sfonline.barnard.edu/sexecon/shah_01.htm).
- AWID (Association for Women’s Rights in Development) “Intersectionality: A Tool For Gender And Economic Justice”, *Facts and Issues*, No. 9. August 2004, AWID, online at: [www.awid.org/Library/Intersectionality-A-Tool-for-Gender-and-Economic-Justice2](http://www.awid.org/Library/Intersectionality-A-Tool-for-Gender-and-Economic-Justice2).