

Practising Pluralist Politics: Implications on Feminist and LGBT Organising



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Fifteen years ago, women's groups fighting for women's sexual health and sexual rights successfully negotiated for the inclusion of women's right to control their sexuality in the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA). Though the terms "sexual orientation" and "sexual rights" were eventually excluded from this historic UN document, the inclusion of matters related to "sexuality" paved the way for discussing sexual health and sexual rights in feminist agendas. Fifteen years later, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activists ask if the recognition of sexual orientation and gender identity as legitimate concerns of feminists has moved beyond symbolic recognition to concrete action.

In the recently concluded Asia Pacific Forum for Beijing +15 last October 2009, a group of feminist and LGBT activists created a space for a discussion on "Practising Pluralist Politics: Implications for Feminist and LGBT Organising". The workshop was sponsored by the Kartini Asia Network, the International Lesbian & Gay Association (ILGA), Isis International and Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN).

As we organised the workshop, our premise was that heteronormativity still exists in feminist movements, a hegemony that privileges heterosexual women's concerns. Such heteronormativity marginalises the issues of lesbians, bisexual women, and transgendered people and reinforces their social, cultural, political, and economic invisibility. It seems that there is a need to learn about the sexual hierarchies that not only exist in dominant mainstream cultures but also the sexual hierarchies that exist in 'alternative' subcultures such as feminist and LGBT movements.

The workshop attracted a handful of women from diverse geographic locations. Wanting to create an atmosphere of openness, a circle was formed and all were asked to freely share their experiences related to issues of sexuality, within and outside political movements. The sharing started with the three assigned "speakers" who jumpstarted the conversation. Because a number of attendees of the workshop expressed concern about the confidentiality of their identities, all names are kept in confidence – in solidarity with those who cannot come out for one reason or another.



Friends and family staged a rally in front of the court room as the trial of the rape and murder of South African soccer player Eudy Simelane resumed. The case of Simelane is just part of the string of hate crimes directed at lesbian women. The year before, Sizakele Sigasa, lesbian activist from the Positive Women's Network (PWN), along with and her friend, Salome Masooa was also raped and killed in Johannesburg. In 2006, a 19 year old lesbian was attacked by 20 men in Cape Town. Zoliswa Nkonyana died afterwards.

Photo and sources: Black Looks (14 January 2009). "Accused for murdering lesbian soccer player go to trial" URL: <http://www.blacklooks.org/page/2?s=eudy+simelane> and (12 July 2007). "A Time of Hurt: lesbians raped, tortured and murdered" URL: http://www.blacklooks.org/2007/07/a_time_of_hurt_lesbians_raped_tortured_and_murdered.html

all the "corrective rapes" perpetuated against black lesbians in South Africa. Eudy Simelane was gang-raped and brutally murdered in 2008. "When we try and report these crimes nothing happens, and then you see the boys who raped you walking free on the street."⁵⁵

Support groups claim an increasingly aggressive and macho political environment is contributing to the inaction of the police over attacks on lesbians and is part of a growing cultural lethargy towards the high levels of gender-based violence in South Africa. "When asking why lesbian women are being targeted you have to look at why all women are being raped and murdered in such high numbers in South Africa. So you have to look at the increasingly macho culture, which seeks to oppress women and sees them as merely sexual beings. So when there is a lesbian woman she is an absolute affront to this kind of masculinity."⁵⁶

The failure of police to follow up eyewitness statements and continue their investigation into another brutal double rape and murder

Identity as facilitating and hindering my politics

The first speaker, identifying herself as a lesbian traced her experience with sexuality as far back as when she was six years old. It was then that she realised that she was attracted to girls and not boys. For years, she had to secretly deal with these same-sex attractions. She recalled how the process of naming her experience was important to her selfhood. Coming out and embracing her lesbian identity during her teenage years was part and parcel of her struggle for social acceptance and self-affirmation. However, now that she is very much identified as a lesbian activist, she has found this same identity as limiting her political involvement. She finds that her lesbian identity becomes her prime and often sole political identity.

Affinity with the marginalised identity of others as my politics

The second speaker talked about her strong empathy and commitment to addressing the issues and concerns of those from marginalised identities and locations, despite or because of her own identity as a heterosexual, white, middle class woman. She talked about her work with men and women of diverse sexualities, as well as her development work with black Africans as a cultural artist-activist. But this empathy and commitment had not necessarily been enough for some of the circles she moved in. She experienced her own share of being perceived as belonging to a privileged socio-economic position and therefore often found herself having to explain why she did the work she did, why she believed in the politics that she did.

Identity as not having the space to be expressed or discovered

The third speaker did not label her identity and instead went into how, in her culture, there is no opportunity to express, explore, or even discover one's sexual identity. She described that the degree of socio-political repression in her culture was such that sexuality was not a matter an individual could control or even think about. Rather heterosexuality was dutifully performed. Women like herself get married and have children, growing old without exploring who they are as sexual beings or what they really want or desire. Exploring homosexuality could have consequences of criminalisation, even death. It was only through her activist work outside the country was she able to learn about sexual rights and sexual identity.

of lesbian couple Sizakele Sigasa and Salome Massooa in July 2007 has led to the formation of the 07-07-07 campaign, a coalition of human rights and equality groups calling for justice for women targeted in these attacks.

Transgender persons are the most likely to be targeted by anti-gay commands in Brazil

Homophobia has been responsible for the killing of 2,403 gays, lesbians, and transgender persons in Brazil in the last 20 years, making Brazil have the highest number of homosexuals killed in the world. This prompted the government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to launch the Brazil without Homophobia program in 2003.

This was a historic moment for the advance of homosexuals' human rights. Among many others it led to Gay Prides in 49 cities, with Sao Paulo being the largest gay pride world wide with 1,8 million supporters. It also encouraged twenty-two candidates (13 gays,

6 transgenders, and 3 lesbians) to run in the 2004 municipal elections. A gay council member was elected in Vitória da Conquista and a transgender Vice Mayor was elected in the city of Colônia.⁷

On the sad side the campaign was not able to stop the violence against LGBT people in Brazil. The headquarter of the Brazilian gay organisation SOMOS in Porto Alegre has been the target of a neo-Nazi group on January, 21, 2009. Three swastika graffiti were painted on the walls of SOMOS headquarter building. The swastika cross is a symbol of hate against homosexuals, black and Jewish people.⁸

In 2008, 190 homosexuals were killed in Brazil, one every two days, representing a 55 percent increase on the previous year. The Annual Report on Murders of Homosexuals, produced by the Grupo Gay da Bahia (GGB) documents crimes that are "specifically motivated by homophobia and prejudice". It states among others that "A transvestite (female transgender person) is 259

A sharing of and from multiple identities

An open sharing of experiences from the small group of women ensued. Many women talked about coming out as a lifelong struggle in their personal and political lives. Within this safe space, a young woman activist came out though she has not carried a lesbian identity in her own country. One lesbian activist felt marginalised within the larger feminist space of the conference. But the women acknowledged that they could not obligate a movement to be open and inclusive, they could only advocate it. Still, the feminist movement was seen as having not a right but a duty to take on the struggles of women with marginalised sexual identities. An older heterosexual feminist posed the idea that women had multiple identities, with sexual identity being only one of these. And in certain situations within political organising, women may project one identity over the other, making sexual identity not necessarily always the prime in a given political space. She likened this process to wearing different masks. But a young lesbian feminist begged to differ. While she agreed that women had multiple identities, she did not think these identities could be taken off that easily when engaging in political work. She believed her multiple identities were pieces of one mask, a mask that she could not take off because it was who she was.

Towards pluralist politics

Surfacing differences within LGBT activists and feminists should not be a threat to collective political action. Rather, our alliance can be strengthened if we organise not because of the same identity or an essential sameness but rather because of a shared commitment to freedom from all forms of oppression. Hence, pluralist politics is a politics informed by multiple, conflicting identities and locations. It means living in tension but being comforted by a shared commitment to fight for the freedom from oppression, even if these oppressions are diverse. It means embracing conflict and contradiction but moving towards continually articulating and rearticulating the social movements' agenda. Pluralist politics then allows for the recognition of specificity and difference without letting go of the dream for equal rights for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgenders, within and beyond the feminist movement; and the vision for freedom for people of diverse genders and sexualities.

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times more likely to be murdered than a gay man.” While majority of the gay men were killed in their homes often stabbed using knives, 80 percent of the transgender persons were killed by fire arms in public places.

Marcelo Cerqueira from GGB, said the sharp rise in gay-bashing murders does not mean that more people were murdered but it rather indicated that more cases are being reported and is a result of “more effective instruments to monitor and register this kind of homicide.”

The LGBT movement in Brazil welcomes the Brazil Free of Homophobia programme by the National Commission on Human Rights. But it needs to take more compelling action. Special police units should be created to deal with hate crimes. Sex education should be included in school curricula “to teach young people to coexist with sexual diversity,” Cerqueira said. Another important step, would be to carry out official media campaigns against homophobia, along the lines of the government’s “Water for All”, “Electricity for All” or “Homes for All” campaigns.

The activist criticised the Brazilian media, especially comedy shows, saying they fuelled

homophobia by ridiculing homosexuals. This kind of humour strengthens the idea that “it’s ok to laugh at or insult gays,” and from there to homophobic hate is just one small step, Cerqueira argued.

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva convened the country's first national conference on LGBT in 2008, with the aim of raising awareness on the citizenship rights of LGBTs.

Source: Pink News – UK (2 December 2007). “Brazilian president calls national LGBT conference. URL: <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/news/articles/2005-6213.html>

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