# Sexuality and Social Justice: A Toolkit

## Strategies for making sexuality rights real

# What's wrong with labels?

It is clear from the number of LGBT advocacy organizations around the world that the fixing of particular labels of identity – like lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender – can be useful for establishing global networks and mobilizing people to claim their rights. But when the use of labels like LGBT come to be seen by those working in development as markers of 'modernity', or of 'western' intervention by those in receipt of funding for development interventions, they can also be dangerous and can harm rather than advance the realisation of sexual rights. This case explores some of the issues being debated in relation to the use of fixed labels of sexual identity in advocacy efforts.

## A Global Language

> "I take as a given that power inheres in the ability to name, and that what we call ourselves has implications for political practice."

Steve Epstein, 1992, p. 241

The identity categories Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender have been instrumental in raising awareness of sexuality issues and of bringing them onto national and international policy agendas. The acronym 'LGBT' (with the addition of Intersex and sometimes Queer and Questioning), is now recognised around the globe and provides a common language for talking about sexual rights and for bringing together individuals and organisations working for social justice. Understanding identity in terms of fixed categories has helped to make same-sex desire and gender non-conforming people visible to policy makers and development actors where they were not before. It has also helped to facilitate dialogue around citizenship and in some cases, enable legal reform.

LGBT identity categories have also been embraced by organisations and individuals around the world for strategic purposes. For example, in order to access funds from international donors; to fight for legal recognition; or to make themselves understood to local researchers or journalists. In this respect, using a global language of sexual identity can be very useful, especially where sexuality is rarely talked about by policy makers or discussed in public forums. It can also make a complex, diverse and generally little-understood aspect of human experience, easier to understand. This is important when it comes to building alliances and forming a cohesive argument to campaign for equal rights or legal redress. As many have pointed out, when it comes to fighting for social justice, such short-hand is imperative.

## A 'Western' Model?

The dominance of LGBT categories as a way to understand and define same-sex desiring and gender non-conforming people has come under criticism for a number of different reasons. One is that it is based on a 'Western' understanding of sexual identity which cannot simply be applied in other settings. For example, the LGBT model has been criticised for being too individualistic, for focusing on the identities and rights of individuals rather than of communities. The labels themselves are also seen to reflect particular 'western' identities that do not speak to the diversity of meanings attached to same-sex desiring and gender non-conforming people in other parts of the world .

A further criticism is of the way that the recognition of LGBT rights has come to be seen as a marker of modernity. In development discourse, those countries that recognize the rights of LGBT persons are increasingly seen to be more developed, enlightened and even more civilized. This is set against those that do not recognize LGBT rights, or criminalize same-sex or non-normative sexualities, who are seen as undeveloped, backward and barbaric. It has been pointed out that this is based on a false assessment, as many Western nations still do not recognize the rights of LGBT people, or do so inconsistently, and continue to discriminate and oppress citizens on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

An often cited attack on 'Western' categories of sexual identities comes from the Palestinian scholar Joseph Massad who describes the defence of human rights on the basis of sexual orientation as a 'missionary task'. The need to adhere to Western definitions of sexual identity is cited as an example of imperialism, where same-sex relations are ascribed particular meanings and identities by the West. This has prompted significant debate around the role of development agencies and multilateral organisations in protecting and promoting LGBT rights, particularly in post-colonial nations.

Another ongoing debate relating to the global advancement of LGBT rights relates to the term 'Pinkwashing'. Pinkwashing refers to the use of LGBT rights discourse by governments for strategic rather than humanitarian purposes. It is often claimed that governments use the LGBT rights agenda to gain popular support, to give the impression that they take human rights seriously, or in some cases, to obscure or downplay other human rights abuses or conservative policies. For example, pinkwashing is often debated in relation to the Israeli state who have publicly championed their achievements in securing and protecting the rights of LGBT citizens. Many argue that this is a strategic move to obscure ongoing human rights violations in relation to Israel's policies and actions towards Palestine (See Tukkun [1] for further discussion).

## Who is Included/Excluded?

Another key criticism of the use of 'LGBT' categories to describe same-sex desire and gender non-conformity is that they are too simplistic and cannot account for the diversity of lived experience across space and time. For example, research has shown the huge variation in the terms used to describe different forms of sexual orientation and gender identity around the world. Many of these terms do not translate neatly in to 'LGBT' and the meanings and significance of those identities are often lost in the process. Evidence has also shown that while many individuals do not see or describe themselves as 'lesbian' or 'gay' in their daily lives, they may be ascribed, or forced to adopt such identities, by others (for example, through their interactions with NGOs, local officials, health professionals or researchers).

A 'Kothi' named Seethal in Pondicherry. Image courtesy of Candace Feit [3]

Because identity categories such as LGBT do not allow for the subtle differences in sexual subjectivities (the experience of being a sexual person as understood by the individual), or for people to determine their own identities, they can misrepresent or fail to capture the lived experience of those marginalised because of their sexuality. Gender identity and sexual orientation, for example, are often conflated, where effeminate or transgender men are assumed to be gay or described as 'MSM' (Men who have Sex with Men) because their behaviour is understood to mean they are homosexual. While fixed identity categories may allow funds to be directed towards certain groups of persons, or global campaigns to be launched, evidence suggests that it can also be oppressive and in some cases, may lead to increased persecution.

Research has also pointed to the resentment that many feel of being identified only in terms of their sexual orientation or gender identity, as if they are not also fathers, market-sellers, Muslims, etc. For those who practice non-normative sexualities, sexual identity categories may become the primary marker of identity in their interaction with employers, health providors, NGOS and donor agencies, etc. This is not the same for heterosexual individuals who are not required to define themselves in terms of their sexuality.

Some groups may remain invisible to development actors because they are not considered to be 'high priority' in terms of funding. This is particularly the case in relation to funding for HIV prevention, where, for example, lesbians - who are not considered to be a 'high risk' group in terms of contracting HIV (and other sexually transmitted diseases) - are excluded from certain interventions, funding and research. As a result, there is very little known about the lived realities of same-sex sexuality amongst women and how they relate to donor priorities such as HIV transmission, maternal health and gender based violence.

## An Uncritical Approach

Some have criticised not the use of LGBT per se, but the uncritical way in which it is applied. For example, advocacy organisations or health initiatives who describe themselves as supporting LGBT persons, often work only with gay men or only target those who identify as transgender. Using the label 'LGBT' is therefore misleading as it gives the impression

that all population groups are targeted equally, when this is very rarely the case. It can also encourage the assumption that the needs and experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender persons are the same and require similar interventions.

## Discussion points:

- Does using terms such as SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) help to avoid some of the issues described?
- What kind of terms are used most by the people you work with?
- What kinds of terms are used most by the donors you work with?
- What are some of the uses and dangers of using terms like 'LBGT' in your work?
- What are some of the values of using the term 'LGBT' in your work?
- What terms would you advise policy makers to use when drawing up development programmes and why?

## Further Reading

Julie Burchill, silo mentalities and international (trans)gender equality [4]. Participation and Power blog, Stephen Wood, (date tbc)

Debating Pinkwashing [1]. A selection of articles on Pinkwashing from Tikkun [5], an online magazine that brings together progressive interfairth voices to talk about social transformation and strategies for political and economic democratization.

El-Khatib, Mohammed M.(2011). Deconstructing the Gay International: A Content Analysis of Coverage of Homosexuality in Arabic Satellite News [6]. MA diss. Georgetown University, Washington D.C.

Altman, D., 2001. Rupture or Continuity? Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Boyce, P., Coyle, D. 2013 Development, Discourse and Law: Transgender and Same-Sex Sexualities in Nepal [7] Evidence Report 13, IDS

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Mos, M. (2013). 'Conflicted Normative Power Europe: The European Union and Sexual Minority Rights', Journal of Contemporary European Research. 9 (1), pp.78-93

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**Source URL:** http://spl.ids.ac.uk/sexuality-and-social-justice-toolkit/1-issues-and-debates/whats-wrong-labels

**Links**

[1] http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/debating-pinkwashing

[2] http://spl.ids.ac.uk/file/kothicandicefeitjpg

[3] http://feitphoto.com/

[4] http://participationpower.wordpress.com/2013/01/22/julie-burchill-silo-mentalities-and-international-transgender-equality-2/

[5] http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/about

[6] https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/557954

[7] http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/123456789/2839#.UuFZhbTFKM8